

INTRODUCTION

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When, in the first book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume wants to exemplify the kind of belief allowing one to make sense of the most everyday experience, he offers an example that has become well known: hearing the door creak downstairs and seeing a porter arrive in his room a few minutes later, he must assume that the man has arrived by way of the stairs. But this example carries on, as the porter delivers a letter

which upon opening it I perceive by the hand-writing and subscription to have come from a friend, who says he is two hundred leagues distant. 'Tis evident I can never account for this phenomenon, comfortable to my experience in other instances, without spreading out in my mind the whole sea and continent between us, and supposing the effects and continu'd existence of posts and ferries, according to my memory and observation.¹

The example of the letter in Hume's hands as an object indecipherable by rational means is one of several moments when the *Treatise* calls attention to the written word in its tactile form, physically encountered by readers even at the moments when they are asked to suspect material forms of evidence. In order to read a letter, Hume suggests, one must actively make sense of something that is not actually perceptible: forgetting the distance it has travelled (for how could one verify that the posts and ferries still ran, or observe every step of its way?) and the contingencies that inevitably haunt its claims (so much time has passed since they were made), one must handle the letter irrationally in order to make sense of its words on paper. If a text is to be functional and pleasurable, the reader must accept the fiction of the distant friend's presence in writing.

This illustration calls up by inference the task of reading any book, produced, as Hume was well aware, as the result of frequent shuffling across oceans, between publishers and editors, printing, correcting and reprinting. In order to read the *Treatise*, Hume's example of the letter suggests, one must imagine Hume's unmediated voice in the room, and thus engage with reading as one of the sociable practices that makes up for the kinds of doubt that Hume expresses about all rational perceptions – and which are now connected, through the example of the

letter, to the case of all writing in its physicality. In the end, Hume will suggest, the letter is more reliable as a common fiction than it is as a piece of physical evidence. And yet the example of the letter also calls attention to the way in which the reader holds the *Treatise* at the moment when he or she reaches the page that contains this example. The sheer reflexivity of the device, juxtaposing the prickly sensation of the real page and Hume's presentation of the fictional page as the most imaginatively constructed of all surfaces, brings writing into the argument as a case that must complicate, even as it is employed to confirm, Hume's suggestion that writing can only serve as a fictional, and never as an ontological, point of access to the material world.

As this example suggests, there are two kinds of 'practice' described by this word in our title. One is the practice of writing in its sheer materiality – a materiality that was particularly tactile and, as Clifford Siskin has argued in the *Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700–1830*, quantitatively overwhelming in the eighteenth century. This proliferation of writing itself – understood here as a nexus of writing, print and silent reading – gave rise, Siskin argues, to the categories in which we now understand texts to originate: disciplinary, professionalism and literature.² For our case, the terms of this reversal in our thinking about the relation between medium and content are crucial, for they suggest the possibility that the practice of writing came before its theory and help to explain what Mark Blackwell describes as the 'preposterous' logic pertaining to eighteenth-century philosophical texts.

The other practice implied by our title is the social practice that writing is understood to be by eighteenth-century writers who use genre, rhetoric and sensation as powerful tools in the construction – rather than just the representation – of the reality their texts describe. Practice may involve, as in the case of Hume or Reid, a belief in the positive power of language as a fiction that compensates for the doubts that an argument raises at the level of content. It might also involve, as in the case of experimental novelists like Diderot, Rousseau, Johnson and Sterne, the stretching of the categories of philosophy and literature themselves into new and compelling conjunctions. The essays in this collection share a sense of the way that one or both of the practical dimensions of writing mattered to the theoretical arguments they expressed. Thus, in the case of Hume described above, the *Treatise*, well-known for its audaciously sceptical epistemology, actually begins to look much more constructive once we take account of the way in which it performs the fictions of reality to which Hume ultimately refers, and of the way in which its material composition as a work of writing (its sequence, its various editions, its format) introduces a material dimension to experience that much of its argument denies. These kinds of practice can obviously intersect and inflect the theories expressed by eighteenth-century philosophers at the same

time. But for the purposes of this introduction, and in the arrangement of our chapters, we have chosen to treat them individually.

Writing Philosophy

In the third Book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke asserts that words stand, not for the reality of things, but only for ideas in the mind that uses them: 'It is a perverting use of Words and brings unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification whenever we make them stand for anything but those *Ideas* we have in our own Minds.'³ His account of the fully human origin of language, and of the subjective link between words and ideas, was a corrective both to the Cartesian account of innate ideas and to the view that language involved a divine correspondence between words and the things they named. Locke's position went on to influence the view of language of philosophers from Shaftesbury to Addison, Berkeley, Rousseau, Johnson and Kant. Fifty years later, David Hume would describe languages as 'gradually establish'd by human conventions' and stress their necessary but arbitrary value, analogous to the value assigned to gold and silver as a measure of exchange linked by convention alone to the objects they come to represent.⁴ With these unsettling assertions in mind, the eighteenth century can be described as a period when language became a focus of anxiety as much because of the limited access to a stable reality that it seemed to promise as because of the sources of confusion and false responses that new genres of fiction might provoke.

In this respect it now seems obvious that many eighteenth-century theories of language resonate with those of the second part of the twentieth century, with the 'literary turns' taken in both periods exposing the extent to which language shapes, obscures and redefines the reality it claims to describe. As Nicholas Hudson puts it in the opening chapter of this collection, the empiricists' insistence 'that all human approaches to experience are mediated through signs ... *sounds* a lot like the implications of deconstruction' (below, p. 12). The fact that the writing of Locke, Hume, Berkeley and Reid has become the province of literary critics during the last decades reflects this affinity. Several strong literary studies of the 1980s and 1990s to which this collection is indebted explicitly use the licence of poststructuralism to unfold the operation of eighteenth-century philosophical texts, not just as theoretical statements about the subjective nature of language, but as discourses that put rhetoric to work in the service of reality. Rather than seeing empiricist writing as an expression of philosophical problems that had to be solved elsewhere, in the realms of society and science, John Richetti, Jerome Christensen, Leo Damrosch and Fred Parker all point out that the rhetorical performance of empiricism is part of the condition described and can, on occasion, make doubt itself reassuring. As Fred Parker has claimed, all

‘sceptical thinking involves ... an essential tension or doubleness: a power of affirmation that emerges from, without denying or transcending, the inadequacy of intellect to master the fluidity and variousness of things.’⁵

Just as Parker’s willingness to concede to the ‘fluidity and variousness of things’ points to a realm of understanding beyond eighteenth-century rhetoric, these studies are all generally informed by the emphasis, common to at least one version of eighteenth-century empiricism and twentieth-century poststructuralism, that it is language that shapes the way we experience the world. In this perspective, the popular version of poststructuralism suggests, an epistemology of language will always present itself as alternative to ontological certainty rather than a path to its recovery. Such a comparison of empiricism and poststructuralism as semiotic projects leaves aside, however, the *a priori* concern with writing that philosophers in both traditions have maintained despite their attacks on metaphysics and their subsequent reputations as ‘deconstructive’. Hudson argues that Derrida in fact conceded neither the ontological or material dimension of philosophy to a realm beyond his jurisdiction: his version of poststructuralism was deeply concerned with the materiality of writing as something that could be known and experienced apart from its status as language, and without the surrender of *a priori* categories, and it was on this basis that he refused to recognize empiricism as philosophy.

Yet, from the perspective of many of the essays in the first part of this collection, the same ontological dimension can be reclaimed for empiricist philosophy *as writing*. Jonathan Kramnick points to the importance of words on a page, suggesting that it is the mediation of absence and presence that occurs with writing that makes sense of Locke’s fluctuating versions of desire as something that comes before and after the object. When Joseph Chaves argues that Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* is positioned at the intersection of polite and philosophical worlds so as to bend the distinctions it upholds at the level of content, he is reading for a possible give-and-take between the written text and the conversations into which it enters. This directs us, similarly, beyond rhetorical postures to the text as something that anticipates its physical immersion in the world of readers and responses. And just as Thomas Reid complains in his attacks on Humean scepticism that the reason why Hume’s system does not work is because it reveals too much of its own technical foundation in writing, so Alexander Dick argues that Reid’s own preference for a naturally visual over an artificially scriptural mediation hides his own frequently admitted position that writing for all its artifice is the fundamental medium through which we know and experience the world. Such readings produce a new angle from which to associate empirical and post-structuralist thinking; not only as kindred descriptions of radical slippage and constructivism, but as linguistic performances in which ontological concerns make their way back into the picture via the materiality of language – literally,

as words upon the page and more generally as an occasion for contact with the material word. Isobel Armstrong writes of Derrida and de Man, they ‘*unthink* the aesthetic and *have* it’; their deconstruction of aesthetics takes place in ‘flagrantly aesthetic texts.’⁶ In the first section of the collection we see analogous cases made for Locke, Hume, Shaftesbury, and Reid: while they may unthink the *a priori*, as writers they also have it.

Reading Hume

Hume’s letter shows how the physical certainty of the book and its media upstage the contingencies of human consciousness, but it also signifies the logical problems that haunt sociable communication and make it an entirely human construction. Indeed, Hume is a central figure in our collection for precisely this reason. He was throughout his career consumed by the ambiguities that writing entailed both for the epistemology that he inherited from Locke and for the fate of philosophy in the future. His divided and troubled career can be tracked, as the essays in this section suggest, largely as a conscious exploration of genre and the different forms of audience that philosophy, essays, history and dialogue could generate. But it can also be tracked, as Adam Budd and Mark Blackwell show, through Hume’s particular attention to the medium of the book in its successive editions and physical structure. Hume was a meticulous proofreader of his own work and his letters to his publisher William Strahan record him worrying over font, errata and paper long after his texts were in press.⁷ Hume’s concern with the medium of writing and the problems of genre go a long way to explain his status as the Scottish Enlightenment’s most widely read representative and the self-proclaimed controversialist of its academic traditions.

Hume’s sense of the performative power of his own rhetoric has already been a major topic for scholars interested in the literary aspects of eighteenth-century philosophy. In *Practicing Enlightenment*, for instance, Christensen argues, ‘In Hume, rhetoric is both the sign of logical contradiction or inconsistency and the device for putting inconsistency to work. It is because of the inexorable failure of rationality either to work on its own terms or to account satisfactorily for the behavior of humans in society that rhetoric becomes inevitable, not merely as the expression of the failure of rationality, but as the remedy for its lapse.’⁸ In emphasizing the subtle ways that Hume’s literary practice overcomes the form of crisis it articulates, Christensen elaborates upon John Richetti’s argument, which shares Christensen’s emphasis on the fact that for Hume, ‘writing is the ultimate and sure relation, providing almost in spite of his relations as a thinker a persuasive tendency to stabilize or at least to ground in relationships the unruly perceptual relationships his thought so intensely explores.’⁹ Adding to this sense of Hume as an author for whom writing can be both the venue for

sceptical thought and a practical forum for more conservative endeavours, Leo Damrosch included Hume in a group of writers that he (more than Richetti and Christensen) asserts consciously explored the 'fertile tension' between writing as something necessarily fictive, and writing as a way of recreating reality.¹⁰

But the four chapters on Hume included here push this productive realm of rhetorical analysis in directions that take account of writing as technology as well as style, and of genre as a fundamental condition of thought. For Mark Blackwell, whose close reading of the *Treatise on Human Nature* opens the second section of this collection, the anti-sequential arrangement of Hume's argument plays with its written form as linear narrative. The architecture of Hume's thought is thus a physical as well as rhetorical condition. Such an argument differs from the ones that literary critics have made about Hume to date because it shifts the emphasis from rhetoric as a supplementary dimension of meaning making to writing in particular as a field of real encounter structuring the arrangement of thought. Adam Budd also uses the history of the *Treatise* as text to rethink not only its philosophical trajectory but also its usefulness as the basis for critical method. Using several early essays and sections of the *Treatise* that were both moved within and removed from the published version, Budd suggests that Hume did not in fact argue that literary works (poetry and fiction) could be the basis for sympathetic understanding but rather claimed that our sympathetic responses to literature are of an order below the real sympathy we feel for actually occurring incidents of pain or pleasure. The larger implication of this is that, contrary to now standard assumptions, Hume may have been trying to prevent the very transference of his sentimental thesis to literary aesthetics.

Whatever Hume's intentions for the *Treatise* might have been, reading and writing became critical points of consideration both in the development of his own philosophy and in the way it was read by other writers. If writing is the essential philosophical problem of the *Treatise*, how might philosophical argument – which after all exists first and foremost as writing – overcome it? One answer, provided here by Eva Dadlez, is that it does not have to. Literature for Hume and later for Jane Austen provides thought experiments for moral reasoning. Another possibility, entertained by John Richetti, is that Hume turned to genres outside philosophy proper, such as history and – in Richetti's study – the theological dialogue, to advance a connection between narrative process and philosophical reasoning. Contesting the view that the dialogue form embodies indeterminability, Richetti argues that Hume's manipulation of the rhetorical positions of his speakers through the dramatic conversation in *Dialogues on Natural Religion* demonstrates a willingness to use the genre toward a determinable position, one that is only evident through the experience of reading it fully and critically. While the *Treatise* stands, even for Hume himself, as a test case for the combination of certainties and anxieties that eighteenth-century philosophers

were beginning to feel while holding onto their books, Hume's experiments with other genres such as the essay and the dialogue show how important literary experience was to the development of his thought.

Thinking Literature

Hume was not, of course, the only philosopher in the period to sense that the traditional authority that philosophy had always assumed over other forms of knowledge was being challenged, on one hand, by its inability to encompass rationally the different and varied experiences that commerce and science were bringing home to Britain and, on the other hand, by the increasing popularity of new genres like history and the novel that seemed better able to manage this plethora of objects and feelings. Consider for instance Francis Hutcheson's remarks in the Preface to his *Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony and Design*. Why, he asks would anyone read philosophy at all? 'Philosophy', Hutcheson worries, 'has become so ungainly a Form, that a Gentleman cannot easily bring himself to like it; and those who are strangers to it, can scarcely bear to hear out our Description of it.'¹¹ Later in the same essay, Hutcheson makes the case that it is not information merely that makes the reading of important books rewarding. 'Everyone knows', he writes,

how dull it is to read over a collection of Gazettes, which shall perhaps relate all the same Events with the Historian: The superior Pleasure then of History must arise, like that of Poetry, from the Manners; as when we see a Character well drawn, wherein we find the secret Causes of a great Diversity of seemingly inconsistent Actions; or an interest of State laid open, or an artful View nicely unfolded, the execution of which influences very different and opposite Actions, as the circumstances may alter.¹²

For Hutcheson, history and poetry are more significant forms of writing than newspapers because they give us the opportunity to reflect on the ambivalence of life and the necessity of change, reflections that he insists are a 'pleasure'. Hutcheson thereby turns the aesthetic experience of mixing and blending styles and genres into a form of compensation for the anxieties that empiricism had accrued.

For poststructuralist readings of empiricism, the mixing of philosophy and literature is a mark, as Paul de Man notably contended regarding Locke, of the seemingly insufferable collapse of philosophical logic into its literary other: metaphor. Viewing the issue from the somewhat broader perspective of the 'generic murkiness' of the philosophical novels of Marivaux, Diderot, Fielding and Sterne, Jonathan Sadow suggests that what de Man saw as the limit of empiricism's pretensions to truth became the starting point for European culture's consciousness of its own modernity *as* the constant flow of generic invention. 'Genre', as Sadow defines it 'represents neither metaphysical objects nor collections of features, but

a form of ongoing cultural discourse and production inextricable from questions surrounding the classification and understanding of knowledge and language' (below, p. 162). As Sadow concludes, eighteenth-century writers anticipated twentieth-century critics in recognizing that no genre could be absolutely pure or distinct. But they also differed from their present-day peers in regarding mixed modes as an opportunity for the production of and pleasure in culture rather than as a point of individual rational anxiety.

Maureen Harkin makes a similar case for the mixed modality of Adam Smith's reflections on history. Though he never completed a book about history (as he sometimes projected), Smith has been long supposed to have been an adherent of the stadial theory popularized by William Robertson and Adam Ferguson: human civilization grew in distinct stages from the near anarchy of primitive hunter-gatherers, to the constantly threatened pastoral societies of shepherds and then farmers and finally to the success and equanimity of commercial states. But Smith also suggested that early human societies had a dignity and restraint that modern commercial societies no longer have. As a result, in Smith, history can no longer be seen as a linear narrative or 'rise', but rather as a narrative that looks in two directions at once. As Harkin states, Smith was both a 'believer in history as progress towards commercial civilization *and* [a] Rousseauian elegist of a lost social harmony' (below, p. 184). The importance of this ambiguity lies in the fact that it persisted into the nineteenth century long after the stadial theory itself had played out its usefulness; it is evident in William Godwin's unpublished essay 'On History and Romance' for instance and in many of Walter Scott's novels.

As the example of Smith's history attests, what was pulling eighteenth-century writers away from the rationality of philosophy and toward a new sense of their historical moment as a moment of culture was feeling, the sentiments, passions and affections that from Hume on became the central focus of the empirical conversation and, to a great extent, account for its fragmentation into the genres and disciplines that make up the humanities and social sciences today. But, as the final three essays in our collection make clear, this move toward sentiment was also an attempt to refashion philosophy, as in fact Hume had originally believed it might, by allowing literature to rescue it from the scepticism produced by and in writing. Such an effort implies, indeed demands, that the process be something of a challenge, becoming in turn the stuff of literary adventure rather than sociable conversation. Thus in Nancy Yousef's reading of Rousseau, marriage becomes the basis for an ideal contract not because marriage embodies the absolute transparency of self to other, but on the contrary, because in the form of Rousseauian romance the mysterious anxieties surrounding commitment and betrayal that haunt all marriages appear as narrative. Similarly, Brian Michael Norton finds in the eighteenth-century novel a venue for unfolding the peculiarly ambiguous

dynamics of human happiness – an obsession of eighteenth-century ethics – ‘on the level of the particular’ case (below, p. 213) rather than on the level of general maxims suited to the form of the treatise.

Finally, rounding out the volume, Adam Potkay argues that William Wordsworth’s poetic experiments with ‘the still sad music of humanity’ were an attempt to recast the kind of obedient conscience promoted in eighteenth-century sermons as a sense or feeling of harmony and bliss such as one finds while listening to music. This final turn in the volume toward Romanticism marks perhaps the final transformation of what had been the pre-eminent problem of Lockean philosophy, that of representation, into the foundation for a new cultural episteme. Nevertheless, as Potkay notes, Wordsworth’s return to conscience in his later verse suggests further that the problematics of ethical determination and epistemological clarity were in no way resolved by the late eighteenth century’s discovery of literature. They were merely reshaped into a new set of dialectical conflicts, ones that are, to a great extent, still with us today.

Whether or not literature could be said to have replaced philosophy as the principle discipline of critical thinking is, to be sure, a question best answered in a history of the canon and the disciplines. We acknowledge the work of Clifford Siskin, Jonathan Kramnick and John Guillory, who have pursued precisely this historical question. Nevertheless, the present collection proposes that literary practice – its technologies, genres and responses – was a crucial and indeed constant preoccupation of eighteenth-century philosophy. And eighteenth-century writing – poetry, history, fiction – became a vital force in European culture because it insistently posed and reposed the epistemological and ethical questions it inherited from philosophy. The point, we submit, is not simply that philosophy and literature were on friendly terms during the eighteenth century but rather that the questions posed by each were the condition of possibility for the other. Whatever tensions this friendship might have provoked were ultimately productive ones. They are, to return to our opening observation from Hume, the posts and ferries by which we cross the seas and continents of self understanding.

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