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THE MAN OF LETTERS AND THE AUTHOR OF NATURE: HUME ON PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

Gary Shapiro

Recent philosophy in the English language manifests a concern with the status and nature of the philosophical text which seems virtually unprecedented in Anglo-American thought. The very suggestion that the concept of the philosophical text ought to be taken seriously by philosophers (as opposed to publishers or literary historians) appears to be a recent addition to our world of discourse. For in the dominant tradition of Anglo-American philosophy, the philosophical enterprise has usually been construed as an open-ended inquiry, a posing and sharpening of questions, counter-questions, objections, and refutations in which the important thing is *doing* philosophy. So far this conception of the activity is in accord with the criticism of the written word in Plato's *Phaedrus*, although many of our philosophical colinguists have shied away from Socrates' insistence that such ongoing discourse must be dialectically oriented toward attaining a single, comprehensive, and systematic view of the totality of things. But even those with a penchant for systematic thought have generally proceeded in a manner which suggests that they could not acknowledge the irony of the Socratic and Platonic positions; for Socrates' critique of writing appears in a dialogue which has been written quite artfully and deliberately and which has attained the status of a cultural icon.

That such irony can no longer be ignored and that it is increasingly being detected in thinkers and texts that stand closer and closer to the mainstream of the dominant tradition can be ascribed to several realizations, some of which have been crystallized by the finally unavoidable force of the perspectives identified with thinkers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault. (I speak of the "dominant tradition," meaning that which *has come* to dominate, for, as I will be suggesting, it is not the only philosophical mode which has been handed down to us in our language.) The tradition of which I write does have a textual base that can be appealed to in cases of crisis of confidence. The canonical authors are Locke, Berkeley, and

Hume, supplemented, if necessary, by those who are perceived as writing in the same style, such as J. S. Mill and Bertrand Russell. The rise of metaphilosophical thought concerning the foundations and directions of this tradition has tended to focus on the special privilege which has been accorded to this textual base and the structures which have been erected on it and on the rather different text and tradition represented by Wittgenstein.

Richard Rorty's recent crisis of faith concerning the problems and topics of Western philosophy from Descartes to Kant has to do with his doubts as to whether the tradition has been justified in giving a special priority to such problems as the foundation and possibility of knowledge or the relation of mind and body. Identifying with the pragmatists, Rorty suggests that "the problems about which philosophers are now offering 'objective, verifiable, and clearly communicable' solutions [are] historical relics, left over from the Enlightenment's misguided search for the hidden essences of knowledge and morality."[1] Rather than continue a scholastic tradition based on the veneration of such relics, Rorty would have the philosopher enter into the "conversation of mankind" in which the concerns of the artist, the politician, the historian and the psychoanalyst will have important places. Certainly the Locke-Berkeley-Hume paradigm which still dominates many university curricula (and certainly dominates our conception of the resources of the English philosophical tradition) seems to be a case of the obsessive foundationalism which Rorty diagnoses.

Since I will eventually be discussing Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which is an acknowledged masterpiece of this tradition, I want to note here that the classic British paradigm may not be as monolithic as Rorty and some others have implied. In the *Dialogues*, Philo, who has rightly been taken to be the character closest to Hume's own views, says in his very last, ironic comments that "To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian" (p. 228).[2] Hume's readers, while they have been impressed by the force of his philosophical skepticism, have tended to think that he has no intention of converting them to being "sound, believing Christian[s]"; yet they have tended to ignore the *subject* of both of these predicates in Philo's final speech: the man of letters. Let me suggest in a provisional way that Hume's man of letters is very much like Rorty's conversational philosopher, who is no

longer enclosed within the confines of a narrow foundationalism but is responsive to a wide range of human expressions and is hesitant to accord a special priority to any one of them. Hume describes himself as a "man of letters" in his short sketch "My Own Life" which was written in the fateful year of 1776 in which he was busily revising the *Dialogues* and during which he died. The *Dialogues*, I claim, can and ought to be read as a metaphilosophical discussion concerning the viability of the purist model of philosophical discourse and the alternative offered by the man of letters, not merely as the storehouse of arguments in natural theology which it has long been recognized to be.

Despite metaphilosophical developments of the sort represented by Rorty and Stanley Cavell, there is still a tendency to suppose that there are two or more distinct philosophical modes or traditions and that the major works and authors of Anglo-American philosophy fall within the prosaic paradigm; the aim then becomes to expand the circle of acceptable philosophical texts by including "Continental" thinkers from Hegel to Derrida or to provide credentials for seemingly deviant works such as *Walden*. In this essay I want to suggest, through the example of a reading of Hume's *Dialogues*, that there is much which is questionable (*fragwürdig*) and uncanny (*unheimlich*) even in what is taken to be the historical core of the English language model of philosophical textuality; this can, in turn, lead to some reflections on how that conventional model of our philosophical past has been constructed and how it might be alternatively construed (or deconstructed).

In recent years the argument of Hume's *Dialogues* has been subjected to intensive analysis, almost always from the perspective of the validity of the arguments in natural theology which are put forward by the characters in the dialogue. Since Norman Kemp Smith's magisterial edition of 1935, there has been general agreement that Philo, the skeptic, has a position which is clearer, more coherent, and closer to Hume's own beliefs than are the views put forward by Cleanthes, the deist, and Demea, the traditional fideist. (Demea, it should be noted, also employs the rational and nonempirical ontological argument which derives from philosophers like Anselm and Descartes.) Yet at the close of the dialogue, Philo seems to reverse himself, apparently becoming a spokesman both for the argument that the world exhibits divine design and for Christianity, more specifically. Our

knowledge of Hume's own skepticism and his deep suspicion of specific historical religions, including Christianity, as well as the whole contents of the preceding dialogue lead to the perception of a deep irony in Philo's conclusion that "A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity" (p. 227). Pamphilus, the young student and ward of Cleanthes who narrates the *Dialogues*, then comments that "Cleanthes and Philo pursued not this conversation much farther; and as nothing ever made greater impression on me, than all the reasonings of that day; so I confess, that, upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth" (p. 228). This too has been supposed (rightly, I think) to exhibit a high degree of irony on Hume's part; the use of a naive narrator whose point of view must contrast with that of the careful, philosophical reader suggests that Hume aims at some balance of opposing points of view that will justify his use of the dialogue form. This, in turn, leads to reflections on Hume's employing a literary genre in this instance that might very well begin with his letter of 1751 to Gilbert Elliot: "I have often thought, that the best way of composing a Dialogue wou'd be for two persons that are of different Opinions about any Question of Importance, to write alternately the different parts of the discourse, and reply to each other. By this means, that vulgar Error would be avoided, of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the Adversary: And at the same time, a Variety of Character and Genius being upheld, would make the whole look more natural and unaffected."[3] So it has also frequently been thought that Pamphilus' letter to Hermippus, which prefaces the dialogues he transmits to his otherwise unidentified friend, must express Hume's own poetics of the dialogue form. While I agree that what Pamphilus says there does accord very closely with Hume's principles of composition, the fact that it is Pamphilus who puts them forward calls for much more attention than it has hitherto received. It suggests that Pamphilus has learned more from Philo than he can yet acknowledge, for the poetics of philosophical discourse is, as we shall see, itself a controversial topic within the dialogue. E. C. Mossner, an authority on the text, has rightly said that anything that Pamphilus says may be ironic.[4] Here what is ironic is not so much the content of Pamphilus' letter of transmission but the very fact that he has *recorded*, *preserved*, and

introduced the dialogue and that in doing so he has formulated a view of the dialogue form which is markedly closer to the views of Philo and of Hume than to those of his guardian and teacher.

Since Pamphilus begins his letter by remarking on the distinction between the ancient philosophers who "conveyed most of their instruction in the form of dialogue" and the moderns who have either avoided dialogue or have "seldom succeeded" at it, we might think here of the complex function played by narration and setting in the Platonic dialogues. The latter can be classified according to whether they are direct dramatic presentations (like the *Apology* and *Crito*), narrated by Socrates (like the *Republic*), by another of those present (like the *Phaedo*), or indirectly by a character who has heard the story from one of the participants (like the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*). Pamphilus is present during the entire dialogue and is mentioned several times by the speakers although he does not himself speak. This silence is appropriate to his condition as a young man under the tutelage of Cleanthes; since this educational motif is the only one sounded in regard to Pamphilus, we may, if we follow Hume's claim that "nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written"[5] than the *Dialogues*, look to the few things which Pamphilus writes to discover something about the educational effect that the dialogue has had on him. If we have read the entire *Dialogues*, then we know that even in his later and considered transmission of the conversations to Hermippus, Pamphilus believes that Cleanthes' principles are closer to the truth than Philo's, and that Philo's are more probable than Demea's. But in the same set of remarks Pamphilus says that "nothing ever made greater impression on me, than all the reasonings of that day." Those who have been subject to a strong educational impression (what Harold Bloom calls the "scene of instruction") are not always in the best position to assess the extent and manner of the impression. So it is with Pamphilus. He observes that the dialogue form is no longer much used because "Accurate and regular argument, indeed, such as is now expected of philosophical enquirers, naturally throws a man into the methodical and didactic manner." That manner leads to an immediate statement of aims and a direct deduction of the proofs which establish a position. Therefore the philosopher who is accustomed to the modern manner if he ventures to write a dialogue "desires, by departing from the direct style of composition, to give a freer air to his performance, and avoid the

appearance of *author* and *reader*, he is apt to run into a worse inconvenience, and convey the image of *pedagogue* and *pupil*." Now in the fiction of the dialogue there is no author, for we are asked to believe that Pamphilus has recollected and transcribed the conversation. Yet also within this fiction there are both "pedagogue and pupil," although their relation does not give the *Dialogues* the heavy, didactic tone which both Pamphilus and Hume fear. Yet if, in fact, as I will be arguing, Philo has managed to subvert the pedagogical relation of Cleanthes and Pamphilus, we must hear unconscious irony in this reference to that relationship. It is such ironies that make the implied author of the *Dialogues* almost as elusive as the "author of nature" who is their subject.

That a subversion of Cleanthes' principles has occurred becomes clear when we compare Pamphilus' justification of the dialogue form with the poetics and pedagogy of his teacher. According to Pamphilus,

> Any question of philosophy . . . which is so *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it; if it should be treated at all; seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation. Reasonable men may be allowed to differ, where no one can reasonably be positive: Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement: And if the subject be curious and interesting, the book carries us, in a manner, into company; and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life, study and society. (p. 128)

Cleanthes' own aesthetic and pedagogical principles emerge early in the dialogue and consistently govern the discourses which he gives in the presence of his pupil. The entire dialogue is set in Cleanthes' library which is, presumably, the scene of instruction. We might also note that the question of education is the very first topic taken up in the *Dialogues* and also the last to which Philo alludes, in his final speech: "And I hope Cleanthes will forgive me for interposing so far in the education and instruction of his pupil" (p. 228). As Pamphilus joins the company, Demea is recommending the stoic curriculum to Cleanthes in order to aid him in his already diligent efforts to convey to his pupil "every useful branch of literature and science" (p. 130). In the stoic curriculum the study of "the nature of the gods" comes only after logic, ethics, and physics (in that order).[6] Philo asks, in apparent astonishment, whether education in such important matters should be delayed so long and Demea replies that only *natural* theology must wait; while they are young he "imprint[s] deeply on [the] tender minds" of his own children (who are absent from

the dialogue) "an habitual reverence for all the principles of religion" (p. 130). Philo proceeds to enlarge on Demea's principles in an ironic vein. While Demea has explained that he has taken pains to show his children the uncertainty of all other branches of knowledge, he will present religion as the only certain one. But Philo takes this to refer to all branches of natural or human knowledge, including natural religion. After showing the uncertainties of all other sciences, he is convinced that we can have no assurance in deciding "concerning the origin of worlds or in trac[ing] their history from eternity to eternity" (p. 132). Cleanthes makes the retort of the practical educator: one cannot live according to a system of principles which would make it arbitrary whether one left the room by the door or the window. Cleanthes says that he will not go quite so far as Arnaud, who argues that skeptics are not philosophers but liars; yet he does affirm that "for my part, whenever I find myself disposed to mirth and amusement, I shall certainly choose my entertainment of a less perplexing and abstruse nature. A comedy, a novel, or at most a history, seems a more natural recreation than such metaphysical subtleties and abstractions" (p. 137). So the skeptic is more a literary man than a philosopher, but he is not a very good literary man, being inferior to other practioners of the genre. Cleanthes would not read a skeptic's writing. Would he place a skeptical dialogue on the reading list for his pupils? Certainly not, if he knew that his own pupil, Pamphilus, could have been so far shaken in regard to the principles of natural religion as to believe that the question of the nature of God "is so *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it" (p. 128). Were Pamphilus a better pupil, he would publish Cleanthes' views on natural religion in the form of a treatise.

Doctrinally, then, Pamphilus seems to have been partially dislodged from the views he should hold as Cleanthes' pupil. This dislodgement, however, leads immediately to an even larger deviation in literary principles. For while Cleanthes finds the skeptic and his works to be less amusing than novels and histories, Pamphilus presents a skeptical dialogue to us as not only an "agreeable amusement" but one which "unites the two *greatest* and *purest* pleasures of human life, study and society" (my emphasis). It is true that Pamphilus is able to proceed serenely in reporting the conversation because he believes that it has no implications concerning God's existence but only

concerning his nature. This distinction is one of Philo's artful dodges to which commentators have drawn attention. If Philo had claimed early on that God's existence was at stake and had never softened his position as he appears to do at the end, we may reasonably speculate that Cleanthes would have terminated this assault on his pupil's beliefs by simply walking out with Pamphilus in tow, much as Demea leaves in the present version of the *Dialogues.* Cleanthes shows he is no friend of the dialogue form when, after Demea's departure, he tells Philo that he would "rather wish to reason with either of you," that is Philo or Demea, "apart on a subject so sublime and interesting." Demea leaves in the present version of the *Dialogues.* Pamphilus, then, has been seduced despite himself, like Phaedrus in Plato's dialogue. And the point of that seduction becomes clearer when we realize that, like the *Phaedrus* and to some extent like its Ciceronian model(s), Hume's *Dialogues* not only concerns a substantive question—the nature of religion or love—but is also very much a dialogue about the process of education and the role of various forms of discourse in that education. In the *Phaedrus* it is the opposition of rhetoric and philosophy; in Hume's *Dialogues* it is the literary and philosophical culture exemplified by the "man of letters" which is in opposition to the narrower and more dogmatic methods favored by Cleanthes.

Who is the man of letters? Hume and other writers of the time use the term and its cognates, such as "the republic of letters," rather liberally. For our purposes Hume's usage in "My Own Life" is especially illuminating. (We should also note that this brief work was written during the same months when Hume added to the *Dialogues* Philo's final speech, "To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters. . . .") The essay is remarkable in that Hume refers to himself throughout as a man of letters rather than as a philosopher. It reminds us that Hume tended to accept his contemporaries' harsh judgment of his early *Treatise of Human Nature,* now generally regarded as his major work, on the grounds that it was rough and unpolished. Hume's public career was based on his various essays and on his *History of England.* Yet I do not mean (nor does Hume) to suggest that he was merely a literary man and not a philosopher, as John Herman Randall once came close to claiming;[7] although Hume's *Dialogues* in particular have been discussed by some recent critics in regard to the question whether they are philosophy or literature, the opposition is anachronistic and not easily

applicable to Hume. In fact it is only Cleanthes who proposes such a dichotomy in the *Dialogues* by suggesting that the skeptic's wit is a poor species of literature rather than a form of philosophy, and I have already argued that Pamphilus' transmission of the conversation is intended to call that easy division into question.

The concept of the man of letters is one that has become increasingly difficult for us to understand; we have poets, novelists, journalists, and publishing scholars, but to call someone a man of letters today suggests a taste for the archaic or perhaps a veiled insult ("I thought he was a philosopher, but he's really a man of letters"). An academic might claim to be a man of letters, but only if he earns his living by writing for the market. Nevertheless, a man of letters emerges every now and then despite our efforts to misread the direction of his activity. Our last man of letters was probably Jean-Paul Sartre, and it is worth noting that his culminating work is a literary biography of Flaubert, who can be credited with crystallizing the modernist priesthood of literature by separating the vocation of the writer from what he saw as the mundane and degraded world of the man of letters. (As Ezra Pound said of the modernist writer, "His true Penelope was Flaubert.")

Sartre suggests that the modernist movement, with its worship of the self-enclosed text and its break with the wider political and philosophical dimensions of earlier literature, was founded in a spirit of envy directed against what appeared to it as the glib fluency of the man of letters.[8] In Hume's analysis the opponents of the man of letters—who represents and combines both philosophical and literary talents—are the dogmatic religionist and those who believe in the power of reason, unaided by the literary and historical record. Such enemies, however, were not sufficient to wound seriously the man of letters, who was dealt his first mortal blow by Flaubert and his colleagues.

In addition to the modernist separation of literature from the man of letters (which coincides with the divorce between poetics and rhetoric), there are problems in the usage of Hume and his contemporaries. There is something of an antinomy between commitment to the general goals of the republic of letters and the individual ambition and vanity of the man of letters. "The republic of letters" is a concept of the late seventeenth and of the eighteenth centuries; its origin lies perhaps in the title of Pierre Bayle's periodical *Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, which

he edited from 1684 to 1687. The republic of letters is not an empire in which one discipline or emphasis holds hegemonic sway. It is a society of equals, a republic with no national boundaries whose members are now conventionally sorted out into poets, philosophers, historians, or economists. The aim of the republic of letters is very close to that of the French Encyclopedists: to promote the spread of enlightenment, especially concerning religious matters. It is possible to belong to the republic while still professing fideism, as Bayle did on skeptical grounds, or as Philo *seems* to do at the end of the *Dialogues*. In any case, the republic of letters is concerned at least as much with the propagation of ideas as with the discovery of new truths. It is an educational establishment without a campus which stands in opposition to the dogmatic instruction of the churches. From Hume's point of view, being a man of letters seems to involve a degree of philosophical skepticism. In part, this is a conscious link with the Ciceronian tradition in which academical skepticism goes hand in hand with an insistence on breadth of humanistic learning and the development of eloquence and style. (Cicero offers his *De natura deorum* as an example of Latin style—meaning an example of how to present ideas in a public format to an interested audience—and not merely as a disinterested inquiry into its subject.)

Hume refers to Berkeley's rejection of abstract ideas as "one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries, that has been made of late years in the republic of letters";[9] we can also hear the Enlightenment tendencies of the term in his preface to the *Abstract* which he published of his own *Treatise*:

> The book seemed to me to have such an air of singularity, and novelty as claimed the attention of the public; especially if it be found, as the author seems to insinuate, that were his philosophy received, we must alter from the foundation the greatest part of the sciences. Such bold attempts are always advantageous in the republic of letters, because they shake off the yoke of authority, accustom men to think for themselves, give new hints, which men of genius may carry further, and, by the very opposition, illustrate points, wherein no one before suspected any difficulty.[10]

At the same time that he must regard his citizenship in the republic of letters with the greatest seriousness, the individual man of letters is ambitious for the success of his own writings and has a constant tendency to vanity. This dialectic of commitment to the general cause versus personal vanity and ambition is mirrored in the publishing conventions of Hume's time. It was the custom for philosophical authors to publish their

works anonymously at first, so that they might receive impartial judgment; the successful work, however, would soon be claimed by its author in order to start or enhance his career. The tension was typically acknowledged in D'Alembert's "Preliminary Discourse" to the *Encyclopedia*: "The Encyclopedia which we are presenting to the public is, as its title declares, the work of a society of men of letters. Were we not of their number we might venture to affirm that they are all favorably known or worthy of being so." [11] Hume's "My Own Life" matches the irony of his *Dialogues* in the way in which it deals with the problem. Hume begins: "It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without vanity; therefore I shall be short. It may be thought an instance of vanity that I pretend at all to write my life; but this narrative shall contain little more than the history of my writings; as indeed almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupations." He now has entitled himself by his success and the irony of his gesture to confess that he "was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments" (p. 233). Hume qualifies the confession, however, by claiming that "Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments" (p. 239). The darker side of the man of letters emerges in the *Dialogues* only in so far as Cleanthes and Demea occasionally charge Philo with making points simply for the sake of effect; this was also the charge of the early reviewers against Hume's *Treatise* which no doubt contributed to Hume's self-knowledge. Certainly it ought not to be forgotten that philosophy within the republic of letters lends itself to such a pattern in which the writer can, as Hegel suggests, systematically shift his emphasis from "my *work*" (the impersonal ideal) to "*my* work!" (in which he can satisfy his vanity and ambition) and back again.[12]

Perhaps the most general feature of the complex of ideas which Hume and other writers of the time designate by "the man of letters" and "the republic of letters" is that the world of letters contains an educational program with a strong emphasis on the public dimension; such publicity may be used for the sake of all or may be seized upon by a single writer to advance himself. In looking at the *Dialogues* we can see that each of the three main speakers has a definite educational program or curriculum in view and that we know something of his practice and results as an educator. Demea has children of his own (who do not appear

in the dialogue); after giving them a sound and orthodox Christian training, he goes through the stoic curriculum with them in order to point out the weaknesses of the merely human sciences. This is an inversion of the usual purposes of the stoic curriculum; for Demea the order of studies becomes an instrument to shake the student's confidence in rationality rather than to foster it. When Philo suggests that religious education formerly appealed to the skeptical tropes in order to clear the way for religion, while now it invokes the arguments of more dogmatic philosophers to strengthen the side of natural theology, he is implicitly consigning Demea to the older category and Cleanthes to the new (pp. 138-140).

Each teacher in the dialogue is bound to his pupil(s) by a relation analogous to the principles of his own natural theology. Demea, the traditionalist and fideist, assumes the "natural" patriarchal role of imbuing his children with respect for divine and paternal authority; a necessary part of that process is the acquisition of contempt for human reason. Cleanthes teaches that natural reason can show the analogy or resemblance between the world and God's mind; rational production has replaced patriarchal mystery. Accordingly, Pamphilus is a ward rather than a son and Cleanthes educates him in the principles of natural theology. He will not depend upon him; the relation is more like that of the deistic world to its creator, once it has been set in motion, than it is like that of the world as seen by religious orthodoxy to its mysterious creator. It is hoped that Pamphilus will come to resemble Cleanthes through a course of rational education. Philo seems to have no children; at the same time he tends to deny the necessity of thinking of the world either as immediately dependent upon God or as a piece of rational craftsmanship which resembles its creator according to reasonable principles. He denies the paternal principle altogether and is at his most shocking and amusing in his suggestion that, far from having a single divine father, the world might be the defective product of immature gods, that it might have arisen through vegetable reproduction or that it might just be a self-maintaining arrangement of matter.

In order to make these many hypotheses vivid, Philo, unlike Cleanthes and Demea, makes use of a wide knowledge of English and classical poetry; in this stylistic respect he is also closer to Hume than are the other speakers. In Part 7 of the *Dialogues* Philo has recourse to a "fertility of invention" (Cleanthes' term

of praise [p. 181]) in order to suggest that the world may just as plausibly have arisen from vegetation or animal generation as from the action of reason:

> A comet, for instance, is the seed of a world; and after it has been fully ripened, by passing from sun to sun, and start to star, it is at last tossed into the unformed elements, which everywhere surround this universe, and immediately sprouts up into a new system.
>
> Or if, for the sake of variety (for I see no other advantage) we should suppose this world to be an animal; a comet is the egg of this animal; and in like manner an ostrich lays its eggs in the sand, which, without any further care, hatches the egg and produces a new animal. . . . (p. 177)

Here Philo would gladly proceed with such inventions, that is with the production of new narrative cosmogonies, but he is interrupted by Demea's objection to such "wild, arbitrary suppositions." As he does at a number of places in the *Dialogues*, Philo's reply to Cleanthes' rather narrow vision of the world as an artifice or machine designed by reason is to suggest by a story of his own or by a historical or literary precedent that things might be otherwise. In this procedure he unites the rhetorician's figures of speech and the argumentative strategies of the skeptics; both of these are known as "tropes," that is, movements or deviations away from a suspended norm of literality or epistemic certainty. Philo concludes this section of the conversation by giving away the models from his rhetorician's art of memory which makes possible the "fertility of invention" that temporarily paralyzes Cleanthes. He cites the example of "Hesiod, and all the ancient mythologists" who "were so struck by this analogy, that they universally explained the origin of nature from an animal birth, and copulation. Plato, too, so far as he is intelligible, seems to have adopted some such notion in his *Timaeus*," and Philo goes on to retell the Brahmin story of the world's having been spun from the bowels of an infinite spider (p. 180). In the *Timaeus* the narrator tells a story which is embedded within the larger story of that dialogue; he begins by noting that such matters cannot be conveyed precisely but require the narrative form of a "likely story." [13]

Having confounded Cleanthes for the moment, Philo takes the opportunity (in Part Eight) to elaborate a revised version of the Epicurean hypothesis of eternal recurrence. In this view the world is composed of a finite number of particles which are capable of only a finite number of possible movements and arrangements; it follows that in infinite time each total arrangement or state of motion must be infinitely repeated so that "This world . . . with

all its events, even the most minute, has before been produced and destroyed, and will again be produced and destroyed, without any bounds and limitation" (p. 182). In the discussion which follows, Philo generalizes upon this hypothesis in order to suggest the view, often thought to be Hume's "own" in the *Dialogues*, that the material universe itself can be regarded as self-maintaining and even as the necessarily existent being, if one must believe in necessary existence. This is the climax of the metaphysical and epistemological part of the *Dialogues* and it is achieved by Philo's "fertility of invention." We should recall here that invention is one of the most important abilities of the rhetorician. In a coda to this climax (Part Nine), Demea advances the a priori argument that all contingent existence requires a necessarily existent being, namely God; this gives Philo the opportunity to formulate the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions and the characteristic Humean claim that no matter of fact can be established by an a priori argument.

It is at this point that the argument takes a decisive turn. Philo believes that he has demolished the argument to design and the a priori arguments for God's necessity and existence (traditionally designated as the cosmological and ontological arguments). In the next two parts of the *Dialogues*, the subject is the problem of evil: how can we reconcile a just and good god with a tragic and painful world? This turn in the conversation is effected by Philo's calling again on the literary memory of the man of letters. Demea remarks that "each man feels . . . the truth of religion within his own breast; and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery, rather than from any other reasoning, is led to seek protection from that Being, on whom he and all nature are dependent" (p. 193). Philo seems to agree, but in fact he strategically substitutes for Demea's appeal to individual feeling the resources of the literary tradition. A new stage in the curriculum has been reached when Philo says that "the best and indeed the only method of bringing every one to a due sense of religion is by just *representations* of the misery and wickedness of men. And for that purpose a *talent of eloquence and strong imagery* is more requisite than that of reason and argument" (p. 193, my emphasis). Philo agrees with Demea that analytical reason and detached observation of nature are insufficient; but as his next exchange with Cleanthes makes clear, he thinks that the appeal to sentiment unsupported by literature and history is also inadequate. The common or vulgar position coincides here with

that of the learned; this reinforcement is necessary, since Cleanthes claims not to feel the misery of the world. But "in all letters, *sacred* and *profane*, the topic of human misery has been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire. The poets, who speak from sentiment, without a system, and whose testimony has therefore the more authority, abound in images of this nature. From Homer down to Dr. Young, the whole inspired tribe have ever been sensible, that no other representation of things would suit the feeling and observation of each individual" (pp. 193-194). Cleanthes claims that he does not see the world as an unhappy place and falls back on his anthropomorphic principles to argue that the world just cannot be as bad as that which Philo and the poets depict. He takes the side of the moderns against the ancients in arguing that the weakness of reason and the melancholy of our condition are espoused only "in ages of stupidity and ignorance" (p. 213). Here Cleanthes reveals his extremely narrow conception of education. He places much more trust in the arguments of natural religion than in the teachings of experience; we should realize that when Philo appeals to experience, however, he has in mind not only the immediate perceptions of each of us but, more significantly, that experience of thousands of years which has been funded in the "eloquence and strong imagery" of the poets and other writers. Cleanthes' curriculum allows such reading only for the sake of amusement, not for knowledge.

The appeal to sentiment and feeling has been taken to be Hume's basic philosophical gesture, as in his reductions of causality to a lively expectation and of morality to feelings of approval and blame; but if Philo is Hume's spokesman, then it must be recognized that Hume sees sentiment from the perspective of articulated discourse. An essential tendency in Hume's philosophical writing, of increasing importance in all of his work after the *Treatise* (and constituting in part a critique of the austere style of that work), is his growing appeal to classical and modern texts and historical narratives. It is for this reason that I am unable to accept Jerry Sobel's view that Hume means us to think approvingly of Cleanthes' appeal to the "idea of a contriver" which flows in upon us "with a force like that of sensation" (p. 154).[14] Philo counters such sensations not only by means of cold and lucid argumentation but also, and at least equally, by drawing on the "eloquence and strong imagery" of sentiments in texts. When Cleanthes does approach Philo's

"fertility of invention" in imagining a world of books which generate other books (in Part Three—shades of Borges!), he deals with the materials of the dialogue's setting (his own library) only in the most general fashion (as meaningful collections of signs) rather than in that concrete form in which they express the sentiments of Homer or Dr. Young.

Given Pamphilus' opening references to the dialogues of the ancient philosophers in his letter of transmission, it is worth exploring some of Hume's relations to these possible models. For Hume the writer, as for Philo the speaker, the ability to think and express oneself in the republic of letters depends upon the resources of a number of traditions. The most obvious model for the *Dialogues* is Cicero's *De natura deorum*, which is not only a dialogue devoted to a similar subject but one whose structure Hume seems to have in part adopted and in part to have consciously modified. In a careful study of "The *Dialogues* as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," Christine Battersby has detailed Hume's use of Cicero, arguing persuasively that the changes which Hume makes in the Ciceronian model are intended to produce a greater sense of balance among a number of possible beliefs about the gods (including the apparently inconsistent beliefs of Philo) than is found in the original. Cicero's main characters are Balbus, a stoic, whose claims in natural theology are very much like Cleanthes'; Cotta, a skeptic, who is Philo's counterpart; and Velleius, an Epicurean, who is surprisingly like Hume's Demea in insisting that there is a universal conception of the gods and that we must worship them in piety. At the dialogue's end Cicero decides against the skeptic, but he also cautions us against placing too much weight on the authority of the author. Hume's introduction of Pamphilus can be seen as a way of emphasizing even more the need for the reader to make his own judgments. As Battersby notes, Hume's irony thus refers to a literary tradition: "The mere fact that Hume imitated a work that is only problematically sincere is grounds enough for suspecting guile." [15] She proceeds to an extremely ingenious reading of the *Dialogues* in which Hume, as the author, appears even more skeptical than the skeptical Philo, in so far as he would claim that there are no conclusive arguments in natural theology, that we are incapable of a total suspension of belief, and that we should accept our own inconsistent tendencies toward belief and disbelief, seeking a balance between them.

This account of Hume's use of the Ciceronian model is valuable because it helps to destroy the myth of British empiricism as a straightforward and direct philosophical discourse which need not rely on other texts, or on literary, rhetorical, and poetic traditions. Yet Battersby has perhaps not fully seen the significance of Pamphilus' role in maintaining equilibrium. Remember that Pamphilus argues in his letter of transmission for the value of equilibrium and the pleasure to be found in it: "Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement" (p. 128). Pamphilus is distanced from Hume by his endorsement of Cleanthes' arguments, but he is distanced from Cleanthes (although so far unconsciously) in adopting a poetics of the dialogue more appropriate to a man of letters than to a narrow natural theologian.

Another example of the ancient dialogue which is more appropriate to this aspect of Hume's *Dialogues* is Plato's *Phaedrus*. Like Hume's work, the *Phaedrus* seems to have two distinct themes whose relation has puzzled many commentators; it is concerned both with the deepest meaning and passions of eros and also with the controversy between rhetoric and philosophy. I have already suggested that Hume too develops both cosmic and educational topics (the existence and nature of God, on the one hand, and the proper relation of religious, literary, and philosophical studies on the other). In the *Phaedrus* Socrates' young partner in conversation begins as an ardent admirer of Lysias' rhetoric but is gradually led to an appreciation of its faults and to an admiration for philosophical discourse by Socrates' artful and masterly speeches about eros. Both dialogues enact a process of educational seduction, although Hume's obviously lacks the passion and vivacity of Plato's. The *Phaedrus* presents us with the irony involved in Plato's having written a text in which Socrates attacks the written word.[16] Hume's *Dialogues* avoid the appearances of both "author and reader" and "pedagogue and pupil" in giving us a text that is written and transmitted by a student who, if he were as faithful as he believes to the principles of his tutor, would never have immortalized either the wit and "raillery" of its skeptical hero or the literary form in which he shines.

For both Plato and Hume, the issue between the two cultures or curricula is ultimately a political and social question. In the last section of the *Dialogues* (Part Twelve) Philo extends the discussion to the widest bounds, arguing that a non-

philosophical religion must always be pernicious. Superstitious religions, by urging people to feign an enthusiasm they do not feel, promote habits of dissimulation. Thinking only of one's eternal salvation discourages natural benevolence and sympathy. The worst educational danger comes from the conjunction of civil and religious authority which can succeed in making terror and hypocrisy the leading principles of public life. The literate skeptic, on the other hand, can preserve a balance in his emotional life while drawing on the experience of men of all times and places to avoid the partiality fostered by all sects, that is, by all non-philosophical religion. It is after this educational argument that Philo concludes with the adage that "to be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step toward being a sound, believing Christian." Surrounded by the books of Cleanthes' library, the conversation comes to an end with the conflict sharply drawn between the liberal aims of the republic of letters and the specter of a state dominated by crafty priests. Insufficient attention has been given to the structure of the *Dialogues*: it begins with a discussion of education (and continues to illustrate the various curricula), proceeds to a philosophical consideration of the possibility of our knowing of God's existence and his attitudes, turns to a discussion of the problem of evil and the tragic dimension of human life, and ends with Philo's impassioned critique of the dangers of priestcraft and a defense of religious and intellectual tolerance.

Hume makes a similar connection between a plurality of voices or narratives and the principle of tolerance in his *Natural History of Religion*. That work revolves around the opposition between monotheism and polytheism; and although Hume makes the obligatory criticisms of the "barbarous" practices of polytheism, he is more distressed when explaining the tendency of monotheism to sectarianism, dogmatism, and enthusiasm. His summing up of the contrast is instructive: "Upon the whole, the greatest and most observable differences betwixt a *traditional, mythological* religion, and a *systematical, scholastic* one are two: The former is often more reasonable, as consisting only of a multitude of stories, which, however groundless, imply no express absurdity and demonstrative contradiction; and sits also so easy and light on men's minds, that though it may be as universally received, it makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding." [17] This contrast of a world of

many discourses with one governed by systematic and scholastic methods should be compared to Richard Rorty's recent statement of a similar principle: "One way of thinking of wisdom as something of which the love is not the same as that of argument, and of which the achievement does not consist in finding the correct vocabulary for representing essence, is to think of it as the practical wisdom necessary to participate in a conversation. One way to see edifying philosophy *as* the love of wisdom is to see it as the attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into an exchange of views." [18]

The question of whether Hume's *Dialogues* ought to be considered a literary or a philosophical work, then, is not one which can be usefully answered by appealing to our own conceptions of literature or philosophy; it is rather a question which is internal to the text itself and which a reading of the text can help to illuminate. John Herman Randall has claimed that Hume's entire philosophical career can be understood as a quest for literary fame and success, in which skeptical arguments are employed only for their shock value. This is a surprising judgment from the one recent and major American historian of philosophy who has explicitly aimed at explaining the "career" of philosophy in relation to changing social and cultural circumstances; for such a compartmentalization of philosophy and literature fails to recognize what Foucault would call the prevailing *episteme* of the eighteenth century which centers around the republic of letters. Even such a sympathetic student of Hume as John Bricke uses such a relatively unexamined distinction between philosophy and literature to protect the philosopher by arguing that especially in the *Dialogues* Hume is concerned with the literary quality of the work and that we must look elsewhere in his writings to find the full development of his thoughts on the topics in question.[19] Convenient and customary as such a distinction is, it is not Hume's. Although it might tell us something about the differences in tone and structure between the earliest work and the last, that is between the *Treatise* and the *Dialogues*, it is not helpful in assessing the work of a man of letters whose *oeuvre* includes essays on political, moral, and aesthetic subjects and a voluminous *History of England.* When the issue is not prejudiced by such an initial distinction between philosophy and literature, it can be seen that Hume's views and practice are in many ways closer to those of Rorty, Gadamer, and Derrida than they are to those of Russell, Habermas, or Husserl;

and they are closer to the Wittgenstein read by Stanley Cavell than to the one read by Gilbert Ryle or Norman Malcolm.

Philosophy today is encountering the question of the philosophical text; it may encounter the questions eagerly, as in France, or reluctantly as in the English-speaking world. As it does so, it turns to the sequence of texts which constitute a history or tradition. But in doing this we tend to discover that such traditions are hardly as uniform as we had once supposed; we may have to face the possibility that there are multiple histories and traditions where we had thought there was only one. Looking at the classical triad of English philosophy, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, we can ask a series of questions: Do their texts indeed support the "tradition" of Anglo-American thinking which appeals to their authority? Which texts of these writers are to be taken most seriously in assessing the goals, strategy, and accomplishments of their philosophical writings? And what alternative models and histories might be discovered, even within the world of the English philosophical text, and how are those related to the classical triad?

These are questions that can scarcely be addressed with the thoroughness which they deserve within the confines of an essay. But it is possible to hazard some suggestions and to indicate some possible directions for further inquiry. If Hume's *Dialogues* are taken as obviously belonging to the great tradition of the Anglo-American philosophical text, then it can hardly support the sharp and relatively unexamined distinction between philosophy and literature that is assumed in the hermeneutic practice of most of the acknowledged representatives of contemporary analytical philosophy (that is, roughly those who are unsympathetic to the perspectives on the philosophical text which have been opened up by Rorty and Cavell and who respond even more negatively to the approaches of Heidegger and Derrida). But it might be argued with some plausibility that the *Dialogues* is a somewhat deviant work because of its genre and pervasive irony. At that point one might undertake a sustained inquiry into Hume's career as an author that would interrogate his works from the perspective of notions like that of the republic of letters. If it seems to be an exceptional feature of the *Dialogues* that it flaunts its intertextuality (by reference to Cicero and possibly Plato), then we might note that Hobbes and Locke devote major efforts to interpreting the text of the Bible, developing their own hermeneutic approaches. I have argued elsewhere that Hobbes's

Leviathan is essentially and not accidentally concerned with the question of how all texts (including specifically itself and the Bible) are subject to the four textual modalities of reading, writing, interpretation, and censorship.[20] That is, in order to be a proper philosophical text, it must embody those same attributes of power and authority (its obvious concerns) in the way in which it offers itself to the reader and confronts the claims of other authoritative texts and of their interpreters. From Hobbes we might move back to the text-oriented world of the Renaissance. In that context one would have to assess Bacon's debt to the neoplatonic and occult writers of the time and to the tradition of the art of memory whose archive has been so well canvassed by Frances Yates. There too we would discover the polysemous emblem books of John Dee and Robert Fludd, which attempted to establish complex series of correspondences between the human microcosm and the encompassing macrocosm. Or we might look more closely at that important but neglected break in British thought which divides Locke's two treatises on government. Of these, only the second has become part of the canon; but the first is a complex intertextual work which offers a comprehensive interpretation of the Biblical texts on power and authority by means of a direct confrontation with Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* and an indirect challenge to Hobbesian hermeneutics. Such inquiries would constitute not only a reassessment of those texts and thinkers which have hitherto been canonical but also an extension and alteration of the canon itself. Stanley Cavell has already launched such a revaluation of American thought through his appraisals of Emerson and Thoreau, which rely on a vigorous inquiry into the nature of their texts. In looking at British philosophy and its history, the new sense of the philosophical text, which is inspired by such sources as Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault, could lead to analgous changes in our approach to the tradition(s). We may not be far from envisioning a new canon of British philosophy in which Bacon, Shakespeare, Shaftesbury, and John Ruskin join Locke, Mill, and Russell as providing the enabling precedents for the philosophical texts in our language. Plato has Socrates speak of an ancient *diaphora*, a difference or dispute, between philosophy and poetry; he was wise enough and sufficiently imbued with the agonistic spirit of Greek life to know (as his own textual practice shows) that in such quarrels total victory is neither possible nor desirable. The tendencies within Anglo-American philosophy to

repress the poetic and its frightening connections with power have apparently been more successful only because we have neglected this aspect of Platonic wisdom; accordingly we must be prepared for the return of the repressed.

NOTES

1. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53 (1980): 732.

2. All page numbers in the text refer to Norman Kemp Smith's edition of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).

3. *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1:154.

4. E. C. Mossner, "Hume and the Legacy of the *Dialogues*," in *David Hume Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 3.

5. *Letters of David Hume*, 2:334.

6. For this ordering of the stoic curriculum, see Plutarch's *De stoicorum repugnantis* in *Moralia*.

7. John Herman Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 1:630-635.

8. Sartre analyzes the fantastic story by the fifteen year old Gustave Flaubert in which an ape-man (born of an orangutan and a human) represents Flaubert himself. In Sartre's account the misunderstood ape-man is Gustave himself, for both represent arrested development at a transitional stage. Gustave, "the idiot of the family," is arrested in his linguistic development at a point where meaning is still inextricably attached to particular sounds. This learning disability is eventually translated into that fiction to which the modernist tradition constantly recurs. In the following analysis by Sartre, Monsieur Paul is the scientist responsible for the ape-man's monstrous birth: "I only want to indicate that Gustave always valued in himself *above all else* not the speaking animal, but the nonspeaking animal. By advertising their inability to understand the poet [the sentimental soul in the silent brute], Monsieur Paul and his friends merely bring the judgment down on their own heads—on the one hand this creature of science, folded in on himself, and on the other *the man of letters*, the men of science who use language to go from one table to another repeating the same commonplaces issued from the same paltry wisdom; the literate man is the one disqualified by this comparison." In Flaubert's hatred of the man of letters, Sartre says, we can read a Nietzschean *ressentiment* directed at his own brother, Achille: "Yes, at seven I did not know my letters and you, from the age of four, you read fluently. Afterward? I was a brute, meaning a poet, and you, you were a little doctor, meaning a robot, and you remained one." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1:25.

9. David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 17.

10. "An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature," quoted in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), p. 125.

11. Jean D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1963), p. 3.

12. See Hegel's brilliant analysis in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of "Das geistige Tierreich" and cf. my article "Notes on the Animal Kingdom of the Spirit," *Clio* 8 (1979):323-338.

13. Hume apparently took the Brahmin story from Bayle's *Dictionary*; for Plato, see *Timaeus* 28b ff. Here as elsewhere the notes and index to the recent Oxford edition are helpful: see *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver, and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. John Valdimir Price, in one volume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

14. See Jerry E. Sobel, "Arguing, Accepting, and Preserving Design in Heidegger, Hume, and Kant," in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). The relation between the aesthetics of Philo and Cleanthes and that of Hume might be pursued in another direction than that which Sobel takes. While Cleanthes appeals to our awe before natural beauty (and therefore anticipates Kant, as Sobel rightly observes), Philo and Hume have a decided taste for the literary and the artistic (anticipating Hegel, who found natural beauty charming, but devoid of significance).

15. Christine Battersby, "The *Dialogues* as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), pp. 239-252.

16. For a closer reading of the *Phaedrus* on these issues see Ronna Burger, *Plato's Phaedrus: A Defense of a Philosophic Act of Writing* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

17. *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. Colver, pp. 80-81.

18. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 372.

19. John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies*, 1976, pp. 1-18.

20. See my essay "Reading and Writing in the Text of Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 18 (1980):35-46. For some valuable studies and a useful bibliography, see *English Literature and British Philosophy*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). A more general view of Hume's philosophical authorship that complements the one I have tried to establish is Richard Kuhn's essay, "Hume's Republic and the Universe of Newton," in *Eighteenth Century Studies Presented to Arthur Wilson*, ed. Peter Gay (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1972). Kuhn's claim that Hume has a therapeutic hermeneutic analogous to Freud's is valuable, especially if we think of the idea discussed by Lacan and others that textual, linguistic, and literary categories are at the heart of psychoanalysis.