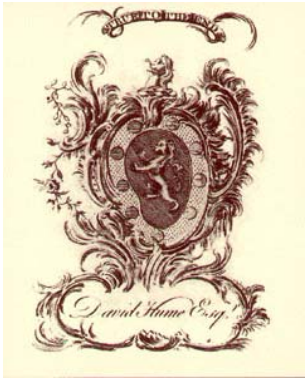

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Critical Study

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ADAM POTKAY. *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. xiv + 253. Cloth: USA $36.95 USA, £30.95 UK.

The author discusses the new historicism at enough length in his introduction to indicate its importance to this book as a hermeneutic approach, though he dissociates himself from its psycho-social agenda (18–20). A supposition of this sort of postmodern approach is that any more or less coherent set of beliefs held by a group is ultimately ideological in the Marxist sense of being a collective delusion. Superimposed onto this model is a Freudian orientation in which these ideologies are seen as subconscious rationalizations, sometimes related in startling ways to sex. Texts—literary, philosophical, whatever—evince these submerged ideologies in ways of which authors usually will be only dimly aware. What authors intend to say becomes less important than the putative ideology shaping their intentions. A Humean analogy is to focus on the psychic factors determining our conscious decisions at the expense of the practical reasoning resulting in our intentions. A difference, however, is that this sort of postmodernism has an activist and psychoanalytic thrust that treats the underlying factors as something like pathology.

Potkay is not blind to the exegetical dangers. The advantages of attempting a sympathetic reading of authors' intentions are declined in favor of a critical perspective on the larger trends that the authors supposedly

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exemplify. To the extent that authors do not well exemplify the putative trends, they are vulnerable to distortion. Collective psyche-reading of people living centuries ago is risky, and a rigorist might feel that the gross earthy mixture of the vulgar is an ingredient which postmodernists commonly stand much in need of and which would serve to temper those fiery particles of which they are composed. Officially, proponents of this approach concede that their own anti-ideological activism is not itself free of ideological motives, and they are supposed to address the problem by being aware of and declaring their own ideologies openly. Often, in an exercise in tough love, competing postmodernist schools altruistically help each other out by disabusing each other of collective illusions. It can be an awful sight.

Reassuringly, Potkay enters caveats about aprioristic interpretation (22). Generally he practices a sort of mitigated new historicism, exercising a sense of moderation. More important virtues inform his book, however. He is very widely read: his range of reference runs from Demosthenes to de Man. His own writing is graceful and elegant. A talented close reader of poetry, he gives sensitive accounts of the phrase-by-phrase experience of reading Alexander Pope. He is very good about attending to chronology, conscientiously observing the evolution of a text's meanings over the years in which it was revised and relating that evolution to concurrent political and biographical events. He practices the old historicism well when it is not overruled by new historical priorities.

It will be evident by now that I do not value the book precisely for the things that Potkay might have expected. I am most grateful for what he has to say about Hume's intentions for the essay "Of Eloquence," though Potkay might regard this as a preliminary step to more important matters. He has noticed the importance in Hume's day of two aesthetic qualities, eloquence and elegance, and intriguingly has treated them as in competition for the hearts and minds of Hume and his readers. His examination of the ideological aspects of eloquence in the eighteenth century strikes me as successful. The ideological aspects of calls for eloquence genuinely existed due to the context of party politics in which much talk of eloquence emerged in the second quarter of the century. Potkay deserves credit for recognizing the applicability of this context, especially since the text of the essay does not draw attention to that context. However, when he proceeds to ferret out the ideological presuppositions of elegance, and finds in Hume the same mythopoeic proclivities that he attacked in espousing elegance and the science of man, Potkay exaggerates his case. And the tendency to see things as pathology seems to get us into the apriorism that he renounces in his introduction (22).

This book is not about Hume so much as about dialectical forces characterizing what Potkay calls the age of Hume. He names the age after Hume not for any influence that Hume might have had on his contemporaries, but rather for Hume's exemplification of the dialectic (9). Because the dialectic is

between the ideals of eloquence and elegance, the most important of Hume's works turns out to be his essay on eloquence, though it has gone almost entirely unremarked for over two centuries. Potkay calls the contest between eloquence and elegance "*the* characteristic theme of the era" (104). Though it is doubtful that "Of Eloquence" is more important than Hume's epistemology, moral theory, politico-economic philosophy, and history, Potkay does contribute to our understanding of Hume by concentrating on a neglected essay.

Probably most Humeans have found "Of Eloquence" peculiar, and one need not subscribe to a dialectical theory of history to wonder what in his historical context prompted Hume to write it. Astutely, Potkay situates it in the context of the paper wars between the Walpole administration and the Opposition. Hume argues for the possibility of reviving "ancient eloquence" in Georgian Britain but presumes, rather than makes a case for, its desirability. This argument is puzzling given his objections to eloquence raised elsewhere. Not long before, in the introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume had objected that in the disputes of the learned "'tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence; and [that] no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colours." It is pertinent to add here that in this paragraph Hume is not regretting the infection by eloquence of philosophy solely, but of all "the sciences,"[1] that is, all of the organized pursuits of knowledge. So eloquence is a hindrance in the sciences but is desirable in some circumstances in parliamentary deliberations, and an attempt to reconcile Hume with himself, one supposes, should work out the differences between the two. Rather than attempt to reconcile the essay with the objections to eloquence, however, Potkay attributes the discrepancy to an ambivalence in Hume. This same ambivalence can explain why Hume makes his case for the revival unsatisfactorily.

Potkay's thesis is that a conflicting ideal of elegance creates this ambivalence as much as concern for the deleterious effects of eloquence. Hume's ambivalence is symptomatic of a culture-wide dialectical tension between eloquence and elegance, with all their socio-political associations. In the context of the Country-versus-Court party struggle, any call for reviving ancient eloquence would be reminiscent of Opposition jeremiads over the corruption of Parliament by court patronage, or "influence," and of Opposition calls for a new era of republicanism featuring orators full of warmth for virtue. So Hume's call for eloquence implicitly takes on associations with the Opposition ideal of fervor for liberty and virtue inspiring patriotic orators to sublimity of expression. It is unlikely that Hume could have been oblivious to these associations. But, according to Potkay, the uneasy relationship of this ideal with "superior good sense"[2] poses Hume a problem that he sidesteps. Instead of showing how "sublime and passionate" eloquence

can be made to serve only good sense and not bad, he addresses instead solely the question of whether such eloquence is possible anymore. Even as he encouraged the cultivation of eloquence, the draw of elegance was stronger. Moreover, the ferment of "the mob" and the demagogic use of eloquence over the course of the '60s made eloquence less and less appealing. In the absence of a Walpole and in the presence of a Wilkes, enthusiasm for eloquence abated and left elegance free to proliferate.

The evolving culture of politeness had as its milieu not the public arena but successive social settings, first the court, later the salon, and finally the circle of family and friends, where it permeates and forms domestic relations. Note the social descent of politeness from the court to the decidedly upper class salon to the middle class nuclear family. In all phases it appeals partly because the distinction of politeness dissociates one from "the vulgar," variously defined. One therefore wonders what Potkay makes of the letter of 1734 in which Hume observes approvingly that in France politeness had pervaded even the lower class.[3]

In permeating domestic relations, polite culture participates in "gender construction." The conversation of modest women was a vital ingredient of polite society, so the culture of elegance advances women's status, but not without a price. As in the chivalric tradition, a woman's importance was in her good influence on the otherwise rambunctious men of her circle, so she had to be superior in refinement of sensibility. So far so good, but at this point the taste for pathology leads Potkay to posit an eighteenth-century ideal of feminine elegance, supposedly shared by Hume, that suppressed natural appetites. In "Hume's image," supposedly, the polite woman was "sexually passionless" (81 and n.). Samuel Richardson's servant-class heroine Pamela perhaps suggests this ideal, but I wonder whether the genteel Clarissa does and doubt that Fielding's Sophia Western does. Hume himself indicates only that he valued modesty in women, and postmodern civilization is in trouble if we believe that we cannot be modest without being sexually passionless.[4]

The book proceeds to trace the comparative fortunes of eloquence and elegance in the writings of Pope, Gray, Sterne, and Macpherson. I will take up here only the discussion of Pope. The fourth book of the *Dunciad* Potkay treats as a satire on the debasement of eloquence in Georgian Britain (106–21), but one in which Pope denounces the age elegantly rather than sublimely. This mock-apocalyptic reading of the *Dunciad* makes it into a document of politeness, notwithstanding its malice and scatology. I agree that it makes sense to try out defining eighteenth century politeness somehow so as to allow scatology, bearing in mind Hume's designation of Swift as the writer of the "first polite prose" in English ("Of Civil Liberty" 91). But the characterization of elegance as "an essentially disembodying style from Pope onward" (16) does not obviously admit scatology. In Swift's case we have a writer notoriously insistent about reminding us of our bodies and of bodily functions. The

attribution to elegance of a disembodying style seems arbitrary: was Pope's style more disembodying than Donne's or Milton's? Moreover, the attribution seems to cause trouble for Potkay's opposition of elegance to eloquence. Potkay quotes Edmund Burke's praise of Milton's disembodied personification of Death in *Paradise Lost* (123), but Burke was describing what he took to be sublimity, not elegance. The opposition seems suspended temporarily when within two pages we read first that Pope's line "evinces an anticorporeal eloquence" and then that the *Dunciad* is one of "the most polite" poems in English literature (128, 130). For Burke elegance is akin to beauty, which he was at pains to distinguish from sublimity (see his *Sublime* 2 ß 3, 3 ß 23), so to avoid reading Potkay as quarreling with his ally I surmise his thinking to be that Pope's anticorporeal eloquence is part of a mock sublime that results in elegance by indirection. But then disembodying effects would characterize the sublime style being mocked, not the elegant style.

When Potkay says, in so many words, that polite style consisted of the effective use of understatement and irony (130–1), one cannot disagree. When he defines polite culture as secularist and heterodoxical (10–11), one imagines what Swift, Addison, and Steele's indignant retorts would be. When he says that "Politeness typically involves an ironic discrepancy between an abstract and convivial style and a thematic fascination with bodies and the unironic consciousness of barbarians" (132), one feels that the eighteenth century has been largely assimilated into T. S. Eliot's wasteland. A greater focus on authors' conscious intentions than on underlying complexes could be a salutary guide. When attempting to define elegance, Burke isolated polish and regularity (3 ß 23). For Hume and many others, a necessary quality of elegant writing was what I have called natural novelty. As Hume said, paraphrasing Addison, "Fine writing...consists of sentiments, which are natural, without being obvious. There cannot be a juster, and more concise definition of fine writing" ("Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" 191).[5] Still another point of departure would have been Hume's extended discussion of "real Politeness of Heart" and the outward "Expression of Politeness" in the letter mentioned earlier (HL I 20). An obvious source for analyzing Hume's execution of his own aesthetics would have been the extravagantly wrought philosophical character studies, "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic." Surely it would have shed light on Hume's notions to determine whether in those essays Hume was striving for sublimity, elegance, or a hybrid. And since the subject of the book is the fate of eloquence, one regrets Potkay's choosing a time frame for examination excluding the parliamentary eloquence of Burke, which seems more important to discuss in this context than Macpherson's *Ossian*.

Potkay notes that the figures of speech most important to the contemporary understanding of sublimity were apostrophe and prosopopoeia, the two with the closest relation to mythopoeic casts of mind. The two have

in common an appeal to our anthropomorphic tendencies, which, Hume observes in a couple of places, can infect philosophy. Therefore the use of personification becomes surprisingly significant in Potkay's Hume. When in the *Natural History of Religion* Potkay's Hume speaks of "the face of nature," he reanimates the cosmos even as he extrudes from it an anthropomorphic god (172–5). When he personifies the passions, he is substituting them for the lamented orators of the past in order to duplicate the orators' unifying influence on society (178). When in the *Treatise* he personifies our perceptions as inducing belief in us through their vivacity, he figures perceptions as orators and the percipient mind as the assembly being persuaded (185). In short, "Hume's necessary fictions—the face of nature, the rostrum of passions, the voice of perception—recoup the form but not the innocence of earlier poetic thought" (188).

Now it hardly needs saying that Hume's use of figurative language is formally like that of poetical, as opposed to philosophical, thought. Calling these figures of speech "necessary fictions" must be the significant point here, but doing so appears to elevate them wrongly to the small number of ineluctable beliefs like that in the uniformity of the future with the past. Be we ever so sceptical, custom will force on us certain beliefs like that in the continued, independent existence of unperceived objects, but it is not the same with using a figure of speech, which we can choose not to employ if we think readers will not recognize it as ornament. One would have supposed that Hume's use of personification indicates simply his expectation that his readers were not unduly susceptible to mythopoiea and that they would be able to discern the proposition expressed through the figure of speech.

By the phrase "necessary fiction" Potkay might not mean something of the order of the "fiction" that produces, for example, our sense of personal identity, but then his phrase invites confusion and what he means by "necessary" is not clear. If he means that thinking in figures, as opposed to speaking in them, is an inescapable part of human nature analogous to the ineluctable beliefs that Hume identified, then Potkay needs to account for people's occasional fashioning of apparently figureless propositions and to demonstrate the impossibility in principle of constructing a discourse out of them. It is insufficient just to invoke Nietzsche and de Man on "the inescapably figural nature of thought" (20). One wants substantiation for the claim that Hume acknowledged "the figural conditions of any discourse" (21): many readers will have thought that Hume believed it practicable to separate the constituents of our ideas in order to clear our minds of the cant of occult sympathies, antipathies, horrors of a vacuum, and other chimeras of figural thinking.

If Potkay means, as it appears, that Hume's figurative personifications are necessarily imposed on him idiosyncratically by a compulsion, as from an approach-avoidance complex, then we need enough evidence of compulsive

behavior to make this theory more plausible than the simple possibility that Hume was given to personification because he had been exposed to it a great deal in his reading and because it ameliorates the dryness of analytic prose.[6] In exegesis, as in other matters of probability, we should proportion belief to the evidence, and plausibility diminishes in proportion as an interpretation is extraordinary or marvelous. Potkay proposes rather than shows that Hume's use of personification reveals a yearning for sublimity and community lost to bourgeois civilization. This theory is more extraordinary, and therefore stands more in need of explanation, than Hume's own, quite unremarkable use of personification.

With these topics we have moved gradually from new historicism to varieties of postmodernism involving philosophy of language. In the present case it is new historicism that produces more insight, and I recommend this book to those interested to see what that approach has to contribute to Humean studies.

NOTES

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), xiv, xiii.

2 Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 104; cited in the text as *Essays* by title of individual essay.

3 Hume, *Letters of David Hume*, edited by J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932) I 19–21; cited in the text as HL.

4 In this connection, and apropos of Potkay's statement that in "reading Hume's early philosophical work one often feels he is speaking of beings very unlike you and me, beings of an animal or divine tranquility" (99), cf. Hume's piece on the problem of evil, in which he says, "Love betwixt the Sexes is...the only [good] that has any Pretensions to the Character of an exquisite & intense Pleasure, whether we consider the bodily Enjoyment which it affords, or the Tenderness & Elegance of that Friendship, which it inspires....But what is all this in Comparison of those many cruel Distempers & violent Sorrows, to which human Life is subject?" See M. A. Stewart, "An Early Fragment on Evil," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, edited by M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 166. Stewart infers that the fragment was excised from the *Treatise*.

5 See my *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), *passim*.

6 Distinguishing three degrees of personification, Hugh Blair finds that even personification in the second degree is admissible in "moral treatises, or works of cool reasoning," rendering the style "both strong and lively." See *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols. (London, 1783; repr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1965) I 328 (lect. 16).