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Hume's Language of Scepticism

IAN SIMPSON ROSS

And how should I begin? sings that hopeless self-doubter, J. Alfred Prufrock, contemplating the love of woman, but perhaps the task is easier for the student of literature and linguistics wishing to provide assistance to lovers of wisdom. He can focus on texts that puzzle them and give rise to their philosophical controversies, and offer his lights for interpretation and criticism by adducing new, perhaps even startling contexts, suggested by the concerns of his own discipline. A primary concern is language and therefore, with considerable trepidation, this student contributes a literary analysis of aspects of what is assuredly a problematic area for philosophers, Hume's language of scepticism.

The meaning I am attaching to "language" in this context is the one advanced by John Pocock, neither a critic nor a linguist but a historian. Pocock wrote:

we are to be concerned with idioms, rhetorics, specialised vocabularies and grammars, modes of discourse or ways of talking about politics which have been created and diffused, but far more importantly, employed, in the political discourse of early-modern Europe.¹

Elucidating Hume's political thought, James Moore² had already demonstrated that Hume used the language of classical republicanism, one of

the languages canvassed in Pagden's *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, and more recently John Laursen³ has attempted to connect Hume's scepticism with his politics traced in two specialized vocabularies of "politeness and manners" and "opinion and belief." I intend to cast a wider net and examine the idioms Hume uses as he pushes his principles of doubt and uncertainty as far as they will take him in exploring the limits of human knowledge; to see if he employs a specialized vocabulary or grammar or syntax; and to identify the nature of his rhetoric: how he reaches his audience, what kind of ethical appeal he makes to them, and how he seeks to arouse emotion through figurative expressions, as well as to win assent through logical demonstration. From this last sentence, it will be appreciated that I believe inquiry into the nature of Hume's scepticism, taking advantage of literary/linguistic insights, must be a more comprehensive activity than the one proposed by D. C. Stove: namely, demonstration, necessarily incomplete, that Hume's assessment of the conclusiveness of arguments is always less favourable than that of other philosophers.⁴

By the same token, I have to recognize, as did Pocock and his co-writers in Pagden's book, the difference pointed out by Saussure⁵ between *langue* and *parole* and, I would add, that meant by Chomsky⁶ in differentiating between linguistic *competence* and *performance*. In this instance, I am calling attention to the difference between the complete system of essential forms and structures that, setting aside issues of translation, could be assembled from the writings or recorded utterances of sceptics down to Hume, also his comprehensive knowledge of this, and his particular language of scepticism in use made up of the writing-acts constituting the sceptical texts that we seek to interpret.

My thesis in this paper is that Hume had a lifelong preoccupation with religious scepticism and that, when dealing with this, and extending into other sceptical topics, in common with the proponents of the intellectual movement of his time we know as the Enlightenment, he turned satire to fashion, or perform in, the *parole* appropriate for his aims as a writer. A corollary to this procedure is that we find him employing techniques of composition such as innuendo, outright invective, paradox, parody, irony, bathos, and disingenuous conclusions, familiar to him and to us in satire, particularly in the writings of Swift, the great contemporary master of this genre, to reinforce, supplement, and compensate for the deficiencies of his logical demonstrations and assessments of arguments. To be sure, Swift wished to use satire to defend religious orthodoxy, but it is a double-edged weapon, and at the right moment, for example, in the essay "Of Miracles," Hume seized control and inflicted wickedly deep and unexpected cuts on that same orthodoxy.

Concerning the claim about the lifelong preoccupation, I offer the following piece of evidence in support. In a letter of 10 March 1751, addressed

to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, Hume discusses the onset of his scepticism, and the loss of his religious faith as an adolescent:

tis not long ago that I burn'd an old Manuscript Book, wrote before I was twenty; which contain'd, Page after Page, the gradual progress of Thoughts on that head. It begun with an anxious search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again; and it was a perpetual Struggle of a restless Imagination against inclination, perhaps against Reason.⁷

Hume goes on to discuss a method for composing the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* had he and his correspondent had the good fortune to live near each other. He would have developed the part of Philo the sceptic, "which you'll own," he wrote to Elliot, "I could have supported naturally enough," and his correspondent "would not have been averse" to sustaining the part of Cleanthes, the philosophical theist. He reckoned both would have kept their tempers in their exchanges, though he acknowledged Elliot remained a religious believer. Hume's expression here reflects the *lanque*, if I may call it that, of classical scepticism, for he writes: "you have not reach'd an absolute philosophical Indifference on these Points" (HL I 154). His meaning is that Elliot has not followed the sceptical path pointed out by Sextus Empiricus, experiencing the equal weight and therefore undecidability of the arguments for and against the religious hypothesis, *epoche*, and thereafter attaining to, and enjoying, an "absolute philosophical Indifference on these Points" or *ataraxia*.⁸

There has been recent discussion⁹ of ways in which Hume might have known of Sextus's arguments and, therefore, cast of language: either directly from the Greek text of Sextus himself, as represented by J. A. Fabricius's edition of his works (1718), common enough in contemporary libraries, for example, that of Hume's good friend Adam Smith,¹⁰ or in Claude Huart's translation (editions, 1725, 1735) of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; or mediately through reviews of those books or writings that incorporated Sextus's ideas and language, for example Jean LeClerc's article (1720) on the Fabricius edition. Above all, there were works consistent in their sceptical strain inspired by Sextus: Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1st ed. 1695–97; 2nd 1702; 3rd 1720; 4th 1730; first English translation 1710), also his *Oeuvres diverses* (1727–31); and Bishop Huet's *Traité de la faiblesse et l'esprit humain* (1723, many reprints and translations; first English translation 1725).¹¹

Hume had been reading Bayle by March 1732, and expresses the hope that a friend, Michael Ramsay of Mungale, will find "Diversion and Improvement" in this author (HL I 12). His own early discoveries in Bayle along these lines, recorded in the manuscript "Early Memoranda," which have been dated

between 1729 and 1740, show that he was attracted to the witty expression in this source of the sceptical challenge to the religious hypothesis of a world formed by a benevolent creator: "Many Plans upon which the Universe might be form'd. Strange that none shou'd be better than the present. Baile" (II 21).¹² Acknowledgment of Huet as a reviver of "all the Doctrines of the ancient Sceptics or Pyrrhonians" is somewhat later: *A Letter from a Gentleman*, 1745,¹³ and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, c.1751, 1776,¹⁴ but this probably reflects reading during Hume's first sojourn in France, 1734–37, when he was composing the *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739–40.¹⁵ As to casting sceptical arguments in dialogic form, Bayle provided an excellent example in extended note B to the article on Pyrrho, commenting on the nicely ironic phrase, "Pyrrhonism or Scepticism... is justly detested in the schools of Divinity." Here Bayle presents one abbé, who is orthodox, debating with another, who is a "good philosopher," why it is the case that Christian theology and the "new Philosophy" (modern physics) provide the sceptic with "unanswerable arguments." This is a highly important passage philosophically speaking, as one source of the argument employed by Berkeley and then Hume against the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and the existence of bodies.¹⁶ It also provides the literary idea of the debate between Christian orthodoxy and scepticism, which Hume takes up in the exchanges between Demea and Philo in the *Dialogues*, also practical demonstration of the management of "discourse behaviour"¹⁷ appropriate for philosophical transaction.

Of course, the classical authors provided many examples for Hume of the dialogue form used for this philosophical debate, most notably Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*. Additionally, it should be noted that one Greek author cited in Hume's "Early Memoranda" is the Greek satirist Lucian, who claimed to have "deserted [Rhetoric] for that bearded fellow Dialogue...said to be the son of Philosophy." Lucian's comic dialogues satirizing abuses in philosophy and religion were much relished in the eighteenth century, and in 1766 the abbé Morellet recollected that Lucian was Hume's favorite author (HL II 158n). A claim that Lucian made about his dialogues was that they framed his revival of the serious jesting of the Cynic Menippus of Gadara, whom he referred to as an "old dog he has dug up, one with a loud bark and sharp teeth, all the more formidable because he laughed as he bit," and whom he featured as the most important character in his *Dialogues of the Dead*. Lucian described his stance as a satirist as that of a "hater of impostors, charlatans, lies and pretentious airs."¹⁸ Swift saw himself as a descendent of Lucian in this respect, and the satiric tradition of witty exposure of vice in a religious guise especially had a powerful appeal for Hume. He must have recognized here a functional connexion between satire and moral philosophy.

Reverting to the topic of Hume's concern with religious scepticism, I turn to the last few days of his life for further evidence of his abiding interest in this

subject. His letters at that time and those of Adam Smith reveal that much on his mind as he lay dying was revision of the *Dialogues* and making arrangements for their posthumous publication. For prudential reasons, Smith resisted promising Hume he would undertake the latter responsibility.¹⁹ Hume did not understand Smith's reluctance in this matter, and wrote on 15 August 1776:

On revising them [the *Dialogues*] (which I have not done these 15 years) I find nothing can be more cautiously and artfully written. You have certainly forgotten them. (HL II 334)

Smith's reply was that he would accept a copy of the *Dialogues* and preserve the manuscript, but he would make no commitment about publication. He did offer, however, to "add a few lines" to Hume's brief autobiography, "My Own Life," describing his friend's "steady cheerfulness, such as very few men have been able to maintain for a few hours," observable for more than two years in the face of what he believed to be the approach of death.²⁰ In the event, Hume's publisher William Strahan was swayed by Smith's scruples not to publish the *Dialogues*, and it fell to a nephew, David Hume the younger, to effect this in 1779. The following year a French translation appeared at Edinburgh, with an *Avertissement* which asserted "[l'auteur] parait avoir voulu se peindre sous le personnage de Philon."²¹ Meantime, true to his word Smith had published his letter to Strahan of 9 November 1776 dealing with Hume's last days.

The centrepiece of this text, moving us back to our focus on the language of scepticism, is yet another dialogue, one that Hume imagined taking place between himself and Charon, in the spirit of those recounted by Lucian, in which various ghosts plead for a little more time in this world. Smith had presented a more outspoken version of this exchange in a letter to Alexander Wedderburn dated 14 August 1776, within a week of hearing it from Hume's own lips. At first, so Hume alleged, he could not think of a suitable excuse to fob off the grim ferryman, but at last one occurred to him:

Good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the people; have a little patience only till I have the pleasure of seeing the churches shut up, and the Clergy sent about their business; but Charon would reply, O you loitering rogue; that won't happen these two hundred years; do you fancy I will give you a lease for so long a time? Get into the boat this instant.²²

Here we have, on the one hand, a delightfully ironic comment by Hume on the anticlerical tendency of his scepticism, putting in appropriate doubt the question of measurable, immediate impact for his writings, whatever hopes might exist for the 1970s. On the other hand, Smith's comment to

Wedderburn in this private letter, which deals with Hume's state of mind as a dying sceptic distinguished from that of an orthodox believer, is a form of epideictic or ceremonial discourse, with praise contrasting blunt invective:

Poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great chearfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God.²³

The project of closing up churches and dismissing the clergy, of course, is satirically handled by Swift in *An argument to prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England, May as things now stand, be attended with some Inconveniencies, and perhaps not produce those many good Effects prop[osed thereby]* (1708). The irony of this text is complex,²⁴ but the heart of the matter is that the ostensible author proclaims that he is not "so weak" as to be defending "real Christianity," the "system of the Gospel, [which] after the fate of other systems, is generally antiquated and exploded." Rather he is arguing for "nominal Christianity," token observance of Anglican rituals, which he reckons to be consistent with "all our present schemes of wealth and power." The *Argument* unfolds to show with wild logic that the revenues of ten thousand or more dismissed parsons, formerly supervising this "nominal Christianity," would not support two hundred young gentlemen of wit and pleasure, and that although the churches might certainly be "converted into playhouses, exchanges, market-houses, common dormitories, and other public edifices," nothing would be gained because they are already thoroughly secularized.

In a similar vein our arguer points out that the absence of parsons would leave many fewer objects for the "scorn and contempt" of great wits, and the disappearance of Christianity would totally prevent them from distinguishing themselves: "Who would have ever suspected Asgil for a wit, or Toland for a philosopher, if the inexhaustible stock of Christianity had not been at hand to provide them with materials?" He also ventures to point out that the abolishing of Christianity may perhaps bring the Church in danger, in that its Anglican constitution may thereby be altered, either allowing zealots to replace it with presbyterianism, or the superstitious to introduce popery. The concessive syntax is ingeniously handled to suggest the following: the Church of England "as things stand" and Christianity are not to be regarded as synonymous; yet the Church is nearer what Christianity ought to be, and thus to be preferred and defended by reasonable people, against the zeal or fanatical enthusiasm of the ultra-Protestants, on the one hand, and the idolatrous superstition of the Roman Catholics, on the other.

The *Argument* reaches its ethical climax with the contention that the abolitionists would not secure their real aim, which is to secure freedom of action and thought, by rejecting Christianity understood as made up of

doctrinal points hard to digest. Their real quarrel is with religion in general which lays "restraints on human nature" through insistence on the reality of God and Providence, that is, a supreme, eternal being in charge of a supernatural system of rewards and punishments for human actions. The anticlimax of the text is a plea to those "at the helm," if they still think that Church and State will benefit from abolishing Christianity, that they will delay implementation until peace comes, because England has allies who are so bigoted as to be proud to call themselves Christian, and they would reject the English if they were to declare themselves in name, what they are in fact, infidels. Moreover, an alliance with the Turks is not to be hoped for: they would be more scandalized than England's neighbors at the country's infidelity, since they observe religious worship strictly and believe in one God, which is more than is required of the English even when calling themselves Christians. Last of all, though some claim trade will benefit from repealing Christianity, it is likely that the Bank of England and East India Company stock will fall 1 percent. Since this is 50 times more than has been laid out by contemporaries to maintain Christianity, there seems no good reason to incur such a loss for its destruction.²⁵

Hume must have fallen with happy glee upon such texts in Swift, notable for their destabilizing mixture of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, to use the terms employed by Cicero in *De Oratore* to distinguish between appeals to ethics, emotion, and reason. They would strike him as brilliant parodies of the deliberative oratory he, like Swift, first learned about during university studies devoted to the rhetorical theories of Cicero and Quintilian. We have no specific evidence that I know about concerning his encounter with the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, though we do know that he read *Gulliver's Travels*, and was sufficiently inspired by it to have intended "frequently" to write a supplement "containing the Ridicule of Priests." He mentioned this in another letter to Elliot of Minto, dated 18 February 1751, continuing:

Twas certainly a Pity that Swift was a Parson. Had he been a Lawyer or a Physician, we had nevertheless been entertain'd at the Expense of these Professions. But Priests are so jealous, that they cannot bear to be touch'd on that Head; and for a plain Reason: Because they are conscious they are really ridiculous. That part of the Doctor's Subject is so fertile, that a much inferior Genius, I am confident, might succeed in it. (HL I 153)

Nothing that has survived came of these frequent intentions of Hume's, but in "Of Miracles" he dealt with the topic intimately connected with what made priests "really ridiculous" in his eyes and those of like-minded contemporaries: the alleged suspensions of the laws of nature, in which the

priests professed to believe, and upon whose interpretation they founded their authority. This is made devastatingly clear in a crucial part of the essay, where the emphasis is on Logos, the rational appeal of discourse:

Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish. It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.²⁶

Here Hume is performing in the *parole* appropriate for a "more *mitigated* scepticism or *academical* philosophy," in which the "undistinguished doubts [of Pyrrhonism, or *excessive* scepticism] are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection" (EHU 161).²⁷ In so doing, he deflates the assurance of Swift or any other dogmatist attempting to seize the higher moral ground on the basis of proclaimed faith in a "popular religion."

For details of the origin and eventual publication of the essay "Of Miracles," we can turn again to Hume's correspondence. Complimenting his friendly Aberdeen adversary, George Campbell, on the tone of his *Dissertation on Miracles*,²⁸ Hume wrote:

It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College of La flèche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and that I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at least he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles; —which observation I thought to admit as a sufficient answer. (HL I 361)

Campbell had attacked Hume's argument that the cause and effect reasoning concerning human testimony was not different from reasoning leading us to draw any inferences about other human actions, namely, our knowledge of human nature drawn from experience, but he had not demonstrated why he believed human testimony about miracles should be privileged. I am drawing these comments from Hume's responses to the contents of Campbell's book, which he made in an earlier letter to Hugh Blair (HL I 349).

Hume was confident of the handling of the principle of Logos in his discourse on miracles, which in an early form he had thought to make part of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. But he had doubts about the handling of Pathos and Ethos. He revealed this concern in a letter of 2 December 1737, addressed to Henry Home of Kames,²⁹ to whom he enclosed a copy of what he then called *Reasonings concerning Miracles*:

I once thought of publishing [them] with the rest, but...I am afraid [they] will give too much Offence, even as the World is disposed at present. There is Something in the turn of Thought, and a good deal in the Turn of Expression, which will not appear so proper, for want of knowing the Context: But the Force of the Argument you'll be judge of, as it stands. Tell me your Thoughts of it. Is not the Style too diffuse? Tho as that was a popular Argument, I have spread it out much more than the other Parts of the Work....Let me know at your Leisure that you have received it, read it, and burnt it. I wou'd not even have you make another nameless Use of it, to which it wou'd not be improper, for fear of Accidents.

Hume goes on to say that he wants to get Joseph Butler's opinion about the *Treatise*, and would be glad to be introduced to him:

I am at present castrating my Work, that is, cutting off its noble Parts, that is, endeavouring it shall give as little Offence as possible, before which I cou'd not pretend to put it into [Butler's] hands. (HNL 3)

Home of Kames advised suppression of the essay "Of Miracles" right up to the time of its first appearance in print in 1748 in *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (2nd edition with important additions, 1750; known as the first *Enquiry* from 1758, when so entitled in the collected *Essays and Treatises*), but Hume decided to publish and be damned:

Our friend [Kames]...is against this as indiscreet. But in the first place, I think I am too deep engaged to think of a retreat. In the second place, I see not what bad consequences follow, in the present age, from the character of an infidel; especially if a man's conduct be in other respects irreproachable. (HL I 106)

These words are Hume's rejoinder to the Ethos of such texts as Swift's *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*, namely, that religion effectively lays "restraints on human nature," and they show his alignment with Bayle's thinking in rejoinder to the Ethos of *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682) criticizing the view that infidels must necessarily be immoral.³⁰ Hume's own thinking must have shifted from the time of the publication of the *Treatise*, when the counsel of Kames and perhaps other friends, adding to his own prudence, made him emasculate his book by removing the *Reasonings concerning Miracles*. What made him confident by 1748 that writing in the "character of an infidel" would not have "bad consequences?" In fact, he lost one university position at Edinburgh because of his reputation for "universal scepticism," and was to be denied another at Glasgow in 1751 apparently for the same reason.³¹ It could be submitted that, like Tristram Shandy, he believed that the credit he gained as an author would more than make up for the setbacks in his life. This credit he assumed would be his due from recognition of his control of style and rhetorical situation gained since the unfortunate publication of the *Treatise*, as he saw matters, and demonstrated in the *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741–42, 1748), also the *Philosophical Essays* (1748) including the one on miracles.

After causing a furor in Hume's lifetime and being "answered" unavailingly by George Campbell and many others, the essay "Of Miracles" in our day still arouses philosophical controversy from which no consensus seems to be emerging.³² In this event, the supplementary approach of the critic sensitive to historical issues may be welcomed, since this requires a focus on the text as a literary work written in a specific context of debate over authentic proofs of miracles and prophecy. Recently, Mark Box has described in a lucid fashion Hume's stylistic progress from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiries* via the *Essays*. His story about "Of Miracles" is that Hume begins this essay by impersonating a "sectarian controversialist aspiring to follow Archbishop Tillotson's example in putting down superstition," then becomes ineptly entangled in fideism, thus allowing the impersonator Hume to entangle the reader in an examination of the miracle that must give rise to his own belief in the miraculous.³³ Such finessing with a persona is certainly one of the lessons Hume could have learned from the satirist Swift, for example, at work in the *Argument against Abolishing Christianity* already cited. The modish arguer's defence of nominal Christianity in this text makes the reader ask what is involved in a commitment to real or primitive Christianity, and not only in Swift's terms which would be to equate important vestiges of it with contemporary Anglicanism.

But candid review of Hume's essay will reveal other Swiftian and Lucianic touches, suggesting not the ineptness of the persona, the writer ostensibly addressing us as readers, but a succession of sceptical perspectives mediated through copiousness of language and strategies of composition. First, it should

be noted that the topic of overthrowing belief in miracles has been taken from its original context in the *Treatise*, the discussion of probability theory,³⁴ where it is unquestionably heralded:

we may observe, that among the vulgar, quacks and projectors meet with a more easy faith upon account of their magnificent pretensions, than if they kept themselves within the bounds of moderation. The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens the idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience. This is a mystery, with which we may be already a little acquainted, and with which we shall have further occasion to be let into in the progress of the treatise. (T 120)

In the *Philosophical Essays*, "Of Miracles" is ironically juxtaposed between "Of the Reason of Animals" (Section IX) and "Of a particular Providence and a future State" (Section XI). Section IX concludes with the humbling assertion that the "experimental reasoning itself, which we possess in common with beasts, and on which the whole conduct of life depends, is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power, that acts in us unknown to ourselves (EHU 108). Essentially, the case put in Section X ("Of Miracles") is that reasoning advanced to promote belief in the miraculous is false, a perversion of our "instinct." Section XI is cast in the form of a dialogue between "Hume" and an alter ego: a "friend who loves sceptical paradoxes," who speaks in the role of an Epicurus supposedly accused by the Athenians of damaging the "ties of morality" and endangering civil peace by teaching a philosophy which rejects theism and therefore divine planning and life after death. A starting point for this dialogue is found in allusions to two examples of the form by Lucian: the scurrilous *Eunuch* and the comic *Symposium*, which hinges on the uselessness of philosophy in inculcating morality.³⁵ The tenor seems generally influenced by the positive view of Epicureanism taken by Lucian, as in the conclusion to *Alexander the False Prophet*,³⁶ one of the sources of Section XI. The real conclusion of the dialogue, put in the mouth of the paradoxical and sceptical friend, is one surely endorsed by Hume himself, a cool refutation of the argument for the necessity of religion to lay "restraints on human nature":

All the philosophy, therefore, in the world, and all the religion, which is nothing but a species of philosophy, will never be able to carry us beyond the usual course of experience, or give us measures of conduct and behaviour different from those which are furnished by reflections on common life. No new fact can ever be inferred from the religious hypothesis; no event foreseen or foretold; no reward or punishment

expected or dreaded, beyond what is already known by practice and observation. (EHU 146)

Unlike Gaul, the essay "Of Miracles" is divided into two parts. The first, to a certain extent, turns upside down the probabilistic argument of Antione Arnauld and Pierre Nicole's *La Logique, ou l'art de penser*, also known as the *Port-Royal Logic* (1st ed. 1662; English translation 1674 authorized by the Royal Society).³⁷ The essay contends that alleged happenings such as prodigies and miracles are so improbable, as contrary to the ordinary course of nature, whose uniformity is established statistically, that no testimony however strong warrants belief. The second part focuses on testimony and reasons, in common with contemporary English deistic and French clandestine irreligious writings, that whatever evidence supports miracles is typically untrustworthy and has never proved sufficient to establish credibility, although prodigies hypothetically could be credible on the basis of strong testimony (EHU 116–17, 127–28).³⁸ Taken together, these claims constitute the "popular Argument" which Hume told Kames in 1737 was to be found in the *Reasonings concerning Miracles*, and which he said he had spread out...much more than the other parts of the [*Treatise*]," wondering if the style might not be "too diffuse" (NHL 2). The spreading out must be the compositional choice of the introduction of reinforcing subordinate arguments for rejecting the credibility of claims for miracles, a process continuing up to the second edition of the *Philosophical Essays* of 1750, which made the text appear to answer pro-miracle arguments of John Locke and Bishop Butler.³⁹ Hume keeps tight control of his style to avoid diffuseness in the published versions of the essay, and inserts a sceptical comment about rhetoric or "eloquence":

when at its highest pitch, [it] leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding. Happily, this pitch it seldom attains. But what a Tully [Cicero] or Demosthenes could scarcely effect over a Roman or Athenian audience, every Capuchin, every itinerant or stationary teacher can perform over the generality of mankind, and in a higher degree, by touching such gross and vulgar passions. (EHU 118)

This is not to say that Hume as an antidote to "eloquence" espouses the plain style of Swift, which Adam Smith was apparently advocating, in 1748–51, should be taken up by the "men of genius in [Scotland]...inclined to abstract and Speculative reasonings."⁴⁰ Indeed, Hume remonstrated as follows in 1768 with the historian William Robertson for his "partiality to Dean Swift, whom I can laugh with, whose style I can even approve, but surely can never admire.

It has no harmony, no eloquence, no ornament, and not much correctness, whatever the English may imagine." Hume covertly expresses his stylistic preferences for classical and French writers, and continues with a typical slam at the poor South Britons: "Were not their literature still in a somewhat barbarous state, [Swift's] place would not be so high among their classics" (HL II 194).

Nevertheless, in his essay Hume maintains a Lucianic and Swiftian perspective on superstition and enthusiasm allied to quackery. To illustrate this, quotations can be set side by side. For example, we have the "modern author" digressing about madness in *A Tale of a Tub*:

this *madness* has been the parent of all those mighty revolutions that have happened in *empire*, in *philosophy*, and in *religion* [Swift instances those effected by Alexander the Great, Descartes, and the Anabaptist demagogue Jack of Leyden]. For the brain, in its natural position and state of serenity, disposeth its owner to pass his life in the common forms without any thoughts of subduing multitudes to his own *power*, his *reasons*, or his *visions*; and the more he shapes his understanding by the pattern of human learning, the less he is inclined to form parties after his particular notions, because that instructs him in his private infirmities, as well as in the stubborn ignorance of the people. But when a man's fancy gets *astride* on his reason, when imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding is kicked out of doors; the first proselyte he makes is himself, and when that is once compassed the difficulty is not so great in bringing over others, a strong delusion always operating from *without* as vigorously as from *within*.⁴¹

Hume writes in the same vein:

The wise lend a very academic faith to every report which favours the passion of the reporter; whether it magnifies his country, his family, or himself; or in any way strikes in with his natural inclinations and propensities. But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven? Who would not encounter many dangers and difficulties in order to attain so sublime a character? Or if, by the help of vanity and a heated imagination, a man has first made a convert of himself, and entered seriously into the delusion; who ever scruples to make use of pious frauds, in support of so holy and meritorious a cause? (EHU 125)

Just before this passage, Hume cited as examples of "pious frauds" the alleged miracles wrought at the tomb of the Jansenist abbé Paris, but in a note supplied for the 1750 text of the essay, he presents further circumstantial

details of Jansenist miracles endorsed by Pascal and Racine as well as Arnauld and Nicole, and refers ironically to one as “really performed by the touch of an authentic holy prickle of the holy thorn, which composed the holy crown, which, etc.” (EHU 346). Is it coincidence alone which makes this a comical echo of Swift’s satire, also in the *Tale*, of the Catholic claims for the miraculous powers of properly blessed holy water to which he refers as a “famous universal pickle”?⁴²

In “Of Miracles,” Hume addresses himself to the “wise,” the “learned,” and the “judicious,” offering to them an “everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion” (EHU 110). As the essay unfolds, we learn that it is the writer’s view, as it was also Swift’s, that a “great part of mankind” is characterized by “bigotry, ignorance, cunning, and roguery” (EHU 124), and so this “check” will always be needed. Simply put, the check is mitigated scepticism, or more explicitly, “a general maxim worthy of our attention.... ‘That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish’” (EHU 115–16).⁴³ Hume reckons this kind of scepticism was manifested by the Cardinal de Retz in Saragossa when confronted with the tale of the church doorkeeper who recovered a lost leg by rubbing holy oil on the stump, though this is an interpretation imposed on the text of the *Mémoires* rather than something stated specifically by the *libertin érudit* himself (EHU 123–24).⁴⁴ Another instructive anecdote in the essay regarding the efficacy of scepticism is that of the false prophet, Alexander of Abonuteichos, whose “wise policy” (another Swiftian touch of irony) was to “lay the scene of his impostures in Paphlagonia, where...the people were extremely ignorant and stupid.” If he had lived at Athens his fraud would have been exposed by the “philosophers of that renowned mart of learning.” As it happened, Lucian was travelling in that region and was able to perform this “good office” of exposure (EHU 120–21). Thus it came about that the satirist played the role of the sceptic as, often, the sceptic has to use the language of the satirist.

What Hume sought by his essay was Enlightenment, which meant freeing humans from the “sophistry and illusion” of popular religion resting on miracles. Pointing out this freedom could be dangerous, for all Hume’s brave words about an irreproachable character outweighing a reputation for infidelity. Robert Darnton has described how much the *Encyclopédistes* were aware that tampering with the world views involving such features as miracles could have painful consequences, and how they hid behind subterfuge, irony, and false protestations of orthodoxy. But they did not hide the epistemological basis of their attack on the old cosmology.⁴⁵ In a similar case, Hume has the same cues for wielding the language of scepticism, and unlike the modernist Prufrock, he dares disturb the universe of believers. Since the text was a “philosophical essay” in origin, we find a prudent mingling of styles

in "Of Miracles," and the oscillation permitted by the form encompassing probabilistic logic and the Menippean bits of invective and innuendo, as the nominally Christian persona deals with "popular" religion. We have the parody of Anglican apologetics in the opening, with its deferential reference to good Archbishop Tillotson. We have the paradox that the testimony of the Catholic Christian church (motto: *Semper eadem*) is demonstrated to be progressively weaker as time passes. We have the bathos of the examination of the Pentateuch according to the "principles of these pretended Christians," i.e., the Christian rationalists, reducing it to the level of a farrago of fables, or a Jansenist miracle, attested by the grave Racine, featured as the tickle of a holy prickle. As a conclusion, we have the disingenuous emphasis of the persona on the requirement for faith in the *Christian Religion* of a "continued miracle" to give a "determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience." The upshot, of course, is that like *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*, we have in Hume's essay a text that continues to vex us with its disturbing power, focused in the satiric finesse as well as logic of its sceptical language.

NOTES

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