ARTIGOS

THE LITERARY ARTS IN HUME'S SCIENCE OF THE FANCY

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RESUMO *Filósofos sempre divergiram sobre se a poesia, o teatro, e outras artes literárias são importantes para a filosofia; e, entre os que as consideram importantes, a explicação de seu valor sempre diferiu imensamente. Este artigo procura explicar e ilustrar algumas das razões porque Hume considerava a literatura um tópico importante para a filosofia e para filósofos. Segundo ele, a filosofia pode ajudar a explicar fenômenos literários gerais e específicos, a fundamentar a ciência da crítica (estética), e a sugerir e justificar os "princípios da arte". Por sua vez, a literatura pode fornecer "experimentos" valiosos para a teorização filosófica e fornecer um modelo para a ciência da moral e (de certo modo) para a própria filosofia. Além disso, na visão de Hume, as artes literárias não somente podem auxiliar na escrita de uma melhor filosofia, elas também podem podem ajudar a se escrever filosofia melhor.*

Palavras-chave: Hume, "science of man", "science of fancy"

ABSTRACT *Philosophers have long disagreed about whether poetry, drama, and other literary arts are important to philosophy; and among those who believe that they are important, explanations of that importance have differed greatly. This paper aims to explain and illustrate some of the reasons why Hume found literature to be an important topic for philosophy and philosophers. Philosophy, he holds, can help to explain general and specific literary phenomena, to ground the science of criticism, and to suggest and justify*

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"principles of art," while at the same time literature can provide valuable "experiments" for philosophical theorizing and provide it with a model for the science of morals and (in some ways) for philosophy itself. Moreover, the literary arts can not only help one to write better philosophy, in Hume's view; they can also help one to write philosophy better.

The Literary Arts in Philosophy

Are poetry, drama, and other such literary arts important to philosophy? Some Western philosophers have answered this question in the affirmative. Many more, either explicitly or by implication, have answered in the negative.

Among those who have answered in the affirmative, there have been varying accounts of *why* literature is important to philosophy. Plato, perhaps the first Western philosopher to concern himself seriously with literature, saw in poetry a means of approach to the Form of Beauty, and he crafted dialogues that constitute some of the most compelling and engaging intellectual dramas ever written. At the same time, however, he saw in poetry and other arts — both literary and non-literary — mere reflections of a world of becoming that was itself merely a reflection of the real and eternal Forms; and these double reflections, twice removed from the ultimate reality, required strict moral censorship and control. Aristotle, worldly theorizer that he was, brought poetics and tragedy no less than stars, animals, and arguments within the scope of his explanatory project. At the end of the eighteenth century, Kant sought to explain the nature of the beautiful and the sublime in literature as well as in nature, while in the nineteenth, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche took up once again Plato's challenge to discover the best mode of literary *expression* for philosophical ideas. Sartre and other existentialists of the mid-twentieth century explored the ability of drama and the novel to express philosophical doctrines in accessible and compelling ways. More recently, concerns with meaning, representation, cognition, and semiotics have stimulated new explorations of literary theory among philosophers of language, while the role of literature in expressing moral ideas and developing the moral sentiments has captured the attention of many ethical theorists.

Between Boethius and the mid-eighteenth century, however, lies a long stretch in which few of the most important Western philosophers saw literature as a topic of central interest to philosophy. Although the scholastic philosophers inherited the poetry and drama of the Bible along with the writings of Aristotle as their authoritative sources, they did not greatly concern themsel-

ves as philosophers with the literary arts, either as topics of study or as vehicles for expressing their own philosophical ideas. And the first important philosophers of the early modern era — who aimed to throw off at least the authority of Aristotle, and sometimes that of the Bible as well — showed little more.

Thus, although Hobbes translated Homer into English in his old age, he did so as a diversion, not because he thought it advanced the understanding of his own philosophy. Descartes mentions literature only in passing, as a pleasant part of the generally inadequate education he received at the Jesuit college at La Fléche. There he learned that "the charm of fables awakens the mind … and that poetry has quite ravishing delicacy and sweetness." But this delicacy and sweetness pale in comparison both with his delight "in mathematics, because of the certainty and self-evidence of its reasonings" and with his alarm that the bankrupt scholastic philosophy he was taught "only gives us the means of speaking plausibly about any subject and of winning the admiration of the less learned" *[Discourse on the Method, Section 1]*. Although Spinoza was friendly with several directors of the Amsterdam theater, his brief remarks about drama place it entirely on a par with sports and horticulture among human recreations:

> It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. [*Ethics* 4p45s]

Locke does not discuss either poetry or drama specifically, but he represents all uses of figurative language as a threat to sober understanding in his chapter of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* on "The Abuse of Words":

> Since wit and fancy find easier entertainment in the world, than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetorick, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats: And therefore however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them.… Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it, to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault

> with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. [*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* III.10.34]

It is, of course, rather ironic — as well an indication of the difficulty of avoiding "all figurative speeches" — that in the passage just quoted Locke himself offers an extended simile comparing the deceptive beauties of eloquence to those of "the fair sex" in order to drive home his point that figurative language is to be avoided in all works intended to "inform and instruct," works such as the very book in which he writes this passage. In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz comments on the passage, approving Locke's "zeal for the truth." In mild defense of figurative language, Leibniz remarks only

> that certain devices of eloquence are like the Egyptian vases which could be used in the worship of the true God. Painting and music are similarly misused: the former is often used to depict fantasies which are grotesque and even harmful, the latter has an enervating effect, and the amusement which each provides is trivial; but they can be usefully employed, one to make the truth vivid and the other to make it affecting — which latter should also be the effect of poetry, which involves both rhetoric and music. [*New Essays on Human Understanding* III.x]

Although Leibniz's *New Essays* was written as a dialogue, in response to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, it is hardly a performance of literary art: on the contrary, it is truly remarkable for its stilted structure, formulaic characters, and complete lack of dramatic tension. Berkeley's philosophical dialogues, published a few decades later, appear literary only in comparison with their immediate predecessors, such as Leibniz's.

In fact, it is not until Hume that an important figure in early modern philosophy takes a serious philosophical interest in literature and the literary arts. In what follows, I will seek to explain the reasons for Hume's interest and to describe some examples of its application.

Hume's Literary Interests

Even as a youth, Hume describes his interests in literature as equal to his interests in philosophy. In his earliest extant letter, written at the age of sixteen, he observes of his readings, "I diversify them at my Pleasure; sometimes a Philosopher, sometimes a Poet" [Letter 1]. In another letter, written at the age of twenty-three, he begins his description of his early years as follows:

> You must know then that from my earliest Infancy, I found alwise a strong Inclination to Books & Letters. As our College Education in Scotland, extending little further than the Languages, ends commonly when we are about 14 or 15 Years of Age, I was after that left to my own Choice in my Reading, & found it encline me almost equally to Books of Reasoning & Philosophy, & to Poetry & the polite Authors. Every one, who is acquainted either with the Philosophers or Critics, knows that there is nothing yet establisht in either of these two Sciences, & that they contain little more than endless Disputes, even in the most fundamental Articles. Upon Examination of these, I found a certain Boldness of Temper, growing in me, which was not enclin'd to submit to any Authority in these Subjects, but led me to seek out some new Medium, by which Truth might be establisht. [Letter 3]

In Hume's many popular essays, only politics is a more frequent topic than literature; essays touching directly on the literary arts include ""Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," "Of Eloquence," "On the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing," "Of Tragedy," and "Of the Standard of Taste." Throughout his later life, he took an active — indeed, tireless and even shameless — role in promoting the Scttish authors whom he befriended and whose writings he appreciated. These included Thomas Blacklock, the blind poet later dubbed "the Scottish Pindar," who ultimately deserted Hume's patronage for that of James Beattie; William Wilkie, "the Homer of the Lowlands" and author of the *Epigoniad*; and his friend John Home, "the Scottish Shakespeare," whose theatrical tragedy *Douglas* inspired Hume to pen his only book dedication, with the (successful) hope of promoting the play's production in England. But his critical assessments of literature extended far beyond the timely expression of approbation for the work of his friends and countrymen. As a historian, he took it as part of his charge in the *History of England* both to report on and to try to explain the state of literature — good, bad, or indifferent — in various eras and reigns, in much the same way that he reported on and tried to explain such political matters as church/state relations or the waxing and waning powers of the Crown.

Hume's combination of aesthetic, personal, patriotic, and historical interests in literature inevitably led him — unlike Descartes, say, or Locke — to think a good deal about the literary arts. Nevertheless, those interests do not, by themselves, explain why or how he found *philosophical* significance in the nature of literature. He might, after all, have cared deeply for literature and still kept it as separate from his philosophy as he kept his evident fondness for food or the game of whist. In order to understand why he found literature to be an important topic for philosophy, it is necessary to understand something of the special — and radical — character of his philosophical project.

Hume's Science of Man as a Science of the Fancy

In the Introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume describes his philosophical project as an investigation into "the science of man":

It is evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to **human nature**; and that, however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the **science of MAN**; since they lie under the cognisance of men, and are judged of by **their** powers and faculties. It is impossible to tell what changes and improvements we might make in these sciences were we thoroughly acquainted with the **extent and force of human understanding, and could explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings …**

If, therefore, the sciences of mathematics, natural philosophy, and natural religion, have such a dependence on the knowledge of man, what may be expected in the **other** sciences, whose connexion with human nature is more close and intimate? The sole end of logic is to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas; morals **and criticism** regard our tastes and sentiments; and politics consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other. In these four sciences of **Logic, Morals, Criticism, and Politics**, is comprehended almost every thing which it can anyway import us to be acquainted with, or which can tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind.

Here then is the only expedient, from which we can hope for success in our philosophical researches, to leave the tedious lingering method, which we have hitherto followed, and, instead of taking now and then a castle or village on the frontier, to **march up directly to the capital or centre of these sciences, to human nature itself**; which being once masters of, we may every where else hope for an easy victory. From this station we may extend our conquests over all those sciences, which more intimately concern human life, and may afterwards proceed at leisure, to discover more fully those which are the objects of pure curiosity. **There is no question of importance, whose decision is not comprised in the science of man**; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. **In pretending, therefore, to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a complete system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security.**

And, as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so, **the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation**.

Although the term 'science of man' is Hume's own, the broad project of improving philosophy and the various sciences by uncovering the nature of the cognitive instruments we employ in our investigations is not. Hume indicates his awareness of this fact in a well-known comparison that immediately follows the passage just quoted:

> It is no astonishing reflection to consider, that the application of **experimental** philosophy to **moral** [i.e., human] subjects should come after that to **natural**, at the distance of above a whole century; since we find in fact, that there was about the same interval betwixt the **origins** of these sciences; and that, reckoning from **Thales** to **Socrates**, the space of time is nearly equal to that betwixt **my Lord Bacon** and **some late philosophers in England**, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public.

As a footnote to this passage indicates, first among the "late philosophers in England who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing" is John Locke. The reader is left to draw for herself the inference that the relation between Locke and his successor Hume will be roughly the same relation as that between "my Lord Bacon" and the exalted Newton. But how exactly does Hume suppose that Locke put the science of man on "a new footing," and how is Hume's philosophy meant to improve upon it?

Histories of philosophy and college curricula alike regularly classify Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz as rationalists, in contrast to Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, whom they classify as empiricists. Yet it is surprisingly difficult to find instances in which the three paradigmatic rationalists line up quite clearly and definitely on one side of a well-defined philosophical issue while the three paradigmatic empiricists line up clearly and definitely on the other. There is at least *one* such difference between rationalists and empiricists, however, and it is one from which a host of less clearly-definable affinities and less-marked tendencies within the two categories flow. It is this: the rationalists affirm, while the empiricists deny, that the human mind has two distinct representational faculties — the intellect and the imagination.

According to Descartes, human beings are capable of forming two quite distinct kinds of ideas, or mental representations, in additional to those that we actually experience in sensation. Ideas of *imagination* are specific images — visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, etc. — and are derived from the contents of sensation. Ideas of intellect, in contrast, are higher, richer in content, capable of expressing a high level of generality without any loss of clari-

ty, and are entirely non-imagistic. While there is a limited methodological role for ideas of imagination — for example, they constitute many memories of specific events and help to prevent geometers from becoming fatigued by the extreme generality and spatial complexity of their investigations — serious inquiry is conducted with ideas of intellect. Spinoza — whose earliest work is entitled *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* — and Leibniz both concur with Descartes that the methodological task of philosophy is to *develop* the use of the intellect and to *diminish* the role of the imagination. It is largely *because* they believe that they have, in the intellect, a source of cognitive content far richer and clearer than the confused contents of sensation and imagination that the rationalists are so willing to allow metaphysical theorizing to dictate the proper interpretation of experience, thereby producing the remarkably bold metaphysical systems for which they are remembered today. Since the literary and other arts derive their primarily appeal *from* the imagination and have their primary appeal *to* that faculty, the rationalists naturally relegate these arts to the role of providing recreation to the mind in its unphilosophical moments.

Unlike the rationalists, Locke rejects the distinction between intellect and imagination. Instead, he holds that all mental representations are imagistic ideas derived directly from the contents of sensory or reflective experience. Book II of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is an attempt to show how the various concepts that the rationalists ascribe exclusively to the intellect — God, infinity, extension, substance, power, and even large numbers — can be produced, to whatever extent they can be produced at all, through a representational faculty more like the Cartesian imagination.

In denying that human beings have an *intellect*, however Locke is not denying that they have either *reason* or *understanding*. The intellect, like the imagination, was postulated as a *representational* faculty — that is, a faculty of producing or having ideas, or mental representations. Reason, however, is an *inferential* faculty — that is, a faculty of making inferences. Thus, Locke differs with the rationalists not in his answer to the question, "*Can* we make inferences through the operation of reason?" but rather in his answer to the question, "On what *kind* of representations does reason *operate* in making inferences?" Since he thinks we have no ideas of *intellect* on which reason could operate, there remain only ideas of imagination to serve this function.

Locke sometimes uses the term "understanding" to characterize all of our cognitive abilities, but he defines "understanding" more specifically as a mental power of perception consisting "of three sorts":

1. The perception of *Ideas* in our Minds.

2. The perception of the signification of Signs.

3. The Perception of the Connexion or Repugnancy, Agreement or Disagreement, that there is between any of our Ideas.

This third sort of understanding — the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas — is crucial to Locke's theory of the general operation of reason. Where we perceive a *certain* agreement or disagreement between ideas, we have *knowledge*. Where we perceive only a *probable* agreement or disagreement of ideas, we have mere *belief* or opinion. *Reason* is simply the process in which we use one or more intermediate ideas (called "proofs") to arrive at a perception either of the certain agreement or the probable agreement of ideas. The kind of reasoning that produces knowledge is called *demonstrative reasoning*; that which produces belief is called *probable reasoning*. But while reason must, by default, operate *on* the contents of the imagination, for Locke, it remains, both in its demonstrative and its probable operations, entirely distinct from those other operations or mechanisms of the imagination that produce works of literature and facilitate their appreciation.

From Hume's standpoint, Locke's philosophy serves to put the "science of man" on a new, more empirical or "experimental" footing in at least two ways. First, Hume thinks, the rejection of the intellect as a higher representational faculty is itself well-supported by empirical observation of the operations of our own minds. Second, by rejecting ideas of intellect, Locke blocks one primary way in which rationalists sought to make *a priori* metaphysics dictate the proper interpretation of empirical observation, and thereby freed empirical *observation* to drive the content of our *theories*.

Hume differs from Locke not in affirming that all ideas are in the imagination rather than in the intellect, but rather in his theory of what reason and understanding are, and hence in his theory of their relation to the imagination. According to Hume "the memory, senses, and understanding [including reason] are all of them *founded on* the imagination, or the vivacity of ideas" [THN 265] and "the understanding *[simply is]* the general and more established properties of the imagination" [THN 267]. What does Hume mean by these claims? The answer lies in the following passage, in which he explains how his theory of mental operations differs from those that have preceded him:

> We may here take occasion to observe a very remarkable error, which, being frequently inculcated in the schools, has become a kind of established maxim, and is universally received by all logicians. This error consists in the vulgar division of the acts of the understanding into **conception, judgment, and reasoning**, and in the **definitions** we give of them. **Conception is defined to be the simple survey of one or more**

> **ideas:** judgment to be the separating or uniting of different ideas: **reasoning to be the separating or uniting of different ideas by the interposition of others, which shew the relation they bear to each other**. But these distinctions and definitions are faulty in very considerable articles. For, first, it is far from being true, that, in every judgment which we form, we unite two different ideas; since in that proposition, *God is*, or indeed, any other, which regards existence, the idea of existence is no distinct idea, which we unite with that of the object, and which is capable of forming a compound idea by the union. Secondly, as we can thus form a proposition, which contains only one idea, so we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium betwixt them. We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others, and more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes. What we may in general affirm concerning these **three acts of the understanding** is, that taking them in a proper light, **they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects.** Whether we consider a single object, or several; whether we dwell on these objects, or run from them to others; and in whatever form or order we survey them, the act of the mind **exceeds not a simple conception**, and the only remarkable difference, which occurs on this occasion, is, **when we join belief to the conception, and are persuaded of the truth of what we conceive**. **This act** of the mind has never yet been explained by any philosopher; and therefore I am at liberty to propose my hypothesis concerning it; which is, **that it is only a strong and steady conception of any** idea, and such as approaches in some measure to an immediate impression.

Since the various acts of the understanding are *all of them* nothing but particular ways of conceiving, or having ideas; and since conceiving, or having ideas, is in turn, the characteristic operation of the imagination; it follows that *understanding* itself turns out to be a set of *operations of the imagination***.** Locke's view of understanding as a mental *perception of relations of cognitive content* among ideas that occurs in all reasoning is replaced by the radical notions that belief is simply the liveliness or vivacity with which some ideas are conceived in the imagination, and probable reasoning (by far the greatest portion of reasoning) a process by which that liveliness is produced. For Hume, an investigation of the cognitive operations by which belief is produced and maintained naturally requires a full investigation and understanding of *all* of the imagination's own distinctive properties. The science of man thereby becomes first and foremost a science *of* the imagination. Or, to use the eighteenth century synonym for "imagination" that Hume himself often employs — especially, but by no means exclusively, when discussing literature — we may say that the science of man becomes in large part a science of "the fancy." Since both the creation and the appreciation of works of literary art *depend* crucially on the distinctive features of the human fancy or imagination, literature and literary criticism naturally acquire a close and mutually-informing relationship with Hume's philosophy. In the time that remains, I will try to

distinguish several different aspects of that relationship and give examples of each.

Philosophy's Contributions to Criticism

According to Hume's Introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, criticism is one of the four sciences — along with logic, morals, and politics — whose "connexion with human nature is more close and intimate." Because Hume's "science of man" takes as its scope the whole operation of the human imagination, together with the full range of experiences (designated as "impressions") that can either produce ideas *in* the imagination or be produced *by* them, that science can hope to provide explanations for a variety of phenomena that occur in the production and appreciation of literature.

Some of these phenomena are both fundamental and pervasive within all literature. Why, for example, do the eloquent descriptions employed in poetry and other literary arts stimulate emotions in us far more powerfully than a mere inventory of the same objects, unaided by such eloquence, would do? Hume's answer is that eloquence of description allows the reader or auditor to conceive what she imagines with greater force and vivacity — it paints the objects in her imagination, as it were — *and this vivacity actually constitutes the sole difference between bare conception and belief.* The ability of eloquent writing to stimulate emotions can therefore be explained as an instance of the same operation of the mind by which a *belief* stirs more emotion than does bare unbelieving conception. This force of eloquence is intrinsically pleasing, even independent of the emotions that it stirs, because "every idea, which has force and vivacity, is [so far] found to be agreeable" to the imagination.

But the science of man can also be enlisted to explain more specific aspects of literature. Why, for example, do poets so often employ what Hume calls "a poetical system of things," such as the familiar mythology of Roman gods? It is because the antecedent familiarity of these ideas to the audience, produced by the repetition of earlier exposure to them, makes it easier for the imagination to conceive them, and hence to conceive with appropriate *vivacity* whatever the poet seeks to make us associate with them. This same feature of the imagination explains why "tragedians always borrow their fable, or at least the names of their principal actors, from some known passage in history"; it is "in order to procure more easy reception into the imagination for those extraordinary events, which they represent." Hume even explains why "this precaution … is not required of comic poets"; it is because their "personages and incidents, being of a more **familiar kind**, enter easily into the con-

ception, and are received without any such formality" as a poetical system or historical anchor [THN I.iii.10].

One of Hume's most extended discussions of a literary phenomenon is his proposed solution to the problem of tragedy — that is, the problem of why the "spectators of a well-written tragedy receive [pleasure] from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable." He notes at the outset that only "the few critics who have had some tincture of **philosophy** have remarked this singular phenomenon, and have endeavored to account for it." Hume's own philosophical solution draws on no fewer than three separate characteristics of the human mind. The first characteristic lies in the fact that "nothing in general is so disagreeable to the mind as the languid, listless state of indolence, into which it falls upon the removal of all passion and occupation," so that the presence of nearly any kind of passion can contribute to a state that the mind prefers to a previous indolence. The second characteristic lies in the fact that literary representations produce in the imagination ideas with a kind of vivacity that has a particular feeling: while it may be powerful, it is also less firm and feels less secure than that produced by reasoning. This is because we are at least dimly aware, from past experience, that the vivacity induced by eloquence lasts only briefly without the support of evidence [THN I.iii.10]; and this circumstance serves to "soften" the quality of the otherwise disagreeable emotions that a tragedy stirs in us. The third characteristic of the mind to which Hume appeals is the remarkable mechanism that allows the force of one emotion to be captured by and increase the force of a stronger emotion, even when their general directions or tendencies are opposed. Thus, just as the worries and fears we feel for our children serve in the end only to increase the force of our love, where that latter emotion is already stronger, so the sorrow produced by tragedy increases the force of our pleasure at the beauty of expression of the author — a pleasure whose predominance is assured by the recurring awareness that the tragic scene is not real, and which may be further aided by our preference of these vivid feelings to the languor of the imagination that preceded them.

Philosophy is not limited, however, to explaining why literature affects us as it does and why authors choose the devices that they do. It is no accident that, when the young Hume complained in the letter cited earlier of there being "nothing yet establisht in either" philosophy or criticism, he proposed to create a single "Medium, by which Truth might be establisht" *in both*. For his science of human nature is intended both to explain how a science of criticism is possible and to provide it, at least on occasion, with crucial support for its principles.

Hume's explanation of how a science of criticism is possible is contained in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste." According to Hume, judgments of beauty and deformity in general, and judgments of literary merit in particular, result from sentiments of taste. These sentiments often differ from person to person. But this no more entails that all judgments of taste are of equal value than the variety of sensory perceptions of the same object to be had by different persons from different perspectives entails that all judgments of color or shape are of equal value. For people can often develop, through practice, a greater delicacy of taste. This delicacy of taste gives its possessor a greater ability to discern and describe fine differences that escape other observers, and all parties can agree that such a sense of taste will enhance a person's competence as a judge, so that not all sentiments of taste are equal. Works that are approved by practiced, intelligent, and impartial judges of good taste over a long period of time are works of merit. Philosophy contributes to the science of criticism in several ways: by *defining* delicacy of taste; by *determining* the features of situations that interfere with its unfettered operation; by *distinguishing* the kinds of disputes that cannot be resolved by appeal to a standard of taste and hence must be allowed to be "innocent" (these are chiefly those that depend on preferences grounded in particular human temperaments or in the manners or opinions of an age or nation); and by *describing* the way in which debates within the science of criticism can and should be conducted in order to produce consensus in judgments of taste, where that is possible.

Because judgments of beauty are made by taste, argumentation in the science of criticism about the merits of a particular work must take the general form of trying to show what an audience's reaction *would* be, were that audience practiced, intelligent, impartial, and of sufficiently delicate taste. Such arguments will typically appeal to what Hume calls "general rules of beauty" or "principles of art." These principles are generalizations about what qualities are pleasing or displeasing; to be convincing, the principles must accord with acknowledged examples or models of pleasing or displeasing works. Once such principles are accepted, we can use them to infer that even lesser degrees of the same qualities *would* please or displease a sufficiently refined and impartial taste, and hence to praise or condemn works that can be seen to contain those qualities in lesser degrees. The science of man can contribute to the invention and proper formulation of such principles by suggesting features of literary performances that can be *expected* to please or displease in light of the principles of that science. Hume's discussion of the unity of action in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is one particularly notable example of this process. There he distinguishes three principles of association that ope-

rate among ideas: resemblance, contiguity in space or time, and causation. When ideas are related to one another in one or more of these ways, they introduce one another into the imagination with more facility. This suggests that a dramatic work will be more convincing, and hence more effective in producing pleasure, to the extent that the events it portrays are related by these three principles. Thus Hume writes

Here therefore we may attain some notion of that Unity of Action, about which all critics, after ARISTOTLE, have talked so much: **Perhaps, to little purpose, while they directed not their taste or sentiment by the accuracy of philosophy**.

In fact, the philosophical investigation of the principles of association and their effect on belief that Hume undertakes leads him to propose and defend an elaborate principle of art according to which unity of action is more important in epic poetry than in dramatic, more important in tragic drama than in comedy, and more important in all of these than in history.

Literature's Contributions to Philosophy

Thus far, we have seen that Hume finds several important roles for philosophy to play in the understanding of literary phenomena. Philosophy explains many aspects, both general and specific, of the production and appreciation of literature; it explains how there can be a science of criticism with its own proper standards of taste; and it is one fruitful source of generalizations about aesthetic response that can serve to underwrite particular principles of art. But the relations of support between literature and philosophy are by no means one-way for Hume. In his view, literature is at least as important to philosophy as philosophy is to literature. This importance is manifested in several distinct ways.

One of the most important and frequent ways in which literature comes to the aid of philosophy is as a source of what Hume calls "experiments" for his experimental science of man. The rejection of the Cartesian intellect requires that science be based on experience and observation. But when the scientist of man sets out directly to perform observations on his own mind by introspection, its operations are disturbed by the premeditated attempt at observation. Hence, Hume says, we must "glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behavior in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" [THN xix]. Literature provides a wealth of experiments concerning human beings — mostly "in their pleasures" — from which the scientist of

man can generate and support hypotheses about the operations of the imagination and related cognitive faculties.

Early in the *Treatise*, for example, Hume observes in support of the "principle, *of the liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas"* that

> the fables we meet with in poems and romances put this entirely out of question. Nature there is totally confounded, and nothing mentioned but winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants.

This observation, it soon becomes clear, is an important (though not the only) piece of support for one of Hume's two most fundamental principles concerning the imagination, namely the principle "that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination" [THN 18]. This principle, in turn, plays a crucial role in many of Hume's most famous and important arguments concerning such topics as space, time, necessary causal connections, substance, and personal identity.

Similarly, an argument drawn from literary phenomena helps to establish Hume's distinctively non-Lockean account of belief as the vivacity of ideas:

> If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words **produce the same ideas in both**; though his testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents … **while the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception** of all these particulars. [THN 98]

This account of belief is further confirmed by the later observation that "'Tis difficult for us to withold our assent from what is painted out to us in all the colours of eloquence" [THN 123].

> Literature is also a ready source of experiments concerning the operations of the three principles of association noted earlier — resemblance, contiguity, and causation. According to Hume, ordinary probable reasoning depends essentially on the transmission of force and vivacity from an impression or memory to an idea of something that is supposed to be related to it by *cause and effect*. He seeks to confirm the existence of this cognitive operation by arguing that the ***other*** associative relations, *resemblance and contiguity,* can *also* convey some vivacity to ideas:

As to the influence of contiguity and resemblance, we may observe, that if the contiguous and resembling object be comprehended in this system of realities, there is no doubt but these two relations will assist that of cause and

effect, and infix the related idea with more force in the imagination …. Mean while I shall carry my observation a step further, and assert, that even where the related object is but feigned, the relation will serve to enliven the idea, and encrease its influence. A poet, no doubt, will be the better able to form a strong description of the Elysian fields, that he prompts his imagination by the **view of a beautiful meadow or garden**; as at another time he may, by his fancy, place himself in the midst of these fabulous regions, that by the feigned **contiguity** he may **enliven his imagination**.

The practices of poets equally show how the principles of association can lead to *confusions* in which related ideas are mistaken for one another. Thus, Hume writes

> But though resemblance be the relation, which most readily produces a mistake in ideas, yet the others of causation and contiguity may also concur in the same influence. We might produce the **figures of poets and orators**, **as sufficient proofs of this, were it as usual as it is reasonable**, in metaphysical subjects, to draw our arguments from that quarter. [THN I.iii.6]

Hume ultimately cites this tendency of the mind, toward confusing related ideas, not only to explain ordinary cognitive *error*, but also to help explain our fundamental belief that there is a world of continuing physical objects existing distinct from our minds.

The most serious challenge that Hume faces to his own philosophical project occurs in Treatise Book I, part iv. There his investigations of our cognitive faculties lead him to discover a series of skeptical arguments based on his discoveries about the specific operations of those faculties. Of these arguments, the most general and potentially damaging one concerns an operation by which reason obliges us to *correct* and *diminish* our *initial* degree of assent to any judgment through a consideration of our liability to error in the use of reasoning. Hume argues that this operation of reason applies to the very reassessments that it produces as well as it does to any other judgments, so that reason, left to itself, would continue to iterate these reassessments to ever new levels, until it produced a complete annihilation of all belief in any judgment whatsoever. Yet in fact, we do not find our belief to be annihilated, even when we attempt to carry out the repeated reflexive procedure that the rules of reasoning and logic require. In order to determine whether he, and we, can retain *any* approval for *any* of the operations of reason in light of this dire circumstance, Hume must first discover *why* these iterated operations of reason fail to annihilate all belief. In searching for an explanation, he suggests that it is because in the iterated reflections

> the **action of the mind becomes forc'd and unnatural**, … tho' the principles of judgment, and the ballancing of opposite causes be the same as at the very beginning; yet their **influence** on the imagination, and the vigour they add to, or diminish from the thought, is by no means equal. Where the mind **reaches not its objects with easiness and facility,** the same principles have not the same effect as in a more natural conception of the ideas; **nor does the imagination feel a sensation, which holds any proportion with that which arises from its common judgments and opinions. The attention is on the stretch**: The **posture of the mind is uneasy**; and the spirits being diverted from their natural course, are **not govern'd in their movements by the same laws, at least not to the same degree, as when they flow in their usual channel**.

To confirm this hypothesis, Hume appeals almost immediately to a related phenomenon in literature:

> The **straining of the imagination always hinders the regular flowing of the passions and sentiments**. A **tragic poet**, that would represent his heroes as very ingenious and witty in their misfortunes, would never touch the passions. As the **emotions of the soul prevent any subtile reasoning and reflection**, so these **latter actions of the mind are equally prejudicial to the former**. The mind, as well as the body, seems to be endowed with a certain precise degree of force and activity, which it never employs in one action, but at the expence of all the rest. This is more evidently true, where the actions are of quite different natures; since in that case the force of the mind is not only diverted, but even the disposition changed, so as to render us incapable of a sudden transition from one action to the other, and still more of performing both at once. No wonder, then, the **conviction**, which arises from a subtile reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the **efforts which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts**. **Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where it is not founded on something natural and easy**. [THN I.iv.1]

As the last sentence intimates, Hume takes this discovery to provide yet further confirmation for his theory that belief is simply vivacity of conception, because it is the only theory that can explain the present phenomenon. Hume's *understanding* of this case in which subtle skeptical reasoning simply fails to convince — an understanding to which the example from tragic poetry contributes — leads ultimately to the discovery and acceptance of what Hume considers the proper rule for determining which deliverances of reason are and are not acceptable: "Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any title to operate on us" [THN 270].

All of the examples of literary "experiments" considered thus far come from Book I of the *Treatise* ("Of the understanding"). But the use of experiments from the literary arts is not restricted to Hume's treatment of the human *understanding.* For example, Hume enlists his observation in Book II ("Of the passions") that the natural ease and facility characterizing flowing poetry is called the "fall" of the cadence to support his hypothesis that the imagination

associates difficulty with height; and this hypothesis, in turn, serves as support for Hume's explanation of why a great distance in time contributes more readily to veneration than does a great distance in space. Literary experiments can even assist the political scientist of Book III. For example, in cases where *some* principle for determining a question of property is needed, but no single principle appears less arbitrary than another, the successful principle will naturally be one that appeals most to the imagination. So, for example, the common poetic figure of speech whereby *city gates* represent the *whole city* sheds light on *where* to stake a claim to an unoccupied city if one wishes one's claim to be most readily accepted [THN III.ii.3n].

Additional examples could be multiplied. But at least as important as the wealth of *particular experiments* that literature furnishes to the science of man is the *general model* that literature provides for understanding the nature of other topics. Literary criticism is the science of literary beauty and deformity for Hume; *morals* is the science of virtue and vice, which constitute respectively *moral beauty* and *moral deformity*. Accordingly, many of the same issues — ontological, psychological, and practical — that arise when we seek to understand and defend a standard of taste in literature also arise when we seek to understand and defend moral standards. Whether the quality judged lies in the observer or the observed; how proper judgment is developed and facilitated; and how to distinguish soluble from insoluble disputes — all of these questions arise equally in criticism and morals. (Incidentally, the two disciplines also inform one another's particular judgments — for a poet's moral errors are among the most disfiguring, according to Hume, while a proper exposure to literature and drama facilitates the development of moral judgment [THN III.iii.3].)

Furthermore, however, the application of the model provided by the establishment of standards of taste in literature is not restricted solely to the science of morals. For the choice of *epistemological standards* by which to conduct philosophy itself — and indeed *all* inquiry — is similar in many ways to the problem of *standards in literature*. According to Hume, the fact that "belief is a more vivid and intense conception of an idea, proceeding from its relation to a present impression" means that

> all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. It is not solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. [THN 102]

This does not mean, of course, that all beliefs or sentiments are equally good, for there are real standards of taste. The crucial "Title Principle" of the *Treatise* cited earlier, that "Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can never have any

title to operate on us" [THN 270] is itself, in the end, a special kind of principle of taste, chosen partly for its ability to predict what cognitive operations will and will not please, engage, and satisfy us.

Conclusion

I have tried to explain and illustrate some of the reasons why Hume found literature to be an important topic for philosophy and philosophers. While philosophy helps to explain general and specific literary phenomena, ground the science of criticism, and suggest and justify principles of art, literature at the same time provides valuable "experiments" for philosophy and provides it with a model not only for the science of morals but, in some ways, for philosophy itself. But not only can the literary arts help us to *write better philosophy*, in Hume's view; they can also help us to *write philosophy better*. Thus, for example, the moral philosopher, when recommending virtue, should borrow "all helps from poets and eloquence" [EHU I]. The philosopher addressing the topics of the existence and nature of God should — as Pamphilus informs Hermippus at the outset of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* — choose to write a dramatic dialogue, which of all literary forms is best suited to the treatment of those two topics. Hume's own philosophical writing — and especially his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which I have seen performed to great effect as a play — are themselves certainly products of fine literary craftsmanship. In Hume's projected science of man, knowledge of literature and criticism contributes to the understanding of human nature, an understanding which in turn informs the choice of what literary forms and figures to use in order to convey most effectively still further aspects of the understanding of human nature and its consequences for the sciences. To the taste of a philosopher such as myself, at least, this architecture of mutual support and reinforcement between literature and philosophy is itself a thing of considerable beauty.

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