Curing Madness: The Departure from and Return to Common Life in Swift, Hume, and Lennox

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The Departure from and Return to Common Life in Swift, Hume, and Lennox

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Introduction

The chapters that follow examine attitudes toward madness in three writers of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift, David Hume, and Charlotte Lennox. This is not a biographical or clinical study. Diagnosis is not the goal of this work, nor does this thesis seek to study the writings of people who suffered from mental disorder (Cowper, Smart, etc.). Rather, the following chapters seek to characterize each writer’s understanding of the causes of madness and his or her prescribed cure. I will argue that each of these three writers understood madness to be some form of departure from common life, the sphere of shared experience upon which social bonds are founded. I chose to focus on these writers and works because I perceived a recurrence of themes in their works regarding questions of subjectivity, truth, and striking a livable balance between the two. For these writers, madness was sometimes the only way to adequately convey the horrible anguish of alienation from common life.

In each chapter, I will attempt to outline what madness signified to the writer and what cure he or she thought was possible. All three writers are united in perceiving madness to be a function of individual hubris, a failure to recognize one’s own human fallibility and belief in having privileged access to truth. This contempt for the supposed ignorance of common life leads one to adore one’s own seemingly perfect system of thought. As one begins to commit to one’s own ideas instead of people, madness ensues. In Swift’s “Digression Concerning Madness” from his Tale of a Tub (1704) and Lennox’s The Female Quixote (1752), this madness

1 Some people thought Swift was mad. Samuel Johnson in Lives of the Poets (1781) wrote, …having by some ridiculous resolution, or mad vow, determined never to wear spectacles, he could make like little use of books in his latter years; his ideas, therefore, being neither renovated by discourse, nor increased by reading, wore gradually away, and left his mind vacant to the vexations of the hour, till at last his anger was heightened into madness. (338)
erupts as a corruption of language. In Swift, the act of treatise-writing is an explicit assault on common life, whereby the treatise-writer stakes out his idiosyncratic definitions in a common language and denies shared thought.

Nonetheless, the three diverge from each other in important ways as well. Most notably, Swift does not perceive any reliable cure for irrationality, which he takes to be a metaphor for the profound moral degradation of humanity. The gap between truth and what he perceives to be the fundamental irrationality as well as continual self-delusion of the human condition generates ultimately irresoluble tensions in Swift’s “Digression.” Swift does allude to common life as a kind of innocent, bucolic ideal, but he does not suggest any satisfactory way for the learned man to rejoin common life, or any possibility of curing the Tale-Teller’s madness.

In contrast to Swift, Hume and Lennox do perceive a means of engaging individual consciousness and common life. In his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), Hume describes inner life to be continuous with common life - our passions are not our own, and our very being is actuated by the passions of others, such that “We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society” (2.2.5, 234). Prolonged solitude thus deprives us of the opportunity to correct our attitudes. Alone, we form our wishes and ideas with reference to a static, distorted image of society in our head, and convince ourselves that we are persecuted by and enemies of common life. Only by mixing in company can we calm our perturbed passions and become reasonable again. Hume calls this communication of passions the principle of sympathy. It is by sympathy that Hume finds his way out of his mental crisis.

Lennox’s novel draws together Swift and Hume’s ideas about madness by showing us a character with a Swiftian malady and Humean cure. In *The Female Quixote*, Arabella convinces herself that she is a heroine like the badly translated French romances she reads and takes for
truth. Like Swift’s Tale-Teller, Arabella essentially inhabits a corrupt textual fantasy that casts the self as the infallible center. Only when her corrupt form of language undergoes reformation into a dialogue of Humean sympathy can she join common life as Glanville betrothed. For Lennox, the reconciliation of individual desire with common life is thus idealized as marriage.

The following chapters all explore a kind of madness that develops in solitude. Overall, the trend in the texts examined is towards a recognition of the fallibility of the human self or mind, and in the cases of Hume and Lennox, an acceptance of common life.
CHAPTER ONE

Breaking Up the Empire of Reason:
The Language of Madness in Jonathan Swift’s Parody of Treatise-Writing

The critic F. R. Leavis saw Swift as an example of negative, destructive energy. In “The Irony of Swift,” Leavis comments,

The positive itself appears only negatively—a kind of skeletal presence, rigid enough, but without life or body; a necessary pre-condition, as it were, of directed negation. The intensity is purely destructive.

Elsewhere, Leavis writes, “Swift’s [irony] is essentially a matter of surprise and negation: its function is to defeat habit, to intimidate and to demoralize” (75). Leavis finds the negativity of Swift to be overwhelming, leaving nothing behind. He points to the passage of the knaves and the fools in “A Digression Concerning Madness” as his crowning evidence for Swift’s destructiveness. However, I would like to argue that, quite to the contrary, Swift’s prose is productive to the point of virulence. The passages which Leavis singles out tend to produce rather than destroy meanings and interpretations. In the “Digression,” Swift demonstrates the full range and power of irony as a rhetorical device. The fecundity of images and meanings in The Tale of a Tub yields a host of Swifts in the readers’ minds. The critic Ricardo Quintana identifies no less than four such Swifts: Bewildered Swift, Swift as Betrayed Idealist, Swift as Absurdist, and Swift as Moralist (1975, p. 16). The parodic fracture of meaning and language parallels the defects that Swift perceives in human reason, whose diagnostic impulse he suggests is guilty of an active offense against common life. As I will demonstrate, this does not constitute a simple case of destruction on the part of the Tale-Teller, but semantic overgrowth of cancerous excess.

Destruction, when it does occur, is performed by the reader. In the attempt to read, we find it necessary to censor out indecorous images and reject the excessive suggestions of the
Tale-Teller. If the Tale-Teller does destroy, it is our complacency which he undertakes to undo. However, even then, he does not leave us with nothing, but instills in its place anxiety, restlessness, and disgust.

The reader also undertakes some positive work as well. We resist the Tale-Teller’s arguments based on the conclusions generated by our own common sense. In that sense, the “Digression Concerning Madness” is an argument for authentic, common life, which the Tale-Teller cannot ever hope to understand. For Swift, life is most readily identified by its resistance to written characterization. The conclusion of the “Digression” purports to reintegrate the inhabitants of insane asylums into the Bedlam of society. In that section, Swift caricatures in disgusting detail the different trades and professions. The fact that these figures so readily lend themselves to caricature is proof enough for Swift of their lifelessness.

To the extent that it is pessimistic and insists on exposing corruption, the “Digression” does engage negative emotion. But it is very strange to write of the pessimism of the “Digression,” for we are not sure where it originates. It probably does not belong to the Tale-Teller, who advertises his conclusions as a testament to his intelligence. Does the pessimism belong to Swift? Us?

Leavis argues that there are no positive values to be found in Swift. But what do we mean by positive? Socially sanctioned moral values? But Swift proposes to preserve traditional values, via “a manner that should be altogether new” (2). In the “Apology” he attaches to the book after the first publication of A Tale of a Tub, Swift explains his motivations thus:

he thought the numerous and gross corruptions in Religion and Learning might furnish matter for a satire that would be useful and diverting. He resolved to proceed in a manner that should be altogether new, the world having already been too long nauseated with endless repetitions upon every subject. The abuses in Religion he proposed to set forth in the Allegory of the Coats and the three Brothers, which was to make up the body of the discourse. Those in learning he chose to introduce by way of digressions. (2)
Far from desiring destruction, Swift wishes to revive our moral life (or at least, insists he does). The satire he writes is meant to be “useful and diverting” (2) – that is, socially productive, serving solemn ends in addition to light ones, producing moral convictions as well as laughter, an aid to the everyday affairs of the household that serves as well for comic chastisement. The modest, even domestic, scale of the Tale’s aims (to be “useful and diverting”) contrasts greatly to the size of the institutions he means to tackle. It is perhaps characteristic of Swift to value things that come in small sizes: children and small pleasures like laughter or “bread and butter” (79). In Swift, offenses of leviathan proportions are best exposed and intensified by compression and transferral into a domestic context. He adapts the “abuses of Religion” into a feud among three brothers. When he writes disapprovingly of power-crazed kings in the “Digression,” he focuses on the decimation of quotidian order:

a mighty king, who, for the space of above thirty years, amused himself to take and lose towns, beat armies and be beaten, drive princes out of their dominions, fright children from their bread and butter, burn, lay waste, plunder, dragoon, massacre subject and stranger, friend and foe, male and female. (79)

Swift begins by noting the king’s efforts to “take and lose towns.” The conquests of “armies” and “dominions” are secondary concerns compared to the “children” and their “bread and butter.” Even when this bully of a king does receive his rebuke in the form of a defeat, the costs are too heavy. Swift links the martial verbs together in a trail that visualizes the swath of destruction left behind by war. Regardless of their righteousness, everybody suffers and becomes a victim, “subject and stranger, friend and foe, male and female.” Swift suggests that the devastation of war renders any victory pyrrhic at best. In the aftermath of battle, the most basic categories of life are dismantled. This eradication of values becomes the object of Swift’s condemnation.
In the “Digression Concerning Madness,” the Tale-Teller is not only engaged in a digression from the main allegory, but also constantly digresses from the thesis he purports to advance, namely, the superiority of madness to reason. Here, Swift assumes a satirical persona whose tone contrasts greatly to the one he takes in his sermons:

I have long sought after this opportunity of doing justice to a society of men for whom I have a peculiar honour, and whose opinions as well as practices have been extremely misrepresented and traduced by the malice or ignorance of their adversaries. For I think it one of the greatest and best of human actions to remove prejudices and place things in their truest and fairest light, which I therefore boldly undertake, without any regards of my own beside the conscience, the honour, and the thanks. (77)

Swift parodies the treatise writer as a hypocrite who justifies his own prejudices in the name of reason. No sooner does the Tale-Teller admit his “peculiar honour” for madmen than he proceeds to pronounce “it one of the greatest and best of human actions to remove prejudices and place things in their truest and fairest light” (77). The critic Michael DePorte remarks, “Through the character of the Hack, then, Swift is able to continue the attack on that insane subjectivity which is for him the chief symptom of ‘modernity’” (DePorte 76). Swift’s Tale-Teller is a provoking figure whose language and imagery seem calculated to offend. For instance, the opening paragraph of the “Digression” makes frequent references to excrement, drawing on “steams from dunghills” and “the fumes issuing from a jakes” as illustrations:

For great turns are not always given by strong hands, but by lucky adaptation and at proper seasons, and it is of no import where the fire was kindled if the vapour has once got up into the brain. For the upper region of man is furnished like the middle region of the air, the materials are formed from causes of the widest difference, yet produce at last the same substance and effect. Mists arise from the earth, steams from dunghills, exhalations from the sea, and smoke from fire; yet all clouds are the same in composition as well as consequences, and the fumes issuing from a jakes will furnish as comely and useful a vapour as incense from an altar. (78)

Notably, Swift mocks theoretical writing by parodying the form and tone of the learned treatise. The superficial hallmarks of learned writing are present. Swift’s Tale-Teller makes liberal use of
long clauses and transitional words and phrases such as “for” and “yet” that usually indicate the logical progression of ideas. However, upon closer inspection, the Tale-Teller’s points and examples appear suspect. To begin with, the logic of the Tale-Teller’s argument that “the fumes issuing from a jakes will furnish as comely and useful a vapour as incense from an altar” (78) is obviously askew. Anybody with a functioning nose and olfactory bulb (i.e., a three-year-old) can distinguish between the “substance and effect” of an outhouse as opposed to altar candles. Swift deliberately offers such offensive, malodorous, and absurd examples in order to excite our common sense and distrust of ostensibly learned writing. Swift ridicules the Tale-Teller’s confidence that he can generate a theory that explains something as complex as the human mind. Indeed, as the treatise progresses, these theories and the language in which they are posed only generate further paradoxes. The Tale-Teller’s diagnostic language, rather than clarifying matters, only serves to perpetuate misunderstanding and to lead us deeper into madness. As the critic Robert Phiddian observes, “The text frustrates the reader, involving her or him in the construction of meanings and their contexts while simultaneously sowing the seeds of deconstruction and promiscuously plural meaning.” Swift parodies the act of diagnosis in learned treatises, mocking it as only a heightened form of madness in its presumption and bias.

Accordingly, Swift works to foster the reader’s distrust of treatise-writers and their motivations. As far as Swift is concerned, human reason is deeply corrupted in its constrictiveness, such that even its aspirations to reason become a form of bias that estranges the learned mind from the rest of humanity.

The Tale-Teller’s many diagnostic theories and metaphors tend to proliferate rather than curb madness. Of the many models which the Tale-Teller proposes for explaining madness, one such theory explores the cliché that philosophers are raving mad:
Let us next examine the great introducers of new schemes in philosophy, and search till we can find from what faculty of the soul the disposition arises in mortal man of taking it into his head to advance new systems with such an eager zeal in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known; from what seeds this disposition springs, and to what quality of human nature these grand innovators have been indebted for their number of disciples, because it is plain that several of the chief among them, both ancient and modern, were usually mistaken by their adversaries, and, indeed, by all, except their own followers, to have been persons crazed or out of their wits, having generally proceeded in the common course of their words and actions by a method very different from the vulgar dictates of unrefined reason, agreeing for the most part in their several models with their present undoubted successors in the academy of modern Bedlam, whose merits and principles I shall further examine in due place. (80)

Swift proposes that conquering kings, philosophers, and founders of new religions must be mad for choosing to advance “a method very different from the vulgar dictates of unrefined reason” (80). The circumlocution of the Tale-Teller enacts the very point Swift is making: his “method” of writing, with all its peculiarities in phrasing and tone, identifies him as being somewhat unhinged. His contempt for common thought is indicated by his reference to “the vulgar dictates of unrefined reason” (80), Swift’s joke being that in advocating refined reason, the Tale-Teller advocates madness. According to this model of madness, the Tale-Teller and other treatise-writers like him must be mad too, for wishing “to advance new systems with such an eager zeal in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known” (80). At such moments when the Tale-Teller seems must unconscious of his own complicity in madness, Swift seems to be speaking up behind him, particularly when he argues against those who would “advance new systems…in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known” (80). Based on our earlier analysis of the opening passage of the “Digression,” we know that Swift bears nothing but contempt for the “systems” that humans would devise. Indeed, the Tale-Teller has been advancing such “systems” all along in this digression on a subject that is “impossible to be known” (80) to this present day. In his eagerness to censure fellow treatise writers seeking to proselytize their own “systems,” the Tale-Teller overlooks the fact that he is guilty of the very same things which he condemns in
others. Of course, in his unconsciousness and lack of insight into his own faulty thinking, the Tale-Teller exhibits classic signs of unreason.

If leaders (“great prescribers,” 81) are mad because their methods are mad, then their followers (“implicit disciples,” 81) must also be mad for going along with such craziness. The Tale-Teller is therefore compelled to explain how it is that the rest of the world (which, presumably, is sane) comes to follow the notions of these mad leaders. The Tale-Teller’s resulting theory ends up generating new contradictions:

for there is a peculiar string in the harmony of human understanding, which in several individuals is exactly of the same tuning. This, if you can dexterously screw up to its right key, and then strike gently upon it whenever you have the good fortune to light among those of the same pitch, they will by a secret necessary sympathy strike exactly at the same time. And in this one circumstance lies all the skill or luck of the matter; for, if you chance to jar the string among those who are either above or below your own height, instead of subscribing to your doctrine, they will tie you fast, call you mad, and feed you with bread and water. (81)

Faced with the conundrum of devising a suitable explanation that preserves the greater population from charges of madness, the Tale-Teller is obliged to propose a social model of madness. This model nonetheless allows for the possibility of the existence of truth or reason as an absolute entity independent of the “peculiar string in the harmony of human understanding” (81). According to this model, we are all mad and the “right key” (81) is only “right” insofar as people agree it is. We simply suffer from sharing the same variety of madness, so that we think ourselves sane because we share the same unhinged outlook and are unhinged to the same degree. Human agreement, then, has nothing to do with rational processes and everything to do with chance or “fortune,” depending on the disposition of the mind, “which in several individuals is exactly of the same tuning,” and “luck” (81). The musical metaphor is a striking image and probably the Tale-Teller’s most beautiful one. The Tale-Teller endorses the “secret necessary sympathy” as a miraculous achievement. In this instance, the Tale-Teller’s hostility is directed at
those who would pass judgment on others, “tie you fast, call you mad, and feed you with bread
and water” (81). In his quickness to resent the presumption of his neighbors, the Tale-Teller
seems entirely unaware of being guilty of the same misdemeanor in desiring others to join in
“subscribing to your doctrine” (81). Likewise, the Tale-Teller entirely neglects to comment on
truth and reason, being so preoccupied with defending the beauty of “the harmony of human
understanding” (81) that he entirely disregards the larger problem of knowing the truth.

As the Tale-Teller proceeds in his argument, we find ourselves dragged deeper into his
biased way of thinking. He begins with the innocuous assertion that individual madness begins
with the overthrow of “reason” and “the senses” by “fancy” and “imagination”:

But when a man’s fancy gets astride on his reason, when imagination is at cuffs with the
senses, and common understanding as well as common sense 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. (82)

In the figure of the Tale-Teller, Swift constructs a vision of humanity as morally degraded,
incapable of rising above the level of the gutter. Even as the Tale-Teller discusses such abstract
notions as the state of the human mind, bawdy connotations creep into his description of “when a
man’s fancy gets astride on his reason”(82). His depiction of madness contains an analogy to
domestic violence, literalizing the imagination and reason as an uneasy relationship of
cohabitation in which “imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding as
well as common sense is kicked out of doors” (82). The bawdy suggestions in his metaphor for
madness, “when fancy gets astride on his reason,” dramatize the dangers posed by the egotistic
human mind when it becomes so enamored of its own likeness that it wishes to replicate itself by
persuading others to its cause. Imagination and reason come together to generate a host of
licentious thoughts and images. Phiddian writes that in reading Swift, “We are drawn into the
ways of error, of language slippery and bereft of contact with true authority, and stranded in the wreckage of flawed attempts to speak authentically” (170). We might also add that the task of determining the truth is complicated by the challenge of listening authentically, of recovering our sense for authentic truth.

In reading Swift, we find any number of interpretations and images possible, down to the individual word (“reason,” “fool,” “knave,” “senses,” etc.). The opening image of this passage (“when a man’s fancy gets astride on his reason,” 82) can be read otherwise, as a quite innocuous comparison to a horse and rider. Indeed, in the concluding paragraphs to the digression, the Tale-Teller makes the equestrian comparison explicit:

I am a person whose imaginations are hard-mouthed and exceedingly disposed to run away with his reason, which I have observed from long experience to be a very light rider, and easily shook off. (87)

Even so, a dream-like fluidity suffuses this passage. We find a subtle inversion of objects. Where previously “fancy” is the rider that “gets astride on his reason” (82), here “reason” becomes the “rider” to his “hard-mouthed” steed, imagination. We also find any number of possible interpretations – we can easily see the Tale-Teller in the first instance as arguing for the reign (and rein) of fancy over reason, since his discussion of happiness as a delusion is pressed into service as a proof of the boons of madness. However, we might also read the image as commentary from Swift suggesting the necessary state of humanity to be reason. Without the tyrannical interference of the rider (reminiscent of the rampaging conquerors on horseback at the beginning of the piece, albeit on a smaller scale), reason would be free to operate unhindered.

The inversion is not perfect; whereas in the first instance, the rider, fancy, has perfect control over his beast (ironically, reason is figured as non-human), at the second instance of this image we find that the rider is helpless against the whims of his “hard-mouthed” imagination.
The one overriding consistency in this transposition of roles is that imagination wins out over reason. Nonetheless, both instances of the horse-and-rider image retain a lively sense of antagonism. Interestingly, in his concluding image, the Tale-Teller’s reason is hostage to his imagination, suggesting that in this instant at least, he longs for reason.

Swift anticipates Saussure’s insight into what the latter termed the arbitrariness of the sign. The horse-and-rider image and the subsequent inversion not only draws our attention to their arbitrariness, but also makes the case for the instability of the linguistic sign. Swift suggests that reality and meaning are far apart in the human conception of the world. Alarmingly, the Tale-Teller succeeds in propagating his methods and systems in his readers. We become “mad interpreters of Swift’s text” (382), as the critic Terry Castle puts it. In writing about Swift, we are compelled to fall into the same process of inversion and admit the impossibility of describing precise relationships in the world. In a sentence reminiscent of that relationship of syntactic and figurative inversions which the Tale-Teller delights in, Castle writes that the Tale of a Tub “is at once a hallucination of Text and a hallucinatory text” (382). Swift’s horse and rider haunt us phantom-like long after we put down the Tale.

The difficulty of interpretation in Swift thus dramatizes the essential moral trap of humanity as Swift understands it. We find our understanding of Swift’s text to vary to the extent that we can no longer identify the original authoritative meaning, if such a meaning exists at all. We can interpret “When fancy gets astride on his reason” in any number of ways. Castle writes, “On the most profound level (the level of dream?), Swift’s satire is motivated by a vision, potentially fearful, of the written artifact as a radically unstable object” (383). Part of the perceived instability derives from the wildly shifting attitudes. We perceive not one, but several perspectives, often within the space of a sentence or two.
A number of startling, disorienting reversals occur in this passage:

For cant and vision are to the ear and the eye the same that tickling is to the touch. Those entertainments and pleasures we most value in life are such as dupe and play the wag with the senses. For if we take an examination of what is generally understood by happiness, as it has respect either to the understanding or the senses we shall find all its properties and adjuncts will herd under this short definition, that it is a perpetual possession of being well deceived. And first, with relation to the mind or understanding, it is manifest what mighty advantages fiction has over truth, and the reason is just at our elbow: because imagination can build nobler scenes and produce more wonderful revolutions than fortune or Nature will be at the expense to furnish. (83)

The Tale-Teller shifts from speaking of the madness of crowds and individuals (“a strong delusion always operating from without as vigorously as from within,” 83) to madness as a result of psychological as opposed to physical stimulation. The shift is peculiar; the Tale-Teller switches from discussing how the masses take up the madness of their leaders (the social phenomenon of madness) to varieties of individual madness. The Tale-Teller suggests that there is a distinction between delusion and reality, that fancy is allied with delusion and reason with reality. However, the Tale-Teller uses this to support his argument for madness.

We are not certain how exactly to understand the tone of the Tale-Teller when he speaks of “cant and vision” (which he seems to take to be equivalent with “entertainments and pleasures,” though “cant and vision” speaks of hypocritical piety and “entertainments and pleasures” of unabashed sensual pleasure). By the end of the passage, the Tale-Teller proceeds from a commonly held assumption (madness as imaginative excess) to arrive at the conclusion that happiness is a state of pleasing madness, being essentially a form of self-delusion, “a perpetual state of being well deceived” (83). Even though our every instinct objects to the Tale-Teller’s conclusion, we find ourselves unable to immediately dismiss the Tale-Teller’s arguments. Not only does the Tale-Teller fail to provide an illuminating explanation of madness, but he also leaves the reader with preoccupations and the burdensome reflection that “if it were
not for the assistance of artificial mediums, false lights, refracted angles, varnish, and tinsel, there would be a mighty level in the felicity and enjoyments of mortal men” (83). We become infected with the Tale-Teller’s ideas and unseemly images.

However, the abrupt reversals do not end there. The Tale-Teller praises madness, but momentarily ventures to speak from the mainstream view (delusion is bad, objective and unvarnished truth is good) when he writes of the blame that some may attach to humanity for choosing madness. His assumption of a natural attachment of blame to the choice of delusion suggests that he values objective truth as well. Indeed, his subsequent argument is based upon the notion that no blame ought to be incurred in the question of happiness, since in the brain, there is no difference between memory and the imagination: “whether things that have place in the imagination may not as properly be said to exist as those that are seated in the memory? which may be justly held in the affirmative” (83). After arguing all along for the superiority of madness to sanity, the Tale-Teller now claims that regardless, there is no viable difference between delusion and memory, such that fancy and reason are continuous in the human mind. In other words, the human mind is inherently irrational and subjective. However, no sooner does he attempt to collapse the category of sane recall of truth (“memory”) into mad delusion (“imagination”) than he proceeds to assert the superiority of imagination to reason. The Tale-Teller thus flips between refusing to recognize a difference between imagination and reason (but admitting subjectivity as a fact and essential facilitator of human existence), and recognizing the distinction but attempting to impose his own value hierarchy by privileging imagination above reason (“[imagination is] acknowledged to be the womb of things, and the other [memory] allowed to be no more than the grave,” 83).

He proceeds to expound upon the impossibility of happiness without self-deception:
How sad and insipid do all objects accost us that are not conveyed in the vehicle of delusion! How shrunk is everything as it appears in the glass of Nature, so that if it were not for the assistance of artificial mediums, false lights, refracted angles, varnish, and tinsel, there would be a mighty level in the felicity and enjoyments of mortal men. (83)

These two pronouncements represent the Tale-Teller’s triumphant assertion of the importance of madness and delusion and their benefits. The irony in this passage thus serves to demonstrate the fluidity of textual meaning and its dependence on the values (which are so difficult to entangle from their petty cousins, prejudice and whim) of the speaker and audience. If we read any kind of longing for truth into this passage, we cannot be sure that it was native to the text or interposed by our own desire. In other words, we find it impossible to read without bias, the influence of which the Tale-Teller would gleefully equate with delusion.

We detect a note of oddity in the Tale-Teller’s reference to “delusion” in his exclamation. Even as the Tale-Teller embraces the imagination, he seems to loathe it or retain ambivalence by referring to its effect as “delusion” rather than “fancy” or the “imagination.” Typically, we think of delusion as a bad thing, as deception or a form of cheating. As such, “delusion” carries a note of resentment or disappointed expectations. At these moments, the reader can no longer be certain whether her understanding is congruent with the Tale-Teller’s intended meaning or if she is projecting her values and assumptions onto the text when she perceives a note of mourning in the Tale-Teller’s tone. In reading Swift, we find it impossible to disentangle our personal reactions from the Tale-Teller’s arguments.

The intractability of disentangling the multiple tones and voices persists in the Tale-Teller’s next sentence: “How shrunk is everything as it appears in the glass of Nature, so that if it were not for the assistance of artificial mediums, false lights, refracted angles, varnish, and tinsel, there would be a mighty level in the felicity and enjoyments of mortal men” (83). The Tale-Teller has seemingly confused “Nature” with the imagination, such that he implies that
“Nature” is the mediating, artificial medium, being a “glass” that causes everything to appear to have “shrunk” (83) from its accustomed size. It is difficult to ascertain whether the Tale-Teller means by “Nature” the concept that we mean. The Tale-Teller seems to have absorbed his own dictum that the imagination and the memory (one possible interpretation of the “glass of Nature”) are contiguous, such that the natural mirror of memory becomes another variant of human subjectivity, serving to make us sad instead of happy, to shrink instead of aggrandize. Swift continues to complicate the tone with his evocations of the dichotomy between falseness and truth, which we find difficult to consider separately from our valuations and preference of truth over falsehood. When the Tale-Teller writes of the necessity for “artificial mediums, false lights, refracted angles, varnish, and tinsel” (83), he inevitably excites our suspicions and caution (we do not call candles “false lights”) against his argument for the superiority of the imagination. “Tinsel” in particular suggests a negative evaluation of imagination as a cheapening of experience or attractiveness without worth. It is unclear whether “tinsel” is spoken by the moralist Swift or the Tale-Teller (whose own values have deviated so far from the mainstream that we can no longer assume that he means the same thing by “tinsel” that we do) or the mischievous Swift playing wag with our senses, or perhaps all three, since they need not be exclusive of one another. Thus, we can see that Swift’s prose is constructed to maximize the tug-and-pull of several tensions and value systems. The effect is hallucinatory in that we cannot be certain who is speaking at any one moment, or how many are speaking, or consequently even what they are saying. Though the impression is of one speaker (since there is one physical text before us), we soon find ourselves stumbling in the midst of the splintering of tones and attitudes in the text. This is the particular challenge of reading Swift’s irony, when he writes one thing but
seems to mean any number of things, such that we despair of acquiring even a literal understanding.

The Tale-Teller indulges in a redundancy of phrasing when he writes of “a mighty level in the felicity and enjoyments of mortal men” (83). The redundancy repeats in both “felicity and enjoyments” and “mortal men,” in which he combines an etymologically French or Latin word with a simpler (syllabically or otherwise) one meaning similar, if not fully identical, things. This repetition seems to be a symptom of the Tale-Teller’s pomposity and circularity. We might also read this as an intrusion of other voices into the text, in which the bread-and-butter Swift crosses rapier wits with the flamboyant Tale-Teller who relishes such polysyllabic words as “emolument” (81).

Swift’s satire specializes in playing upon familiar notions and exposing their contradictions by proceeding to draw such disturbing conclusions as to make us doubt our former assumptions. We become utterly lost as to what Swift means when he writes of “reason” or “happiness” (82). Rooted in Swift’s prose is a deep sense of loss of certainty about meaning that parallels his sense of estrangement from truth and moral purity. The critic Richard Quintana writes of Sir Francis Bacon what might well be said of Swift: “What he desired above all for himself and for mankind was true knowledge of Nature, that is, of the Divinely-created universe.” But Swift was much more pessimistic about the possibility of finally acquiring that true knowledge.

Essentially, the Tale-Teller argues the case for madness as a beneficial force, which is responsible for not only national and scientific advances, but also human happiness. The Tale-Teller undertakes to make a reasoned argument for madness, but it breaks down midway through the piece. Richard Quintana describes Swift’s style as a “reversing process of irony, which gives
us praise that blames and blame that praises” (19). However, we find that we are duped when we think that we grasp a key to Swift’s meaning as we realize the views of Swift and the Tale-Teller coincide in the question of happiness. In his analysis of the Tale-Teller’s exclamation “How sad and insipid do all objects accost us,” Leavis identifies a “sudden change of tone and reversal of attitude…as if one found Swift in the place – at the point of view – where one expected to find his butt” (373). In the face of this unexpected conclusion to the initial proposition that madness is an excess of “fancy,” the reader cannot help but resent the Tale-Teller’s conclusions as an unlooked-for burden, which we can only dismiss by condemning it as a symptom of the Tale-Teller’s subjectivity. We recognize that many of the Tale-Teller’s arguments are perversely reasoned. Swift’s irony thus depends on the reader’s inner mechanisms of moral correction to recognize and condemn the erroneous, specious arguments that the Tale-Teller advances. Irony is thus the perfect rhetorical device for stimulating the development of a rhetorical conscience that mirrors the moral conscience. In reading Swift, the reader is compelled to be vigilant in her monitoring of Swift’s ideas. At no time are we permitted to accept his words at face value. The Tale-Teller’s words constitute surface appearances, pliable to the prejudices and whims of the Tale-Teller’s intentions, whose influence we only feel all too strongly.

The Tale-Teller argues for “credulity” as being preferable to “curiosity.” This is in accordance with his general attitude throughout the treatise, which is that madness, delusion, and appearances are preferable to the ugliness of the truth which philosophy seeks to uncover. He values “credulity” because of the peace it affords him, suggesting that peace is another quality favored by the Tale-Teller or Swift (in accordance with the “bread-and-butter”). However, his attitude quickly becomes complicated in the subsequent clause of the same sentence. He writes,

In the proportion that credulity is a more peaceful possession of the mind than curiosity, so far preferable is that wisdom which converses about the surface to that pretended
philosophy which enters into the depths of things and then comes gravely back with informations and discoveries, that in the inside they are good for nothing (83)

What complicates these attitudes is the attachment of counterintuitive descriptors to concepts which we generally associate otherwise: by definition, “philosophy” considers the profound question of existence, but the Tale-Teller refers to it here as “pretended philosophy.” Likewise, the Tale-Teller calls superficial conversation “wisdom.” We find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between “pretended philosophy” and this surface “wisdom,” since both are associated with the putting-on or maintenance of an appearance. The Tale-Teller’s love of mixing categories, upending conventional valuations to promote his own, becomes especially evident here. The difference between philosophical and superficial conversation, according to the Tale-Teller, is that philosophy holds false pretensions to speaking deep truths, whereas superficial conversation is unpretentious in its aims. Strangely, this distinction between philosophy and conversational superficialities rests on a distinction between truth and falsehood, one which we soon find to be entirely dubious. The Tale-Teller’s justification for calling “philosophy” a “pretended” discipline turns out to be his dislike of its conclusions, which he oversimplifies into the facile but evocative statement that “in the inside they [things] are good for nothing” (83). In other words, his evaluation of philosophy as a pretense rests entirely on his subjective definition of truth.

Long before the rise of the telecommunications industry, Swift anticipates the popular appeal of the sound bite.

The Tale-Teller accuses reason of distortion: “Now I take all this [reason’s tendency to bare the ugly truth] to be the last degree of perverting Nature, one of whose eternal laws it is to put her best furniture forward” (83). The Tale-Teller accuses “Nature” itself of bias in its rule “to put her best furniture forward.” We begin to wonder what the Tale-Teller means at all by “Nature.” Thus Swift uses persuasive writing in the genre of the learned treatise to dramatize
how human reason becomes an expression of human subjectivity. The Tale-Teller begins with a premise that is no more than his starting bias, and his categories and values engage in a constantly shifting landscape, such that upon closer inspection, he seems to be doing no more than writing about madness all along, even when he claims to write about reason. His descriptions of reason become increasingly difficult to distinguish from his descriptions of madness.

We can understand Swift to be insinuating several different things simultaneously: that human reason is a poor excuse for reason, being prone to self-serving bias; and resembles a form of madness according to Swift’s understanding. Swift suggests that reason itself, being opposed to any form of subjectivity, is often antithetical to human interests and experiences.

The ironies in the Tale-Teller’s statement are manifold: there is the Tale-Teller’s argument for the irony of philosophy, which claims to uncover the truth but seems to be as subjective as a grumpy grandfather in its assessment of the world (“inside they are good for nothing”) and in posing its assessment as the rationally discovered truth rather than a mirror of its subjective attitudes. However, we must also be wary of the Truth-Teller’s own tendency to bias, and cannot help but notice the irony of the Tale-Teller warning us against the whims of philosophy when he admits to a soft spot for madness and is himself guilty of many counts of subjective distortions which he accuses in others. Of course, there is the ever-present irony of the Tale-Teller’s efforts to make a rational argument for the benefits of madness. Based on his own standards – his definition of philosophy as a pretense and the preferability of superficial discussions - the Tale-Teller would be better served by engaging in an argument for reason (since his duty ought not be to expose the truth as he understands it, but to maintain “credulity”). In no sense are these ironies easily made legible by any single operation. A great deal of the
difficulty derives from his rapid shifting in values. After spending a substantial amount of time
detailing the many disadvantages of reason and sanity and criticizing the conclusions of
philosophy as a pretense, the Tale-Teller writes that “in such conclusions as these reason is
certainly in the right” (speaking in reference to the philosophical conclusion that the insides of
things are “good for nothing”). This sudden reversion to apparent agreement with the voice of
reason is all the odder for the fact that what follows (a coolly described flaying) is scarcely
concordant with our conception of a reasonable mind.

Mad though the Tale-Teller might be, his portrait of the world is sufficiently recognizable
that we cannot entirely discount it. It is unlikely that Swift desires us to idolize reason. After all,
we find that the Tale-Teller’s method of rational argument merely seems to be a refined or
disguised expression of subjective attitudes. By this time, caught up in the cynicism of the Tale-
Teller, we may find ourselves succumbing to his suggestions. Swift thus uses his prose to test our
ability to resist our subjective states. Ironically, we depend on a subjective mechanism to climb
out of the Tale-Teller’s morass. That is, we depend on our feelings to resist the Tale-Teller’s
arguments. Our instinctive desire for peace and the commonsensical values we have (that deep
thought and rationality are good, and madness is bad) preserve us from falling into extreme
despair.

The Tale-Teller, ironically, does exactly what he condemns, seeking to expose the errors
of rationality by showing us why the truth is “good for nothing” (83). He works to reveal the
defects of human reason and to mangle conventional morality with his topsy-turvy values. Even
as he intrudes upon our equanimity with his grotesque illustrations, he upbraids reason for
“officiously” offering its discoveries, “with tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and
piercing” (83). After arguing against reason while engaged in his own attempt at rational
exposition, the Tale-Teller says that “in such conclusions as these reason is certainly in the right.” It takes us a while to realize what he means: that philosophy is at its best when it tries to maintain false appearances rather than supporting reason in its inquiry of truth.

Swift takes his provocations to a climax in the passage where the Tale-Teller discusses a woman being flayed:

And therefore, in order to save the charges of all such expensive anatomy for the time to come, I do here think fit to inform the reader that in such conclusions as these reason is certainly in the right; and that in most corporeal beings which have fallen under my cognisance, the outside hath been infinitely preferable to the in, whereof I have been further convinced from some late experiments. Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the carcass of a beau to be stripped in my presence, when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected faults under one suit of clothes. (84)

A sign of the Tale-Teller’s peculiarity is his imbalanced sense of scale, his tendency to commingle trivial aims with grand ones. Where previously he speaks of “steams from dunghills” as being on equal footing with “mists [which] arise from the earth” (78), the Tale-Teller now ventures to issue a grand affirmation of “reason” so that he can “save the charges of all such expensive anatomy” (84). The Tale-Teller rather absurdly declares the benefit of philosophical questions for economical thrift. Swift thus slyly pokes fun at the usefulness of philosophy, insinuating that regardless of their self-importance, at best philosophers can only hope that their discoveries will save the world some money. The Tale-Teller proceeds to make an obvious-sounding statement with pedantic self-importance, writing, “I do here think fit to inform the reader that in such conclusions as these reason is certainly in the right.” Swift ridicules the opinions of such modern philosophers as faddish, whose tendency to vary their views over time is not too far removed from the deviations of madmen. Contrary to the Tale-Teller’s assertion that “in such conclusions as these, reason is certainly in the right”(84), we know that all rigorous philosophical conclusions depend on reason in order to be right (at least, hopefully they do). The
Tale-Teller then follows this affirmation of reason with a very unreasonable statement: “in most corporeal beings which have fallen under my cognisance, the outside hath been infinitely preferable to the in” (84). The proof, the Tale-Teller explains, lies in the surgical theater. Michael DePorte remarks that the discussion of the flaying exposes the Tale-Teller to be a disingenuous writer who simply exchanges one set of superficial judgments for another. I would like to refine that further and argue that Swift uses this episode to call our attention to the disingenuousness of many a theoretical writer, but also to specifically invoke our common sense. With this passage, Swift establishes the highest tension between common sense and the Tale-Teller’s logic, as well as the most dramatic shifts in tone. The Tale-Teller, in speaking of his own understanding of humanity, draws on unusual Latinate diction (“corporeal beings,” “cognizance,” 84). Through the stylistically idiosyncratic prose of the Tale-Teller, Swift dramatizes the way in which abstraction distances the theorist from the rest of humanity with terrible consequences. In referring to people as “corporeal beings” with the capacity to further his “cognizance,” the Tale-Teller strives to distinguish himself from the people he is studying and presumably attempting to assist. Swift suggests that this studied aloofness is a form of pretension.

The Tale-Teller then abruptly switches from the high Latinate diction to mundane words that shockingly belie the horrific images he describes: “Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse” (84). Swift suggests that the Tale-Teller does not even require the distancing tool of theoretical language to remove himself from emotional involvement with his subjects. The Tale-Teller, even in the language of everyday conversation, has attained the epitome of detachment from humanity. His words betray not a jot of sympathy in the face of such suffering. Swift also ridicules the distortions in values
that theorists risk incurring in their eagerness to prove the ingenuity of their arguments. The reader can immediately recognize the hideous deformity in perspective that could lead a person to calmly watch another human being undergo torture as an intellectual exercise and refer to it afterwards as “some late experiments” (84) that support his point. Rather than commenting on the more pertinent fact of the inhumanity of these “experiments,” the Tale-Teller makes the observation that “you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse” (84). Swift deliberately uses these clearly erroneous arguments to prod the reader into actively questioning the assumptions behind theoretical writing. He suggests that truth is more closely allied with values rather than a set of human procedures or exercises. The Tale-Teller’s errors in logic are closely tied to his incapacity for sympathy. In turn, this incapacity for sympathy is tied to his deviant subjectivity. He argues against flaying, not because it is a cruel and wrong thing to do, but because by revealing the gruesome interior of the human body, it fails to yield him pleasurable profit.

The Tale-Teller’s theories can have the effect of infecting the reader’s consciousness. Ironically, rather than stemming the tide of madness, the Tale-Teller’s treatise tends to rouse new anxieties and doubts. His discussion of the flaying, while shocking and extremely distasteful, has a kind of internal coherence to its argument that occasionally lends it the semblance of sound conviction.

Where mere sentences before the Tale-Teller condemns reason and philosophy for presenting a distorted picture of Nature, he now declares it the proper aim of philosophy as “an art to sodder and patch up the flaws and imperfections of Nature” (84). At first, we might be tempted to discount the Tale-Teller completely – surely it is not Nature which needs amending, but the Tale-Teller’s overactive imagination, which perceives reality as deficient unless properly
dressed by his imagination. Certainly, the Tale-Teller is looking in the wrong place if he desires to know the true appearance of human nature, and his condemnation of typical philosophical methods of inquiry is unfounded on that account. However, we cannot help but agree that there is some truth to the Tale-Teller’s assertion of the “flaws and imperfections of Nature” (84). In our agreement with his notions, however slight, we find it impossible to distance ourselves completely from the Tale-Teller and his madness.

And he whose fortunes and dispositions have placed him in a convenient station to enjoy the fruits of this noble art, he that can with Epicurus content his ideas with the films and images that fly off upon his senses from the superficies of things, such a man, truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the sour and the dregs for philosophy and reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined point of felicity called the possession of being well-deceived, the serene peaceful state of being a fool among knaves. (84)

In this passage, we can discern a Swift who appears to consider everything besides the moral truth to be a sham, such that one’s sensory experience are mere “films and images that fly off upon his senses from the superficies of things,” a form of hallucination which does not relate to the truth. The Tale-Teller associates the unvarnished truth with unhappiness and human thought, referring to it as “the sour and the dregs for philosophy and reason to lap up” (84). As is his style, Swift chooses to use distasteful imagery to ridicule the over-reliance of learned writing on metaphors and reductive physical models to provide explanatory power. In presenting us with such a manifestly reductive images as “the sour and dregs” to describe reason, Swift relies on the reader to exercise her common sense to resist the Tale-Teller’s subjective pronouncements.

The Tale-Teller opposes the mainstream view. He defines “the sublime and refined point of felicity” as “the possession of being well-deceived,” a triumphant point for the Tale-Teller, who desires no more than to prove that the crux of human experience is madness, that we are all mad in some way. Simultaneously, we also sense a Swift who wishes to expose human experience as tending to subjectivity and to caution against the over-valuation of subjective
experience as truth. Swift and the Tale-Teller are not totally opposed in their conclusions: both desire to prove the subjectivity of human existence. Swift is no figure of benevolent authority; he is deeply involving, his irony engages the affect and is not easy to disentangle—we are never entirely sure if the enthusiasm for offense belongs to the Tale-Teller or Swift.

Swift confronts us with a truly perplexing paradox when he writes of the man who lives upon the “superficies of things” as enjoying “the serene peaceful state of being a fool among knaves” (84). The critic Robert C. Elliott writes that in this moment “Swift has momentarily tossed the Tale-teller aside, speaking out in his own voice” (129). However, I argue that no simple formula for segregating meaning can be satisfactorily applied. Conceivably, “fool” is the Tale-Teller’s own word of praise for the man who knows to prize his “tinsel” and appreciates the delights of being “dupe” to his senses (83) Even if we do interpret the “fool among knaves” to be a literal expression and intrusion of Swift’s own sentiments, its suddenness takes us by surprise. We scarcely expect to see Swift appear here of all places, when the Tale-Teller has been building up the momentum for the triumphant moment in his praise of folly. If we do perceive Swift, then he appears more as a fleeting hallucinatory suggestion than a concrete authorial presence. In finding ourselves unable to refute the Tale-Teller’s wit, we feel as though in this instance, madness is in the right. The critic C.J. Rawson writes, “We cannot be sure of the nature of any saving alternative, and may even uneasily suspect that we are in a fool’s ‘Serene Peaceful State’ for imagining that such alternatives exist” (41). We are left grappling with the unsettling sensation of being included in Swift’s disapproval, no matter our affiliation.

Swift puts us into the uncomfortable position of making a judgment without the solace of feeling that we are right. In the same sentence, we hear praise and condemnation of the Epicurean – he is “truly wise” to leave “the sour and dregs for philosophy and reason,” but that
surface wisdom nonetheless makes him “a fool among knaves” (84). The reader is never permitted to feel complacent about her moral condition. The note of antagonism is generated by the perverse juxtaposition of concepts: felicity with delusion, serenity and peace with foolishness. In presenting such extreme, distasteful polarities, Swift parodies impartiality as an enthusiasm for every kind of blemish in the world; and hence, a perverse form of subjectivity (instead of truly rational objectivity that considers all sides) that delights in what others revolt at.

In various other works, Swift asserts certain values, of which the belief in the Christian God is one. However, he also presents the shocking alternatives. We can use Swift’s sermons as a rough guide to some of the norms that underpin his sense of satire. In Swift’s sermon “On the Trinity,” he distills the ultimate question of existence into a binary choice:

We must either believe what God directly commands us in Holy Scripture, or we must wholly reject the Scripture, and the Christian religion which we pretend to profess. But this, I hope, is too desperate a step for any of us to make.

Though it is clear which of these choices we are expected to make (for the latter, Swift comments, “is too desperate a step”), he nonetheless cannot resist indulging in the thought of the wicked course of action. The implications of the immoral alternative are too interesting to let altogether alone. Oddly enough, the length of the “either-or” sentence is weighted to the latter half, which considers rejection of “the Christian religion.” Swift spends slightly longer than necessary to outline the alternative, presumably undesirable course of action. Rather than simply ending at “reject[ing] the Scripture,” Swift goes on to add “and the Christian religion which we pretend to profess.” Although the “either-or” syntax initially appears to suggest the presentation of two equal options, what it really offers here is the doctrinally accepted truth in Christianity versus the shocking, and therefore much more interesting, alternative of rejecting the Christian Bible. The abrupt shift that turns on the fulcrum of a single conjunction, “or,” is characteristic of
Swift’s volatile style. Rather than providing reassurance, however, Swift merely remarks, “But this, I hope, is too desperate a step for any of us to make.” Characteristically, he compresses large questions into a concept or word to facilitate these rapid transitions, abbreviating the problem of faith into a single pronoun, “this.” Swift’s style dramatizes moral choice through his intense evocation of the anxieties attached to the question. Even in the non-ironic context of his sermons, the dark side lingers as a very present and potent danger which the reader is left to refute on her own.

For all of his vexing propositions, Swift nonetheless had a very conventional objective in mind. In an “Apology” later published to preface the Tale, Swift writes, “[The Tale] celebrates the Church of England as the most perfect of all others in discipline and doctrine; it advances no opinion they reject, nor condemns any they receive” (2). Quintana notes that “Swift was a moralist before everything else, and it is a moralist who has here been admonishing us to accept the known realities and to live by these and not by the mere appearances of things – distortions of reality – however seductive” (16). To be a moralist is also to profess in certain values. Accordingly, Swift had a rigorous notion of Christianity and its scriptures as a deep form of truth that repudiates the superficial, morally corrupt arguments of humanity. Swift asserts the existence of an absolute reality independent of human judgment. In “On the Trinity,” he writes:

Reason itself is true and just, but the reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interests, his passions, and his vices. Let any man but consider, when he hath a controversy with another, although his cause be ever so unjust, although the world be against him, how blinded he is by the love of himself, to believe that right is wrong, and wrong is right, when it maketh for his own advantage. Where is then the right use of his reason, which he so much boasts of, and which he would blasphemously set up to control the commands of the Almighty?

Swift distinguishes between “Reason” and “the reason of every particular man” in such a way as to align “Reason itself” with the Christian God in His purity, constancy, and justice. In speaking
of the truth of “Reason itself,” Swift invokes both senses of “true” to denote faithfulness and verity, qualities that characterize the Christian God. Swift denounces “the reason of every particular man” as being permanently skewed by the moral corruption of human nature. Swift’s description of human reason contrasts it to the divine qualities of “Reason itself” (“true and just”). The only constant in human reason is its inconstancy, for it is “weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interests, his passions, and his vices.” Swift describes the motivating “cause” of human interest as being “unjust.” To complete the contrast, Swift demonstrates that the convictions of humanity are manifestly false, since the average person is “blinded…by the love of himself” into believing “that right is wrong, and wrong is right.” [This description suggests that the average person cannot access “Reason itself” at all, for “Reason itself,” “true and just,” is as unattainable in its purity as the deity it resembles.]

Swift insists on the sacredness of the doctrine of the Trinity as a divine mystery:

And therefore many divines, who thought fit to answer those wicked books, have been mistaken too, by answering fools in their folly; and endeavouring to explain a mystery, which God intended to keep secret from us. And, as I would exhort all men to avoid reading those wicked books written against this doctrine [of the Trinity], as dangerous and pernicious; so I think they may omit the answers, as unnecessary. This I confess will probably affect but few or none among the generality of our congregations, who do not much trouble themselves with books, at least of this kind. However, many who do not read themselves, are seduced by others that do; and thus become unbelievers upon trust and at second-hand

Swift’s hostility towards human systems of explanation arises from a certain kind of animosity towards those who believe they are acquainted with God’s mysteries. For Swift, “endeavouring to explain a mystery, which God intended to keep secret from us,” represents a supreme example of human “fools in their folly.” In essence, Swift suggests that truth itself constitutes the ultimate divine mystery. That is, all divinely ordained mysteries are true and remain unknowable to the human mind. We are fated to remain ignorant of the ultimate truths and secrets of our existence;
according to Swift, to think otherwise, or to imagine ourselves capable of insight into such matters, is to be guilty of the most severe instance of hubris, of thinking that we are perfect enough to judge rightly. In Swift, the capacity for acquiring knowledge and “the right use of his reason” is directly linked to the purity of one’s moral nature. Earlier in the sermon, Swift argues that human reason is blighted by “his interests, his passions, and his vices.” For Swift, the greatest obstacle to knowing the objective truth is human subjectivity, which is inherent to human nature in the form of immoral self-interest and desire. Our resulting inability to see the truth for what it is leads to ignorance, or worse, madness, which in Swift is the lack of insight into our state of moral degradation. Swift’s reasoning might be approximated as follows: To think we are acquainted with the truths instituted by God is to think that we have perfect use of reason and are as free of sinful bias as God, such that we are able to understand his divine mysteries.

The problem of how one might be able to acquire true knowledge at all in the midst of this moral degradation remains unresolved and a continual source of vexation in Swift. He condemns bodies of writings that seek to “explain a mystery, which God intended to keep secret from us,” as “wicked books,” “dangerous and pernicious.” He cites an additional instance of the evil done by these books: “many who do not read themselves, are seduced by others that do; and thus become unbelievers upon trust and at second-hand.” In Swift, ignorance compounds and reproduces ignorance. Human arguments are accepted as irrationally as they are made. But then again, Swift’s vision takes irrationality to be the defining feature of the human condition.

In this chapter, I have argued that Swift uses madness to depict the estrangement of the solitary mind from common life. The treatise form is parodied, its formal style and systems exposed as a corruption of common language which veers into insanity in “A Digression
Concerning Madness.” The diagnostic language of the treatise becomes the vector by which madness spreads its invidious influence. Irrationality is depicted as a cacophony of dissent, where each mind sings a different tune. Ultimately, Swift suggests that the isolation of the learned mind in its theoretical pitch cannot be overcome, such that the best that we can do is tolerate each other, to “give some allowance to the author’s spleen and short fits or intervals of dullness, as well as his own” (Swift 102-103).
CHAPTER TWO

The Common Life Cure for Madness: David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*

Hume’s answer to Swift’s paradox: Introduction

In “A Digression Concerning Madness,” Jonathan Swift assumes that the passions divide minds. Subjective experience, in the form of passion, colors our ways of thinking such that we can never accurately perceive the objective truth. For Swift, this realization of the inescapable subjectivity of the human condition leads to a crisis: we can choose to be optimistic fools or smart-aleck, jaded knaves. Either way, we are doomed to live a lie of our mind’s making. The knavish philosopher who realizes that we are all irrational in some sense then concludes that the best we can do is pick which kind of madness to go along with. And indeed, that is what Swift’s Tale-Teller does at the end of his treatise.

The philosopher David Hume had most certainly read and enjoyed Swift. Writing of Swift’s style, he pays him the backhanded compliment of calling him one “whom I can often 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” (114). Hume perceives a failure in Swift to balance argument with appropriate sentiment. The lack of stylistic “harmony” threatens to generate further discord by provoking a cacophony of passions. The kind of laughter which Swift inspires is not the bonhomie of the backgammon table, but the peevish outburst of a volatile temper. Hume writes that “Nothing can be more entertaining on this head than Dr. Swift, an author, who has more humour than knowledge, more taste than judgment, and more spleen, prejudice, and passion than any of these qualities” (112). For Hume, Swift exemplifies how satirical language risks creating misunderstanding: “‘Tis dangerous to rely upon writers, who
deal in ridicule and satire. What will posterity, for instance, infer from this passage of Dr. Swift [from *Gulliver’s Travels*]? (113). Hume suggests that satire threatens to break language as a means of authentic, sympathetic communication. He comments that Swift’s satire is “carry’d to extremes” (113), suggesting that Swift’s writing is dangerous because it threatens to overturn that delicate mental balance and moderation of sentiment which we call sanity. As we shall see, Hume’s crisis centers on negotiating this balancing act of the mind.

A moment of crisis similar to that in Swift’s “Digression” occurs in the conclusion to Book 1 of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. To paraphrase the Swiftian paradox in Humean terms, Swift’s choice of fools and knaves is a choice between common life and skepticism. The vast majority of the world falls under Swift’s category of the fool, being disinclined to question the reliability of human reason and quite content with the wisdom of common life. By contrast, the skeptic, who corresponds to Swift’s knave, has examined the nature of human reason, found it lacking, and promptly declares all intellectual labor to be futile. Thus, after examining the basis of belief and finding that “all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation” (1.3.8, 72), Hume is driven to the realization that “We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all” (1.4.7, 174).

However, from this point on, Hume’s account of the mind diverges from that of Swift. Whereas Swift leaves the reader to consign herself to her doom, Hume seriously takes up the question of how we can live with that choice as social, thinking beings. The Humean philosopher acknowledges the failure of human reason, but he also goes on to affirm the legitimacy of the passions of common life. Whereas Swift declares the passions to be subjective and therefore lies, Hume affirms the passions to be “original existence[s]” (2.3.3, 266) in their own right - not lies, but real objects of our perception. For Hume, the passions define, but do not necessarily
condemn, human experience. Rather, the passions unify our minds, giving rise to a form of shared reality that anchors us.

The Humean philosopher recognizes her extreme skepticism to be the influence of passion. This recognition frees her to move on from her despair, which she recognizes to be a momentary condition which will give way to other passions. In this way, she resolves her skeptical despair. Simply by joining her friends at the dining or backgammon table, the Humean philosopher finds that her former sensations of despair dissipate. Hume gives a name to this influence on the passions by physical proximity: the principle of sympathy. Conviction is simply the propensity or the effect of passions, and no more. Therefore when the philosopher finds herself at odds with the common view, she simply joins some companions for a meal or a game of backgammon, and the principle of sympathy ensures that the proximity to these jolly companions will release her from her despairing skepticism.

Hume ultimately finds relief in common life, in social activity with his friends, and declares that no philosophy can be truly philosophical if it allows its skepticism to rise to such immoderate heights as to dispense with common life. A true lover of truth will not dismiss human experience as delusion, but recognize it to be an essential part of existence, and therefore a legitimate object of and contributor to philosophical inquiry.

It is far from my intention to argue that Hume thinks “reason is entirely subservient to natural impulses” (Norton 219), as the Hume scholar David Fate Norton characterizes one extreme reading of the Treatise. Hume is most certainly a proponent of rational inquiry. However, that is not the same as saying that he advocates the mastery of reason above all. Rather, Hume redefines rational inquiry in his Treatise. He is quick to note the non-rational basis of our beliefs, but does not go so far as to deny all beliefs. To put it simply, Hume advocates a
kind of mitigated rationalism, or mitigated irrationalism, if you will. Even if we as humans are fundamentally irrational in our way of thinking, we can still live reasonably. We can correct our beliefs as we uncover more of the truth in our reasoned inquiries. Likewise, we temper our reasoned skepticism with our passion for common life. Hume is very adamant on the point that reason is the discovery of a relationship between “truth and falsehood.” The philosopher who idolizes reason is as condemnable as the philosopher who abdicates all rational judgment. Such extreme skepticism indulges in the triumph of the solitary mind over the common life and becomes guilty of another kind of prejudice that is directed against humanity. Hume’s crisis in the Conclusion in Book 1 demonstrates just such a kind of dogmatic reason at work.

However, Hume adds a complication to the equation. What we typically consider to be human reason, he shows, involves the activity of many parts of the mind. He focuses on three key components, which I will call the Humean trinity: reason, imagination, and the passions. Hume has a specific definition for each of these three parts, which will be discussed in further detail later. Notably, Hume considers reason to be primarily a fact-finding faculty: “Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood…an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact,” (3.1.1, 295). Of more interest to Hume are the less orthodox contributions to philosophy he discerns in the imagination and passions.

In the conclusion to Book 1 of the Treatise, Hume describes the activity of the Humean trinity. The conclusions of one part inevitably affect the others, such that when he renounces his belief in belief, he finds himself assailed by the skeptical passions of fear, doubt, and resentment. Via the principle of sympathy, joining his companions for social activity dissipates his skeptical passions and former despair. By enabling the calibration of our passions to the common view, the principle of sympathy is the cure or mechanism by which we rejoin and participate in
common life. Meanwhile, the passions of humility and curiosity, or the love of truth, work to mitigate his skepticism and guide his thoughts back to rational inquiry. The passions or “inclination” allow us to return to philosophy when the propensity strikes us. Thus, of the Humean trinity, the passions might be said to be the philosopher’s savior from extreme skepticism. Only by acknowledging the passions as the determinant of her convictions can the philosopher maintain a reasonable degree of skepticism in her inquiries and to be skeptical of her former, extreme skepticism.

My goal here is to describe the parts of the Humean mind, but especially the passions, and to elaborate on the relationships amongst those parts; to trace the motions of those parts in the skeptical crisis in the Conclusion to Book 1, describe their volatility, and suggest ways in which Hume’s conception of the mind is not so stable; and examine more explicitly the role of the passions in resolving the skeptical crisis. I will attempt to develop a holistic interpretation of Hume, one which considers the Conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise* in relation to the other two Books of the *Treatise*. Specifically, I consider the application of Hume’s principle of sympathy to the resolution of his skeptical crisis in the Conclusion. The critic Donald Livingston suggests a version of Hume’s notion of sympathy, specifying its philosophical form as philosophical piety, or the conviction that “custom as a totality is sacred” (Livingston 38). I agree with this reading of Hume and will try to explain why the philosopher struggles to realize he is a participant in custom in the first place. I will then try to trace and account for the philosopher’s realization of belonging to custom and common life.

**Hume and His Critics**

The critical response to Hume’s *Treatise* has divided along what might be called Swiftian lines, tending to see Hume as either a destructive skeptic or pure emotivist. Hume’s
contemporaries, particularly that luminary of the Scottish school of Common Sense, Thomas Reid, charged him with purely destructive skepticism (Graham 2001). To the Common Sense school, who saw themselves as defenders of ordinary, normal thinking and therefore of rationality, Hume’s identification of flaws in human reason and his assertion of the role of the passions in morality threatened to undermine their sense of rational, divine order in the universe. Their thinking went something like this: Mankind, divinely mandated to rule the earth and all that is in it, must be equipped with adequate powers of judgment to carry out his task. Human nature must reflect the divinely ordained place of humanity in the universe. Reid, who belonged to the Common Sense school, therefore perceived Hume’s philosophy as a destructively skeptical one which gave a negative account of human reason.

Credit for restituting Hume’s philosophy as a constructive effort and vision must go to Norman Kemp Smith. Most famously, Kemp Smith asserted, “what is central in Hume’s philosophy is his contention that reason ‘is and ought only to be’ the servant of the ‘passions’” (Kemp Smith v). In what has come to be known as the naturalistic interpretation of Hume, Kemp Smith argued that “natural belief takes the place of rational insight” (Kemp Smith 102) and “feeling has primacy over reason” (Kemp Smith 543). In contrast to the destructive skepticism which Reid perceived and objected to in the Treatise, Kemp Smith’s Hume did not abandon us to an irrational and therefore Godless universe. Rather, Kemp Smith’s Hume replaces reason with emotion as the infallible guide in matters philosophical and moral.

Subsequent interpretations have attempted to present a more balanced account of Hume’s philosophy. David Fate Norton specifically responds to Kemp Smith’s naturalism in a book whose subtitle sums up his understanding of Hume: Common-sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician. For Norton, Hume’s Treatise is divided up into parts which accordingly reflect
“two quite distinguishable philosophical crises, a speculative crisis and a moral crisis, or as may be preferable, in response to two kinds of skepticism, epistemological and moral” (Norton 304).

Norton argues that Hume is a naturalist only in his conception of morality. That is, “morals and metaphysics have essentially different standards of truths” (Norton 310), such that

Hume, although he readily acknowledges the importance of sentiment (in the form of natural or instinctive belief) as a guide in practical affairs, was not prepared to support the view that sentiment has, de jure or de facto, control in both practical and speculative affairs. (Norton 305)

Norton thus describes a split in Hume’s philosophy along “practical and speculative” lines.

More recently, critics have considered the unity of Hume’s epistemology with his moral theory, seeing his account of metaphysics and morality as alike in being rooted in social-moral virtues. Donald Livingston and Annette Baier both identify a social-moral component to Hume’s conception of reason. Their positions suggest the impossibility of separating Hume’s moral ideas from his metaphysics. True philosophy takes the form of virtue. Specifically, Baier defines Humean reason thus in her 1991 book *A Progress of Sentiments*:

Reason passed the test of reflection only when it became not just the lively love of truth, but also a moral virtue, only when it came to incorporate shared sentiments and a shared cooperative love of truth…Once true cooperative reason works for a sympathy-based moral sentiment, it prescribes fewer draconian laws and maxims, and avoids both tyranny and imbecility. (Baier 287-288)

Baier lays out Hume’s very specific definition of the mental faculty of reason (not to be mistaken for Reason with a capital “R”):

Hume’s *Treatise* campaign to show the limits of “reason,” to point up what it cannot do alone, was a campaign directed first against deductive reason or “demonstration,” then against a wider-ranging inferential reason that was limited to fact-finding, fact-relating and fact-predicting. This latter needs to “concur” with some motivating passion before it goes to work for any practical or evaluative purpose. (Baier 279)

However, Baier plays down the role of the other passions, and of sympathy. She focuses on the centrality of reason:
Its [Reason’s] final status in the *Treatise* is as a very important natural virtue or ability…Reason joins the virtues, and may even be put high on the list. It is, however, a transformed reason. It is accompanied by other abilities and virtues; it is answerable to the shared moral sentiment; it is itself a social capacity, both in its activities and in the standards of excellence by which they are judged. (Baier 280)

Baier concludes that “the slave [reason]” is “a transformed reason” (Baier 280). In her final assessment of Hume, Baier writes that the *Treatise* “reestablished a transformed, active, socialized reason to a ‘likeness of rank, not to say equality’ with sovereign moral sentiment” (Baier 288). Similarly, Livingston suggests that Hume’s epistemology is related to his moral theory: “True philosophy, for Hume, is not only a mode of inquiry but a way of life, a form of wisdom” (Livingston xii).

Likewise, both Baier and Livingston describe the Conclusion to Book 1 of Hume’s *Treatise* as a moment of transformation or conversion to the social world of common life. Livingston writes,

> Having recognized the magnificent and radiant order of participation in custom, philosophical speculation can never be the same. Henceforth, any return to the speculative moment must take account of oneself as a participant in custom. (Livingston 37)

Livingston’s tone is striking for its confidence that “philosophical speculation can never be the same” (37). Baier and Livingston present Hume’s skeptical crisis in the Conclusion to Book 1 as a largely resolved one.

I agree with the broad outlines of Baier and Livingston’s interpretations of Hume’s *Treatise*. Likewise, I agree with their perception of a definite link between Hume’s metaphysics and his morality, as well as their recognizing Hume’s emphasis on common social life. However, I disagree that Hume’s philosopher is totally purified from further temptations to false philosophy following his conversion. Rather, the Humean mind remains susceptible to the same prejudices which impaired it before, with one exception: the Humean philosopher pledges her
loyalty to common life, thereby uniting her love of common life with her love of truth. Her conversion does not preserve her from further struggle, but rather reveals to her the nature of virtuous philosophical struggle, which is shown to be continuous with the larger human struggle of the passions. The Humean philosopher realizes that her conflict is not one of reason against passion or common life, but one of competing passions within her own mind. It is not her faculties which have been transformed, but her loyalties. The Humean philosopher acknowledges her membership in common life, admitting to share in its struggles, and vows to return to common life when she finds herself drifting. No longer will the philosopher allow herself to indulge in a fit of misanthropy. The Humean philosopher recognizes herself to be equally human and not in a position of epistemological privilege to judge common life.

Livingston traces the virtues of true philosophy. His portrayal of the outcome of conversion to true philosophy is highly optimistic. However, I argue that the conversion does not resolve all of the philosopher’s struggles. Rather, a key component of the conversion is the realization of the quality of that struggle. It is not that all struggles cease upon conversion, but that the philosopher finally sees clearly what her struggle is. Where previously, the philosopher imagines her struggle to be one of reason against passion, the converted philosopher realizes that the true conflict resides within her passions, and that she has mistaken passion for reason. Equipped with this understanding, the philosopher can more effectively carry out her investigations by learning to be skeptical of her reason. Nonetheless, if she should drop her vigilance, she risks falling back into the trap of false philosophy. In other words, the conversion is not a silver bullet against false philosophy, but merely a pledge of loyalty to common life, to defend it against philosophical dogma. At various times, the philosopher must struggle with passions of her own which might threaten her loyalty to common life. At all times, there is the
risk of returning to the old, false way of philosophy. Even after her conversion, then, the philosopher must continually monitor herself and engage in self-correction.

As will be evident later, Hume places great importance on the shared human experience. It is common experience which allows Hume to return from the despair of his skeptical crisis in the conclusion to Book 1. Our shared, or common, experience is part of the unitary human experience that constitutes the closest analogue we have to an objective reality or truth. Common experience also becomes the foundation for Hume’s morality. It is by entering into a “common view of things” that we can extract ourselves from our self-interested perspectives and participate fully in society. Hume emphasizes the harmony of rational thought with everyday wisdom, of which his discussion of geometry supplies one example:

‘Tis true, mathematicians pretend they give an exact definition of a right line, when they say, *it is the shortest way betwixt two points*. But in the *first* place I observe, that this is more properly the discovery of one of the properties of a right line, than a just definition of it. For I ask any one, if upon mention of a right line he thinks not immediately on such a particular appearance, and if ‘tis not by accident only that he considers this property. (1.2.4, 37)

Hume’s tone contains a shadow of Swift’s satiric bite when he writes that “mathematicians pretend they give an exact definition of a right line” (1.2.4, 37). In this analysis, Hume thus describes the insights of common wisdom as preceding the discoveries of rational inquiry. He also implies that desirability and attainability of a wide rational consensus, accessible to all. Notably, Hume writes to the populace, opting to use “common language” (1.3.8, 73) to articulate his philosophy, inexactness notwithstanding (for it is far better to express one’s inexact reasonings in a manifestly inexact language than to “pretend” to write with pure logical precision, that one might avoid the mistaken hubris of believing human reason’s conclusions to be infallible).
Swift is a perfectionist: the mere fact of our fundamentally irrational minds drives him into a frenzy of anxiety. Hume, by contrast, is pragmatically reconciliatory – he is concerned foremost with how we can persist in philosophical inquiry despite our irrationality, and in figuring out how we can be simultaneously engaged in common life and rational thought. If we are doing it right, our inquiries should be extensions of (rather than barriers to) common life. To put it another way, Hume seeks to unite the love of truth with a love of humanity. Hume wishes to separate philosophy from a dogmatic loyalty to the cold, passionless reason that drives the “demonstrative sciences.” As such, he exerts himself to enlarge our conception of philosophy beyond methodology and logical proof, emphasizing the role of the passions, imagination, and the social commons in philosophy. In her discussion of Hume’s conclusion to the first book of the Treatise, Baier argues that

Hume enacts for us the turn he wants us to imitate, a turn from a one-sided reliance on intellect and its methods of proceeding to an attempt to use, in our philosophy, all the capacities of the human mind: memory, passion and sentiment as well as a chastened intellect. (Baier 1)

Baier refers to “passion and sentiment.” The Humean mind readily receives the influence of the passions. However, the Humean passions are not to be confused with Kemp Smith’s feeling. Hume makes it very clear that he does not think we are motivated by simple “emotions”; when he speaks of the human passions and their central role in human behavior and thought, he refers to a range of influences that operate on the human mind.

Hume desires people, but philosophers in particular, to engage the imagination and the passions in their thought, not merely the part which has typically been known as reason. Prior to conversion, the false philosopher dismisses the passions as a form of prejudice limited to common life, from which philosophy remains separate. However, Hume argues that true philosophy must engage common life and is not exempt from the passions. On the contrary, the
Humean philosopher recognizes that she has been under the influence of the passions all along, even when she thought herself to be guided by reason alone. Hume proposes that reason has been over-emphasized. Tellingly, he opens Part 4 of Book 1 with a section on “skepticism with regard to reason.” Ultimately, Hume wishes for us not to discard reason entirely, but to pursue truth in such a way as to ensure our continued involvement in common life, that we might not stray into the kind of modern learning detested and satirized by Swift, arcane and absurd. Hume wishes to wean aspiring philosophers from devotion to their own faculties of reason, and to become earnest lovers of truth. Hume warns against trusting in human reason too much:

In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible said uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error. We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief; and must enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceived us, compared with those, wherein its testimony was just and true. (1.4.1, 121)

Hume therefore recommends constant vigilance in every step of the reasoning process. He writes, “we must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or control on our first judgment or belief” (121). Notably, he will also show that belief is the product of passion rather than logic.

**The Paradox of Reason and Belief**

In Book 1 of the *Treatise*, Hume writes,

[The skeptic] cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* (1.4.2, 125, emphasis in the original)

Hume identifies a fundamental paradox in philosophy that can be equally applied to the task of diagnosing madness. We cannot ascertain the “veracity” of experience by “any arguments of
philosophy.” Indeed, Hume refers to such investigations as “uncertain reasonings and speculations” (Hume 125). Hume thus complicates conventional notions about objectivity and rational thinking. For Hume, philosophy appears to be not so much determining some objective, absolute truth as a rigorous inquiry into the foundations of our beliefs. Hume does not see human reason as equivalent to or capable of attaining the objective understanding that it ostensibly aspires to. To put it simply, human reason is not truth. Human reason is a flawed instrument of rational inquiry. One might say that human reason suffers from systematic error.

Though Hume thinks our reason is flawed, that is not to say that he believes there is no objective reality at all that can be studied. Hume does leave room for speculation about the existence of an objective reality. Human reason cannot be “uncertain” unless there is a dimension of existence distinct from human experience. However, as far as human experience is concerned, Hume argues that we can never be fully certain of the “veracity” of our impressions, although we might be able to come to useful approximations.

In light of this understanding of human reason, the explanation for why intellectual rigor does not necessarily lead to reason (in the sense of attaining a robust understanding of objective reality, of acquiring reasonable experience) becomes clear. In breaking down the relationship between human reason and truth, Hume exposes the mechanism by which human reason leads to madness. Like Swift, Hume takes human reasoning to be a faulty process, subject to the individual variations in experience. He writes,

Our reason must be considered as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability; and this probability is greater or less, according to our experience of the veracity or deceitfulness of our understanding, and according to the simplicity or intricacy of the question. (121)
However, Hume differs from Swift in his understanding of the ultimate direction of human reason. Whereas Swift sees each person’s practice of reason as ultimately divergent from each other in idiosyncratic flights of madness, Hume sees human reason as converging on a form of radical skepticism. In a process exceedingly well-modeled by Swift’s Tale-Teller in “A Digression Concerning Madness” and Lennox’s Arabella in *The Female Quixote*, human reasoning leads to an understanding of the world that risks increasing deviation from reality. Taken to its utmost, human reasoning leads the philosopher to skepticism of the most destructive order. Book 1, in its reasoned investigation “Of the Understanding,” culminates in a moment of profound despair in Part 4.

**The Conclusion to Book 1 of Hume’s Treatise**

Hume’s philosophical despair follows on the heels of his declared resolution to undertake “a more close examination of our subject, and to proceed in the accurate anatomy of human nature, having fully explain’d the nature of our judgment and understanding” (1.4.6, 171). The sequence of events suggests that Hume believes true philosophy to be impossible without engaging the consciousness of the passions and the other parts of the subjective self, including memory and the imagination. In the conclusion to Book 1, Hume models for us the reflections of a truly skeptical philosopher. He uses language to describe his response to his philosophical conclusions:

Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escaped shipwreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances. (1.4.7, 172)
Hume uses the imagery of a man in a boat tossed about by the sea, comparing his “forlorn solitude” to that of a “storm, which beats upon me from every side” (172). Hume’s nautical imagery, reminiscent of Biblical imagery of life’s trials, exalts philosophical melancholy. Hume uses idioms and imagery drawn from the Christian idiom familiar to most of his readers to assist them in entering into his views. In doing so, Hume draws upon a kind of common language. His borrowed imagery underscores the desperation of the philosopher in the midst of his isolation. However, the pain of that isolation is critical for planting in Hume the desire to return to common life. This pain overwhelms him for the moment:

My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity. This sudden view of my danger strikes me with melancholy; and as it is usual for that passion, above all others, to indulge itself; I cannot forbear feeding my despair, with all those desponding reflections, which the present subject furnishes me with in such abundance. (1.4.7, 172)

Hume deliberately uses language that merges the mental faculties, combining reasoning with memory and emotional response. He refers to the philosophical problems he encounters as “perplexities,” a word which registers both the cognitive and emotional aspects, signifying both intellectual challenge and the ensuing sensation of confusion. Hume suggests that such “weakness” of the mind does not condemn human reason as foolish, but only yields more cause for compassion. He attends to the natural response of his passions to his reasoned skepticism, speaking of his “melancholy,” “despair,” and desponding reflections” (172). Rather than

2 “I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm.” (Job 30:20-22, NIV)
embracing this conclusion (that human belief depends on the imagination, that we may never be absolutely certain of the truth) as a triumphant discovery to his credit as a philosopher, Hume recoils, aghast at the irredeemable moral failure which he seems to have found: “And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock” (171). Here we discover a key difference between Hume and Swift’s Tale-Teller: whereas the Tale-Teller delights in posing paradoxes condemning of humanity, in advancing theory for theory’s sake, and abandons us to our despair, Hume takes the view of advancing truth for humanity’s sake. Hume is ever conscious of truth as a profoundly human concern. His love of truth entails understanding it in relation to humanity. Thus, he speaks of this philosophical problem as a “danger” (172) to his tranquility. According to Hume, truth should never result in lasting alienation from common life (Baier 187).

For Hume, the greatest difficulty is not the impossibility of ascertaining the truth, but the ensuing despair and alienation from common life in which his skepticism places him:

I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am placed in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expelled all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate. Fain would I run into the crowd for shelter and warmth; but cannot prevail with myself to mix with such deformity. (1.4.7, 173)

Although Hume does discern an antagonistic role for his imagination in relation to his peace of mind, observing that it causes him to “fancy myself some strange uncouth monster” (173), his imagination also serves to rein in his extreme (even pathological) skepticism. Whereas the Tale-Teller’s imagination only makes his mind teem with distasteful imagery, Hume’s imagination gives him pause in his speculations by giving rise to a sense of self-awareness. He is able to take the common view of his condition and be skeptical of his skepticism only by the means of “fancy.” As a result of his “fancy,” Hume becomes hesitant, stopped by fear, which prevents
him from embarking on the kind of misanthropic condemnation of human reason that we have come to expect from Swift’s Tale-Teller. Instead, Hume’s fancy turns the lens of his awareness back onto himself. It is his fancy which enables him to take an external view of himself. Though this image of the self is undoubtedly imaginative and, factually speaking, not true (a philosopher’s speculations does not cause him to transform into a literal “monster,” and a sampling of portraits of Hume will not show him to be markedly different in appearance from his contemporaries), it permits him to take a step outside of himself to view his position more critically. This is the first step not only to rejoining common life, but also to a more moderate and therefore rational skepticism.

The passion of humility lends its helpful, correcting influence. Hume’s description of humility in Book 2 bears a close correspondence to his crisis in Book 1. “The sensation of humility is uneasy” (2.1.5, 189), as Hume observes:

the same house, still belonging to ourselves, produces humility, when by any accident its beauty is chang’d into deformity, and thereby the sensation of pleasure, which corresponded to pride, is transform’d into pain, which is related to humility (2.1.5, 189)

Aided by the pains of humility, Hume perceives the “deformity” of his extreme skepticism.

Finding himself “unable to mingle and unite in society” (1.4.7, 172), Hume considers an alternative that we might find familiar from reading Swift’s “Digression Concerning Madness”: he considers that he might “call upon others to join me, in order to make a company apart” (1.4.7, 172). However, he finds their response chastening: “no one will hearken to me. Everyone keeps at a distance” (172). Here we find a significant difference between Hume and Swift’s Tale-Teller in their response to skeptical crisis. Whereas the Tale-Teller could not care less about whether the rest of the world joins him, and is content with the knowledge of the truth of his own arguments, Hume suffers the passion of loneliness, calling himself “affrighted and confounded
with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac’d in my philosophy” (1.4.7, 172). Livingston describes this tendency of Hume as “the knowledge of ourselves as participants in custom” (37).

Nonetheless, this capacity for self-examination through “fancy” and humility does not immediately relieve Hume of his “melancholy” (172). Indeed, his reflections lead him to pity himself, pulling him deeper into despair and farther from the common view:

I have expos’d myself to the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians; and can I wonder at the insults I must suffer? I have declar’d my disapprobation of their systems; and can I be surpriz’d, if they shou’d express a hatred of mine and of mine person? (1.4.7, 172)

Humility or awareness of one’s defects is not curative, and indeed can become a form of egotism in its excessive focus on the sufferings of the self. Hume’s account gives a sense of the volatility of the human mind: no single faculty or any one virtuous passion (if we can, indeed, speak of virtuous passions, for Hume will later show that the passions cannot be said to be unreasonable) suffices to ensure his equanimity. Hume indeed explains in a later book of the Treatise that the passions are complicated, so it is not just the passion of the love of truth which saves him, but a multitude of “wheeling” passions (Baier 145) – a lifesaver, if you will, which allows him to float above the sea of his doubts. The complexity of Hume’s state cannot be overstated, for his self-questioning is also evidently a form of self-doubt, one congenial to common life. However, a strain of pride and accusation (of others as well as self) runs through his speculations as well.

Hume continues with his reflections in this complex mixture of passions:

When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho’ such is my weakness, that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the approbation of others. Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning. (1.4.7, 172)
This is the socially corrective mechanism that is missing from the Tale-Teller’s account of philosophy. For Hume, crisis ensues when the desire for common life (that is, shared experience) appears to be at odds with the philosophical passion for truth. The key conflict of the inquiring mind is not between reason and the imagination (though that is certainly a contributor to his unease) or even reason and passion, but between the social and skeptical impulses. His resentment, as evinced by his accusations of “anger, calumny and detraction” coming from “All the world,” is tempered by the “weakness” of his humility and loneliness, “unsupported by the approbation of others” (172). This humility with respect to his own mind expands into the awareness of sharing the same “infirmities” as the rest of humanity:

> For with what confidence can I venture upon such bold enterprizes, when beside those numberless infirmities peculiar to myself, I find so many which are common to human nature? (1.4.7, 172)

As soon as he realizes that he shares in the common weakness of the human mind, he ceases to resent the world, and instead begins to examine himself. The passions of loneliness and humility thus spur him into a more rigorous mode of skepticism, one which undertakes to inquire into his own assumptions or philosophical beliefs. In this moment, Hume begins to reconcile the philosophical passion for truth and knowledge with the desire for common life. The consequence is a renewed passion for truth, evidenced by a more vigorous degree of self-questioning:

> Can I be sure, that in leaving all establish’d opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune shou’d at last guide me on her foot-steps? After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou’d assent to it; and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects strongly in that view, under which they appear to me. (1.4.7, 172)

In this renewed vein of rational inquiry, Hume recognizes that his reasoned conviction is no more than another opinion which competes with “all establish’d opinions,” and that his extreme
skepticism is not necessarily “truth” (172). Hume begins to search for the basis of true knowledge. He asks, “by what criterion shall I distinguish her [truth]”? (172).

Hume begins to inquire into the minute principles of belief formation, undertaking the kind of rational inquiry which he recommends as the right pursuit of philosophy:

Experience is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others, which are not attended with the same advantages. Without this quality [of the imagination], by which the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others (which seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded upon reason) we cou’d never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses. (1.4.7, 172-173)

Hume thus realizes that the basis of his newly reasoned skepticism is ultimately sentimental. He ventures to “assent” to his argument not because it is true, but because he feels it to be so, based on the “intense and lively manner” of its appearance and assisted by the imagination. Norton identifies this as an attack on imagination, but I would modify that assertion to say that Hume attacks the fundamental irrationality of reasoned belief, because founded upon the “quality” of the imagination. Hume’s cycle of self-questioning is driven by the painful passion of humility, pain to the self as object, and leads to the realization that we are little more than a series of impressions. The solitary philosopher is thus deprived even of the imaginative satisfaction of imagining himself as the Biblical hero who strikes out bravely “upon that boundless ocean” (1.4.7, 172) with which he begins this section, for he is no more than a “succession of perceptions, which constitutes our self or person” (173).

Hume ushers in a new era of rational inquiry, when we acknowledge the essential influence of the traditionally rational and non-rational faculties working in tandem to facilitate our philosophical investigations. The question of truth, then, is not as much whether we ought to heed our imagination or analytical reasoning, for we must accept as granted that both are
necessary and potent influences already working to shape our thinking. It is rather to what extent we should assent to or be guided by either. Hitherto we have too long emphasized the reign of reason. In doing so, we have neglected the contributions of the faculties which have conventionally been categorized as irrational, hence Hume’s strenuous efforts to define and establish the roles of imagination and the passions in rational inquiry. As we shall see later on, Hume determines a very specific and legitimate role for these faculties in rational inquiry. This trinity of the parts of Humean inquiry – reason, imagination, and the passions - is as complicated as the Christian theology from which Hume borrows his allusions. The Humean philosopher, by this reckoning, does not attempt to deny one part of the mind at the expense of the other parts, but rather endeavors to be as exact as he can in his investigations, acknowledging rather than disavowing those prevailing influences of common life, the imagination and the passions. It is not mistaken to say that Hume supports reason, but it is mistaken to argue that Hume subordinates instinct and feeling to it, if by “reason” we mean what Hume did, the faculty that is specific to demonstrative proof.

I argue that Norton conflates Hume’s reason with the passion for truth, curiosity, when he writes that “reason itself is an instinct, and that those conclusions of reason that are believed are instinctive beliefs” (Norton 227). To his credit, Hume says that such errors are the sacrifice that we make when we write in the common language, which renders us prone to such confusions. Perhaps we might agree that Hume’s Treatise consists of an attempt to inaugurate a new mode of rational inquiry, one that reconciles our passions for common life with our philosophical passion of curiosity. To that end, the new Humean philosopher acknowledges her debt to all three parts of the Humean trinity - reason (in the strict Humean sense of demonstrative analysis), the passions, and the imagination – and does not attempt to credit any one part undue authority over
the others. Reason as a mode of causal or analytical inference, then, is not to be confused with curiosity, the passion or “instinct” (Norton 227) for true knowledge.

Norton’s summary of Hume’s philosophy assigns a central, “profound role” for reason. He writes, “[Hume] believes in the efficacy of reason even against the forces of nature and finds that even in its highest form, that is, in critical philosophy, reason has a profound role in human affairs” (Norton 20). It seems to me, however, that he does so at the expense of Hume’s own carefully modulated exposition of rational inquiry as laid out in the conclusion to Book 1.

Contrary to Norton’s argument that Hume’s “epistemological” or “speculative crisis” is distinct from his “moral crisis” (Norton 304), I contend that the distinction between true and false philosophy rests on the moral desire for common life. Likewise, I differ from Norton in his view that Hume, though he readily acknowledges the importance of sentiment (in the form of natural or instinctive belief) as a guide in practical affairs, was not prepared to support the view that sentiment has, de jure or de facto, control in both practical and speculative affairs. (Norton 305)

Sentiment, on the other hand, can motivate us and approbation and blame are themselves sentiments. However, these claims only establish the leading role of sentiment in morals, while leaving unanswered all questions regarding the standard of truth. (Norton 306)

Norton’s claims, though laudable in their careful attempt to offer a more balanced view of sentiment and reason, nonetheless conflate the passion for truth with the demonstrative, analytical faculty of reason. As we know from the Conclusion to Book 1 of Hume’s Treatise, the passion for truth (to name just one of many philosophical passions) is crucial to the resolution of the “speculative crisis” (Norton 305). The rational or speculative faculties include sentiment, such that a speculative enterprise in the Humean manner must necessarily allow itself to be guided at times by “sentiment” or, to use Hume’s word, passion. To use the analogy of the Humean trinity, the three parts that comprise the speculative faculties (reason, imagination, and
the passions) all contribute to philosophical inquiry, and any one of the three parts may lead the others. Thus, Hume’s vision of rational inquiry is much more volatile than has hitherto been assumed or described by most of his interpreters. In Book 1, Hume writes, “We have command over our mind to a certain degree, but beyond that lose all empire over it” (1.3.14, 109). Rational inquiry does not advance by reason’s conquest of the imagination or passions. The Humean vessel is the same battered one as that which he sails in the Conclusion in Book 1, and the sea it sails is no less the stormy.

Thus, Hume asks, “How then shall we adjust those principles together?” (1.4.7, 173). I think that Hume’s subsequent account is an attempt to find that ideal equilibrium, to work through the passions via causal reasoning. Thus, rather than simply allowing sentiment to “take over the guiding role” (Baier 20), Hume actually engages both reason and sentiment when he writes,

Nothing is more curiously enquired after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phenomenon; nor are we content with knowing the immediate causes, but push on our enquiries, till we arrive at the original and ultimate principle. We would not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect; that tie, which connects them together; and that efficacious quality, on which the tie depends. This is our aim in all our studies and reflections: And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquired by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other? Such a discovery not only cuts off all hope of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes; since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning. (1.4.7, 173)

Contrary to appearance, this passage is no mere emotional rant, but a rational examination of the passions. Hume describes the passions as a cause and effect of philosophical inquiry. The passion of curiosity motivates “the mind of man” to search for “the causes of every phenomenon” and “the original and ultimate principle” (173). However, in our efforts “to trace

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up the human understanding to its first principles” via causal reasoning, we find that our ostensibly rationally formed opinions are nothing but an effect of the passions and the imagination. This conclusion necessarily gives rise to the passions of humility, disappointment, and despair, and “discourage us from future enquiries” (173).

By this account, passion precedes any sort of causal or demonstrative reasoning, even in philosophy. This is what Hume means when he writes that “reason is perfectly inert” (3.1.1, 294) – not that reason is utterly devoid of influence, but that it cannot be the ultimate, initiating influence. Thus, Hume’s statement of the role of reason must be taken to be an argument about “the original and ultimate principle” of human understanding. Reason can affect the passions and understanding, no doubt, but the “original and ultimate” impetus of this inquiry can only be the passion for truth. The phrase “original and ultimate” itself is peculiar, suggesting a mystery of origin and being analogous to that of the Christian God, who is called the Alpha and the Omega (first and the last) in the Book of Revelation. For Hume, this phrase captures what is at stake for the philosopher: the whole enterprise of philosophy is imperiled by the discovery that there are no cause and effects external to our mind. Instead, there is only “this connexion, tie, or energy [which] lies merely in ourselves” (1.4.7, 173). Causal reasoning is based upon nothing more than an impression, “that determination of the mind, which is acquir’d by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other” (173). The perception of causal relationships is entirely artificial, based upon sentiment and impression. Causality is not at all an inherent property of the world we inhabit and observe, to the extent that we are capable of doing so.

This finding leads Hume to spiral into despair:

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and
reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty. (1.4.7, 175)

Hume describes his extreme skepticism as an example of how it obstructs philosophy by discouraging him from answering these questions. His doubts overwhelm him; he is in a state of imagination and passion (“confounded,” “fancy,” “deplorable,” “depriv’d”) precipitated by the conclusions of his reason. Extreme skepticism is really a convenient shorthand for the process by which reason’s conclusions leads to annihilating doubt that alienates us from common life. Thus, skepticism results from a combined process of reason and passion. The “manifold contradictions and imperfections” revealed by his reason (i.e., his capacity for analyzing the relationships between facts) lead him to be “ready to reject all belief and reasoning” (175). This description of paralyzing despair and the doubts that have “heated my brain” (175) recalls the crisis that we came across earlier in Swift’s “Digression Concerning Madness.

In analyzing this moment of Hume’s skeptical crisis, we must be careful not to confuse doubt with curiosity, the virtuous philosophical passion. What is described here is most certainly debilitating doubt. Doubt annihilates any sense of understanding and denies common life, whereas curiosity spurs us on in our investigations, toward truth. Solitude has “heated my brain” (175), increasing the intensity of his doubting passion and further fired by his imagination. He begins to “fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty” (175). The mind is cast into a state of absolute alienation from common life. In his “fancy” and physical reality, the philosopher is alone, “depriv’d” of any means of connection to common life. When the passion of doubt acts so vigorously on the imagination, the philosopher cannot “enter…into remote
views of things” (1.4.7). Only when we assent to the influence of common life are we able to return to our philosophical investigations.

The passions of common life save us from extreme or false skepticism, which is annihilative rather than revelatory. By the principle of sympathy, our proximity to others in common life communicates their passion to our consciousness. These passions renew our common beliefs, the ones which mitigate our skeptical passions (the skeptical passions include doubt, confoundedness, and despair) and make philosophy possible. While reason condemns the qualities of the human mind, the passions and imagination strengthen the desire to “mingle and unite in society,” even as they prevent that mingling by convincing the philosopher of his social unfitness. Reason cannot help him out of his despair, for his reasoned skepticism is what prompts his sensations of alienation and condemns his condition. Hume laments that he “cannot prevail with myself to mix with such deformity.” His allusion to “deformity” leaves the object of its reference unclear (does he refer to his own monstrous thoughts, or to the character of the crowd?), thus dramatizing the incomplete awareness of the mind to the full effect of its imagination.

In Hume’s account, the passions and the reflections which they prompt aid the aspirations of philosophy to truth-seeking by making him proceed “with hesitation” and teaching him to “dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning” (172). The passions, rather than inciting him to headless condemnation, rein in his faulty reasoning. His apprehensions help him to apply skepticism to his own reasoning. In this way, the Humean passions step forth as the philosopher’s savior from the pitfalls of excessive confidence and tyrannical insistence that Swift condemns in learned opinions. In the events leading up to Hume’s crisis, we can thus observe how the passions help to curb his whims.
The Cure for the Philosopher’s Malady

For Hume, the skeptical crisis proceeds from the fundamental qualities of the human mind – the imagination’s tendency to gain momentum in any fixed idea until it becomes a mad obsession, the mental commotion produced by the involuntary movements of the passions via the inviolable and automatic principles of association. If we are to continue philosophizing, we must do so in a way that is congenial to our nature and passions, satisfying both the love of truth and the desire for common life.

Now that we see our reasoned conclusions to be merely relationships (of ideas), based upon passions and not necessarily facts, we ought to privilege one relationship above all: our relationship with others. The personification of passions and ideas in Hume’s vocabulary of thought reflects his deep investment in common life and the passions as conduit to that scene.

The role of passion in philosophy extends beyond that of supplying the initial motivation. Hume emphasizes that belief is a function of passion: “belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures” (1.4.1, 123). We assent to an argument not because we know it to be true, but because we feel it to be true. The Humean philosopher realizes that our cause-and-effect relationships were merely sentimental (in the sense that they are founded upon the passions), much the way that our attachments to our community are sentimental. If we renounce common life, then we deny the very basis of rational inquiry. Moreover, leaving common life would be alienating ourselves from the most fundamental relationship of all. Common life, the shared experience or correspondence of passions between people, anchors us in a reality outside our immediate selves.

Recognizing the passions as the “original and ultimate principle” of human understanding does not totally invalidate the enterprise of rational inquiry. The practice of making arguments
reasoned from observation is still as valid (or invalid) as before. This is not to say that Hume is advocating the abandonment of philosophy in favor of blind acceptance of common assumptions. Hume is very clear what such cessation of vigorous inquiry would lead to: “we must at last become asham’d of our credulity” (1.4.7, 174). Hume perceives the proper activity of philosophy to be inquiry into the assumptions of the world. The passion for truth is still very real and in operation. Rather, recognizing the fundamental basis of our rational inquiry in the passions allows us to be more clear-headed. We must realize that the relationships we perceive remain merely that, perceptions: not that there is no discoverable relation of cause and effect in the world, but that we cannot ever be certain of having fully determined that causal relationship, owing to the nature of human reason. Our mode of understanding does not permit us to perceive those relationships directly. The association of perceived causal relationships in our minds is entirely founded upon the passions and imagination rather than pure logic. Thus, perception does not necessarily mean observation. We cannot be sure that perceived causality extends beyond our perception or reflects the true nature of the world. This awareness of the precariousness of philosophy and human understanding is the true definition of skepticism in Hume’s books. The passions are not the undoer of reason, but the savior. Ultimately, it is the passion for truth and the desire for common life which saves us from the despair of extreme skepticism and permits us to resume our daily occupations.

In one sense, Hume proceeds much like Swift’s Tale-Teller: he works his way through his theories, begins to reflect on the implications of his theory, and works himself into a state of anxiety. However, whereas Swift despairs of any cure for human depravity or madness, which he thought to be much the same, Hume does find a sort of cure for his maddening despair:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and
delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (175)

Commentators have dismissed this passage as a cop-out, a refusal to give a rational account of how the skeptical crisis resolves, as Singer has observed (606). However, I argue that Hume’s account of the passions and the principle of sympathy is a reasoned explication of the processes that lead him out of his despair. Once he has been “merry with my friends” (175), his former passions of despair gradually pass under the influence of his company. Hume suggests that social gatherings allow a vital process of equilibration to occur, one which he calls by the principle of sympathy. The principle of sympathy is our primary means of accessing and responding to the shared reality of our passions. Notably, Hume believes that the principle of sympathy is an essential feature of human nature. When we interact with people, we cannot help being influenced by their passions. Passions from common life thus help steady and unite us via the principle of sympathy. By contrast, passions generated in response to the idiosyncratic ideas or “chimeras” of our reason and imagination tend to distance us from each other, leading to distress of the sort described in the Conclusion to Book 1. By the principle of sympathy and by reaffirming our ties to humanity and common life, the passions enable our recovery from the skeptical crisis. The converted Humean philosopher recognizes that her conclusions are based on passion, that the powers of judgment which she recognizes as reason is a flawed capability. Accordingly, she need no longer hold herself captive to her conclusions, but consider them to be a work in progress, a continual process of refinement and recalibration to a common, reasoned consensus.
To return to philosophy, we simply wait for the propensity or passion to strike us again. Hume articulates his new philosophy thus:

Nay if we are philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical principles, and from an inclination, which we feel to the employing ourselves after that manner. Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (1.4.7, 176)

For Hume, philosophy conducted “upon sceptical principles” (176) must acknowledge that its own beliefs are open to questioning. Armed with this new awareness of the weakness in our judgment, our new priority is to monitor for and correct any prejudices in our judgment in order to attain that common point of view. Here, all the parts of the Humean trinity come into play: we use our imagination to “enter with difficulty into remote views of things” (1.4.7) and “into sentiments, which in no way belong to us” (3.3.1, 376). The imagination and the passions enable us to transcend our prejudices.

For Hume, the passions supply the material for a common reality. Hume indicates that skepticism, contrary to Swift’s characterizations of it as hubris, represents a supreme form of humility, casting the philosopher into the deepest wells of not only self-doubt, but also doubt of the power of human reason. Notably, Hume’s string of questions proceeds from the first-person to the social: “Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me?” The pain of humility turns the philosopher’s attention beyond himself, to the world of common life.

The Passions

Hume’s notion of the passions is far from one that portrays them as the primal drives that we typically take them to be. The Humean passion is not the same as a “simple emotion” (96). Rather, they are complex entities rooted in the circumstances of the world, such that we can speak of their “causes, and effects” (2.1.2, 182), as well as distinguish between their “object” and
What Hume means by passion is quite different from our contemporary sense of emotion. In the now familiar narrative of psychopathology that we have, madness is the result of passion overwhelming reason. According to this popular conception of madness, passion is the precursor to madness by virtue of its volatility and irrationality. Passions are primal, subjective, unthinking states in this account of the mind. By contrast, Hume argues that passions have an objective existence, and a complex one at that. In the hierarchy of perception that Hume establishes, the passions are “secondary and reflective” impressions, one rung higher than ideas. These passions provide the founding materials for common life. Hume writes,

> the passion, properly speaking, is not a simple emotion, but a compounded one, of a great number of weaker passions, deriv’d from a view of each part of the object…Thus a man, who desires a thousand pound, has in reality thousand or more desires, which uniting together, seem to make only one passion. (1.3.12, 96)

Passions cannot be unreasonable because they are facts of existence rather than ideas to be contested:

> A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, a modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification…’Tis impossible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider’d as copies, with those objects, which they represent. (2.3.3, 266)

Hume wishes to demolish the age-old trope of human psychology that the passions act contrary to reason.

The passions can divide human minds, but for Hume they primarily provide the means of uniting minds via the principle of sympathy, by which the Humean philosopher returns to common life. In contrast, reason divides minds via the principle of comparison, which is “directly contrary to sympathy in its operation”. The link between comparison and reason is definitive in Hume’s account: “All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a comparison” (1.3.2, 52). Hume writes that “We judge more of objects by comparison, than by their intrinsic
worth and value...But no comparison is more obvious than that with ourselves” (3.3.2, 379). Thus, comparison does its dirty work by pitting the desire for pleasure against the desire for common life.

Any kind of departure from common life carries dire consequences, according to Hume. It is undesirable in the most fundamental sense of going against our very nature, which he characterizes as having “the most ardent desire of society...We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society” (2.2.5, 234). Learning that is alienated from the desire for common life inevitably diverges from “the foundation of those moral rules concerning natural and civil justice” (364). When Hume writes, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (2.3.3, 266), he means this: what does and ought to guide the will in philosophical inquiry or moral decisions is not reason, but rather the calm passions and the desire for common life.

Hume writes,

Now it is certain, there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, though they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation. These desires are of two kinds; either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, considered merely as such. When any of these passions are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason, and are supposed to proceed from the same faculty, with that, which judges of truth and falsehood. (2.3.3, 268)

Hume describes human actions or the visible embodiment of what we traditionally call human will as the “effects” (268) of the passions. Hume’s understanding of human nature thus contains a large element of volatility in its attribution of human motivation to any number of passions that happen to make up the “general character or present disposition” (2.3.3, 268) of any individual at any one time. The passions are fluid, and in analyzing the mind we can only characterize it in a
“general” way and hypothesize about the “present disposition” (268). No one reason, passion, or instinct accounts for human behavior. In that sense, our true motivation for doing anything will always remain somewhat mysterious and opaque to our understanding.

The traditional struggle between reason and passion is really a struggle between the calm and violent passions:

what makes this whole affair more uncertain, is, that a calm passion may easily be chang’d into a violent one, either by a change of temper, or of the circumstances and situation of the object, as by the borrowing of force from any attendant passion, by custom, or by exciting the imagination. Upon the whole, this struggle of passion and of reason, as it is called, diversifies human life, and makes men so different not only from each other, but also from themselves in different times. (Hume 2.3.8, 280)

Hume implies here that the calm and violent passions give rise to a sort of volatility within the human mind – their existence “diversifies human life, and makes men so different not only from each other, but also from themselves in different times” (2.3.8, 280).

In summing up the project of inquiring into passions and the continual competition between the calm and violent passions, Hume writes,

Philosophy can only account for a few of the greater and more sensible events of this war; but must leave all the smaller and more delicate revolutions, as dependent on principles too fine and minute for her comprehension. (2.3.8, 280)

The Humean trinity of the mind, once acknowledged, nonetheless resists being fully comprehended by its devotees. The Humean philosopher recognizes the limitations of reason and does not pretend to be able to explain all “principles” (280).

Sympathy and the Passions: Sustaining Common Life

Swift and Hume share a sense of the inadequacy of human reason alone. This is embodied for Hume in his philosophical despair at the Conclusion to Book 1; for Swift, represented by the Tale-Teller as treatise writer in his reasoned madness. Once departed from common life, the alienated mind is painfully bent into the channel of misanthropy. Prior to her
conversion, the philosopher fails to realize that her prejudice against common life is the fruit of a “warm imagination” (1.4.7, 177). As long as this is so, we will continue to follow the bent of our fancy and cultivate hypotheses embrac’d merely for being specious and agreeable, [and] we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience. (1.4.7, 177)

If we persist in denying the influence of the passions and the imagination in our inquiries, then we undermine the intent of our whole philosophical enterprise. We have founded our convictions upon our whimsical notions without admitting it, opening ourselves up to faulty reasoning to the worst extent possible. If we don’t repent, we will end up like Swift’s Tale-Teller, condemned to the fires of our own judgment, hating all of humanity and incapable of leaving that state. The gospel that Hume wishes to spread amongst philosophers is the reality of the passions and the need for common life:

I wish we cou’d communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthy mixture [of honest common folk], as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which wou’d serve to temper those fiery particles of which they are compos’d. (1.4.7, 177)

Hume declares the aim of his reformed, converted philosophy:

we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hoped for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination. (1.4.7, 177)

Typically, he tempers even this ambition with a qualifying phrase, “we might hope” (177). Salvation from that dreaded state of doubt is by no means assured. However, we might at least hope to avoid some of the more egregious mistakes, and find sustenance and satisfaction in the natural pleasures of common life.

Hume finds sympathy to be the crucial link between individual and common life. By sympathy, Hume refers to the principle by which we communicate passions to one another, the
“communication of sentiments and passions” (3.3.2, 378). For Hume, sympathy is an operation rather than a sentiment, one which permits us to engage in the same reality as others. Hume argues that the similarity of our minds facilitates a kind of sentimental affinity:

We may begin with considering a-new the nature and force of sympathy. The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations; nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. (3.3.1, 368)

Hume’s analogies bear many resemblances to those of the Tale-Teller in Swift’s “A Digression Concerning Madness.” However, Swift is pessimistic, arguing that

if you chance to jar the string among those who are either above or below your own height, instead of subscribing to your doctrine, they will tie you fast, call you mad, and feed you with bread and water. (Swift 81)

Swift sees dissonance to be the more likely outcome. Whether there is “harmony of human understanding” depends entirely on whether the individuals share “the same tuning” (Swift 81) in the first place. Moreover, one’s pitch seems to be fixed. Should two individuals be discordant in their “tuning,” Swift seems to see little possibility of changing that. By contrast, Hume holds a much more optimistic view of humanity’s capacity for sympathy. For Hume, human minds operate sympathetically by default. Just as the physical nature of strings dictates that one vibration will initiate further vibrations in the next string, so does the sympathetic nature of human minds ensure the communicability of passions.

Notably, sympathy engages not simply the passions, but also the rational faculties. Hume uses the surgical theater as an instance of sympathy in operation. He depicts the interaction of sympathy and reason as an organic and seamless transition:

When I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the
passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. In like manner, when I perceive
the causes of any emotion, my mind is conveyed to the effects, and is actuated with a like
emotion. Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, it is certain,
that even before it begun, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in
order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patient and
assistants, would have a great effect upon my mind, and excite the strongest sentiments of
pity and terror. No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are
only sensible of its causes or effects. From these we infer the passion: And consequently
these give rise to our sympathy. (3.3.1, 368)

This passage also has important parallels to Swift’s example of the flayed woman in the
“Digression,” with the key difference being that the Tale-Teller does not register any emotional
involvement or observation. By contrast, Hume speaks of responding to “signs of anxiety and
concern in the patient and assistants” with “the strongest sentiments of pity and terror.”
However, this is not a simple instance of conditioned response. Hume emphasizes that sympathy
is not a primitive reflex, nor is it even immediate. He writes, “No passion of another discovers
itself immediately to the mind.” Nor is sympathy strictly confined to the emotions. Hume’s
language blends thought and feeling, enacting the process that it describes. Of the passions,
Hume writes, “We are only sensible of its causes or effects,” from which “we infer the passion.”
In other words, sympathy requires the activity of reason. Sympathy, or emotional correlation, is
guaranteed only by the similarity and consistency of human nature. Minds will agree only so far
as they are similar in disposition. And even then, the natural tendency of the human mind is to
diverge in sentiment and judgment:

   every particular person’s pleasure and interest being different, it is impossible men cou’d
ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of
view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the
same to all of them. (3.3.1, 377)
It is only by active exertion that we become attuned to each other. Sympathy is acquired by effort. Hume’s solution to the partiality of humanity is to encourage us to be partial on the same terms by settling on a “common point of view” (377).

Hume remains optimistic that there is some possibility of correcting our partiality with experience:

In general, all sentiments of blame or praise are variable, according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blamed or praised, and according to the present disposition of our mind…Experience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments, or at least, of correcting our language, where the sentiments are more stubborn and inalterable. (3.3.1, 372)

Hume uses a very Swiftian example to support his argument for the importance of sympathy. Sympathy is essential to the upkeep of everyday life:

A man will be mortified, if you tell him he has a stinking breath; though it is evidently no annoyance to himself. Our fancy easily changes its situation; and either surveying ourselves as we appear to others, or considering others as they feel themselves, we enter, by that means, into sentiments, which in no way belong to us, and in which nothing but sympathy is able to interest us. And this sympathy we sometimes carry so far, as even to be displeased with a quality commodious to us, merely because it displeases others, and makes us disagreeable in their eyes; though perhaps we never can have any interest in rendering ourselves agreeable to them. (3.3.1, 376)

Hume’s mundane example suggests the importance of everyday life to him, a concern which Swift also shares. The underpinnings of common life fascinate Hume. In the face of so much uncertainty (about the unsound basis of our knowledge) as revealed by skeptical inquiry, how do we maintain any sense of stability or sanity? In the very ordinary case of a man with a “stinking breath,” Hume discerns an extraordinary shift or conformity of self-interest to common interest.

For Hume, the first-person point of view is the most unstable of them all:

When we form our judgments of persons, merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation (3.3.1, 372-3)
Hume finds the self-interested point of view full of the same kinds of “contradictions,” “uncertainty,” and “incessant changes” enacted by Swift’s Tale-Teller. Hume suggests that some degree of selfless generosity is necessary for our own peace of mind. According to Hume’s optimistic vision, our individual desire for psychological stability coincides with the community need for harmony. We have an incentive to remove ourselves from our own “peculiar” positions (371) and acquire a common point of view. Hume argues that we are rationally and sentimentally motivated to seek common ground. He thus equates sanity with common life. The sane person is not just one in full possession of his reasoning powers, for we have seen that human reason is forever misguided by self-interest. Rather, we must strive to attain that common point of view which enables our mental poise. To renounce common life is to risk entering a mental territory fraught with dangerous “variation” (373). Fortunately, we are assisted in our efforts to align ourselves with the common view by the sociable inclination of our nature.

Hume sees the human mind as being primarily defined by its affinity for other minds. So deep and natural to us is this connection that the mind as we know it cannot exist in isolation:

We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy’d apart from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. (2.2.5, 234)

Hume’s affirmation of social life, with its references to the misery of a “perfect solitude” (234) carries within it lingering memories of the painful crisis in the Conclusion to Book 1. Hume exhibits some of the Tale-Teller’s volatility and penchant for “momentous Truths” (Swift 87). Whereas earlier Hume admits of conflicts built into the particularity of human desire and the effort required to enter into a “common view” of things, he now asserts the intimacy of “the correspondence of human souls” (378). However, Hume’s volatility is of a different tincture from the Tale-Teller. Unlike the Tale-Teller, who is led to his “momentous Truths” by a desire to
assert his thesis, Hume is guided by the desire to think well of human nature. His effusions tend to err on the side of generous optimism:

For it is remarkable, that when a person opposes me in any thing, which I am strongly bent upon, and rouses up my passion by contradiction, I have always a degree of sympathy with him, nor does my commotion proceed from any other origin... The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own; in which case they operate upon us, by opposing and encreasing our passions, in the very same manner, as if they had been originally derived from our own temper and disposition. While they remain concealed in the minds of others, they can never have an influence upon us: And even when they are known, if they went no farther than the imagination, or conception; that faculty is so accustomed to objects of every different kind, that a mere idea, though contrary to our sentiments and inclinations, would never alone be able to affect us. (3.3.2, 378)

Nonetheless, Hume reveals that this principle of sympathy can be undermined. Although we readily respond to others’ passions, we cannot be affected if those passions “remain concealed in the minds of others” (378). While it is true that the passions provide us with an avenue of mutual understanding, the process by which they do so can be easily derailed.

For Hume, the source of discontent with common life lies in comparison. What obstructs our access to common life, or sympathy, is the tendency of our reason to compare. He writes,

We judge more, of objects by comparison, than by their intrinsic worth and value; and regard every thing as mean, when set in opposition to what is superior of the same kind. But no comparison is more obvious than that with ourselves; and hence it is that on all occasions it takes place, and mixes with most of our passions. This kind of comparison is directly contrary to sympathy in its operation, as we have observed in treating of compassion and malice. In all kinds of comparison an object makes us always receive from another, to which it is compar’d, a sensation contrary to what arises from itself in its direct and immediate survey. The direct survey of another’s pleasure naturally gives us pleasure, and therefore produces pain when compar’d with our own. His pain, consider’d in itself, is painful to us, but augments the idea of our own happiness, and gives us pleasure. (3.3.2, 379)

According to Hume’s conception, “comparison is directly contrary to sympathy” (379). Such “comparison” and judgments tend to prevent us from commiserating with other people or sharing in their happiness. The reasoning faculties are the lens which perverts a natural desire for
pleasure into a desire for a monopoly on pleasure: “[another person’s] pain, consider’d in itself, is painful to us, but augments the idea of our own happiness, and gives us pleasure” (379).

Thinking deals in ideas, which Hume tells us are necessarily fainter than the original impressions. As a result, the more we contemplate another person’s suffering, the more likely we are to gain pleasure from the principle of comparison. Thus, we can trace a direct correlation between thinking and weakened sympathy. To renew our sympathy, we must participate in the activities of common life.

Language provides one means of renewing our commitment to common life, which Hume models for us. He tends to rely on imaginative illustrations and examples from common life. These tropes become a way of accessing the common point of view. Hume thus enacts his own principles in his writing. For instance, to explain the relationship between sympathy and comparison, he uses the example of seamen in a storm:

Suppose the ship to be driven so near me, that I can perceive distinctly the horror, painted on the countenance of the seamen and passengers, hear their lamentable cries, see the dearest friends give their last adieu, or embrace with a resolution to perish in each others arms: No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spectacle, or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy. It is evident, therefore, there is a medium in this case; and that if the idea be too feint, it has no influence by comparison; and on the other hand, if it be too strong, it operates on us entirely by sympathy, which is the contrary to comparison. Sympathy being the conversion of an idea into an impression, demands a greater force and vivacity in the idea than is requisite to comparison. (3.3.2, 379)

In his discussion of the factors that can tip the balance of concern from compassion into schadenfreude, Hume conscientiously avoids ascribing evil intent to human nature. He emphasizes that envy and malice are the results of less-than-vivacious notions of others’ pain, a matter of circumstance rather than will or character. The vivacity of those ideas and ensuing inclination to sympathy, he tells us, are the result of observer proximity. In contrast to Swift, who
perceives the disposition of humanity to be fundamentally corrupt, Hume asserts an optimistic view of human nature: “No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spectacle [as a shipwreck], or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy” (379). The fault is not in the person, but the circumstance. Hume thus tends to consider “human will as an effect [rather than cause]” (Baier 152), an object rather than agent.

Hume acknowledges that certain distasteful tendencies in human nature cannot be dispensed with entirely. Pride, always a target of Swift’s satire, is admitted to be inevitable to some extent. Like the Tale-Teller, Hume asserts the necessity for a surface or “disguise” (381). However, whereas Swift cannot tolerate this discrepancy between the outside and inside (it is intolerable moral filth to him, and the comparison or discrepancy only makes it even more unbearable), Hume indulges in surface appearance as a necessary strategy for everyday life in human society:

At least, it must be owned, that some disguise in this particular is absolutely requisite; and that if we harbour pride in our breasts, we must carry a fair outside, and have the appearance of modesty and mutual deference in all our conduct and behaviour. (3.3.2, 381) [Hume acknowledges that inside is sometimes ugly]

Hume strikes a tone much akin to that of a conduct manual:

We must, on every occasion, be ready to prefer others to ourselves; to treat them with a kind of deference, even though they be our equals; to seem always the lowest and least in the company, where we are not very much distinguished above them: And if we observe these rules in our conduct, men will have more indulgence for our secret sentiments, when we discover them in an oblique manner. (3.3.2, 381)

Hume’s rationale for selfless conduct is very pragmatic: if we act honorably, people will be more forgiving of our slips. In other words, Hume is not as much concerned about some absolute evaluation of our conduct as how we can coexist as a common. Whereas Swift considers such mutual tolerance to be evidence of our corruption, Hume perceives such “secret sentiments” to
be natural and acceptable, since they do not interfere with common life. In fact, Hume goes on to assert the primacy of pride:

I believe no one, who has any practice of the world, and can penetrate into the inward sentiments of men, will assert, that the humility, which good-breeding and decency require of us, goes beyond the outside, or that a thorough sincerity in this particular is esteemed a real part of our duty. On the contrary, we may observe, that a genuine and hearty pride, or self-esteem, if well concealed and well founded, is essential to the character of a man of honour. (3.3.2, 382)

Hume emphasizes the “practice of the world” as the testing ground of his theory about the necessity for sincerity in humility. Hume thus explicitly adopts the common point of view to elaborate and express his philosophy. He writes that “the object of prudence is to conform our actions to the general usage and custom” (382). Likewise, he consults history, an extension of “common life and conversation” (382), to support his argument for pride:

…we observe, that all those great actions and sentiments, which have become the admiration of mankind, are founded on nothing but pride and self-esteem. Go, says Alexander the Great to his soldiers, when they refus’d to follow him to the Indies, go tell your countrymen, that you left Alexander compleating the conquest of the world. This passage was always particularly admir’d by the prince of Conde, as we learn from St. Evremond. Alexander, said that prince, “abandon’d by his soldiers, among barbarians…cou’d not believe it possible any one cou’d refuse to obey him.” (3.3.2, 382)

Hume takes seriously the notion of “common life and conversation” as integral, focal areas of existence, so much so that he relies on them as supporting evidence for his argument. Notably, his example is given as a series of conversations, first between Alexander and his soldiers, then amongst his admirers. For Hume, the most reliable method of avoiding descent into a pathological mindset is to tap into the conversation of common life. Hume, unlike Swift, admires conquerors like Alexander the Great. Provided that it is sanctioned by custom and celebrated in common life, pride does not pose a moral obstacle in Hume’s mind. Hume takes the best evidence for the benignity of pride to be the great pleasure that we draw from pride in common life.
Accordingly, Hume proposes that morality derives not from reason, but custom and sentiment. Hume’s emphasis on the role of custom and the passions in morality contrasts sharply to the views of many of his contemporaries, who believed moral judgment to be the stable product of a pure reason (for instance, in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Reid asserts a rational component to moral conviction, writing that “all knowledge got by reasoning must be built upon first principles” (Reid 346) and that “There are also first principles in morals” (Reid 379). Tellingly, Hume makes his point in a section on “the laws of nations.” Moral judgment, according to Hume, must be the product of a more socialized and general capacity than that of reason:

> The practice of the world goes farther in teaching us the degrees of our duty, than the most subtile philosophy, which was ever yet invented. And this may serve as a convincing proof, that all men have an implicit notion of the foundation of those moral rules concerning natural and civil justice, and are sensible, that they arise merely from human conventions, and from the interest, which we have in the preservation of peace and order. For otherwise the diminution of the interest would never produce a relaxation of the morality, and reconcile us more easily to any transgression of justice among princes and republics, than in the private commerce of one subject with another. (3.2.11, 364)

Hume suggests a distinction between moral philosophy and morality, where the former strictly concerns itself with explanation and the latter with instruction. Hume’s conception of morality is clear in its priorities: common life should guide the philosopher, and not the other way around. Thus, to learn “the degrees of our duty,” we ought to look to “the practice of the world” (364) or common life rather than “abstract speculations” (395). This does not mean that Hume wishes for us to give up philosophy, or that philosophy cannot affect common life. On the contrary, Hume’s goal in the *Treatise* is to show how common life is compatible with curiosity. Hume’s point is that philosophy must not interfere with the “innocent satisfaction” (1.4.7, 177) of common life. Later, he sums it up this way:
The same system may help us to form a just notion of the *happiness*, as well as of the *dignity* of virtue, and may interest every principle of our nature in the embracing and cherishing that noble quality… And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*; and may render this latter science more correct in its percepts, and more perswasive in its exhortations. (3.3.6, 395)

In other words, Hume says that the study of how things are should not affect common life except to assist it. Philosophy must “become subservient to practical morality” (395). If philosophy is to alter our common doings at all, it must only be for their betterment, not their destruction.

Whatever crises occur in the life of mind must not be allowed to spoil the enjoyment of common life, or the “*happiness* as well as of the *dignity*” (395) of human virtue.
Conclusion

The Hume scholar Donald W. Livingston writes in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* that “the question ‘What is man?’ is a question about humanity and a question which manifests an essential human characteristic: self-inquiry” (Livingston 11). Likewise, the question “What is madness?” is an introspective question about humanity. As Hume suggests in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, the difficulty in answering that question lies in determining “how far we are ourselves the objects of our senses” (Hume 1.4.1, 126). To inquire into the realities of our sensory perception and otherwise engage in skeptical inquiry “with regard to the senses” (Hume 125) is to inquire into “what constitutes a person” (Hume 127), from which Hume draws a startling conclusion: “in common life ‘tis evident these ideas of self and person are never very fix’d nor determinate. ‘Tis absurd, therefore, to imagine the senses can ever distinguish betwixt ourselves and external objects” (Hume 127). If we take Hume’s line of reasoning to the extreme, we could understand Hume to say that we can never truly distinguish self-imposed delusion from reality – at least, not through introspection. When we see with our senses, our field of vision is most occluded with ourselves – our habitual attributions, assumptions, and knowledge. Our sensory perception, like our mental perceptions or perceptions in the sense of opinions, is deeply linked to our sense of self. But even this degree of subjectivity is no barrier to pursuing a rational life of mind. I have tried to show in this chapter that Hume’s reformed notion of rational inquiry is quite complex, and in many aspects as volatile as Swift in his understanding of the mind.

According to Hume, we are always subject to the influence of the passions and the imagination. Does Hume then suggest that we are all mad to some extent? I believe he thinks otherwise. Hume has a very complicated understanding of human subjectivity. We typically understand subjectivity to imply falseness of experience, and take passion to be the prime
example of subjectivity. However, Hume argues that the passions are “an original existence” (2.3.3, 266) unto themselves. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the passions cannot be judged as unreasonable. Moreover, although the passions may contribute to individual experience, they are general enough (due to the approximate uniformity of human nature) that they also constitute a type of shared experience or common life. Finally, Hume also argues that our experience of the physical world is itself subjective. In Book 1 Section 4, “Skepticism with Regard to the Senses,” Hume argues that our understanding of the physical world is wholly mediated by the process of human perception. We do not experience the world directly through the senses. Rather, all sensations are translated into impressions. Notably, Hume classifies as impressions “all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul” (1.1.1, 7), placing on equal ground what are typically considered to be subjective aspects of human life, the internal world of psychological states, with the external world of physical sensory experience.

Hume does not use the word madness outright, but he does speak of suffering from “philosophical melancholy and delirium” in the conclusion to Book 1. Hume’s conclusions and ensuing skepticism cause him to become alienated from common life. We might understand this to be Hume’s accepted definition of madness.

The heated brain of the philosopher can only be cured by her affirmation of common life. Once she recognizes Reason to be a false god and converts to common life, she can no longer lay claim to any superiority of judgment. She is no more privileged in her access to truth than the rest of the commons, for she, too, operates by passion and the imagination. However, since this struggle ensues from a basic feature of human nature, she is not exempt from struggle following her conversion. Even after she recognizes the human god which she idolizes, she is still subject
to the same principles which originally led to our crisis. Following her conversion, then, the 
philosopher’s struggle is far from over. She no longer suffers the skeptical crisis, that false 
notion of conflict between reason and the passions or common life. Rather, in recognizing the 
essential weakness of the human mind, its inability to exist apart from common life, the Humean 
philosopher submits to the struggles of common life.

Swift wished to strip humanity naked to reveal the true nature beneath. Hume believed in 
keeping the polite distance taught by “the practice of the world” (3.3.2, 382), let alone 
undressing in public. He writes,

The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter; nor in his accurate dissections and 
portraiture of the smaller parts of the human body, pretend to give his figures any 
graceful and engaging attitude or expression. There is even something hideous, or at least 
minute in the views of things, which he presents; and ‘tis necessary the objects shou’d be 
set more at a distance, and be more cover’d up from sight, to make them engaging to the 
eye and imagination. An anatomist, however, is admirably fitted to give advice to a 
painter; and ‘tis even impracticable to excel in the latter art, without the assistance of the 
former. (3.3.6, 395)

If we are to be anatomists at all, then it must be in the service of art. We make incisions in hopes 
of assisting the dignity of the human figure. Such was Hume’s stance on the matter.
CHAPTER THREE

Dispelling the Fantasy of Romance:

Curative Sentiment in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*

The last thing that can be said of a lunatic is that his actions are causeless. If any human acts may loosely be called causeless, they are the minor acts of a healthy man; whistling as he walks; slashing the grass with a stick; kicking his heels or rubbing his hands. It is the happy man who does the useless things; the sick man is not strong enough to be idle. It is exactly such careless and causeless actions that the madman could never understand; for the madman (like the determinist) generally sees too much cause in everything. The madman would read a conspiratorial significance into those empty activities...The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. - G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908)

Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) corroborates G.K. Chesterton’s sense of madness as a form of hyperactive reason: an over-interpreting paranoia that tends to “read a conspiratorial significance into...empty activities” (Chesterton). The notion that reason and madness are not too far separated is not a new one. Deranged scholars abound who have presumably mastered the art of induction, from Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* to the Astronomer in Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*. Relentless inquiry leads Swift’s Tale-Teller and Hume into crisis. In Swift, Hume, and Lennox, we observe the unsustainability of the solitary mind and hints that human reason is a deeply flawed faculty. In Swift and Lennox, this madness takes the form of a desire for and belief in a limitless, infallible authority centered on the self which corrupts language. However, whereas Swift sees human reason as being irreparably, irredeemably broken, Hume and Lennox shift their focus away from abstract representations of truth or reason and towards the valuation of human relationships and common life. We are not rational, but neither are we animals as Swift’s Tale-Teller insinuates. For Hume and Lennox, humanity occupies someplace in between, and their ideal of common humanity unites sentiment...
and reason. By sentiment, I mean the Humean notion of passion, the perceptions of the mind which have traditionally been called subjective. In both Hume and Lennox, the cure for madness requires the acceptance of the fallibility of the self and the true nature of passion (manifest in Hume as an acknowledgment of the sentimental basis of human reason and the fictionality of heroism in Lennox) as a condition of humanity. In Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, this cure specifically requires that Arabella abandon her rigid, linguistic fantasies of desire and recover the power of sympathy. By sympathy, I mean the Humean capacity for reciprocal sentiment which makes social bonds, or common life, possible.

I would like to make the shocking claim that Arabella’s romantic delusion is not a form of female empowerment, but a deeply debilitating (and irritating) pathology of thought akin to that of Swift’s Tale-Teller. Love and treatise writing alike take up language as a weapon of egotistic conquest. The limitless self-as-conqueror, far from being a shining beacon of self-actualization, is disruptive in Swift and Lennox, leading to the corruption of language and cessation of meaningful conversation. The lengthy love-speech and the Tale-Teller’s treatise have in common their long-winded disregard for their listener or readers’ comfort, which tends to kill conversations, and in Arabella’s case, any chance of attracting potential suitors. In *The Female Quixote*, the cure for Arabella’s madness requires her to move from one-sided speeches of desire to loving dialogues. However, romance novels are not the only scene of such absurd conventions. Lennox is no less harsh in her satiric depictions of flirts and dandies. Like romance heroines, flirts like Charlotte Glanville or Sir George are guilty of a selfishly fantasizing expression of desire that turns the body into an actor of “unmeaning Gestures” (Lennox 279): “all that Variety in her Face, and that extreme seeming Earnestness in his Discourse, was occasioned by the most trifling Subjects imaginable” (Lennox 149). In the case of romance
heroines and flirts alike, language – properly a means of achieving Humean sympathy – is corrupted into the signification of individual desire as opposed to achieving the reciprocal exchange of sentiment. In Swift as well as Lennox, untrammeled desire is formulated as a kind of madness and corruption of language. Madness is epitomized in *The Female Quixote* as a kind of semantic displacement, in which the passions are alienated from their signifiers, and sincere reciprocation imperiled. A great deal of attention is given to Arabella’s “distant manner” and strange style of speech. Indeed, she never simply talks, but delivers speeches. In that sense, her madness is Swiftian. However, there is a cure, and it is strikingly Humean. Only when Arabella confronts the fictionality of belief (that is, becoming aware that they are a novelistic product of the passions and the imagination, such that her “Heart yields to the Force of Truth,” Lennox 381) can she truly ally sentiment with reason and rejoin common life, as exemplified by her union with Glanville. Hume’s *Treatise* redefines the terms of rational inquiry. Similarly, Lennox’s *Female Quixote* reforms the novel of romance. In both, reason is associated with the development and recognition of a language of sympathy.

Critics have largely analyzed Arabella’s madness as a feminist parable about what happens to female desire in the eighteenth-century: it is mercilessly denounced and silenced into matrimonial compliance with the patriarchy. However, I argue that such interpretations give insufficient recognition to the details of female agency in *The Female Quixote*, or to the chastening of male desire in Sir George. After all, Arabella’s desire in its romantically deluded form involved its suppression rather than expression, as well as an exaggeration of male desire (to the extent that she is convinced that every man she meets has an active interest in ravishing her). In a conversation with Glanville which will repeat itself throughout the novel, Arabella says,
You had the Boldness, said she, to talk to me of Love; and you will know that Persons of my Sex and Quality are not permitted to listen to such Discourses; and if, for that Offence, I banished you my Presence, I did no more than Decency required of me. (Lennox 44)

Mr. Glanville, who desired nothing so much as to stay some time longer with his Cousin in her Solitude, got his Father to intreat that Favour for him of Arabella: But she represented to her Uncle the Impropriety of a young Gentleman’s staying with her, in her House...She recollected the many agreeable Conversations she had had with Glanville; and wished it had been consistent with Decency to have detained him. (Lennox 66-67)

Arabella reveals that she wishes Glanville to stay longer, and would have assented to Glanville’s extended visit if not for the absurdly strict notions of “Decency” acquired from her romance novels. Arabella’s romantic delusions cause her to suppress rather than express her desire. If we agree with the critic Patricia Meyer Spacks’s thesis that “Romances tell the truth of female desire” (1988, 533), then we must accept a very unflattering portrait of female desire, one which says that women want to subjugate all men (as the romantic heroines do in the novels that Arabella reads) and demand absolute obedience from their lovers. Such an interpretation ignores Lennox’s explicit critique of the men who propagate these romance conventions, as embodied by the comeuppance of Sir George, who is forced to confess “the ridiculous Farce he had invented to deceive her [Arabella]” (Lennox 382). The novels which Arabella reads and most frequently refers to – La Calprenede’s Cassandra and Cleopatra, and Artamenes or the Grand Cyrus (which Lennox, tellingly, mistakes to be primarily written by Georges de Scudery rather than by his sister, Mademoiselle de Scudery; Lennox 62) – were written or presumed to be by men. Lennox chastens not female desire in the interest of the patriarchy, but problematic desire in general – what Sir George, Charlotte Glanville, and Arabella all have in common is their self-centered notion of relationships.

The Female Quixote contains two ideas about language: that it should communicate rather than pontificate, and that self-centered desire (in man or woman) can corrupt it. It is
significant that Arabella’s madness derives from reading not just romances, but bad translations of them. In other words, her delusion is fueled by a corrupted version of language. Curing her romantic delusion requires that she shift from a language of desire to a language of sympathy. The romance novel is condemned on the grounds of propagating love as private fantasy rather than a relationship of interdependence, much as the romance novel centers language on the self rather than as a means to a communicative relationship.

Critics reading *The Female Quixote* have tended to suggest the positivity of madness, delusion as a vision of female empowerment. Scott Paul Gordon in “The Space of Romance” (1998) argues that Lennox uses madness as a novelistic strategy to preserve Arabella from charges of self-interest. However, I am not sure that this strategy is entirely successful. Arabella’s quixotism is preeminently self-absorption at its finest. She remains an endlessly frustrating character for most of the novel. Moreover, if true, this would suggest that Arabella need not be cured, that her madness is not problematic, and that it is her cure which is problematic. For instance, the critic Catherine Gallagher argues that Arabella’s cure results in the surrender of her estate:

As long as Arabella refuses fiction, resists the suppositional, she owns her estate, but when she capitulates to textuality, she becomes the vehicle through which the estate descends from her father to his chosen heir, her cousin. When Arabella understands the books as mere representations, in other words, she understands her “real-life” function as a representation, as a means of transferring and preserving the property by giving herself away. Thus a woman’s practice in sympathizing with nobody was a peculiarly fitting prelude to disposing of, rather than increasing, her own material substance. (Gallagher 1994, 195)

I disagree that “when she capitulates to textuality, she becomes the vehicle through which the estate descends” (Gallagher 1994) to Glanville. The estate falls to Glanville, regardless of whether he marries her, as his father tells him:
I would advise you to think no more of her [Arabella]; content yourself with the Estate you gain by her Refusal of you: With that Addition to your own Fortune, you may pretend to any Lady whatever; and you will find many that are full as agreeable as your Cousin. (Lennox 200)

I argue that Arabella, though she progresses greatly in her awareness, does not advance to the extent that she “understands her ‘real-life’ function as a representation, as a means of transferring and preserving the property by giving herself away” (Gallagher 195). She certainly saw herself as a representation before her cure (a heroine), consequently suffering from reading representational excess into everything, and is at last cured when she ceases to think of herself and the world in terms of representations. The myth of the heroine – the Ur-representation in the romance novel – is debunked. Rather, celebrated in its place is the subsumption of heroic figures into marital union and common life. Marriage is depicted as a union that can reconcile the inclinations of reason and sentiment – for property and common life. At the end, Arabella and Glanville achieve the Humean ideal of sympathy in their union: “Mr. Glanville and Arabella were united, as well as in these [Fortunes, Equipages, Titles, and Expence], as in every Virtue and laudable Affection of the Mind (Lennox 383).”

Gallagher’s argument is an interesting take on Arabella’s marriage, but does not explain why the other realistic, “compliant” females in the novel, such as Charlotte Glanville, are not equally celebrated. I do agree with Gallagher that Arabella’s cure depends on her acceptance of fiction as a genre rather than truth. I would like to develop that thought further by suggesting that Arabaella’s acceptance of fiction as a genre is tantamount to the deconstruction of the romance novel. By that, I mean Arabella develops an awareness that the romance novel structure is
centered on the heroic self, and that the self is a fallible being animated by its relationships to others. Her cure involves a commitment to the relationship rather than its terms or conventions.

I will not comment on the political correctness of this position (to put it crudely, that madness is solitude and alienation resulting from language corrupted by egocentrism, that the death of the self as center is the cure, and that marriage is the ideal consummation of common life) but I do argue that it is the position which Lennox’s text develops. The recovery of Arabella’s sanity is linked to an ability to shift from a language of fantasizing desire to a mature exchange of sentiment that recognizes the self and its desires to be unstable centers, and embrace the indefinite freeplay of common life as the anchoring reality. This is the vision of sentiment celebrated in Lennox’s novel – when the center of the self (as the basis for defining our understanding of the world) is debunked, and we find reality beyond our individual judgment.

Lennox parodies the genre of the romance novel in the figure of Arabella. Raised in rural seclusion by her reclusive father, Arabella addles her brain with her late mother’s stash of badly translated French romances, mistaking men for ravishers and prostitutes for genteel ladies requiring chivalrous rescue. Her embarrassing delusions prevent Mr. Glanville from marrying her straightaway. Arabella is cured only after a series of encounters that superimpose the romance novel onto real-world structures. A rival suitor schemes to convince her that Glanville is also Ariamenes, a two-timing lover who has abandoned the Princess of Gaul to pursue her. In a leap of illogic, Arabella throws herself into the Thames to escape her imagined ravishers and gain enduring fame. A long talk with her doctor while recovering from her near-drowning finally cures her of her belief in knights, ravishers, and mortal sacrifice.

3 I borrow the terminology of (but am not committed to) Derridean criticism.
Arabella’s romance form is a supreme form of suppression in herself and others. In a conversation with Arabella, Glanville laments that “you have expressly forbid me to tell you I love you” (Lennox 113). The romance novel also forbids that she speak of desire, such that the greatest expression of affection for Glanville that she can allow herself is to tell him that “I do not wish your Death” (Lennox 134). Of course, one can argue that Arabella thus prolongs the courtship process, controlling it, but arguably that control is as self-deluding as that of a flirt, both of whom only prolong an act of private fantasy rather than engaging real sentiment.

Through Arabella, Lennox describes how the mind becomes isolated from history and humanity in the pursuit of its fantasy. The relentless inquiry of the analytic mind becomes a form of neurosis that alienates Arabella from society. Arabella continuously monitors her own behavior and that of others for adherence to romance forms. When Sir Charles inquires about her relationship with his son, she answers:

She did not hate him so much, but that his Death would affect her very sensibly. Arabella, in speaking those Words, blushed with Shame, as thinking they were rather too tender. (160)

Arabella formulates her replies according to vocabulary and syntax demanded by “the Laws of Honour and Romance” (116), which always remain foremost in her mind. However, “the Laws of Honour and Romance” (116) extend beyond that of a set of linguistic or genre conventions, its territory covering morality and manners. Significantly, Arabella groups “Honour and Romance” together. She equates form (“Romance”) with the concepts it represents (“Honour”). The distinctions between form and concept, manners and morality, become increasingly hazy.

Arabella constantly considers the image she conveys to others, chastising herself whenever she catches herself saying “too much” (115) or being “too tender” according to “the Laws of Honour and Romance” (116). Standards restrain expression and feeling. Contrary to Spacks’s
argument that the romance novel speaks the truth of female desire, Arabella’s romantic obsession obliges her to suppress any show of her desire.

Stuck in the conventionalized language of desire and the grammar of romance, she is constantly preoccupied with making sure that she and her lovers are adequately heroic. Arabella’s desire for heroism requires duels, oaths, and the vanquishing of rivals from her lovers. She is obsessed with the extent to which she and others are conforming to her standards (for though they are taken from romance novels, amongst the characters they are undoubtedly unique to her). The Doctor describes her affliction thus:

Nothing can hinder you from being the happiest of Mortals, but Want of Power to understand your own Advantages…you enjoy all that Intellectual Excellence can confer; yet I see you harrass’d with innumerable Terrors and Perplexities, which never disturb the Peace of Poverty or Ignorance. (370-371)

The cure for Arabella’s crippling self-concern requires no less than a conversion by a clergyman, “a Pious and Learned Doctor” (366). The Doctor’s title in this instance refers to his learnedness as a man of the church, but the potential for conflation carries significance. The Doctor, though a clergyman, mingles theological sentiment with scientific rigor. His discussions with Glanville have the flavor of a physician’s consultations in anticipation of a delicate medical procedure: “the Doctor and he [Glanville] agreed to expect for some Days longer an Alteration for the better in the Health of her Body, before he attempted the Cure of her Mind” (367). Through the figure of the “good Doctor,” Lennox suggests that piety is the ideal tempering of reasoned rigor with sentiment.

That Arabella’s flawed epistemology and distorted moral standards must be cured by the same process suggests that reasoned beliefs and moral beliefs share the same sentimental basis as in Hume. Indeed, the critic Wendy Motooka (260) argues that Arabella’s frame of mind bears much resemblance to that of the scientific method: Arabella observes, then makes inferences
about those phenomena, and upon being confronted with the error of her thinking, speculates anew with alternative explanations. However, Arabella consistently fails to generate the correct conclusion because her mind remains constrained by the limitations of her reason. The mind is suited to generating predictions, but the model it uses to generate these predictions is always impoverished compared to the real world. The mind cannot transform itself without external intervention in the form of sentiment. As long as Arabella remains incapable of sympathy (that is, the reciprocal communication of sentiment) and stuck in her private epistemological fantasy of romance, she cannot correct the mistaken beliefs which derail her reasoning. Thus, developing a language of sympathy is as essential to right reasoning as it is to human relationships.

Ultimately, an objective account of the sort demanded by rationalists is impossible because no event or action can be separated from its interpretation. Meaning is the event. The problem with Arabella’s way of understanding the world is not that she observes and then interprets the world differently. Observation cannot be separated from the act of interpretation, as both are revealed to be continuous with each other. Objectivity is just as much of a fantasy as romance. When Arabella sees richly garbed horsemen, nothing within the moment favors or informs one description over another. Her discussion with Glanville demonstrates the inseparability of description from interpretation:

Pardon me, Madam, said Mr. Glanville, who was willing to prevent his Father from answering her Absurdities; these Men had no other Design, than to rob us of our Money.

How! said Arabella: Were these Cavaliers, who appeared to be in so handsome a Garb, that I took them for Persons of prime Quality, were they Robbers? I have been strangely mistaken, if seems: However, I apprehend there is no Certainty, that your Suspicions are true; and it may still be as I say, that they either came to rescue or carry us away. (259)

The verbs “rob,” “rescue,” and “carry” posit very different interpretations. There is no way to record the event without interpreting the roles of the participants, who might be alternately described as “Cavaliers” coming to the rescue or “Robbers.” In Lennox, as in Hume, every
perception is shown to be a reaction of the mind, such that direct observation and acquisition of knowledge is not possible. Therefore, we find the truth to be much more complicated than a simple accounting of visible phenomena. Lennox suggests that the scientific empiricist may find it as difficult as Arabella to determine the truth and generate the correct explanation.

Social-moral truth cannot be extricated from what we normally consider to be reality. Arabella’s sense of reality is inseparable from that of her morality (her understanding of her social obligations). As long as Arabella’s understanding remains solitary and intellectual (and therefore rationalizing) rather than social (acknowledging the influence that others have on her), she remains captive to the delusions of her romantic paradigms. Before being cured, she is a Swiftian empiricist who imposes her hypotheses on others and fails to recognize the interposition of the analytical and attributive self in her observations. Arabella remains incapable of freeing herself from her romantic delusions when she continues to operate on the basis of assumptions gained from books and intellectual arguments rather than the heart. When Arabella encounters a kindly Countess who takes Arabella under her wing and tries to cure her, the Countess fails because she founds her arguments upon intellectual propositions rather than sentiment. Sentiment has all the transcendental force of the divine in its resistance to containment by human devices. Sentiment, which occurs above the level of man-made terms and systems, cannot be refuted.

Although Glanville and Sir George both desire Arabella, Lennox makes clear the inconsiderate basis of Sir George’s claims: “Sir George was meditating on the Means he should use to acquire the Esteem of Lady Bella, of whose Person he was a little enamoured, but of her Fortune a great deal more” (Lennox 129).

Both Sir George and Arabella are concerned with language, specifically the conventions
of the romance novel as a language of desire, as a means to achieving their private fantasy.

Lennox portrays their proclivity for the romance language of desire as the result of insufficient sympathy for others. Lennox writes of Sir George:

He resolved to make his Addresses to *Arabella* in the Form they prescribed; and, not having Delicacy enough to be disgusted with the Ridicule in her Character, served himself with her Foible, to effect his Designs. (Lennox 131)

As in Swift, language is susceptible to corruption by overreaching ambition. Arabella’s madness manifests itself partly as a tyrannical insistence on Glanville’s absolute obedience to her romance novel fantasies. Her language of fantasy reduces relationships to “romance Forms” and results in many a misunderstanding. After returning home from another adventure, Arabella interrogates her maid about how Glanville reacted to her disappearance:

“What! interrupted *Arabella*: And didst thou not observe the Tears trickle from his Eyes, which, haply, he strove to conceal? Did he not strike his Bosom with the Vehemence of his Grief; and cast his accusing and despairing Eyes to Heaven, which had permitted such a Misfortune to befall me?” (109)

Lennox draws attention to the way romance novel convention transforms her language from communication into self-absorption. Arabella’s questions are rhetorical. Tellingly, the question returns to her (“me”) as the focal object. The romance novel, with its emphasis on desire, centered on the heroic self, thus corrupts language from an act of communication into an act of unfeeling fantasy.

*Arabella* commits the fault of making herself the reference point for her outlook. Thus, Glanville’s identity is determined for *Arabella* as “her Lover” (157), who must prove his identity by showing himself to fulfill the criteria for that role: “Courage” and “Valour” (157).

*Arabella* saw all the Actions of her Lover, and intended Ravisher; and, being possessed with an Opinion of her Cousin's Cowardice, was extremely rejoiced to see him fall upon his Enemy first, and that with so much Fury, that she had no longer any Reason to doubt his Courage: Her Suspicions, therefore, being removed, her Tenderness for him returned; and when she saw them engaged with their Swords (for, at that Distance, she did not
plainly perceive the Difference of their Weapons), her Apprehensions for her Cousin were so strong, that, though she did not doubt his Valour, she could not bear to see him expose his Life for her (157).

Lennox draws our attention to Arabella’s insistence on seeing. She “saw all the Actions of her Lover” and “extremely rejoiced to see him fall upon his Enemy first,” and “saw them engaged with their Swords,” and “could not bear to see him expose his Life for her” (157). Arabella ironically “did not plainly perceive the Difference of their Weapons” (157). Had she seen that Glanville was defending himself against a sword with a mere “hanger” and horse-whip, her opinion of Glanville’s courage would have been even more heightened. Arabella thus engages in a parody of the scientific method, where her insistence on visual evidence only prevents her from seeing with clarity. She observes and makes inferences from those observations, but her heuristics are faulty and resistant to change, just as her language is inflexibly imperative.

Lennox exposes Arabella’s reasoning to be mere rationalization. Her quixotic mode of empiricism, which insists on “Distance” (157), the better for observation and admiration, prevents her from realizing intimacy and true human understanding. Lennox deplores this senseless distancing, which only leads to more misunderstanding. As long as Arabella insists on a relationship mediated by romance terms and forms, she limits herself to conditional love, a love validated by requisite conditions, and cannot truly be united with Glanville, for her relationship will always be mediated by “Suspicions,” “doubt,” and “Apprehensions.” Her affections are obstructed by these conditions and prepositions – she is restricted to having “Tenderness for him” (157) rather than being able to love him outright. The price to pay for this quixotic independence is paranoia and uneasiness, “suspicions” and “doubt.” This is the result of that rupture, of rigid definitions (“Lover,” “Lady”) that only exchange one set of uncertainties for another. And of course, Arabella’s rigidity of definitions endangers Glanville’s life by needlessly
involving him in a duel. Interestingly, the intellectual components of the mind that we more commonly associate with scientific empiricism are what lead Arabella to her great folly in this case. Her “suspicions,” “doubt,” and desire to see for herself proof of Glanville’s courage are what lead her to make such unreasonable demands of his courage. It is sentiment, not reason, which provides a corrective influence. Arabella’s “tenderness” and “Apprehensions” cause her to become concerned for Glanville’s life and to desire to put an end to the bloodshed. In this episode, language becomes a measure of moral character. Arabella is most at fault when she presumes to judge and command Glanville with her language of romance.

Lennox suggests a hierarchy of valuations through characters that embody each structure: Arabella stands for the world of implausible fiction and the romance novel, the Glanvilles and the Doctor for the plausible real world, society, and truth. However, we find that the value assignments do not remain stable. Arabella is satirized, but so are Charlotte Glanville and Glanville’s friend Sir George. It is true that Arabella’s commitment to the romance novel is endlessly ridiculed. On the other hand, Lennox also bestows upon Arabella many conventionally romantic qualities that are favorably portrayed. Arabella’s extraordinary eloquence and beauty make her objectively admirable. The value distinctions established at the outset repeatedly break down in Arabella, as we see that romance values are compatible with real-world values.

Arabella makes her debut at a ball in a robe styled after her admired heroines of antiquity:

Scarce had the first tumultuous Whisper escap’d to the Lips of each Individual, when they found themselves aw’d to Respect by that irresistible Charm in the Person of Arabella, which commanded Reverence and Love from all who beheld her.

Her noble Air, the native Dignity in her Looks, the inexpressible Grace which accompany’d all her Motions, and the consummate Loveliness of her Form, drew the Admiration of the whole Assembly (272)

In this scene, the impulses of social propriety and romance novel heroism align. Whereas at the outset of the book we are meant to scoff at Arabella’s expectations of “a Croud of Adorers” (7),
here Lennox confirms those expectations as Arabella’s rightful due. Lennox signals the indubitable reality of Arabella’s beauty by describing it as “inexpressible” (272). That is, her beauty transcends the structures of language, and therefore situates it beyond the romance novel structure (the romance novel being a function of language). However, in its very hyperbolic excess, Lennox’s description of Arabella participates in the conventions of the romance novel and places Arabella firmly within the ranks of other romantic heroines. In this instance, Lennox endorses Arabella’s conformity to the “romantic forms” (13).

Scott Paul Gordon argues that Arabella’s quixotism “protects her from being accused of self-interest” (Gordon 512), allowing her to engage in dominating behavior without incurring charges of selfishness or coquetry. However, such a valuation of Arabella’s quixotism implies that quixotism is a good thing, and falls into the very tendency of contemporary criticism to exalt quixotism.

Without a doubt, Arabella needs to be cured of her annoying habits and self-righteousness. Lennox suggests the aggravating absurdity of Arabella’s habit of justifying her behavior to others with legalistic definitions: “‘I have not, in my Opinion, transgressed the Laws of Decency and Decorum, in what I have said’” (161). In so strenuously seeking to fulfill the criteria of romance, Arabella neglects the relationship itself, the raison d’etre of romance. For relationships require the Other, and the Other constitutes what we cannot articulate. As long as Arabella insists on confining romance to what she can articulate in static forms and signs, she remains incapable of experiencing it. When Arabella thinks that nothing can change her, that she is the dictating force of her relationship with Glanville, she is still not truly in a relationship with him. Arabella’s notions of romantic love must be “disappointed” (349) to cure her. Arabella must realize that neither she nor romance is a stable center. Her egocentric notion of romance must be
dethroned by no less than a revolution in which “Grief, Rage, Jealousy, and Despair made so cruel a War in her gentle Bosom,” 349) before she can enter into a true marriage of love with Glanville.

Arabella must learn to transition from a solitary, self-referential epistemology of thought to feelings, which she links with truth and sight:

Arabella, taking Notice of his pensive Posture, turn’d away her Head, lest by beholding him, she should relent, and treat him with less Severity than she had intended; making at the same Time a sign to him to be gone. (352)

Lennox associates sight with sentiment. Arabella cannot bear to look at Glanville, for the mere sight of him will soften her feelings. In this scene, feeling threatens to disrupt Arabella’s self-referential romantic delusions. If she would only look at Glanville, she would realize that he loves her.

Yet, sight is nonetheless fraught with epistemological difficulty. Lennox betrays ambivalence towards sight in the concluding incidents of The Female Quixote. Glanville mistakes his sister for Arabella. What follows is a brief pantomime from one of Arabella’s romance novels – the lover, the rival, the duel, and the dying man’s speech. However, we find certain significant details altered. For one, the lady turns out to not be the beloved at all, but the man’s sister. The romance form obscures the familiar. Arabella’s veil casts a distorting pall over the Glanvilles’ garden. Lennox draws our attention to the dangers of habitual thinking. The Glanvilles’ garden becomes a metaphor for a rigidified frame of mind. The accustomed sight of “his cousin, cover’d with her Veil as usual” in the garden (357) causes Glanville to assume that the veiled lady must be Arabella. The scene enacts Arabella’s epistemology. Forms and representations are taken for the things themselves. The veil is taken for the lady. Lennox
notably prefaces the scene by noting that “he thought he saw his Cousin” (357), an immediate red flag that suggests Glanville is about to commit an Arabellian folly.

Lennox suggests that reason fails because it cannot account for the unexpected. Rational empiricism looks for patterns and makes predictions based on those patterns. Ultimately, the heart is what allows one to cope with the unknown and novel.

His Chamber Window looking into the Garden, he thought he saw his Cousin, cover'd with her Veil as usual, hasten down one of the Walks; his Heart leap'd at this transient View, he threw up the Sash, and looking out, saw her very plainly strike into a cross Walk, and a Moment after saw Sir George, who came out of a little Summer-house, at her Feet. Transported with Rage at this Sight, he snatch'd up his Sword, flew down the Stairs into the Garden, and came running like a Madman up the Walk in which the Lovers were. The Lady observing him first, for Sir George's Back was towards him, shriek'd aloud, and not knowing what she did, ran towards the House, crying for Help, and came back as fast, yet not Time enough to prevent Mischief: For Mr. Glanville, actuated by an irresistible Fury, cry'd out to Sir George to defend himself, who had but just Time to draw his Sword and make an ineffectual Pass at Mr. Glanville, when he receiv'd his into his Body, and fell to the Ground.

Mr. Glanville losing his Resentment insensibly at the Sight of his Rival's Blood, threw down his Sword, and endeavour'd to support him; while the Lady, who had lost her Veil in her running, and to the great Astonishment of Mr. Glanville, prov'd to be his Sister, came up to them, with Tears and Exclamations, blaming herself for all that had happen'd. Mr. Glanville, with a Heart throbbing with Remorse for what he had done, gaz'd on his Sister with an accusing Look, as she hung over the wounded Baronet with streaming Eyes, sometimes wringing her Hands, then clasping them together in an Agony of Grief. (357)

The Glanvilles’ garden supplies a metaphor for psychological blindness. Arabella’s veil of romance causes trouble for everyone.

Like Swift, Lennox decries the rigidity of systems. The Female Quixote is an anti-romance and anti-escapist fiction in the sense that the reader is made conscious of the urgent necessity for the return to reality. Lennox connects the romantic imagination with rigidity rather than transcendence. Arabella is constantly trying to write her own romance. She attributes motives and affections to others – as, for instance, when she accuses Mr. Selvin of ravishing her. The
mere sight of him in her chamber causes her to faint with the expectation that he will attempt violence on her:

seeing Tinsel, who, confounded to the last Degree at the Cries of both the Lady and her Woman, had got into her Chamber he knew not how, she gave herself over for lost, and fell back in her Chair in a Swoon, or something she took for a Swoon, for she was persuaded it could happen no otherwise; since all Ladies in the same Circumstances are terrify’d into a fainting Fit, and seldom recover till they are conveniently carried away; and when they awake, find themselves many Miles off in the Power of their Ravisher. (300)

Mr. Selvin is left trying to deny that anything happened. This is perhaps the best example of anti-narrative: the denial of an event. Notably, Lennox describes Arabella as being “persuaded it could happen no otherwise” (300). For Lennox, romance denies possibility. Romance repeatedly enacts the fall of man, sin, and fails to achieve that transcendent liberation from the old sinner’s narrative. Imagination offers not freedom, but captivity to one’s mind.

In *The Age of Reasons*, Motooka argues that

Focusing on the obstacles to a proper understanding of real virtue – its mistaken nature and its changing names – the Countess counsels Arabella to think skeptically about the relation between reality and representation…The Countess’ nominalist, unsentimental arguments cannot say the essentialist, absolutist Arabella. Abruptly, the Countess disappears from the narrative, and the task of curing Arabella falls to the sentimental, Johnsonian clergyman. (Motooka 138)

Although I agree with Motooka that there is significance in the Countess’s failure to cure Arabella, I argue that this failure proceeds not as much from the incompatibility of certain epistemologies as from the fact that she fails to recognize the inadequacy of arguments at all. In order to return to common life, in which virtuous living requires both Arabella’s “Romantic generosity” and Glanville’s undeluded understanding, Arabella must experience for herself the moral consequences of her previous delusions. In other words, Lennox suggests that Arabella’s quixotism can only be cured through repentance – Arabella must recognize her inability to adhere to romance forms when her feelings betray her, demonstrating the impossibility of complete mastery, even over oneself. It is not simply that Arabella’s understanding is compatible
with the Doctor’s by their shared sentimentalism, as Motooka argues. Lennox suggests that sentiment paves the way to moral understanding.

Lennox envisions the dissolution of structures as the condition that makes possible the dissolution of differences. No individual distinction is so insurmountable as to be irreconcilable with society. No matter how ingenious the argument, the instability of language ensures that those tenets will break down. Hence, the Doctor remarks that “It is of little Importance…to decide whether in the real or fictitious Life, most Wickedness is to be found,” 380). Reasoning is beside the point – it is always off-center.

The greatest proof of this is in the way Sir George’s schemes are thwarted. However great we might fancy our command of certain conventions to be, the structural instability of language ensures that no one person has mastery over another through language. The fluidity of distinctions opens up new semantic possibilities that extend beyond the author’s original intentions. Despite Sir George’s mastery of the romance forms, he ultimately miscalculates. In a classic instance of how text can take on a life of its own, apart from the intentions of the author (“he was the Author of their present Mis-understanding; and that he had impos’d some new Fallacy upon Arabella, in order to promote a Quarrel between them,” 354), Sir George’s stratagems and plotting almost lead to his death and Arabella’s.

In both instances of Sir George’s attempts to deceive Arabella, Sir George miscalculates Arabella’s response terribly. In foisting upon Arabella the false tale of Glanville’s amorous treachery through the equally fictitious figure of the Princess of Gaul, Sir George hopes to divest Arabella of her affections for his rival Glanville. However, he greatly misjudges how Arabella will react.
Sir George remains locked in his own fantasy of desire, which prevents him from correctly predicting Arabella’s reactions. He thinks Arabella will simply see the light and switch affections after finding Glanville to be false. Instead, Arabella is thrown into paroxysms of grief and nearly drowns after mistaking some horsemen for ravishers. Sir George also fails to take the violence of the Glanvilles’ affections into account. He underestimates the force of Charlotte Glanville’s desires, which are so great that she resorts to disguising herself in Arabella’s veil to contrive a meeting with him, foiling his plans to beguile Arabella. Glanville is “actuated by an irresistible Fury” (357) that leads him to run his sword through Sir George when he thinks he sees his rival about to seduce Arabella in his very garden. Sir George is forever scheming, but never fully understanding – or perhaps his understanding is too full. That is, he has mastered the forms but does not have their sentiment. He has head-knowledge, but not heart.

By contrast, the “powerful male moralist” (Spacks 535) is also the definitive sentimentalist, as embodied in the figure of the Doctor. He “rebukes her [Arabella] for her indulgence of her imagination, and implicitly, of her sexual fantasies” (Spacks 535). Spacks notes that in the ending, “Arabella, blushing, relinquishes her faith in her own significance,” making “Arabella’s successful repression of desire, her great achievement” (Spacks 538). However, Spacks overlooks the fact that Arabella’s conversion involves her realization (emotional, and eventually nuptial) of her desire for Glanville. It is not simply the case that “The claims of fiction and passion yield to those of truth and rationality” (Spacks 535). The Female Quixote shares many of the features of romance novels, and the valuations do not always favor “truth and rationality” above “fiction and passion” (535). The marriage between Glanville and Arabella is a romantic one in which both parties fall madly in love with each other. Glanville’s long-suffering passion for Arabella matches her extraordinary beauty and “generosity” in
romanticism. We cringe and become exasperated by Arabella’s delusions, not primarily because she frustrates her desires, but because she frustrates our desires for a sensible heroine that conforms to our ideals and a comfortable reading experience. Arabella violates not only the social contract with Glanville, but that with the reader as well.

Thus, The Female Quixote does not linearly or systematically deny romantic desire in favor of reason. Rather, romance and reason can coexist, as in Arabella and Glanville’s conveniently romantic marriage. Lennox affirms relationships rather than terms or systems. Both Arabella and Charlotte Glanville are condemned for their socially damaging rigidity of thought. Lennox thus exposes the failings of a rigidly quixotic system and a system based on social propriety or reasonable behavior. It takes no less than a near-death experience and quasi-religious conversion to correct Arabella’s ways.

The Doctor’s conversation is meant to be a culminating discourse that encapsulates the moral distinctions between fiction and truth. In his attempt to cure Arabella of her delusional faith in the principles that govern romance novels, the Doctor attempts to establish a value hierarchy of oppositions that privileges truth over fiction. “Yet judging of them [romance novel characters] as Christians, we shall find them impious and base, and directly opposite to our present Notions of moral and relative Duties” (329).

However, the Doctor overlooks the fact that the most laudable inhabitants of his world are virtuous precisely because of their romantic qualities. In Arabella, the structures of fiction and truth lose their clarity of hierarchical distinctions. Her majestic beauty, of fictional, romantic proportions, is figured favorably. Arabella is more like a romance novel heroine than a real person, whom Lennox portrays as being all the more admirable for the fictional excess of her good points. Extraordinary virtue is thus associated with the emblematic figure of fiction.
(Arabella) rather than reality (Miss Glanville). By contrast, Lennox portrays Miss Glanville's looks as plausibly pretty, but attached to a personality of correspondingly plausible pettiness. The most realistic or believable characters in *The Female Quixote* are often least laudable. Lennox makes clear that Miss Glanville, with all her realistic flaws, is inferior to Arabella on all accounts.

The Doctor attempts to delineate how fiction is subordinate to truth. He heaps scorn on “senseless Fictions; which at once vitiate the Mind, and pervert the Understanding; and which if they are at any Time read with Safety, owe their Innocence only to their Absurdity” (374). The resulting perplexity of structural interactions is suggested in the way that the Doctor substitutes several central terms in speaking of the romance novel: “falsehood” (378), “fiction” (377), and “physical and philosophical absurdities” (378). Reality is alternately figured as “truth” (377), “moral and domestic wisdom” (377), the “world,” (378), “experience” (378), “example” (380), and “reason and piety” (380). In this litany of terms, certain tensions are suggested, the most significant one being that between “Example” (380) and exemplary moral truth as dictated by “reason and piety” (380). We find that a narrative may be true in more than one way, indicating its defiance of any one self-sufficient definition. A narrative may be true to the example of the typical actions of the world, or it may be true to the exemplary ideals determined by “reason and piety” (380). Truth is determined by comparison, and therefore truth is structural. Truth may be the ruler by which we judge merit, but the ruler itself is a product of arbitrary decree, the measuring notches themselves measured relative to their positions to each other.

Upon closer examination, truth as the organizing principle becomes difficult to define. We find that we do not have a very good grasp at all of truth. The former dialectic definition of truth as reality, the opposite of falsehood, breaks down when we are told by the Doctor that not
all fictions are untruthful: “Truth is not always injured by Fiction” (377). Significantly, he does not make a positive assertion about what truth constitutes. He can only situate truth in negative relation to other terms of his discourse (by stating what truth is not), or with adjectives that locate it relative to other structures (Christian “piety,” 377; “present Notions of moral and relative Duties,” 329). Upon closer examination, we find truth difficult to distinguish from the “Perfection of Fiction” (378).

Indeed, the Doctor argues that the best fiction may be recognized by “its Resemblance to Truth” (378). Good fictions, we are told,

convey the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel, and, to use the Words of the greatest Genius in the present Age, ‘Has taught the Passions to move at the Command of Virtue.’ The Fables of Aesop, though never I suppose believed, yet have been long considered as Lectures of moral and domestic Wisdom. (377)

Thus, truth, as the organizing principle of reality, is indeed “within the structure and outside it” (Derrida 1). Truth can be found within the structure of history, but also lies in its purest moral forms in “the pleasing Dress of a Novel” (377).

According to the Doctor, the romance novel “disfigures the whole Appearance of the World” (378). However, we find that the world itself is disfigured, and that the Doctor’s assertions do not hold up as sustainable distinctions. When we consider the examples of Arabella and Miss Glanville, we find the latter’s personality to be warped by her realism. It is reality which mars and intrudes upon the “Perfection of Fiction” (378). There is no true heroism in society, only “Mock-Heroicks” (335) and the insipid manners of “good breeding” that pass for good morals. Likewise, there is no true beauty in the reality that Lennox depicts in Charlotte Glanville, only the artificial result of hours of primping and dressing in front of the mirror. The Doctor’s assertion that the romance novel “disfigures the whole Appearance of the World” (378)
reveals the uncertainty of truth. We can speak of what seems or appears in terms of its relationship to the observer (perspective), but not directly of what is (facts).

When Arabella observes that reality does not exemplify moral truth, the Doctor cannot and does not attempt to reconcile these divergent structural definitions of truth. He replies that “It is of little Importance…to decide whether in the real or fictitious Life, most Wickedness is to be found. Books ought to supply an Antidote to Example” (380). The Doctor adopts the language of relativity and opposition in his definition of good books as the “Antidote to example” (380). His discourse thus enacts his ethic of interdependency.

In his pronouncement that “Books ought to supply an Antidote to Example” (380), the Doctor’s original valuation of realism above falsehood threatens to collapse. In this dialectic definition of good fiction, the Doctor suggests that books ought not to be representations of real life, but to depict ideals. By extension of this view, we must conclude that virtuous ideals and real life are mutually exclusive, and that virtuous ideals have more in common with fiction than reality. Moral truth finds perfect expression in fiction rather than reality. In this way, the original hierarchical valuations of truth above fiction begin to break down as the boundary between the ideal and the imaginary begins to blur.

Regardless of authorial intention (for instance, Lennox’s attempts to establish a value hierarchy that subordinates fiction to truth), the text proliferates a perplexing array of distinctions; such is the sandy foundation upon which the author’s structures are built. Structurality draws our attention to language as an inherently fallible instrument of differentiation. One might well observe that “nothing is more different from a human Being, than Heroes or Heroines” (380) as the Doctor does, but it is not very long before one recognizes that “the Difference is not in Favour of the present World” (380).
Yet, Lennox suggests that short-lived as these structures are, their fleeting existence simply reflects the temporality of our own mortal bodies, and are useful for as long as they last. Structures, whether textual or fleshly, remain useful insofar as they permit us to develop relationships, to live, and to love. For Lennox, it is unnecessary to assign absolute, enduring values. Lennox is not interested in determining with nanometric precision the measure of moral truth in one person or domain compared with another. Social and relative values are much more important – human relationships take precedence above philosophical questions of meaning. The Doctor argues that

> It is impossible to read these Tales without lessening part of that Humility, which by preserving in us a Sense of our Alliance with all human nature, keeps us awake to Tenderness and Sympathy, or without impairing that Compassion which is implanted in us as an incentive to Acts of Kindness. (381)

The limited and interdependent nature of structure serves to remind us of our own social-moral obligations as mortal and insufficient beings indebted to the Christian God. The Doctor welcomes the subversion of authorial intent in freeplay as an intervention against the perils of hubris. The impossibility of inhabiting a structure separate from all other structures (as when Arabella attempts to assert the supremacy of the romance novel) fosters “Humility” (381).

The Doctor has no desire to establish permanent distinctions. Instead, he seeks to order the world through a taxonomy founded upon marriages of antitheses (for instance, in his classification of good fiction as an “Antidote to Example,” 380). His mission to help Arabella recover her “Alliance with all human nature” (381) is facilitated by the unsustainability of distinctions. Only when Arabella becomes cured of her distinctive beliefs can she enter into her union with Glanville. Marriage celebrates the dissolution of self-as-distinction. By tracing the freeplay of Derridean structure, we may thus discern in *The Female Quixote* a parable about language and marriage.
Lennox locates the transcendental in the heart, in what cannot be named or explained, where the relationships between terms rather than the terms themselves become privileged. She thus affirms the ordinary (i.e., lacking distinction) as extraordinary, transcending the ordinary distinctions of written language. In accepting that there is no need for differentiation and embracing the ordinary, we free ourselves to transcend the realm of ordinary reality. Refusing to become tied to “romantic forms” frees us to enter into the truest kind of union, without alienating differences that would nurture distrust or suspicion. Thus, Lennox notes:

Sir George, entangled in his own Artifices, saw himself under a Necessity of confirming the Promises he had made to Miss Glanville during his Fit of Penitence, and was accordingly married to that young Lady, at the same Time that Mr. Glanville and Arabella were united.

We chuse, Reader, to express this Circumstance, though the same, in different Words, as well to avoid Repetition, as to intimate that the first mentioned Pair were indeed only married in the common Acceptation of the Word; that is, they were privileged to join Fortunes, Equipages, Titles, and Expence; while Mr. Glanville and Arabella were united, as well in these, as in every Virtue and laudable Affection of the Mind. (383)

As long as we insist on definitions and conformity with the “Laws of Decency and Decorum,” we remain, like Miss Glanville, restrained to an existence of the most quotidian order, one of mere legal agreement. Only when Arabella relinquishes her insistence upon extraordinary romance can she truly enter into a loving union with Glanville that transcends ordinary notions of marriage. Lennox thus suggests that human ideals and notions of propriety are legalistic. As long as we are bound to terms and definitions, we become captive to self-referential epistemologies like that of Arabella.

Analyses of the 18th century have tended to emphasize the Enlightenment’s notion of the rational, logical mind as a patriarchal instrument of domination. However, Lennox, Swift, and Hume all suggest that such a formulation is reductive and neglects the importance of sentimentality and the emoting body in the governance of society. Lennox portrays sentiment as
the underpinning of morality. Without emotions, Arabella would have had no way of breaking out of her self-reinforcing system of quixotic delusions. Emotion alone can fracture the illusions and rationalizations of the imaginative mind. Lennox situates social and moral truth in the feelings of the heart rather than any disingenuous conclusion drawn by the thinking and rationalizing mind. Arguments become yet another structure of wish fulfillment in *The Female Quixote*. Glanville’s interest in arguments only extends as far as their usefulness in helping him to fulfill his desire for Arabella. This is not to say that Lennox herself does not believe in reality or moral values, but that she believes that moral values are best calibrated to relationships rather than rigid and excessively abstracted systems.

Spacks observes that “fiction, which, dressed by desire, arouses feeling and threatens rationality” (Spacks 541). She argues that “desire involves true feelings” (541). However, I argue that feelings and rationality (in the sense of truth or reason) need not be opposed. In *The Female Quixote*, feelings transform Arabella and set her on the path to recovery. Lennox depicts Arabella’s repentance as the transformation of egocentric desire into reciprocal love, personal fantasy into mutual relationship. Spacks writes that “wishes…possess their own truth” (Spacks 541). However, Arabella’s behavior suggests much to the contrary. Desire speaks in the monologues and commands of Arabella’s beloved romance novels, turning a shared feeling into a demanding egocentric fantasy. Lennox informs us that Arabella is “kept in a continual Anxiety by a Vicissitude of Hopes, Fears, Wishes, and Disappointments” (8). Romance novels, as structures of wish fulfillment, inscribe love into a set of stipulations (the romance novel heroine adopts at face value the saying “your wish is my command”). Love is always conditional in Arabella’s romance novels.
For a quixote like Arabella, jealousy is the awakening of the suspicion that one’s desires are not fulfilled. Hence, Arabella must experience jealousy in order to be disabused of her notion that desire or “love was the ruling principle of the world” (7). Jealousy is the result of direct competition between paradigms perpetuated by the self and those by society, of desire as individual fantasy and love as a shared social reality. Sentiment breaks her cognitive illusions. Lennox portrays the thinking mind as an instrument of rationalization that in Arabella only serves to sustain delusions through over-analysis. Sentiment alone can fracture the illusion and lead to moral understanding and alignment. In this sense, Lennox confirms the trope that solitude leads to madness. Philosophy cannot save Arabella; only feelings can. Only belief in Glanville’s betrayal can shock Arabella into her senses. To understand the rupture between romance forms and experience, or language and meaning, Arabella must experience firsthand the deconstruction of romance novel forms. The Doctor’s task ultimately consists of converting Arabella, displacing her romance language and impious, egotistic worldview. Essentially, Arabella’s greatest fault is hubris. Her claim to wielding the moral imperative verges on transgression into the domain of the Christian God. She ventures to test and pronounce judgment on everybody.

Arabella’s repentance is indicated by her newly acquired insight into herself, proof of her realization of her vulnerability in being subject to influence from others:

It is not necessary, Sir, interrupted Arabella, that you strengthen by any new Proof a Position which when calmly considered cannot be denied; my Heart yields to the Force of Truth, and I now wonder how the Blaze of Enthusiastic Bravery, could hinder me from remarking with Abhorrence the Crime of deliberate unnecessary Bloodshed.

I begin to perceive that I have hitherto at least trifled away my Time, and fear that I have already made some Approaches to the Crime of encouraging Violence and Revenge. I hope, Madam, said the good Man with Horror in his Looks, that no Life was ever lost by your Incitement. Arabella seeing him thus moved, burst into Tears, and could not immediately answer. Is it possible, cried the Doctor, that such Gentleness and Elegance should be stained with Blood? Be not too hasty in your Censure, said Arabella, recovering herself, I tremble indeed to think how nearly I have approached the Brink of Murder, when I thought myself
only consulting my own Glory; but whatever I suffer, I will never more demand or instigate Vengeance, nor consider my Punctilios as important enough to be balanced against Life. (381)

Emotions prevent Arabella from answering “immediately” (381), allowing her to engage in dialogue. Rather than dominating the conversation as she previously would have done, Arabella allows the Doctor to speak and correct her. Arabella’s emotional vulnerability translates into linguistic and moral redemption. Arabella’s language also indicates her new insight into her position. The interposition of “I” visually indicates Arabella’s location on the page and demonstrates the de-centeredness of the self (“I” is not at the center of the page, but scattered throughout, and only its relation to other words gives it meaning). Speaking in the first person dramatizes the minimization of the person; whereas the third person expands the self (in Arabella’s instance, from the monosyllabic “I” to the full four syllables of her name), the first person recognizes “I” to be a limited cipher, a subject rather than object of the world’s attention.

The Doctor’s “miracle” ascribes agency to supertextual and therefore superhuman forces:

The Doctor confirmed her in her new Resolutions, and thinking Solitude was necessary to compose her Spirits after the Fatigue of so long a Conversation, he retired to acquaint Mr. Glanville with his Success, who in the Transport of his Joy was almost ready to throw himself at his Feet, to thank him for the Miracle, as he called it, that he had performed. (382)

Arabella gains new life. Here, the “success” of the conversion is conflated with that of her physical recovery. “Resolution” nicely encapsulates this conjunction of scientific analysis and spiritual epiphany. Resolution is the untying or separation of something into its original components, the break-up or undoing of a structure that is simultaneous with the revelation of a new one (OED). It is also the loosening of something into a relaxed state. In this light, “resolution” suits Arabella’s circumstance exactly, suggesting how the deconstruction of her romance novel values allows her to loose herself from “strict” adherence to romance forms.
The self is recreated and therefore decentralized in the syntax: “The Doctor confirmed her in her new Resolutions” (382). The self becomes the grammatical object. Here, strength of will derives from association, as suggested in the verb “confirmed” (“con” – “together,” firmare – “to strengthen, make fast,” OED). In other words, the dissolution of distinctions results in a new, stronger self, or distinctiveness from togetherness. Composition of the self requires the association or putting-together of several elements; identity is drawn from coherence rather than difference. To join is to create. By joining words, the Doctor succeeds in helping Arabella to rejoin the world in her understanding, a feat that Glanville hails to be no less than a “miracle” (382).

Arabella’s language undergoes reformation, from monologue to dialogue. Her language is no longer beholden to the tyranny of the sign. Arabella reaches a more perfect understanding, in which words, dumb signs, and silences meld in conjugal communication. When Arabella apologizes to Glanville she uses a blend of strategies, no longer relying on long monologues and signs. Arabella learns to speak and participate in the language of relationships. Rather than attempting to define and justify her behavior according to a set of criteria, she acknowledges the Other’s influence:

[Arabella], turning to Mr. Glanville, whom she beheld with a Look of mingled Tenderness and Modesty, To give you myself, with all my remaining Imperfections, is making you but a poor Present in return for the Obligations your generous Affection has laid me under to you; yet since I am so happy as to be desired for a Partner for Life by a Man of your Sense and Honour, I will endeavour to make myself as worthy as I am able of such a favourable Distinction.

Mr. Glanville kissed the Hand she gave him with an emphatic Silence, while Sir Charles, in the most obliging Manner imaginable, thanked her for the Honour she conferred both on himself and Son by this Alliance. (383)

Glanville becomes a Christ-like figure of overwhelming, tolerant love. Arabella speaks the language of reciprocity (“making you but a poor Present in return for the Obligations your generous Affection has laid me under to you”) rather than command. Her speech now melds emotion with
understanding: “I am so happy as to be desired” (383). Lennox suggests how ordinary “generous Affection” is so much the more desirable than romance. Whereas ordinary affection is reciprocal, romance is egocentric in its relationally damaging insistence on the exaltation of heroism.

The Doctor bases his arguments against romance novels partly on the modern consciousness of progress. He argues the present to be a more civilized state, one tamed of unpredictability. In service of his later assertion that “nothing is more different from a human Being, than Heroes or Heroines” (380), he observes:

the Order of the World is so established, that all human Affairs proceed in a regular Method, and very little Opportunity is left for Sallies or Hazards, for Assault or Rescue; but the Brave and the Coward, the Sprightly and the Dull, suffer themselves to be carried alike down the Stream of Custom. (379)

Here as in Hume, the “Stream of Custom” (379), the forces of history and society, must overrule individual desire. The natural order of common life obviates the need and “Opportunity” for chivalric protection. The “Brave and the Coward” behave alike, according to the demands of polite “Custom.” The Doctor aims to integrate the heroine Arabella into society by abolishing the systems that have led to her fantastical world. “Heroes or Heroines” imply genre, a world instituted on the basis of individualistic systems. Therefore the Doctor favors the “human Being” over “Heroes or Heroines” as the preferred term. The non-exclusivity of the label “human Being” makes it amenable to socialization. The Doctor seeks not to abolish all structures, but only egocentric, highly individualistic structures that resist socialization and disrupt human relationships.

The Doctor denies aspiring heroes and heroines their fantasies of “Love” (381) as the organizing principle. The self-centered universe sows the seeds of its own deconstruction because self-identity depends on and is destabilized by its social context. By pluralizing “Heroes or Heroines,” the Doctor implies the contradictoriness of multiple egocentric narratives. When
“Love” or desire is the “ruling principle of the world,” one must question whose desire it is that should govern everyone. Human society would not function were everyone to consider themselves heroes and heroines deserving of “Worship” (380). Indeed, Sir George’s efforts to persuade Arabella to adore him end in disaster.

In *The Female Quixote*, proof of experience lies in feelings rather than intellectual speculations or propositions. Lennox does not favor thought over sentiment. She neither partakes in nor desires objectivity, for objectivity is irrelevant to her desire for social harmony. Motooka observes that “There is a method to Arabella’s madness, and that method looks strikingly similar to the empiricist epistemology employed by her ‘rational’ companions” (Motooka 260). Lennox suggests that quixotism and empiricism are just as likely to lead one astray, being rationalizing forms of thought, such that one mode of thinking does not necessarily bring us any closer to reason than the other. Arabella’s anxiety and paranoia, consequences of possessing an over-analytical mind, are ultimately cured not by diagnostic systems or even philosophy, but sentiment.
Touched in the Head and Heart: Conclusion

At the end of Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, Arabella undergoes a conversion from heroic alienation to the joys of common life, as signified by her marriage. The former, uncritical belief in the self is abandoned. She no longer claims to be an authorial arbiter of reality, but recognizes the heroic self to be an ultimately unsustainable fictional construct. Sentiment is confirmed as the basis for common life and the way out of self-delusion. In this way, Lennox’s novel continues the reevaluation of the crisis of mind which was taken up in Swift and Hume.

This study has suggested the ways in which Swift, Hume, and Lennox model the tensions between madness and common life. Certainly, for these writers as well as popular opinion in the eighteenth century, madness was seen as a state of social-moral alienation, the mind in disorder. In the Age of Reason, any disruption of the rational order of the mind was to be dreaded intensely. Swift even takes that one step further, accepting that there is no reliable distinction between madness and reason. In *Some Thoughts on Free-Thinking*, Swift writes,

Discouraging one day with a prelate of the kingdom of Ireland, who is a person of excellent wit and learning, he offered a notion applicable to the subject, we were then upon, which I took to be altogether new and right. He said, that the difference betwixt a mad-man and one in his wits, in what related to speech, consisted in this: That the former spoke out whatever came into his mind, and just in the confused manner as his imagination presented the ideas. The latter only expressed such thoughts, as his judgment directed him to chuse, leaving the rest to die away in his memory. And if the wisest man would at any time utter his thoughts, in the crude indigested manner, as they come into his head, he would be looked upon as raving mad. And indeed, when we consider our thoughts, as they are the seeds of words and actions, we cannot but agree, that they ought to be kept under the strictest regulation. And that in the great multiplicity of ideas, which one’s mind is apt to form, there is nothing more difficult than to select those, which are most proper for the conduct of life.

Madness here is a release of the tendencies that we usually suppress. For Swift, madness was a satirical device and confirmation of the latent irrationality that lurks in all of us. The mind is always disordered, such that madness consists of the uncensored revelation of that disorder. In
his darker moments, Swift suggests that at best, one can only hope to hide one’s madness, perhaps by mixing with people of a similar proclivity. In Swift’s “Digression Concerning Madness,” this madness takes the form of a relentlessly diagnostic, theorizing impulse that threatens the integrity of common language. Madness is figured as an assault on common life, culminating in the satirical assertion of an impracticable thesis. The empire of reason, says Swift, will always bear evidence of deficiencies in its ruler.

Swift and Hume both find themselves in crisis as they reflect on the inadequacy of human reason. However, Swift never quite frees himself from his fretful preoccupation with our cognitive failings and even seems to find them insurmountable. By contrast, in his Treatise Hume argues that our flawed reason is no barrier to rational inquiry or common life. For Hume, sentiment paves the way from madness to the sanity of common life. Though our flawed reason prevents us from directly accessing an objective reality, we nonetheless have entry to a realm of shared experience through the passions. By the principle of sympathy, we respond to and understand each other’s sentiments. Hume thus emphasizes sanity and philosophy as a constructive process of the passions in conjunction with the imagination and reason.

Lennox shares Hume’s belief in the capacity of sentiment to compensate for the failings of human reason. Lennox’s Female Quixote shows how sentiment can pierce even the most severe delusion. The “Order of the World” consists in this: the individual is to be subsumed by the “Stream of Custom” (Lennox 379), a concept which we have previously encountered in Swift and Hume. Neither common life nor custom is to be confused with the authoritarian order of an ambitious conqueror. Rather, Swift, Lennox, and Hume extol the natural order of common life and routine. Sane minds recognize the sanctity of common life above any individual ambition or impulse.
The traditional view held that reason was the rightful ruler of the mind. To allow either the passions or imagination to hold sway over the mind was to succumb to madness. However, what was considered madness in the eighteenth century would come to be venerated by the Romantics as the brilliant, transcendent visions of the individual. In their celebration of the passions and involuntary motions of the mind, the Romantics seemed to take at face value Hume’s assertion that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (2.3.3, 266). Wordsworth writes in his “Preface” to the second edition (1800) of *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” In the age to come, no longer would the influence of the passions or imagination be dreaded. The departure from common life was to be exalted as a moment of sublime genius.

Yet, Hume and many of his contemporaries would say that these spontaneous outpourings are ultimately unsustainable. The heroic self cannot endure apart from common life indefinitely. Not only that, but these visions can only be fulfilled at horrific expense to common life. This truth in Hume’s wisdom is pointedly observed by the critic F. L. Lucas: “Had men taken him [Hume] to heart, there would have been no French Terror, no Paris Commune, no Marxism and no Nazism, no World Wars” (78). We could do much worse than to take a leaf out of Hume’s book.

Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*: Project Gutenburg, 1908.


