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CHRISTOPHER MACLACHLAN

In 1987 M. A. Box identified the verse quotations in Hume's essays "Of Essay Writing" and "The Epicurean."¹ It is therefore odd that in their edition of a selection of the essays, Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar should state in a note to "Of Essay Writing" that "the source of this couplet has not been located. In his [1985] edition of the *Essays* Eugene Miller has suggested that it may belong to the same author or poem as the couplet quoted in 'The Epicurean'."² Miller of course was quite right, for, as Box showed, both couplets come from Matthew Prior's poem "Alma: or, The Progress of the Mind," first published in 1718.³

The first couplet reads as follows in "Of Essay Writing":

Stunn'd and worn out with endless chat,
Of Will did this, and Nan did that?

(*Essays* 1)

The question mark is not in the original, but is required because Hume is using the quotation to end an interrogative sentence, and Hume has replaced "Nan said that" with "Nan did that," but otherwise these are clearly lines 524 and 525 of the third canto of "Alma" (p. 514). In "The Epicurean" appear these lines:

What foolish figure must it make?
Do nothing else but *sleep* and *ake*.

(*Essays* 79)

The italics are not in the original, and the first line reads "A foolish figure He must make," but these are clearly lines 116 and 117 of the first canto of "Alma."

Beyond these identifications Box's note does not go, except to point out a reference to the poem in Hume's *Treatise*. Hume is arguing that "shou'd an author compose a treatise, of which one part was serious and profound, another light and humorous, every one wou'd condemn so strange a mixture, and wou'd accuse him of the neglect of all rules of art and criticism," one of which he says "requires a consistency in every performance" since "the mind is incapable of passing in a moment from one passion and disposition to quite a different one." But he immediately adds:

Yet this makes us not blame Mr. *Prior* for joining his *Alma* and his *Solomon* in the same volume; tho' that admirable poet has succeeded perfectly well in the gaiety of the one, as well as in the melancholy of the other . . . because [the reader] considers these performances as entirely different, and by this break in the ideas, breaks the progress of the affections. (T II ii 8)⁴

This is useful in confirming Hume's acquaintance with the poem. His use of its name, and the contrast with Prior's earlier work, "Solomon on the Vanity of the World,"⁵ suggests he also expected his readers to be familiar at least with the nature of both poems. Even in 1781, when Samuel Johnson opened the second volume of his *Lives of the English Poets* with his life of Prior, he could write as though Prior were still a well-known poet, though there are signs in Johnson's comments on the poems themselves that they were not as widely read as before. He does, however, single out "Alma" and "Solomon" for particular comment. Johnson's life of Prior may signal the beginning of the decay of his reputation from the relatively high regard in which he was held in the first part of the eighteenth century, when he could be ranked with Pope and Swift, to his present obscurity.

But more striking than the fact that Hume shared a taste for Prior's verse is the prominence he gave to "Alma," and the implication that he knew this poem very well, for the couplets he quotes from it are not only from widely spaced parts of the poem (one just over a hundred lines from its beginning, and the other less than a hundred from its end),⁶ but they are also in themselves hardly memorable. Neither couplet has much epigrammatic force or poetic distinction, though both are well suited to the context in which Hume uses them. It seems fair to say that he must have had a close knowledge of this lengthy poem to be able to pick out these pairs of lines when he saw a use for them, and it is remarkable that he should use "Alma" twice in two different essays. For that reason, it seems worthwhile to examine the poem itself to see why Hume found it so interesting and memorable.

It is worth prefacing comment on the poem by noting that it has attracted very little critical attention in modern times, and most of that has had to do with Prior's sources and his later influence. In 1932 W. P. Barrett pointed out a connection between the poem and Montaigne's essay "De l'Yvrogerie" and suggested that in turn Prior influenced Diderot.⁷ His article is more about this influence than about "Alma." This is also true of Otis Fellows's 1967 essay "Metaphysics and the *Bijoux indiscrets*: Diderot's debt to Prior,"⁸ although he does give an account of the poem. In a later article Fellows claims that the source for Prior's poem is not Montaigne but *Don Quixote*.⁹ Essays by Monroe K. Spears which address the meaning of the poem will be discussed below.

"Alma" begins with a short introduction to explain that the manuscript of the dialogue between Matthew and Richard has been half eaten by rats and what follows is all that remains. The reader is then plunged into a series of differing accounts of where "Alma in Verse; in Prose, the Mind" (I 14) is located in the body, beginning with Aristotle's view that it is "All in All" (I 17) and yet also in every sinew, nerve, and vein. Then comes the view of "the Cambridge Wits" that the mind is in the brain, where it receives impressions from the eyes, nose, palate, ears, and sense of feeling. To this the Aristotelians are made to respond that even if the mind is situated in the brain it can do nothing without the assistance of the limbs and senses; it is from this section of the poem that the lines Hume quotes in "The Epicurean" come. The passage goes on to argue that there must be a necessary connection between the mind and its bodily allies, since their functions as aids to the mind could not have developed after they came into being. Prior indulges in some humorous analogies to show the absurdity of purposive activity undertaken without intentions (e.g., no man goes to fetch a midwife before he knows his wife is pregnant). He ends this section of the poem by contrasting those who believe that Alma cannot decay or die with those who say she can.

Having thus shown how confused and confusing ancient and modern theories of the mind are, Matthew, the principal speaker, then brings forward his own: that in the course of a person's life the mind progresses stage by stage through the body, "from the Feet upward to the Head" (I 266). Thus, the first stage of life is characterised by crawling and kicking, before the child learns to walk (the mind has reached the legs). Later it will ascend to the thighs, and dancing and vigorous sports become the main preoccupation. Then the mind reaches a higher position ("O need I name the Seat She takes" (I 316), says Matthew coyly), and her thoughts turn to the opposite sex. Here Richard objects, saying that the poets tell us love's place is the heart, but Matthew refutes this by showing that the heart is the seat of courage, not love, and that two such opposite feelings could not occupy the same place. The canto ends with proof of this from historical examples of men, like Mark Antony, who made choices between love and war.

The second canto, after an introductory digression on the merits of digressions, resumes the account of the progress of the soul through the body. It confronts the problem of which of a pair of limbs Alma might be located in by saying that she moves into that which is being used for the moment. If one limb or feature is most in use, the mind will make it its prime location, and may indeed progress no further, as is shown by examples of people whose early enthusiasms reappear in old age. In addition, local traditions and customs, and fashions of dress, can affect the part of the body favored by Alma, leading to extremes of behavioral differences amongst different cultures, and even between near neighbors, such as France and Spain. The implication here is that no rational preference is possible and people can argue for opposite positions as in their opinion “natural.”

Perhaps because the second canto ends with some far-fetched examples, deliberately ranging the world for illustrations of diverse customs, the third canto begins with Richard’s objection that Matthew is taking his theory too seriously. Matthew rather tartly replies that “One must Teach, and t’Other Learn” (III 41) and that, like Pythagoras, Lucretius, Descartes, and Newton, he expects to be heard without interruption and granted the premises on which his theory is raised. Having brow-beaten Richard into silence, if not submission, Matthew then continues his thesis by bringing Alma at last up to the brain, which he describes as a hive of activity, “ten thousand Cells:/In each some active Fancy dwells” (III 168–169). But this is too much for Richard, who interrupts again to say that he thinks Matthew’s theory is quite wrong and that the seat of the mind is neither the heart nor the brain but the belly, and goes on to show that what we are depends on what we eat. In a remarkable simile, he declares that the stomach is like the basic time-keeping in a watch. This may have other functions, such as showing the phases of the moon or the months of the year, but without them a watch is still a watch as long as it tells the hour, though if it ceases to do that it also ceases to be a watch. If, says Richard, you “spoil the Engine of Digestion . . . Alma’s Affairs no Pow’r can mend” (III 286–288). Matthew objects that this makes Alma a mere machine, but Richard rejects this inference:

Fight fair, Sir: what I never meant
 Don’t You infer. In Argument,
 Similies are like Songs in Love:
 They much describe: they nothing prove.
 (III 313–315)

Matthew consequently declares that they will never agree because, like Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, what they do not know they simply deny, and he goes on to list a number of unresolvable problems. Nevertheless, he ends by incorporating Richard’s idea into his system.

He then resumes his discussion of Alma in the head, where various obsessions are formed, such as avarice and a mania for collecting pictures or medals. The passage is reminiscent of the comedy of humors of Ben Jonson, and of Pope's illustrations of the Ruling Passion in his *Moral Essays*. It leads to the follies of Alma and the mind's search for pastimes in order to forget itself. The futility of these pursuits and the failure to be reasonable or consistent leads to the observation that if we achieve wisdom it is only at an age too late for us to use it. The tone of the poem has considerably darkened by now, moving to the point where Alma wearies of life. It is here that Hume's second quotation appears, "Stunn'd and worn out with endless Chat,/Of Will did this, and Nan said that," just before Alma finds the way out through death, perhaps to some afterlife, if the phrase "upward She soars" (III 529) means anything. In his final speech, therefore, Matthew asks only for pleasures to console old age, though gloomily aware that what he and Richard take delight in will be at the mercy of their heirs when they die. At this, Richard finally loses patience with Matthew's philosophizing, since it only makes for sadness, and calls instead for a servant to bring them a drink:

Remove these Papers from my Sight:
Burn Mat's Des-Cart', and Aristotle:
Here, Jonathan, Your Master's Bottle.
(III 611-613)

The poem therefore ends with a rejection of philosophy in favour of conviviality, anticipating the famous passage in the *Treatise* where Hume says that, to cure the melancholy which philosophy induces, "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends" (T I iv 7).

It will be seen from this sketch of "Alma" that the poem is humorous and ironic. Its irony is directed not only at the ideas it contains, both its own and those of the various philosophers it mentions, but also at itself as a dialogue. What is more, the poem acknowledges this by the way it treats Matthew's presentation of his doctrine of the progress of the mind. Richard's objection at the beginning of Canto III that he is taking himself too seriously, and his getting the final word, rejecting philosophy altogether, make it plain that Prior himself is not to be identified with the character who seems to bear his own first name. As Otis Fellows says in his 1967 essay, "the pragmatic Richard is closer to Prior's position than Mat, and Prior's poem succeeds only as Mat's system fails, as indeed all systems must fail that employ only the modest agent of human reason for metaphysical speculation."¹⁰ Over twenty years earlier, in 1946, Monroe K. Spears described "Alma" as the work of a skeptic or Pyrrhonist.¹¹ Two years later, in an essay on Prior's attitude to natural science, which was surely the source of many of the notes to the 1959 edition of Prior that Spears co-edited, he developed his ideas on the nature of Prior's

skepticism.¹² Like Montaigne, says Spears, Prior was a Pyrrhonist, regarding all human systems as based on unprovable assumptions, and seeing neither God nor nature as fully comprehensible by man. Yet the success of Newton and other scientists meant that Prior could not completely dismiss natural science:

His whole attitude is a protest against the meaning of scientific doctrines in human terms, and he is important as the first imaginative writer to perceive the significance of the new science in such terms. Never convinced by his own criticisms of science, he was oppressed throughout his life by the materialistic and deterministic implications he saw in it.¹³

"Alma," says Spears, attempts to ridicule science by imitation. He shows that Prior owned many scientific texts and was familiar with them, and that he knew of the objections of Leibniz, and perhaps of Berkeley, to the systems of Newton and Locke. Despite its whimsicality, then, the poem is a serious contribution to the debates it mocks, and its mockery is part of its argument.

Hume's close knowledge of the poem is therefore intriguing. Its skepticism must have been congenial, especially as it is directed specifically against the claims to sure knowledge of natural scientists from Aristotle onwards. At the beginning of the last canto Matthew makes his ironic demand that he, like other system builders, must be allowed at least one unchallengeable assumption. The other thinkers he names—Pythagoras, Lucretius, Descartes, and Newton—are all in their way natural scientists, and the assumptions Matthew claims they need for their systems are respectively the music of the spheres, the idea of a void or vacuum, "subtil Matter," and the elastic force: all to do with the physical universe, and all hypotheses which defy common sense. Prior's skepticism here is directed at the requirement of followers of each of these philosophers that they believe what they are told:

How could our *Chymic* Friends go on,
To find the *Philosophic* Stone:
If You more pow'rful Reasons bring,
To prove, that there is no such Thing?

(III 61–64)

Seventy lines later he is delighted to accept Richard as an unquestioning member of his sect. The poem is striking for the way it presents theories about nature that ought to be based on observation and evidence as actually expressions of personal enthusiasms and as the beliefs of philosophical factions.

A major aspect of this is the cultural relativism of the end of the second canto, where Prior accumulates references to a variety of customs from many continents, conspicuously without privileging the European. Interestingly, one

of his examples, the contrast between "gay France" and "sober Spain," is also used by Hume in his essay "Of National Characters" (*Essays* 117), and both make the point that all that separates the two different nations is the Pyrenees. Prior returns to this approach in the last canto, when Richard expands his theory of the stomach as the seat of the mind by pointing to the variety of effects diet has on different peoples:

Observe the various Operations
Of Food, and Drink in several Nations.
(III 240–241)

Though the effect of this kind of argument is broadly humorous, it takes on a more serious cast in Canto II as the examples climax in differences of religion, illustrated by the change in the image of the Pope, from "Aged Priest" to "Painted Whore" (II 517–518), over the relatively short distance between Rome and Geneva; indeed, the same alteration is apparent by crossing from one Swiss canton to another, so that

One may be
A Heretic, or True Believer,
On this, or t'other Side a River.
(II 526–528)

Hume of course was to make much more thoroughgoing use of this line of argument in "The Natural History of Religion."

The moment in the poem referred to above, when Richard, having used the simile of the watch, refuses to allow Matthew to extend its meaning, is another that must have intrigued Hume. The use of watches as analogies to the creation in arguments for a Divine Artificer is of course a commonplace of the period. In his edition of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, John Valdimir Price quotes, in a footnote to the passage in Part VII where Philo mentions the idea that the world resembles a watch, an extract from William Derham's *The Artificial Clock-maker* (1696) that has some strong verbal parallels with lines 257–261 of Canto III of "Alma."¹⁴ What is interesting about Prior's use of the idea, however, is his awareness of it as a simile and the objection Richard makes to Matthew's inferring meanings from it beyond what he intended. In other words, Prior criticizes this way of arguing by analogy because it too easily allows for reading back into the main topic qualities belonging to the illustrative parallel, that is, the transference to the tenor of elements of the vehicle of the simile. The ironic exploitation of this device is a feature of Part VII of the *Dialogues*, where Hume deals a mortal blow to the simile of the Divine Watchmaker by allowing Philo to multiply other creation metaphors and their implications, without a Richard to try to call a halt to the process. The effect

of this on Matthew in the dialogue is to leave him "a little gravel'd" (III 316), and leads him to make his plea that, like other philosophers, he should be allowed to have his say without objections from others, and "prove Things likely, tho' not true" (III 379). This admission by Matthew shows that Prior realized that arguments by analogy are not secure, though he has Matthew carry on regardless.

So far, this essay has attempted to show ways in which the ideas in "Alma" might have attracted Hume to the poem. There is also a way in which the poem's treatment of the dialogue form may have been an influence on the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. The point derives from a recent book on philosophical dialogue by Michael Prince.¹⁵ He does not mention Prior or "Alma," perhaps because his attention is on prose dialogues, although something of what he says about the development of the form in the eighteenth century can be applied to the poem. More particularly, what he has to say about Hume, in a central chapter of his book, suggests another parallel with Prior's work. Prince's starting point is the adoption of the dialogue form by religious apologists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as apparently offering a way of giving the reader the pleasure of discussion of a topic, rather than a dry exposition, while leading him, or her, to a just conclusion. Dialogue is a form which, while apparently presenting differing viewpoints, moves toward final agreement: "dialogue dramatized one being made two, and two being made one again" (14). But this was always an illusion, since the point the author of a dialogue wanted to make was always the pre-ordained conclusion of the debate. The apparent transcendence of difference by discussion only masks the unspoken existence of the predetermined truths the dialogue is designed to convey. "Dialogue thus permitted moral philosophers to make allowance for the increasing autonomy of individual subjects and an increasing diversity within the social order while still portraying an inevitable consolidation of viewpoints, characters, and interests under a providential scheme" (15).

If, however, the providential outcome were to be directly challenged, or plainly revealed, the fiction of agreement between different voices would be shown to be artifice, or, in a case where the goal of the dialogue was unacceptable to one of its participants, agreement would be unconvincing or impossible, and the dialogue would lose the cohesion of a clear ending. Prince's early chapters analyse dialogues by several writers, including Shaftesbury and Berkeley, for signs of the tension between the appearance of free debate between their participants, the underlying drive toward a firm conclusion, and the effort to disguise how the conclusion's firmness is at odds with the freedom of debate. In Prince's view, there lurks behind the scenes of every dialogue a dogmatic position that is the *real* subject of the discussion but that cannot be acknowledged or voiced. Unsurprisingly, he credits David Hume with bringing this into the open, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural*

Religion. Hume's critical innovation is the introduction of a third character, the fideist Demea,¹⁶ to the usual theist and sceptic of conventional dialogues, in which of course the sceptic is destined, like the reader, to be persuaded by the reasonable arguments of the theist. In Hume's three-sided dialogue, the reasonable arguments of the theist so offend the fideist that he walks out of the debate. Hume, writes Prince, "exposes the absurdity of analogical reasoning in religious dispute specifically by constructing a dialogue in which the move towards closure is frustrated and consensus is shown to depend upon the *exclusion* of the third party—the dogmatist—who does not belong in a rational dialogue" (141). Thus, although the purpose of a religious dialogue is presumably to persuade the reader to take up a set of definite beliefs, the direct presentation of those beliefs in the dialogue will not only warn the uncommitted reader off but it will also undermine the position of the voice of persuasion in the dialogue as both disingenuous and entangled in efforts to explain what cannot be explained, only believed. Hume's *Dialogues*, then, do not merely offer arguments against natural religion; they also expose the weaknesses of the dialogue form as a means of philosophical teaching.

Prior's "Alma," of course, has only two speakers and so does not anticipate Hume's major development of the form. Nevertheless, Prior does seem to make other moves that expose the dialogue form to the line of attack Prince defines and credits to Hume. For one thing, the discussion is dominated by the speaker with a theory to expound, Matthew, to the virtual exclusion of his interlocutor, Richard, for most of the poem. In the first canto, Richard has only 18 of the 522 lines, and in case we miss the point these are introduced by a sentence beginning "Dick, who thus long had passive sat" (I 345). Dick has even fewer lines in the second canto, and towards its end slyly remarks, "Your proofs come mighty full, and thick" (II 530). He has more to say in Canto III, but brings it to its close by interrupting Matthew to say he is tired with his philosophy.

Richard's interventions, then, often serve to remind us that Matthew talks too much, and that Prior knows it. But Prior also clearly understands that Matthew, for all his use of conversational signs of reasonableness and attentiveness to his audience, is in fact the reverse of these, being both dogmatic and hectoring. This is most forcefully brought out at the beginning of the third canto, the only one where Richard speaks first (having roused himself from the sleep Matthew's discourse has caused). The substance of his objection to Matthew's theorizing—that he has carried too far an idle fancy just because it is his own—has already been described, as well as Matthew's reply, that he, like other philosophers, must be granted his premises; but the role of this in the critique of dialogue remains to be described. This is the first point in the poem where the two actually debate, but the outcome is Matthew's flat contradiction of the nature of debate in his insistence that he is the teacher and Richard the pupil, and that therefore he must be allowed to make his speeches

uninterrupted. Richard must not think for himself, nor even speak for himself. As Matthew puts it:

So put off all Mistrust and Pride.
And while My Principles I beg:
Pray answer only with Your Leg.
Believe what friendly I advise:
* Be first secure; and then be wise.
(III 132–136)¹⁷

A few lines later he tells Richard “attend . . . but don’t reply” (III 145), an extraordinary thing for one speaker in a dialogue to say to the only other. Richard does in fact speak again, first to make his counter-assertion that Alma is seated in the belly, and then to bring the dialogue to a close by calling for a drink. The first of these interventions threatens and the second actually manages to end the discussion. Matthew avoids the earlier threat of an ending by boldly swallowing what Richard says and going on, “in a Tone/More Magisterial” (III 416–417). This makes him seem more dogmatic than ever, and the reader is hardly surprised when the long-suffering Richard at last calls a halt to philosophizing. By then, the pretense that the dialogue is an exchange of ideas leading to enlightenment has long since disappeared.

Prior, it might be said, did not need to introduce a third speaker to uncover the dogmatic purpose of dialogue and its demand that in order to end in agreement all concerned should be disposed to agree. Hume’s treatment of the form, as Michael Prince shows, is more cunning and discreet, and dangerous, but he may have been led to it by the example of Prior’s “Alma,” a poem that surely provided him with more than just a pair of apt quotations.

NOTES

1. M. A. Box, “Two Couplets in David Hume’s *Essays Identified*,” *Notes and Queries* 232 (September 1987): 345.
2. David Hume, *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 333. References to the *Essays* in the text are to page numbers in this selection.
3. *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, ed. H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), vol. 1, 470–516. References to “Alma” in the text are to this edition, citing canto and line number.
4. References are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited as “T.”

5. Probably written some ten years before "Alma," though published with it in 1718 (Wright and Spears, *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, 913).
6. The poem contains nearly 1,700 lines in three cantos of almost equal size.
7. W. P. Barrett, "Matthew Prior's *Alma*," *Modern Language Review* 27 (1932): 454-458.
8. Otis Fellows, "Metaphysics and the *Bijoux indiscrets*: Diderot's debt to Prior," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 56 (1967): 509-540.
9. Otis Fellows, "Prior's 'Pritty Spanish Conceit'," *Modern Language Notes* 87 (1972): 3-11.
10. Otis Fellows, "Metaphysics and the *Bijoux indiscrets*," 523.
11. Monroe K. Spears, "The Meaning of Matthew Prior's *Alma*," *English Literary History* 13 (1946): 266-290. Charles Kerby-Miller, in a long note on this article in *Philological Quarterly* 26 (1947): 136-137, attacks the idea that Prior is a skeptic, though granting there are skeptical reflections in the poem.
12. Monroe K. Spears, "Matthew Prior's Attitude toward Natural Science," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 63 (1948): 485-507.
13. *Ibid.*, 506.
14. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion and Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver and John Valdimir Price (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 202.
15. Michael Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
16. Incidentally, Prince offers a source for the name of this character in Berkeley's *Alciphron* (Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue*, 141).
17. Line 134 here, "Pray answer only with your leg," is an allusion to Ben Jonson's play *Epicoene; or, the Silent Woman*. In Act II, scene i, Morose, who has a morbid fear of noise, insists that his servants answer his questions by gestures, such as "making legs," or bowing. Matthew's use of Morose's catch-phrase shows that Prior thinks him similarly obsessive, and, like Morose, fond of no voice but his own.