



***Fred Parker. Scepticism and Literature:  
An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson***

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FRED PARKER. *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. x + 290. ISBN 0-19-925318-8, cloth, \$65/£50.

To carry on reasoning in the face of the implications of skepticism is what Fred Parker calls “sceptical thinking.” Not to be confused with the engineered vacillation leading to a tranquillizing suspense of judgement, it involves the double perspective of someone conducting a life, believing and reasoning as we do, while acutely aware that the whole endeavor is, in a sense, untenable. If, as Sir Philip Sidney famously said, an imaginative writer “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth,” then the dilemma posed by skepticism might be less embarrassing for that kind of writer than for philosophers. The latter purport to offer tenets valued according to their truth, however variously defined; the former, on the other hand, create “speaking pictures,” or verbal imitations (cf. Arist. *Poetics* 1). Sceptically thinking imaginative writers can create speaking pictures of a life in which knowledge is unavailable though people must reason, believe, and act. In a famous letter Keats went so far as to deem a kind of ataraxy to be a condition of the highest art, adducing Shakespeare’s “*Negative Capability* . . . of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (21, 27 December 1817). Parker does not discuss the possibility that negative capability might conduce to the highest flights of literature. He is concerned with the unresolved tensions of skeptical thinking that he sees as complicating key works of literature in the Hanoverian reigns. For their authors and readers, the negativity of skepticism was “disillusioning and destabilizing” (14) if not ameliorated by a humor like Sterne’s or an irony like Hume’s. Humor or irony arises from the oddity that skepticism is put in its place only when we give up and allow nature to reassert itself. Not heroic measures, but backgammon and making merry with friends prevail over doubt. Sometimes, when the confrontation with skepticism gives rise to the precept of following nature, skepticism can result in “a surprising confidence of assertion” (53).

Imaginative writers might be more readily able than philosophers to relish the situation, but nothing prevents a philosopher from taking an intermission to create a speaking picture of skeptical thinking, as Hume did at the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. Thus, Parker puts Hume in the company of Pope, Sterne, and even Samuel Johnson as reflecting an efflorescence of skeptical thinking in the eighteenth century. After two chapters of conceptual and historical introduction, each of these four authors gets a chapter in what amounts to an assemblage of independent but linked essays somewhat in the fashion of Hume’s *Philosophical*

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*Essays*. In this review I will concentrate more on the chapters of most concern to those interested in Hume.

Readers of this journal will not be surprised to hear that Montaigne's assaying ruminations, Locke's "destabilizing epistemology" (33), and Bayle's oscillations in argument set the stage for this efflorescence of skeptical thinking. Chapter 2 is devoted to the collateral damage of Locke's endeavor to clear the ground a little of the rubbish obstructing the way to knowledge. Locke's critics, early and late, correctly found skeptical implications in the way of ideas, and though the *Essay* was intended as a vaccination against scepticism, "it was a vaccine which carried some risk of transmitting the condition in active and perhaps virulent form" (61). Locke's empiricist program depended alarmingly on suppositions that, normally if not reliably, our words stand for ideas in an intersubjectively uniform way and that ideas represent external reality. Also alarming was Locke's suspicious attempt to exempt moral and religious language from the contingent relation between words and reality that he had elsewhere insisted was a plentiful source of error.

In chapter 3, Parker juxtaposes Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733–34) with (a) the *First Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated* (1738) and (b) the philosophical essays of Pope's supposed mentor, Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke. In the *Epistle*, Pope gives a self-portrait emphasizing his own incoherency of mind and self-contradictions (lines 166, 175). Parker sees in this portrait not humorous self-depreciation so much as an openness to the claims of conflicting views. In light of this valorization of inconsistency, the earlier poem appears less an attempt at a theodicy than an "incarnation of thought as experience" (87). The comparison of the *Essay* with Bolingbroke's deistical writings shows the poet to be a skeptic, the peer to be a rationalist. However Pope publicly defers to the peer, the poet is not genuinely a disciple. The tenets of the inconsistent system in the *Essay* are revealed to be a poetic response to the "present view of the object" (to import language from *Treatise* 1.4.7.5). Pope was more a scion of Montaigne than of Bolingbroke, and the *Essay* is akin to an *essai*.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Hume, who provides what I think must be a textbook case of skeptical thinking, showing us in ways that need no elaboration here that the profound philosopher is also a mere plebeian. Skeptical examinations of causality and of the existence of the world and of personal identity continuously and independently of our perceptions lead to the much noted crisis from which Hume is rescued by postprandial backgammon, only to be enticed back to philosophy by its pleasures. When profound philosophers grow skeptical and melancholic, they turn into splenetic plebeians who recover their composure with "three or four hours' amusement" and become "serious good-humour'd" philosophers (*Treatise* 1.4.7.9–11). But the detached humor with which Hume describes these oscillations in the *Treatise* shows a state of mind cognizant of both perspectives simultaneously.

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(I think it need not be a transcendent state, but simply the self-awareness allowed during the good-humored stage of philosophy, when calm passions are prompting thought.) Hume, too, is a scion of Montaigne.

Moving beyond epistemology, Hume “regularly demolishes the rational foundations on which the edifice of morality, or religion, or political conviction was supposed to stand, then assures us that it stands well enough without them” (144). Parker sees the “fiction” behind belief in causal connexion as akin to the process by which we make the transition from individually experienced moral sentiments to a principled intersubjective set of mores. Someone conscious of the origin of morals in sentiment is less inclined to give priority to those sentiments over custom and convention, which represent the organization of individuals’ sentiments into a social code. For such a skeptic, membership in polite society is not unthinking conformism, but a way of living according to appearances. Thus the dichotomy is not absolute between the easy, obvious philosophy, with its conservative orientation, and the accurate, abstruse kind, with its iconoclastic propensities. The two kinds of philosophy claim a double allegiance from Hume, who would mix them in varying ways in the two *Enquiries* and the posthumous *Dialogues*.

Subscription to social mores as a form of following appearances was not good enough for moralists like Samuel Johnson, much less the paper-thin piety suggested by skeptical conformism. A result of the double perspective of skeptical thinking is the detached, “careless” way of reasoning of Hume’s Philo. The equivocal ending of the *Dialogues* is in Parker’s interpretation not a satirical tactic, but a speaking picture of the polite simulations of society practiced unhyppocritically by skeptics who value the forms of society in their peculiar, easygoing way.

Hume describes the skeptic as laughing at himself over “the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them” (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 12.23). Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* is a speaking picture of that laughably whimsical condition. A celebration of the triumph of spontaneity and sentiment over deliberation, Sterne’s novel shows “the natural relation to comedy” of skepticism (190). Johnson presents a different story. Though Parker does not say so, Johnson appears as a case showing that one can be a skeptical thinker without being a skeptic. Though Johnson distrusts singularity and defers to the general experience of mankind in a way that is contrary to Sterne’s way of skeptical thinking, he is acutely alive to the limits of experience. I will quote from a passage from *Adventurer* 107 that I prefer to the one Parker cites: “we may examine, indeed, but we never can decide, because our faculties are unequal to the subject: we see a little, and form an opinion; we see more, and change it” (§ 15). Any concept of wisdom must involve, therefore, a response to the

irremediable vanity of human wishes. Not only can we not fit means to ends; we cannot choose ends that lead to happiness. Johnson's appeals to providence and revelation to compensate for ineluctable unhappiness and natural ignorance are, in Parker's estimation, perfunctory and unconvincing. Life is a struggle to manage unhappiness, and we are not freed from moral obligation by our lack of knowledge with which to exercise judgement. In the apologue, *Rasselas*, the result is an irony in which "any assertion of a general truth or position is felt as a moment in an ongoing process to which the assertion is not wholly adequate" (279).

Parker is a gifted close reader of literature. Clearly and engagingly written, his book forces a reconsideration of familiar writings in a new light. It succeeded with me despite my disinclination to make much of any skepticism in these writings, and almost all points of disagreement for me were questions of emphasis and degree. *Rasselas* does seem to explore the implications of skepticism for moral wisdom, but Johnson provides for a straightforward interpretation that is compatible with Christianity. It is illuminating to see how the spirit of Montaigne informs Pope's self-portrait in the *Epistle*, but ultimately I am unable to see the poem as essentially about skeptical thinking. The readers of this journal will have their own views concerning the place of skepticism in Hume's philosophy and are unlikely to find their judgements overthrown by this book. What they will find is a new perspective on a culture that had assimilated skepticism to the point that it became a part of the understructure to the ways that people saw themselves. Similar studies of the assimilation of stoicism and epicureanism into Georgian culture have been enlightening too. We benefit from understanding these ingredients and how they mixed with Christianity to shape eighteenth-century European civilization.

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