



***Author's Response: A Reply to Mark Box***

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## *Author's Response*

### A Reply to Mark Box

ADAM POTKAY

I find that all in all Box makes my book seem much more forbidding than it is—or at least, than I think it is. Much of this is probably my own fault for starting my book with a somewhat theoretical section on methodology—on the so-called “new historicism.” While I accept responsibility for making statements about the new historicism, I think it might be “profitable to confess what moved me to make such statements”: my editor at Cornell wouldn’t publish my book unless I did so. It seems that many university presses are eager, today, for literary critics and historians to begin their books by orienting themselves with regard to current methodological practices and controversies. So I ended up situating my largely historical little book in relation to a recent “ism”—new historicism. I make fairly clear, however, that unlike many of these new historicists, I’m neither a Marxist in any activist sense, nor a Freudian in any sense at all. My book, unlike Box’s précis, contains no “febrile psyches,” “existential crises,” “approach-avoidance complexes,” “subconscious rationalizations,” or “pathologies.” And although I do talk about “ideologies,” I tend to use that term as many political historians now do to mean any more or less coherent body of beliefs; only once do I venture an explicitly Marxian use of that term. Here’s the offending passage:

It is fair to say that politeness is an ideology in the classical Marxian sense because its proponents—especially in Scotland—conceiving of themselves as the restorers of a type of social equality found in the

*places publiques* of Athens, disguised (perhaps even to themselves) their role as spokesmen for a rising class of gentry, professionals, well-to-do tradesmen, and moderate clericals who sought to confirm their identity and consolidate their power in contradistinction to a growing urban "mob." This mob refers to the smaller tradesmen, artisans, and workers of London, and, to a lesser degree, Edinburgh and Glasgow, insofar as they sought—as they increasingly did after 1760—to wrest political authority from its accustomed channels. (17–18)

What leads me to say this is obviously not Hume's youthful letter of 1734, in which he observes that in France politeness has pervaded even the lower class; it is, rather, Hume's plangent complaints about the vulgar and the mob in his letters of the 1760s, the decade, significantly, in which he made substantial revisions to his youthful essay "Of Eloquence," revisions that evince a growing squeamishness about the whole notion of passionate and popular eloquence. Significantly, the 1760s was also the decade in which Adam Smith delivered the lectures on rhetoric and belles-lettres that have (presumably with some degree of fidelity) come down to us—lectures that are, as I demonstrate in my book, fairly obsessed with teaching his young Glaswegian students how to distinguish themselves, by their reserve and elegance of address, from the vulgar and the mob. Indeed, by adducing Hume's letter of 1734, Box neglects what I had hoped to have been one of the chief lessons of my book—namely, that Hume's political opinions change between 1741 and 1770, or between first writing, and finally revising, "Of Eloquence." Hume grows far less comfortable with "the people," and accordingly with the popular appeal of the ancient orators. He grows much more concerned with the ill effects of demagoguery. He grows far more committed to an ethos of polite style that distinguishes "us" from the "vulgar."

Box seems to think it's a little bit funny that I pay all this attention to the evolution of a single essay, particularly "Of Eloquence," which, in his assessment, "has gone almost entirely unremarked for over two centuries." But, as I have argued in a recent paper,<sup>1</sup> Hume's "Of Eloquence" was probably the one piece of his writing most widely known in both Britain and America through the nineteenth century—whether or not those who knew it knew that they knew it. "Of Eloquence" was indeed known directly to many, both from the popularity of the *Essays* and from its reproduction in periodicals from *The Craftsman* (no. 747, 10 October 1741) to *The Virginia Gazette* (Feb. 25, 1768). But by the late eighteenth century Hume's sentences reached a vastly wider audience through the medium of Hugh Blair's published *Lectures on Rhetoric*.<sup>2</sup> For Blair's discussion of political eloquence, in lectures 25 through 27, consists in large part of paraphrase and unacknowledged quotation of Hume's "Of Eloquence." As Blair's lectures became the cornerstone of the rhetoric and

literature curricula in most all American and a good many British colleges, most college-educated men, on both sides of the Atlantic, ended up knowing the arguments and even some of the cadences of Hume's essay. Ironically, however, they ended up knowing a Hume who ostensibly advocated the revival of Demosthenic eloquence in the modern Atlantic world.

As Box is quite right to note, my book contends that between 1740 and 1770, in the 30 years that Hume grew increasingly uneasy with the ideal of popular and passionate eloquence and the notions of classical civic community that it entailed, so did a good number of other British writers—hence the latter part of my book addresses poems by Pope, Gray, and Macpherson, and the novels of Sterne. All of these works, I argue, are animated by a tension between theme—the sublime eloquence of the past—and form—the embodiment of modern polite style. Here, where I become less historical and more theoretical in my criticism, is where my book gives Box the most trouble, and some of the confusion is no doubt mine. Still, I'll try to defend what I was getting at in these sections.

*Pace* Edmund Burke, I contend that for the writers I treat the sublime was an embodying style—hence their insistence on the sublimity of prosopopoeia, the figure that bestows form or voice, and apostrophe, the figure that gives an ear. Hume is thus sublime as well as mythopoeic at those moments in his writings—and those moments, I argue, come most insistently in *The Natural History of Religion* and *The History of England*—when he makes the passions into quasi-personified or hypostasized agents that ineluctably act upon human beings, and unify us precisely by their independent action upon us. My argument is that, especially for the eighteenth century reader's ready allegorical imagination, Hume at these moments *embodied* the passions, in an imaginative act that is cunningly parallel to the theological imagination he describes in *The Natural History of Religion*. In my book I indeed call Hume's quasi-deification of the passions a "necessary fiction" because along with Kenneth Burke I tend to believe that every discourse has its "god-terms" (see Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*); I'll allow, however, that my phrase (which I employ only once in 228 pages) may be imprudent, or may even, as Box accuses me, "exaggerate my case." Blame it on my youth.

If the sublime is essentially an embodying style, polite style, on the contrary, is essentially a disembodying style—it tends to blur visual detail of all sorts, especially the low details of our bodily lives. As I write in my book, "polite speech may be defined as a thoroughly conventional code of self-censorship about one's physical or passional desires, activities, or aversions" (76). Box counters that Jonathan Swift, whom Hume called the writer of the "first polite prose" in English, is "notoriously insistent about reminding us of our bodies and of bodily functions." To which I reply—yes, but one can be either politely or impolitely scatological. Gulliver is polite when he describes his first defecation in Lilliput:

I had been for some hours extremely pressed by the necessities of nature; which was no wonder, it being almost two days since I had first disburthened myself...I went as far as my chain would suffer, and discharged my body of that uneasy load. (*Gulliver's Travels*, Bk. 1, Chap. 2)

By contrast, Swift's Strephon is decidedly impolite in declaring, "in his amorous fits, / Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" ("The Lady's Dressing Room," ll. 117-18).

Much of Box's disapproval of my analysis of politeness stems from his own casual—and I think unwarranted—conflation of the terms "politeness" and "elegance." What I try to suggest in my book is some sense of what Hume in particular means by the former term. Box's avowed interest is in "elegant writing," and the defining characteristic of this elegance, as he explains it in a portion of his *The Suasive Art of David Hume*<sup>3</sup> that he alludes to here, is an effect he calls "natural novelty." I would note, however, that in his book he infers this definition of "elegance" from passages of Pope and Johnson that explicitly address the concept of "true wit." Surely the two concepts aren't quite the same. And I would think that someone so eager to be punctilious should like to note the differences.

## NOTES

1 Potkay, "David Hume, John Quincy Adams, and the Theory of Eloquence in America," delivered at the Hume and 18th Century America Conference, Williamsburg, Virginia, March 1995.

2 Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric* (London, 1783; first American ed., Philadelphia, 1784).

3 M. A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 44-45.