

M. A. BOX

The Suasive Art of David Hume



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M. A. Box

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[A]nd then there was Hume: the
scepticism of that charming philosopher
touched a kindred note in Philip; and,
revelling in the lucid style which seemed
able to put complicated thought into
simple words, musical and measured, he
read as he might have read a novel, a
smile of pleasure on his lips.

—W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human
Bondage*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK is a literary study with an orientation in intellectual history. Its purpose is not to confirm or confute Hume's philosophy, but to describe his development as a writer over one period of his career. On the other hand, it has been necessary to claim that he held certain tenets and thought others false, and as his tenets are not plain to the view I have endeavored to explain them as the occasion called for it. Over interpretive details there is unending disagreement, and it is not to be hoped that any explanation of Hume's tenets will satisfy everyone. Many more contradictory positions have been attributed to Hume than one would expect from a thinker who, unlike Emerson or Nietzsche, was attempting to build a self-consistent system. A recent trend has been to see him as much more consistent than generally had been supposed, but exegetical unanimity is still nowhere in sight, and the digressions needed to defend every disputable point of interpretation would have crowded my own contributions. For such defenses sometimes the reader is referred in the citations to other commentators. I have had to depend upon those commentators who seem to me most sound and to walk humbly before those who do not. However, I have not used the notes to provide a bibliographic survey of Humean studies, for which there has been no room here and which is better provided, moreover, by Roland Hall's *Fifty Years of Hume Scholarship* (Edinburgh, 1978) together with his supplements in the second number of each volume of *Hume Studies*.

It would be best to state my allegiances outright. My understanding of the moral theory is based primarily upon J. L. Mackie's account. On passiona! psychology, valuation, and reasonableness I am the pupil of Páll Árdal, while on Hume's sociopolitical views I have found David Miller especially helpful. An important and underappreciated fact is that by his "logic" Hume means a conflation of logic and epistemology (an

epistemologic, so to speak) in which the rules for reasoning are determined by the limitations inherent in the process by which we can know things. For Hume's "logic" I am indebted to James Noxon. My own explanations, however, not being mere synopses of these accounts, have no claim to the endorsement of these commentators.

I have also tried to depict in general terms the system into which these tenets fit. It has been necessary to consider Hume's system as a whole in order to relate his behavior as a writer to his aspirations for his philosophy. In historical fact, his system as a totality probably had no effect whatsoever on society since it was never perceived as a cohesive unit. Hume appears to have made his mark on history entirely through individual arguments, usually negative ones viewed in isolation from their contexts. But this was not his intention, and it is with his intentions that we will be concerned.

One can hardly say anything about Hume's philosophy with complete assurance; and the following literary readings are pervaded with the philosophy. I have had to revise my own views of his thought too often to offer these readings otherwise than in the tentative spirit of empirical inquiry, with the hope and expectation that further research will in many respects supersede them.

For various favors thanks are due to Mlle. Tisnes, *bibliothécaire* of Prytanée Militaire de La Flèche, Dr. M. A. Stewart, Mr. A. D. Nuttall, and Dr. Juris Lidaka. I have benefited from the Meyerstein Special Research Fund. Special thanks are due to Rotary International and to the University of Wisconsin at Madison for giving me fellowships, to the late J. C. Hilson, the late J. L. Mackie, Dr. Avril Bruton, Mr. Patrick Gardiner, and Dr. J. D. Fleeman. It is trite but true and needful to say that this monograph could not have been completed without the help of my wife, Elizabeth Shapland, to whom it is dedicated.

ABBREVIATIONS

- LDH* *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932) 1: 168 = vol. 1, p. 168
- NLDH* *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner (Oxford, 1954)
- Hist.* *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, foreword by William B. Todd, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, 1983) 5: 155 = vol. 5, p. 155

The following will usually be cited parenthetically within the text:

- THN* *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d rev. ed., P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978) 2. 3. 3(414) = bk. 2, pt. 3, § 3, p. 414
- Abs.* *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c* (quoted from *THN* cited above)
- DNR* *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith, 2d ed. (Edinburgh, 1947) iv (159) = pt. 4, p. 159
- Wks.* *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (London, 1874-75) 3: 39 = vol. 3, p. 39
- EHU* *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (referred to hereinafter as the *Philosophical Essays* and quoted from *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, vol. 4 of the *Wks.* cited above) vii. 2 (62) = § 7, pt. 2, p. 62
- EPM* *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (referred to hereinafter as the second *Enquiry* and cited from vol. 4 of the *Wks.*) ix. 1 (252) = § 9, pt. 1, p. 252

- LGent.* *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* (1745), fac. repr. ed. Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh, 1967)
- EMPLit.* *Essays Morals, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985)

Page number citations for the following will be from the *EMPLit.* cited above:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| "A" | "Of Avarice" |
| "BT" | "Of the Balance of Trade" |
| "Comm." | "Of Commerce" |
| "CL" | "Of Civil Liberty" |
| "DMHNat." | "Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature" |
| "DTP" | "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion" |
| "E" | "Of Eloquence" |
| "EW" | "Of Essay Writing" |
| "FPGov." | "Of the First Principles of Government" |
| "IM" | "Of Impudence and Modesty" |
| "Int." | "Of Interest" |
| "IParl." | "Of the Independency of Parliament" |
| "IPComm." | "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" |
| "LM" | "Of Love and Marriage" |
| "M" | "Of Money" |
| "MSL" | "Of the Middle Station of Life" |
| "NC" | "Of National Characters" |
| "OContr." | "Of the Original Contract" |
| "PDiv." | "Of Polygamy and Divorces" |
| "PGen." | "Of Parties in General" |
| "PO" | "Of Passive Obedience" |
| "PSci." | "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science" |
| "RPASci." | "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" |
| "Sceptic" | "The Sceptic" |
| "SE" | "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" |
| "SHist." | "Of the Study of History" |
| "SRW" | "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" |
| "ST" | "Of the Standard of Taste" |

The Suasive Art of David Hume



Chapter I

THE CLIMATE OF OPINION

Certain masters of composition, as Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope, the writers of the Protestant Bible and Prayer Book, Hooker and Addison, Swift, Hume, and Goldsmith, have been the making of the English language.

—Newman, *The Idea of a University* II. iii. 3

HUME WAS one of the most celebrated writers of his day. George Birkbeck Hill, who was qualified to judge, reckoned that his European fame was equaled only by Rousseau's and Voltaire's.¹ Thus we find Boswell, before he fell under Johnson's influence, recording in his journal that Hume was "the greatest Writer in Brittain." Upon Hume's death an anonymous biographer wrote that after the publication of the *History* Hume "was considered as the greatest writer of the age: his most insignificant performances were sought after with avidity."² We must make allowances for exaggeration here, and acknowledge that some of this celebrity was a *succès de scandale* due to his scepticism. And, as we shall see, his career was by no means a succession of triumphs. One suspects, however, that in Britain the scandal of his scepticism hurt Hume as much as it helped, and among the English any admissions of the literary ability of a Scot were only grudgingly

¹ George Birkbeck Hill, ed., *Letters of David Hume to William Strahan* (Oxford, 1888), 83. For Hume's reputation in France, see the doctoral theses of Laurence Bongie, "Hume en France au dix-huitième siècle" (Université de Paris, 1952); Paul H. Meyer, "Hume in Eighteenth-Century France" (Columbia University, 1954).

² 4 Nov. 1762, *Private Papers of James Boswell*, ed. Geoffrey Scott, 18 vols. (n.p., 1928–34), I: 130; "An Account of the Life and Writings of the Late David Hume, Esq.," repr. *Annual Register* 19, pt. 2 (1776, 4th ed. 1788): 31.

extracted. Yet it remains that his literary stature was equal to, very possibly greater than, Samuel Johnson's during what is now often called the age of Johnson.

Because we now have a much narrower notion of what constitutes literature, this picture of Hume comes as somewhat of a surprise. But the fact that Hume wrote philosophy and history and not poems, plays, or novels did not keep Goldsmith from thinking of him as a competitor in letters. From Boswell we learn that Goldsmith

lamented . . . that the praise due to literary merit is already occupied by the first writers, who will keep it and get the better even of the superior merit which the moderns may possess. He said David Hume was one of those, who seeing the first place occupied on the right side, rather than take a second, wants to have a first in what is wrong.

A note of envy is detectable in Goldsmith's disapproval. One gathers that from his own professional frustrations he thought he had personal insights into Hume's motives. Goldsmith's competitive feelings are slightly muted in the periodical essay of 3 November 1759, "A Resverie," in which Goldsmith imagined an allegorical coach that delivers worthy writers to the temple of fame. Previous passengers had been Addison, Swift, Pope, Steele, Congreve, and Cibber. Modestly, Goldsmith depicts himself as being refused upon applying for transport. The first to gain admittance is Johnson, the third is Smollett, and between them is none other than Hume. In application Hume first submits for judgment his *Philosophical Essays*:

"These . . . are rhapsodies against the religion of my country."
 "And how can you expect to come into my coach, after thus chusing the wrong side of the question." "Ay, but I am right (replied the other;) and if you give me leave, I shall in a few minutes state the argument." "Right or wrong (said the coachman) he who disturbs religion, is a blockhead, and he shall never travel in a coach of mine." "If then (said the gentleman, mustering up all his courage) if I am not to have admittance as

an essayist, I hope I shall not be repulsed as an historian; the last volume of my history met with applause."³

The *History* is sufficient for the discriminating coachman. The *Philosophical Essays* is disqualified for its pernicious tendencies and not for being different in kind from the productions of the other passengers. It is evident from the company he will keep in the coach and at the temple that in the eyes of the allegorist Hume was not less of a writer for writing philosophy or history. William Shaw plainly thought of Hume as competition for Johnson:

His peculiar excentricities and paradoxes, chiefly on moral, philosophical, and religious subjects, procured him an incredible number of votaries in both kingdoms. Nothing appeared in the literary world, about which he was not consulted; and it is well known, the critics of the times, regarded his opinion as sacred and decisive. He mentioned the Rambler, however, with respect; and only regretted there should be so much cant and so much pedantry, in a performance replete with taste, erudition, and genius.

This stricture very obviously marred, though it did not absolutely prevent the success of the book. Johnson, when told of the fact, only acknowledged himself the less surprized that his papers had not been more universally read. *My countrymen*, said he, *will not always regard the voice of a Blasphemer as an oracle*.⁴

Johnson was right, of course, and Hume's reputation became a casualty of the revolution in tastes of the next century and the widening chasm between the objective sciences and the arts. The belletristic qualities that his writings exemplified

³ See 26 June 1763, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick Pottle, Yale (Trade) Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell, 13 vols. to date (London, 1950-), 1: 285; *The Bee*, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), 1: 448.

⁴ *Memories of the Life and Writings of the Late Dr. Samuel Johnson . . .*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (London, 1974), 32. For a discussion of Hume and Johnson as leaders of rival literary coteries, see Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Forgotten Hume: Le bon David* (New York, 1943), 189-209.

went out of fashion, and philosophy took on a sense of its own dignity that did not accord with his efforts to please. His works were depreciated as being tainted with an element of popularization. Norman Kemp Smith cited, among others, John Stuart Mill and T. H. Huxley as the most notable among this class of Hume's critics.⁵ To them must be added Leslie Stephen, who, though perhaps more appreciative of Hume than anyone else at that time, conceded that "Hume, indeed, may be accused of some divergence from the straight path under the influence of literary vanity."⁶ Stephen here refers to the fact that Hume disowned his greatest achievement, the *Treatise*, recast its materials into a number of shorter works, and did so for literary rather than philosophical reasons. Hume's divergence was to indulge in popularization instead of forging ahead with the quest for philosophical truth heedless of public neglect, incomprehension, or disapprobation. In philosophy as in literature, the Victorians demanded a high seriousness that Hume did not exhibit.

Since then Kemp Smith, Ernest Campbell Mossner, Antony Flew, James Noxon, and others have come to the defense of Hume's thought, with such success that he is now not infrequently referred to as the greatest philosopher that Britain has produced.⁷ There now exists a society of international membership and a semiannually published journal dedicated to furthering our knowledge of Hume's philosophy. But literary scholars, though they have made great progress in helping us to see eighteenth-century literature with clearer, un-Romantic eyes, have not yet given Hume attention nearly com-

⁵ John Stuart Mill, rev. of *A History of the British Empire*, by George Brodie, art. 5, *Westminster Review* 2 (1824): 346; T. H. Huxley, *Hume* (London, 1887), 11; both quoted in Kemp Smith's *Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941), 514-20.

⁶ *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (London, 1902), 1: 43.

⁷ See Kemp Smith cited above; Ernest Campbell Mossner, "Philosophy and Biography: The Case of David Hume," *Philosophical Review* 59 (1950): 184-201; Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief. A Study of His First "Inquiry"* (London, 1961), *passim*; and James Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development: A Study of His Methods* (Oxford, 1973), *passim*.

mensurate with the figure he cut in his day or with the range and depth of his writings. Only two book-length literary studies of Hume have been published.⁸ Today we place a higher value on his thought than even his contemporaries did, but they had a better appreciation of him as a man of letters.

To remedy this defect in our appreciation requires some historical reconstruction and sufficient flexibility of mind to see things through eighteenth-century eyes. As much as possible we shall try to see them through Hume's eyes, mindful of the temptation to reduce Hume's individuality so as to fit him to some preconceived eighteenth-century worldview. Unfortunately his statements on the writing of philosophy are few. He did not often record his authorial intentions, and never did so with much specificity. Possibly he did not formulate them in the detail that students of literature are accustomed to discover in the works they examine. And even when he makes pertinent statements it is often risky to take them at face value. As in the interpretation of his philosophy, it is necessary to reconcile apparent contradictions by referring individual statements to the wider contexts of his writings as a whole and of the culture in which he lived. It is necessary to recreate the milieu in which he executed his works, and to adopt a Humean spirit, in order to uncover his unstated, perhaps only vaguely formulated, aesthetic values and aims.

We will confine our study to the period in his career from

⁸ J. V. Price, *The Ironical Hume* (Austin, 1965); Jerome Christensen, *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career* (Madison, 1987). Price has also written *David Hume* (New York, 1968) for the Twayne's English Authors Series, and a number of articles on works by Hume not covered here. At first glance Christensen's book and the present one might seem to cover some of the same ground, but our approaches are so different that there is no overlap in content whatsoever. Whereas Christensen is, as he says, deeply "suspicious" of Hume and the Enlightenment, I am sympathetic, and whereas he views Hume from a modern theoretical perspective drawn from Gramsci, Foucault, and Greenblatt, I attempt to understand Hume as he understood himself. Portions of Leo Braudy's *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon* (Princeton, 1970) and John Richetti's *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) are devoted to Hume.

the composition of the *Treatise* through its recasting into the two *Enquiries*. It might seem odd to exclude thereby discussion of the *History*, the work for which Hume was best known in his lifetime; but within our chosen period there is a developmental story of a scope that recommends itself to the telling, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That story can be summarized briefly as follows. The *Treatise* was the fruit of many years of Hume's hardest and best thinking, involving labor and stress that at one point endangered his health. Its failure with the critics and the public was a shock to which the young author reacted with maturity by turning from epistemological and moral philosophy to more popular subjects, to the more popular essay genre, and to a more concentrated effort to improve his literary talent. At this stage he emulated to different extents the periodical papers the *Spectator* and the *Craftsman* as models of elegant and popular writing. The success that he had with the essay genre encouraged him to return to his epistemological and moral philosophies. Having attempted to fashion them anew into more appealing forms, he felt that he had achieved his purpose with the *Philosophical Essays*, and more so with the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*.

Herein we may observe a noble attempt, a setback, a gathering of forces, and a victorious return to the arena of the initial defeat. Because Hume saw himself as having solved certain identifiable literary problems in the second *Enquiry*, our story ends with that book. Before we can tell this story intelligibly, however, we must pause to set the scene. There are a number of things that must be understood at the start concerning contemporary attitudes toward philosophy, religion, and literature. For this reason the climate of opinion will be the subject of sections 1–3.⁹

⁹ It is reassuring to find that what I say in this chapter and elsewhere is in agreement with the picture that Price draws in "The Reading of Philosophical Literature," *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Isabel Rivers (Leicester, 1982), 165–96.

ANTIMETAPHYSICAL SENTIMENT

Can knowledge have no bound, but must advance
 So far, to make us wish for ignorance?
 —Denham, *Cooper's Hill* (1660 version), 145–46

The explosive growth of information of which we are the recipients and that necessitates our specialization into separate disciplines was not so advanced in Hume's time that it had yet quite killed off the ideal of the Renaissance man. In claiming for his province practically all knowledge and polite letters too, Hume was not behaving hubristically in the eyes of his contemporaries. Nor did they think him naive. Though they were not insensible of the differences between philosophy, history, and belles-lettres, the importance of maintaining diverse criteria for evaluation in these fields was not so evident to them. The ways in which the fields were complementary seemed more important. History weighed and recounted facts; philosophy ascertained of what factual knowledge consists; historical interpretation was applied philosophy; philosophy and history supplied matter for literature and invigorated it; literature disseminated both. The prevailing cultural values, extending often to firm prejudice, were against specialization and the compartmentalization of learning. They were toward an ideal of the evenly developed, well-balanced, erudite but polished performer in society. There was outside of the universities a positive aversion to even the appearance of pedantry, an aversion that is evident throughout the literature and criticism of the day, evident, for example, in Hume's criticism of the *Rambler* quoted above. Society was demanding that learning endeavor to be polite.¹⁰

The desire for social advancement is not supposed to be a

¹⁰ As a historian of the idea of politeness has observed, " 'Pedantry' had many meanings, but few friends" (Lawrence E. Klein, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 [1986]: 203 n. 43). See also Klein's "Berkeley, Shaftesbury, and the Meaning of Politeness," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 16 (1986): 57–68.

determining factor in the activities of philosophers, and by itself it would have been an inadequate incentive for philosophers of real merit to attend to the tastes of society. But for the new breed of philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a more compelling reason to learn to write like gentlemen for gentlemen, and this was simply the need to find a more responsive audience than that provided by the scholars of the universities. The stimulating influence of mathematics and experimental science on their thinking had led the more adventurous into tracks where the universities were slow to follow. The natural audience for philosophy, those in the universities and the churches who had studied its questions, was insufficiently responsive to suit the ambitions of the rationalist and empiricist thinkers for the advancement of knowledge. It appeared worth the trial to bypass an unappreciative audience and lay this new philosophy directly before the literate public. From the Restoration age through the eighteenth century the identity of this literate public, like the identity of the "gentleman," came to exchange somewhat its aristocratic for a bourgeois character; but this difference is less important for understanding Hume than that between the literate gentleman, upper or middle class, and the "schoolman."

The universities, then, were more of an obstacle to be surmounted than a theater in which to perform. A more promising theater for the rationalists and empiricists seemed to be that of the world of men of affairs, where, precisely because it was untrained, the audience might be expected to be more receptive. What was lost in the sophistication of the audience stood to be recovered in impartiality and freshness of eye. Of course this lack of sophistication presented certain literary problems to the philosophers. Most philosophers today would look upon the requirement to address their thoughts to the uninformed and untrained as an impracticable compromise. But as it happened, certain philosophers of the Enlightenment not only made do in the face of these problems; they actually produced works that transformed Western civilization and are still centuries later the focus of important discussion.

It has been noted that Descartes wrote the *Discours de la methode* (1637) in French rather than in Latin, just as Galileo when he wrote in Italian, intending "to aim over the heads of the academic community and to reach educated men of *bon sens*, among whom he hoped to get a favorable hearing," and that consequently he developed a prose style that "has always been regarded as a model for the expression of abstract thought in that language."¹¹ Locke composed his works likewise under the difficulty of having to reach educated men with no expertise in his subject, for he had a low opinion of the impartiality of pedagogues and expected only carping from them.¹² Though not now often lauded as a highly readable book, his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1690) enjoyed a popular success unprecedented for a work of epistemology. With this example before them it would not seem impossible to Berkeley and Hume that their philosophical writings could reach a wide audience and attain for them considerable fame. Thus the revolution in thought that has been characterized as the Enlightenment was attended with a change in literary manner to suit a new taste. It is a commonplace of literary history that during this period English prose changed in the direction of the gentlemanly virtues of simplicity and clarity. Remarkably, philosophy was able to partake in this change toward simplicity at a time when it was in ferment. This stylistic change not only did not hamper the new philosophy, but actually seems to have complemented it. The success with which these philosophers dealt with their literary problems is of a high order of cultural significance, and, with Berkeley, Hume stands at the summit of this achievement.

This stylistic change is the literary aspect of the Enlightenment repudiation of scholasticism. Disdain for the "school-

¹¹ Bernard Williams, "Descartes, René," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards et al., 8 vols. (New York, 1967), 2: 344-45.

¹² See, e.g., *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* 4. 20, § 11. For Locke's intentions and projected audience, see Neal Wood, *The Politics of Locke's Philosophy: A Social Study of "An Essay concerning Human Understanding"* (Berkeley, 1983), 41-64.

man" is a theme common to the writings of Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Under the rubric of "the schools" the empiricists tended to lump together that large and various body of medieval and Renaissance theological philosophy with the disputation taught then at Oxford and Cambridge. Locke called this disputation "Hogshearing."¹³ To distinguish between Scotism and Thomism, or between them both and what went on in the modern universities, did not serve the new philosophers' polemical purposes. Hume, having no personal quarrel with Oxford or Cambridge, and being an alumnus of a university not given over to scholastic disputation, usually alluded only to the neo-Aristotelians and Neoplatonists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance when he disparaged the "dreaming and captious philosophy of the schools."¹⁴ For their own reasons the empiricists took up the Renaissance humanists' criticisms of the schools, prominent among which was the charge of barbarous writing. Cowley thus described the corruption of Aristotelianism into scholasticism:

And in the *School-mens* hands it perisht quite at last.
 Then nought but *Words* it grew,
 And those all *Barb'arous* too.
 It *perisht*, and it *vanisht* there,
 The *Life* and *Soul* breath'd out, became but empty *Air*.¹⁵

The preoccupation of philosophers with disputes over meaningless words is to be deplored by anyone who cares about the state of the language: it is a misfortune for culture in general. "Every science, as well as polite literature, must be con-

¹³ Peter Laslett's introduction to his edition of *Two Treatises of Government* . . . , by John Locke, 2d ed. (London, 1967), 23. Cf. Locke, *Essay* 3. 10, § 2; 20 Jan. 1693, *Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. DeBeer, 8 vols. to date (Oxford, 1976-), 4: 627.

¹⁴ *Hist.* 3: 229 (A.D. 1536). For the comparative freedom of Edinburgh University from "scholastic jargon," see Goldsmith, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning*, in *Collected Works* 1: 333.

¹⁵ "To Mr. Hobs," st. 2, *Poems*, ed. A. R. Waller (London, 1905), 188. For Hume's assessment of Cowley's writings, see *Hist.* 6. 152.

sidered as being yet in its infancy," wrote Hume of the Jacobean age. "Scholastic learning and polemical divinity retarded the growth of all true knowledge."¹⁶ What progress Europe had made was possible only to the extent that scholastic philosophy had lost its influence over society.

The unintelligibility complained of was treated in society as a failure of taste as well as of clear reasoning. For the new philosophers to censure the schoolman was, as well as a genuine expression of protest, an implicit appeal to the gentleman's distaste for the pedantic. This gentlemanly distaste was reflected in and probably given some vogue by the second Earl of Rochester's famous "Satyr against Reason and Mankind" (London, 1679), in which the poet pillories philosophical pride:

This busy, puzzling stirrer-up of doubt
That frames deep mysteries, then finds 'em out,
Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools
Those reverend bedlams, colleges and schools;
Borne on whose wings, each heavy sot can pierce
The limits of the boundless universe. . . .

(lines 80–85)¹⁷

It may seem foolish of philosophers to seek an audience in people with such an attitude, but in important ways the empiricists concurred with the views Rochester expressed. They held that proud reason unchecked by reference to experience was abusive and often ridiculous. Hence the empiricists looked upon rationalists, deluded into a false sense of certainty by a priori reasoning, as little better than the schoolmen; and they had some success in bringing the public to share this opinion. As scholastic legerdemain had been satirized in the character of Hudibras, so now was a prominent strain of rationalism in the characters of Mr. Square and Pangloss. The empiricist stress on experience as against ratioci-

¹⁶ *Hist.* 5: 155 (app. to the Reign of James I).

¹⁷ *Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (New Haven, 1968), 97. For Hume's assessment of Rochester's poems, see *Hist.* 6: 543–44.

nation was appealingly analogous to the gentlemanly stress on worldly experience as against book-learning. Both were seen as means of keeping one's feet firmly on the ground.

By the eighteenth century the preeminent figure of empiricism was Locke, whose influence reached deep into popular culture.¹⁸ Of course Locke repeatedly and in no uncertain terms disavowed the mixing of literature and philosophy,¹⁹ but there is no question that to many he represented an example of the grooming of philosophy for society. Locke's famous declaration of purpose was that he had employed himself

*as an Under-Labourer in clearing Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the World, if the Endeavours of ingenious and industrious Men had not been much cumbred with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible Terms, introduced into the Sciences, and there made an Art of, to that Degree, that Philosophy, which is nothing but the true Knowledge of Things, was thought unfit, or incapable to be brought into well-bred Company, and polite Conversation.*²⁰

This hint was taken up by Locke's sometime educational charge, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who, characteristically emphasizing taste, maintained that "[t]o philosophise, in a just signification, is but to carry good-breeding a step higher." Philosophy, he lamented,

is no longer active in the world, nor can hardly, with any advantage, be brought upon the public stage. We have immured her, poor lady, in colleges and cells, and have set her servilely to such works as those in the mines. Empirics and pedantic soph-

¹⁸ See Kenneth MacLean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1936).

¹⁹ See *Essay* 3. 10, § 34; the letter of 5 Apr. 1696; and the draft of a letter dated 1698/99, *Correspondence* 5: 596, 6: 539.

²⁰ *Essay*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (corr. repr. Oxford, 1979), 10.

ists are her chief pupils. The school-syllogism and the elixir are the choicest of her products. . . .

It may be properly alleged perhaps, as a reason for this general shyness in moral inquiries, that the people to whom it has principally belonged to handle these subjects have done it in such a manner as to put the better sort out of countenance with the undertaking. The appropriating this concern to mere scholastics has brought their fashion and air into the very subject. . . . We can give no quarter to anything like it in good company. The least mention of such matters gives us a disgust, and puts us out of humour. If learning comes across us, we count it pedantry; if morality, 'tis preaching.

Philosophy is discredited by association with tasteless pedants, and the leaders of society injudiciously turn from it. Shaftesbury feared that writing on substantial subjects would be left to languish with the schoolmen:

If the formalists of this sort were erected into patentees with a sole commission of authorship, we should undoubtedly see such writing in our days as would either wholly wean us from all books in general, or at least from all such as were the product of our own nation under such a subordinate and conforming government.²¹

Good relations between philosophy and literature, then, are a matter of some importance. Philosophy without tasteful presentation is vitiated for society, and society without philosophy is undiscerning and directionless. To restore a balance was imperative. Hume would say, further, that familiarity with social life is essential to reasoning accurately about human nature: "We must . . . glean up our experiments . . . from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (*THN*, xix). In "Of Essay Writing" Hume welcomes the progress that

²¹ *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.*, ed. John M. Robertson, 2 vols. (London, 1900), 2: 255, 4-5; 1: 216. "Empirics" here does not mean empiricists, but quacks.

had been made in striking such a balance since Shaftesbury's day. Bad relations between society and the intelligentsia rendered society insipid, and

Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company. By that Means, every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation. Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping re-cluse Method of Study, and became as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery. And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation? (*EMPLit.*, 534–35)²²

We might guess that Hume has in mind the Cambridge Platonists and the *Port-Royalistes*.²³ But though people like Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson had restored the good name of philosophy to an extent, the climate of opinion was still not propitious to it, as we shall see. To the cultivation and maintenance of good relations Hume wanted to contribute. Thus when he proclaimed to Montesquieu, "*J'ai consacré ma vie à la philosophie et aux belles-lettres*," he was not confess-

²² Cf. Frances Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 3d corr. ed. (London, 1729), xv–xvi: "I doubt we have made Philosophy, as well as Religion, by our foolish management of it, so austere and 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 our Description of it. So much it is changed from what was once the delight of the finest Gentlemen among the Ancients and their Recreation after the Hurry of publick Affairs!"

²³ I say this notwithstanding the extent to which the Cambridge Platonists influenced Shaftesbury and thereby, possibly, Hume (see Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove [Austin, 1953], 157–202), and the extent to which unacknowledged Cartesian notions underlay Hume's thinking (see John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of Hume* [Minneapolis, 1983]).