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The Making of the Subject of the Leviathan

By

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Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Wintroub, Chair

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Abstract

The Making of the Subject of the Leviathan

by

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The thesis of this dissertation is that modern society makes individuals into conformists and therefore into suitable subjects for social control and undemocratic rule.

This thesis may seem counterintuitive at first. What characterizes modernity, one could say, is precisely that it *releases* individual members of society from existing structures of incorporation. And this is true. What is also true, however, is that individuation and conformism are not incompatible. Indeed, it is the history of their compatibility that is demonstrated in the present work.

This is demonstrated on the example of England. Politically, England is the birthplace of constitutionalism and parliamentarism; economically, of the industrial revolution and capitalism; socially, of middle-class consumerism; intellectually, of liberalism. England—especially the England of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—is therefore the most suitable point of entry for the analysis of modern society, and of the origins of contemporary global society.

More precisely, the focus is on the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and his work *Leviathan*. Though Hobbes's own views are discussed at length, the presence of Hobbes here looms larger in a symbolic way. Namely, to the extent to which he has stood for authoritarianism, Hobbes has not been taken as a progenitor of English and global modernity, especially not of political modernity, but as its opponent. Already loudly rejected by his own contemporaries, Hobbes remained notorious—a practically unspeakable name—for generations after his death, and the entire subsequent development of political practice and theory in England (and Scotland later on) could be seen as a frenzied reaction to his work. And, yet, the argument here is that Hobbes's political testament was nevertheless in essence quietly realized.

Generally speaking, this testament has to do with the way society is held together. What keeps a society together according to Hobbes is an omnipotent and capricious force hovering over and above all individual members of society, a force external to them and keeping them all in check. To claim that this force ceased to exist in England in the centuries after Hobbes would be foolish, even for Hobbes's staunchest critics. More importantly, however, what marked the period after Hobbes is that the integrity of English society became just as dependent on the way its individual members came fully to embody this external force through their language, their tastes, manners, emotions, and their entire demeanor and attitude—the so-called English mentality. In other words, the Leviathan came to reside within and not outside the individual. The Leviathan was produced (or, more correctly, reproduced) in the course of the production of the individual.

The task of this dissertation is therefore twofold. First, it shows that Hobbes was indeed aware of this subjective element in his conception of the Leviathan. He recognized that an ordered and peaceful society must rely both on the force of the sovereign as well as on the particular make-up of the individual. He was very much concerned with the kind of individual that would be most suitable for the purposes he assigned to the state. Second, it shows the actual ways in which Englishmen did change along the lines of Hobbes's thinking between the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. To this end, close analysis has been made of the changes that took place in the various spheres of human intellectual activity at the time, especially in literature, philosophy, science, and pulpit oratory, as well as in built environment, arts and crafts, and clothing. It is shown that all these spheres were strongly affected by a particular ideology of individual self-effacement. Analysis has also been made of the changes in manners and speech, and in the interaction between individuals, especially between men and women, parents and children, both verbal and physical. What they all have in common is an increased tendency to uniformity, a desire to be agreeable and pleasant, to be "sociable." Anything that could upset the order of things, arouse strong feelings, or offend, or even draw attention, is suspicious. Forms of individuality are carefully prescribed and can be expressed in countless ways as long as they fit the given framework. In brief, an underlying conservatism came to dominate 18<sup>th</sup> century England in ways that were extra-political, but which would continue to make a profound impact on the political reality of the state.

To Theodore G. Schmidt, Jr.  
and  
In memory of Elizabeth Ellis Schmidt  
With immense affection and gratitude

The task at hand is to answer the following question: Who is the subject of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*?

To pose the question of the subject as opposed to the sovereign may be odd from the standpoint of a tradition which seems enthralled with those who govern, with those, who are, at least ostensibly, in power. In Plato we begin with the philosopher king, in Machiavelli with the prince, in Hobbes with the sovereign. Later the focus is on the enlightened legislator, the state, government, the party, etc. Even so-called democratic theory has rarely concerned itself with the *demos*, and has instead preferred the loftier discussions of the rule of law, of constitutions, regulations, and other norms. In each case, the individual is either ignored or treated derivatively. As any student of Hobbes very well knows, the fascination has always been, and remains, with the figure of the sovereign ("the head of the Leviathan"), and it is this figure that has exerted the greatest influence and retained the greatest mystique.

And yet, to know the nature of the sovereign, we ought to know the nature of his subject and the way the subject has come to be. The two seem to compose an inseparable pair. What is more, when Hobbes wrote his *Leviathan*, there was no Leviathan properly speaking. Hobbes was only making a case for one. It was a piece of propaganda, though carefully couched in terms of universal truths. What did exist was the individual who, in Hobbes's view, required most urgently a sovereign of the sort he had described. The aim of Hobbes was to protect society from ever again falling apart, and the Leviathan was only his potential solution; the source of the problem, on the other hand, namely the men needing a Leviathan, was presumably already there. So who was this man? More precisely, what sort of subject did this man need to become, in Hobbes's view, in order to be a proper subject to the Leviathan?

This question is important not only because of Hobbes. As one of the founders of modern political theory, and one of the early theorists who is still deemed to be modern, perhaps more so than ever before, Hobbes figures prominently in our understanding of the political condition itself. In so far as Hobbes is our foundation, in so far as he is still modern, his subject must be present with us to the extent that his Leviathan is, and merely to say that this subject is a member of the nascent bourgeoisie, an egotist and a possessive individualist, is no longer sufficient. The goal is not so much to illuminate Hobbes, as it is to illuminate the nature of the Hobbesian subject, of the person who subjects. We must therefore enter our subject quite carefully and patiently, not in order to assail, but to unravel and to unveil.

It should not be necessary to emphasize that this work is guided by the understanding that every theoretical problem in the social sciences is always at the same time a historical one. Moreover, that only within, and to the extent of, our understanding of its history, is it a problem in the first place.

It is also guided by the conviction, well stated by Max Weber, that changes in history are not all mere "matters of degree," and that a genuinely critical reflection "will focus on the

*changes* that emerge in spite of all parallels, and will use the similarities of two societies only to highlight their *distinctiveness*.”<sup>1</sup>

## I

In the eighteenth century, England was considered by contemporaries to be a land of freedom and equality, a land of habeas corpus and of trial by jury, of the freedom of opinion, speech, and press, of assembly and petition, a land of religious toleration. It was, moreover, a land which had replaced serfdom with a growing middle class and which had granted both political and social dignity to occupations in trade. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the member of the middle class had already become the subject of praise even in the poetry of England. We can observe it in Philips (*Cyder*, 1708), in Tickell (*The Prospect of Peace*, 1712), in Pope (*Windsor Forrester*, 1713), in Thomson (*The Seasons*, 1726), in Dyer (*The Fleece*, 1757); but also in the drama of Steele (*The Conscious Lovers*, 1722) or Gay (*Polly*, 1729; *The Distress'd Wife*, 1734), and in the novels of Defoe (*Roxana*, 1724) or Richardson (*Clarissa*, 1748). The most influential of these works was George Lillo's play *The London Merchant* (1731) where we are told, among other things, that “those countries where trade is promoted and encouraged do not make discoveries to destroy but to improve mankind.”<sup>2</sup> Words such as these were previously unheard of, in England or on the Continent, and meant much more than might seem to us at first blush. Translated later by Diderot and praised even by Rousseau (that enemy of all theater!), *The London Merchant* was the first to treat bourgeois man not as matter for realistic satirical comedy, but as subject of opinions, values, and even of tragic emotions previously reserved only for royals.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this change becomes apparent when we recall that just several decades earlier, during the reign of Charles and James in the second half of the seventeenth century, “Republicans, Puritans, most ‘citizens,’ and all godly people stayed away” from theaters.<sup>4</sup> Theaters, we are told, used to be “mansions of dissolute licentiousness,” “a magnet for the worst elements in fashionable society.”<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, “the great middle class” at the time “neither frequented the theater nor was represented upon the stage, except, perhaps, as an object of ridicule.”<sup>6</sup> Ravenscroft's *The Citizen Turn'd Gentleman* (1672) or *The London Cuckolds* (1681) come readily to mind. “Even in the final decade of the century,” says John Loftis, “Congreve in *The Old Bachelor* (1693) and Farquhar in *The Constant Couple* (1699) pass social judgments on ‘citizens,’ undifferentiated as to wealth and status, not unlike those of Dryden and Wycherley a generation before.” He speaks of “the tradition of contempt for the citizens.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, tr. R. I. Frank, London, NLB, 1976, p. 341. Translation altered. See Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Tübingen, Verlag J. C. B. Mohr, 1924, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> See George Lillo, “The London Merchant,” in Michael R. Booth, ed., *Eighteenth Century Tragedy*, London, Oxford UP, 1965, Act II.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D'Alambert and Writings for the Theater*, trans. & ed. Allan Bloom, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Wilson, *The Court Wits of the Restoration*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1948, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006, vol. 2, p. 97; James Sutherland, *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century*, New York, Oxford UP, 1969, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. Krutch, *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration*, New York, Columbia UP, 1949, pp. 37-38.

<sup>7</sup> “The Social and Literary Context,” in *The Revels History of Drama in English*, ed. T. W. Craik, London, Methuen & Co Ltd, 1976, vol. 5, pp. 20-21.



In short, somewhere between, say, Dryden's *Albion and Albanius* (1685), which treated the common people plainly as a mob, and Rowe's *Tamerlane* (1701) and, especially, Addison's *Cato* (1713), which praised tolerance and the liberty of the individual, an entire world came to an end and the foundations of a new world were being laid. That literature would, in turn, become such a prominent measure of wider social changes was no accident, but a sign of how deeply the changes in question were cutting into the living tissue of social relations, and what fine treatment was required to bring them to full light. It is not without significance that the first intellectual exchanges between England and France, for example, exchanges that would create the environment in which the French Revolution would for the first time become thinkable, and even necessary, occurred in the realm of literature, among writers and literary critics, rather than between political theorists "proper." For only that which can bestow artificial life, with its own vivid reality and sense of time, to the existential situation of the individual, to all its pressures and uncertainties, ambitions and anxieties, sentiments and imagination, could give coherence to what otherwise must have seemed as isolated, even idiosyncratic, phenomena. Only that which is capable of registering even the slightest social wobble could make sense of—and communicate—changes in something so elusive as one's conception and experience of oneself. That is why literature, with its deep layers of significance, is particularly suited to our analysis. More than the works of Hobbes or Locke, it is the plays and poetry of England that could grasp the subtlety of the important changes that were by the turn of the eighteenth century becoming as much proper to man's inner life as they were to his dealings with others. What literature seemed to have registered this time around was, in fact, so dramatic that it would transform English literature itself, its codes and canons, as well as the social map of the land.

This refers, most immediately, to those great disputes in England—the early eighteenth-century culture wars—which were fought, among other things, at least on the surface of it, over the question of the essential element in a successful literary creation. Already in full sway by the end of the seventeenth century, these disputes involved the rebellious city of London on the one hand, which sought to define the essence of poetry in terms of "sense" (judgment, intellect, mind), and those grouped around the royal court on the other, who defended the older definition of poetry as essentially an expression of "wit" (fancy, imagination, or taste). The latter praised wit as "a capacity for wide-ranging speculation that soars above man's necessities and desires... a flame and agitation of soul that little minds and men of action cannot comprehend."<sup>8</sup> They deemed it "the purest element, and swiftest motion of the brain," "the essence of thoughts" that "encircles all things."<sup>9</sup> They saw in it genius—transcendent, inscrutable, unattainable by reason—as opposed to mere learning, a "grace beyond the reach of art,"<sup>10</sup> a "radiant spark of heavenly fire,"<sup>11</sup> the *furor poeticus* pure and simple. Like a "power divine," which could

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<sup>8</sup> John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, p. 233.

<sup>9</sup> John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe*, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt, London, Methuen & Co Ltd, 1965, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> D. Judson Milburn, *The Age of Wit, 1650-1750*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1966, p. 169.

be defined only negatively, wit was deemed the mysterious core of poetry.<sup>12</sup> The critics of poetry founded on wit, on the other hand, condemned it as unwarrantably elitist. They read in it nothing but verbal ingenuity, emptiness wrapped in extravagant language, in ingenious metaphors, puns and paradoxes, in virtuosic turns of phrase, in epigrams, and replete with alliterations, anagrams, and acrostics: “nothing but the froth and ferment of the soul, beclouding reason and sinking rational pursuits into the miasma of fantasy,” an art “which pleased by confounding truth and deceiving men.”<sup>13</sup> Florid, whimsical, and flamboyant, facetious and frivolous, smacking of airy sophistication and the desire to surprise and startle, in constant search of mystical resemblance, all “wit-writing” became suspect and was subjected to criticism as a likely enemy to all goodness and decency, let alone to true poetry.<sup>14</sup> Such writing was said to disperse rather than comprehend. It profaned, it vulgarized, it thrived on obscenity. It produced false pleasure. It was excessive and lame, its only purpose being to amuse. It condescended, and those who practiced it wrote, as Samuel Johnson would later put it, “rather as beholders than partakers of human nature; as beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure; as Epicurean deities, making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest and without emotion.”<sup>15</sup> This was clearly then, in the eyes of the rebellious city, not merely a war between two aesthetic conceptions, debating, say, the relationship between style and subject-matter, or art and morality, but more generally a war between ideas and mere words, between argument and elocution, reason and mystification, sense and nonsense, learning and mere posturing. Involving most of the leading literary figures of the time, and narrated famously by Daniel Defoe as a mock-heroic account of a battle between Britannia’s warlike sons (“The Men of Sense against the Men of Wit, eternal Fighting must determine it...”<sup>16</sup>), the rebellion of City against wit was seen by its protagonists as a necessary part of a wider moral reform and a defense of traditional English virtue undermined by aristocratic immodesty and dissoluteness. The divide between the poetic sense and wit was so deeply felt to be a symptom of a wider social divide and part of a profound change in the sensibilities of English society itself, that Defoe could, in the end, reduce its meaning quite simply to two alternative ways of ruling Britain (“*Wit* is a king without a Parliament, and *sense* a democratic government”<sup>17</sup>), with one commentator calling it an outright war “between Cheapside and Covent Garden, between City and Court, between bourgeoisie and aristocracy.”<sup>18</sup> This was the culmination of a long literary controversy, which at its core was fought over the sort of individual that was to stand at the center of English literature, not only as its subject, but as its generative principle, a principle of taste, an ideal, and a measure of right tone. More importantly, it was the ground upon which a much larger battle was

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<sup>12</sup> Abraham Cowley, “Ode. Of Wit,” in *The Complete Work of Abraham Cowley*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, New York, AMS Press, 1967, vol. 1, p. 136, ll. 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Niles Hooker, “Pope on Wit: The *Essay on Criticism*,” in Richard Foster Jones (ed.), *The Seventeenth Century: Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1951, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, vol. 1, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Defoe, “The Pacificator,” in *The True-Born Englishman and Other Poems*, ed. W. R. Owens, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Defoe, *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Krapp, “Class Analysis of a Literary Controversy: Wit and Sense in Seventeenth Century English Literature,” *Science and Society*, v. 10 (1946), #1, p. 87.

being fought between different conceptions of what it meant to *be* an individual in the course of the seventeenth century. The struggle was over the sort of individual that ought to be the generative principle of not only the English society, but of any human society in general. This struggle is the object of our present concern.

## II

Wit must surely be one of the most obscure concepts of English literature. “If a man had time to study the history of one word only, *wit* would perhaps be the best word he could choose,”<sup>19</sup> said C. S. Lewis, and without much exaggeration. Not even literary criticism, which one would expect to yearn for areas in want of research, has seemed too eager to take it on, and it is only around the time when T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, the later Yates and Mallarmé—i.e., the experimentalists, symbolists, modernists—were writing their poetry that it garnered some (derivative) interest, but not much since. In fact, the entire seventeenth century, and especially its first half, so critical for our understanding of wit, has been mostly avoided by literary histories, which, as if not wanting to sully themselves, skipped from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth by the convenient way of Jonson and Dryden, with a detour to Milton, leaving the rest of the century in peculiar darkness. According to Alvarez, for example, “the critical tradition descends from the Elizabethans to the Restoration seemingly without pause,” thus making the poetry of wit “seem an aberration.”<sup>20</sup> And according to Croll, “the period (1575-1675) between the Renaissance, properly so-called, and the neo-Classical age has never been clearly differentiated in literary history, although in the other arts, in sculpture, painting, and architecture, its character has been recognized and described.”<sup>21</sup> No wonder, then, that the immediate instigator of the war on wit, which lasted between 1695 and 1702, but whose echoes reverberated for at least another twenty five years, is a man completely forgotten today, a certain physician and amateur poet by the name of Richard Blackmore.

Said to have been one of the most widely and deservedly unread of British authors—apparently his productions were terribly dull—, Blackmore did get some praise in his time from Joseph Addison (who qualified a work of Blackmore’s as “one of the most useful and noble productions in our English verse”), from John Dennis (who compared him favorably to Lucretius), as well as from Richard Steele and John Locke. William Molyneux, Locke’s devoted disciple, even held that “all our English poets (except Milton) have been mere ballad-makers, in comparison to him.”<sup>22</sup> But the quality of Blackmore’s poetic work is not of concern to us here. Instead, what really distinguishes Blackmore is his resolve—certainly an ambitious one, given his (at least initial) obscurity as a poet—to deal a death blow to the poetry of wit, so pervasive in the seventeenth century, by juxtaposing it to a poetry of sense. Being a physician, Blackmore repeatedly treated wit, the way it had evolved over time, as a disease, a deviation from normalcy, and not only one confined to poetry, but one spreading from poetry into all corners of

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<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1967, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Alvarez, A. *The School of Donne*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1961, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1966, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> R. C. Boys, *Sir Richard Blackmore and the Wits*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1949, pp. 31, 27.

society. In his *Satyr against Wit* (1699), he actually likened wit to the spread of a plague, and described those displaying wit—the wits—as mad dogs spreading rabies (or as insects destroying crops) throughout the land. In an earlier work, *Prince Arthur* (1695), he accused these poets (“if they must be called so”) of being “engaged in a general confederacy to ruin the end of their own art, to expose religion and virtue, and bring vice and corruption into esteem and reputation.”<sup>23</sup> And after his verses were made the butt of the wits’ jokes, Blackmore reflected on their behavior yet again in the preface to his *King Arthur* (1697): “When I considered that I was so great a stranger to the muses..., having never kissed their governor’s [i.e. Dryden’s] hands, nor made the least court to the committee that sits in Covent Garden; and that therefore mine was not so much a *permission poem*, but a pure, downright *interloper*, it was but natural to conclude that those gentlemen, who by assisting, crying up, excusing and complimenting one another, carry on their poetical trade in a joint-stock, would certainly do what they could to sink and ruin an unlicensed adventurer.”<sup>24</sup>

By the time Blackmore wrote his *Satyr against Wit*, the controversy became so heated and widespread, with many supporters on both sides, that he could launch a frontal attack. Again using the metaphor of disease, Blackmore decried how wit “takes men in the head, and in the fit / They lose their senses, and are gone in wit.”<sup>25</sup> We are told how wits strain “Always to say fine things, but strive in vain / Urged with a dry tenesmus of the brain.”<sup>26</sup> After saying how the poets of wit undermine all virtue, public and private, how they abhor reason and common sense (“The mob of wit is up to storm the town, / To pull all virtue and right reason down. / Quite to subvert religion’s sacred fence / To set up wit, and pull down common sense”<sup>27</sup>), and how they threaten to demolish not only English morality and culture, but also the English state as well (they “threaten ruin more than foreign arms”<sup>28</sup>), Blackmore proposed a radical reform of English poetry on the model of none other than a middle-class English town, to include—obviously besides a hospital—a bank, a workhouse, and a customs office. The main purpose of the reform would be to regulate wit by “melting” down and then recasting the whole of wit currently in circulation:

‘Tis true, that when the course and worthless dross  
Is purged away, there will be mighty loss.  
Even Congreve, Southerne, manly Wycherly,  
When thus refined will grievous sufferers be.  
Into the melting pot when Dryden comes,  
What horrid stench will rise, what noisome fumes?  
How will he shrink, when all his lewd allay,  
And wicked mixture shall be purged away?  
When once his boasted heaps are melted down,  
A chest full scarce will yield one sterling crown.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Richard Blackmore, *Prince Arthur, An Heroic Poem*, London, Awnsham and John Churchill, 1695, pp. iii, iv.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Blackmore, *King Arthur, An Heroic Poem*, London, Awnsham and John Churchill, 1697, pp. i-ii.

<sup>25</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 136, ll. 34-35.

<sup>26</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 136, ll. 40-41.

<sup>27</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 138, ll. 81-84.

<sup>28</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 134, l. 9.

<sup>29</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, London, Samuel Crouch, 1700, pp. 145-146, ll. 202-211.

“Fiscal” control in the town would be entrusted to a Bank of Wit, administered by the poets of sense (“These are good men, in whom we all agree / Their notes for wit are good security”<sup>30</sup>); a workhouse, fully in the spirit of the English poor laws, would serve to prevent poets from loitering outside the production-line of true wit (“But let the lusty beggar-wits that lurk / About the [Parnassus] Hill, be seized and set to work”<sup>31</sup>); and customs would be set up to prevent false wit coming in clandestinely from France (i.e. to uncover the poets who smuggle “French wit, as others silks and wine”<sup>32</sup>). That Blackmore would take France into consideration in his musings on a virtuous Parnassus is not at all surprising. One author, for example, had defined the fop poet few years earlier as “a smuggler of wit” who “steals French fancies without paying customary duties.”<sup>33</sup> Such an image of France as the land of (cheap) fancy seems, in fact, to have been quite common at the time. The court of France, after all, was the model which Charles II and his debauched courtiers looked up to when it came to their own standard of manners. Courthope speaks of “their *Chedreux perruques*, their clothes scented with pulvilio, orange, and jasmine, their French phrases, introduced at every tenth word,” of their “Provençal jargon of ‘servants,’ ‘cruelty,’ ‘danger,’ ‘killing eyes,’ ‘the unpardonable sin of talking,’” all of which was meant to supply an aura of chivalrous aristocracy, but was certain to end in a caricature.<sup>34</sup> John Oldham, for example, decries the following in 1682: “What wouldst thou say, great Harry [Henry V], shouldst thou view / Thy gaudy, fluttering race of English now, / Their tawdry clothes, pulvilios, essences, /.../ Which thou, and they of old did so despise?”<sup>35</sup> Blackmore would, of course, have little patience for such fashionable delusions, as would other contemporaries critical of the court culture. On the contrary, in the preface to *Prince Arthur* he strongly reprimands those in power (“The universal corruption of manners and irreligious disposition of mind that infects the Kingdom seems to have been in a great measure derived from the State, or has at least been highly promoted by it”).

A man of common sense, with both his feet firmly planted on the ground, and with a strong empirical bias, Blackmore began his career by taking up the advice of Thomas Sydenham, the “English Hippocrates,” and reading *Don Quixote*, of all books, as the best guide to his medical practice.<sup>36</sup> “Beware of your imagination” was Sydenham’s message, “get rid of your fancies; let facts be facts; do not view nature in the light of your preconceived ideas.”<sup>37</sup> No wonder then that Blackmore could, quite humorlessly, treat of poetry in terms of public debts, tax rates, mortgages, and municipal bond-issues, for his approach to medicine was merely carried over into his literary practice. What was also carried over, clearly, was a peculiar mixture of Puritan morality and sober middle-class values. “Far from being debauched,” the middle and lower class in England during the

<sup>30</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 146, ll. 232-233.

<sup>31</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 153, ll. 368-369.

<sup>32</sup> *A Satyr against Wit*, p. 150, l. 316.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, New York, Source Book Press, 1970, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, London, Macmillan, vol. 3, pp. 455-456.

<sup>35</sup> John Oldham, “A Satire in Imitation of the Third of Juvenal,” in *Restoration Literature*, ed. Paul Hammond, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002, p. 91, ll. 95-99.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. H. M. Solomon, *Sir Richard Blackmore*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1980, pp. 22-23.

<sup>37</sup> Ludwig Edelstein, “Sydenham and Cervantes,” in *Essays in the History of Medicine presented to Professor Arturo Castiglioni*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1944, p. 61.

Restoration, we are told, “was permeated with a spirit of somewhat crude and narrow piety.” And while political Puritanism might have been defeated, “the great majority of the people [still] looked with horror upon the life of the fashionable set.”<sup>38</sup> The most striking example is certainly the war against theater, waged at the same time that Blackmore waged his war against wit. What brings the two together is that, in reaction to the decadence of court culture, they revive the claims advanced already by pagans (such as Plutarch, Horace, Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus), more explicitly and trenchantly by the early Christians (e.g. Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Lactantius) and the medieval councils of the Catholic Church, and most recently and severely by the Puritans under Cromwell, namely that the purpose of literature, and of art in general, is to teach morality.<sup>39</sup> On this view, any delight that art may produce is secondary, subordinate, and a mere means to the purpose of instruction (“A poet should employ all his Judgment and Wit, exhaust all the riches of his fancy, and abound in beautiful and noble expression, to divert and entertain others; but then it must be with this prospect, that he may hereby engage attention, insinuate more easily into their minds, and more effectively convey to them wise instructions”<sup>40</sup>). The vehemence with which Blackmore assails wit—as opposed to the immorality of the stage, which was historically and at the time the more common complaint<sup>41</sup>—is only due to the fact that, with a radically empiricist and medical mind, he attempted to seek the root cause—and not merely an expression—of the problems that were besetting England, and to eradicate it entirely. To that end, for the sake of the mental and moral hygiene of society, Blackmore makes in his later *Essay upon Wit* (1716) a clear distinction between two faculties or “qualifications” of the mind (he actually speaks of the role of various “ferments” and “animal spirits,” of “active fire” and “different proportions of phlegm” in the “operations of the mind”)—that of wit and that of sense—which ultimately correspond to two types, “denominations,” “classes,” or “species” of men. On the one hand there are the men of wit, namely those with “an inferior degree of wisdom and discretion,” and deficient in “prudence and common sense.” These men, according to Blackmore, are “more inclined than others to levity and dissolute manners,” “more violent and impatient of restraint,” “less able than others to resist the allurements and criminal delights” (“and this remark is confirmed by daily experience,” he adds), who have “a moral impotence of will to restrain [their] evil propensities and govern [their] vicious appetites.” Unlike these “comic” “gentlemen of a pleasant and witty turn of mind,” on the other hand, are the normal, healthy people, the men of “prudence and common sense,” with “a solid understanding and a faculty of close and clear reasoning,” “industrious merchants and grave persons of all professions,” men of “industry, good sense, and regular economy.”<sup>42</sup> In short, Blackmore traces the distinction between wit and sense to two different socio-economic classes of contemporary England, and further down to two different “compositions,” as he says, of

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<sup>38</sup> Krutch, *Comedy and Conscience*, pp. 36-37. “Outside the court, England remained serious, god-fearing and in large measure Puritan,” V. de Sola Pinto, *The English Renaissance, 1510-1688*, London, The Cresset Press, 1966, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Krutch, pp. 72-191. For the Puritan distinction, see H. J. C. Grierson, *Cross-Currents in 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature*, pp. 6-7, 130-132, and, more extensively, Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage*, 1903.

<sup>40</sup> See the preface to *Prince Arthur*.

<sup>41</sup> F. T. Wood compiled a list, very incomplete he says, of 83 pamphlets published on this topic between 1698 and 1800, with about 20 of them being published in the first three years alone. Cf. “The Attack on the Stage in the XVIII century,” *Notes and Queries*, September 25, 1937, pp. 218-222.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Blackmore, *An Essay Upon Wit*, Los Angeles, The Augustan Reprint Society, 1946, pp. 195-198.

the human mind. Believing that “where the legislator ends, the comic genius begins, and presides over the low and ordinary affairs and manners of life,”<sup>43</sup> Blackmore thus proposes the extension of law to censure this kind of devious behavior. This is very much in keeping with his *Satyr against Wit* (“Therefore some just and wholesome laws ordain, / That may this wild licentiousness restrain”<sup>44</sup>), and with his earliest work, *Prince Arthur*, where he proposed that poets be completely in the pay and under the control of the state, forbidden to write anything debasing government or religion. Given the severity of such a response, it would therefore behoove us to take a closer look at the origin and nature of this infamous poetry of wit.

### III

That English literature would ever play an important role in the formation of modern individuality, as is being suggested here, would in no way have seemed certain, or even likely, just a century earlier. “Of the books published in English during the first three decades of the sixteenth century,” we are told, “scarcely half a dozen are of interest to the student of literature.”<sup>45</sup> Neither the drama nor the prose of the sixteenth-century England could have even approached that of the continent; before the advent of Shakespeare (and Shakespeare was more of an exception, an aberration, rather than a general change of course), there is no one in England that could match Racine, Corneille, or Molière. The fifteenth century was apparently even worse, being called “one of the most uninspiring and depressing in the annals of English poetry,” “barren,” and “stricken with sterility in every corner.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, these were the times of intense preparation, of schooling, of the breaking in of the language, of bridling it and taming it, until one day—to use the words of C. S. Lewis—the English “have at last learned how to write.”<sup>47</sup> Here was the birth of the style of short nondramatic poetry that Lewis called “golden” and “innocent,” in which the right thing to do was obvious, in which good was “as visible as green,” and so for a few years, which happened to coincide with the reign of Elizabeth, nothing more was needed “than to play out again and again the strong simple music of the uncontroverted line and to load one’s poem with all that is naturally delightful—with flowers and swans, with ladies’ hair, hands, lips, breasts, and eyes, with silver and gold, woods and waters, the stars, the moon, and the sun.”<sup>48</sup> What a relief it must have been for the English finally to be able to play with their own language, as opposed to being oppressed by it, to hear in it pleasant sounds, to indulge in its finally discovered harmony and simplicity! The English became fluent, and the poetry of the period does indeed betray an air of youthful naïveté, and of confidence and optimism, that would in any other context be deemed saccharine. This was the poetry of Sidney and especially of Spenser. It was charming, picturesque, pretty, often characterized as feminine. It is thus all the more extraordinary that very soon, already by the end of the sixteenth century, and practically out of nowhere, this

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Blackmore, *An Essay Upon Wit*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>44</sup> Blackmore, *Satyr against Wit*, p. 149, ll. 289-290.

<sup>45</sup> William G. Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, New York, Columbia UP, 1937, pp. 25-26.

<sup>46</sup> William Edward Mead, “Introduction,” in Stephen Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, London, Oxford UP, 1928, p. xv; Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1962, v. 3, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954, p. 65. So dramatic was the change in language that, by the fifteenth century, Chaucer was practically incomprehensible to the English. See V. de Sola Pinto, *The English Renaissance, 1510-1688*, London, The Cresset Press, 1966, p. 14, also pp. 46, 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

style would be overcome and obliterated by a style unusually mature, much more potent and less “delightful,” less soft, smooth, and pleasant, taken up by the so-called Metaphysical poetry of John Donne and his followers. It is the period marked by this style, by its youthful vigor and masculinity, and its eventual perversion and decadence, and most of all by the changing concept of wit associated with it, which concerns us here, because it provided a fertile ground for a clash that went far beyond the domain of literature itself. At stake were none other than “conflicting notions of intellectual coherence and competing versions of reality”<sup>49</sup> itself. The change that ensued, we are told, “was general and was based on a deliberate rejection of one kind of intellectual discipline—one way of thinking, in the strict sense—and the deliberate adoption of another.”<sup>50</sup> It was “an intellectual upheaval; it gave men a new sense of reality.”<sup>51</sup> It was a battle after which “an entire way of thinking had changed.”<sup>52</sup> “It reflected a broader change in the consciousness of the nation.”<sup>53</sup> This was, in fact, the period when literature became larger than itself, and when literary concerns, perhaps for one last time, became of utmost philosophical and socio-economic significance, when literature had to be seriously reckoned with. Consequently, if we look for one place where these three aspects—the literary, the philosophical, and the socio-economic—meet, and even coincide, in the English poetry of the seventeenth century, we will find it exhibited most clearly in the actual style of writing. To reconstruct, as it were, the historical import of this new style is to go a long way to provide an answer concerning one of the most fundamental presuppositions of modern society, namely the advent of the language of the middle class, with its distinct place for human individuality.<sup>54</sup>

The most obvious distinction of Donne and his followers, such as Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Marvell, or Traherne, is a style harsh, rugged, and economical, in clear and conscious opposition to Spenserian melody and abundance (Donne: “I sing not, siren-like, to tempt; for I am harsh”<sup>55</sup>). His style is dramatic, abrupt, metrically irregular, not

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<sup>49</sup> John Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> A. Alvarez, *The School of Donne*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1961, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> R. L. Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1940, p. 138.

<sup>52</sup> A. J. Smith, *Metaphysical Wit*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991, p. xi.

<sup>53</sup> R. L. Sharp, “Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness,” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 31, 1934, p. 499.

<sup>54</sup> The sources of Donne’s poetry are not altogether clear. For Italian and Spanish influences, see Silvia Ruffo-Fiori, *Donne’s Petrarchism*, Florence, 1976; J. A. Mazzeo, “A Critique of Some Modern Metaphysical Theories,” *Modern Philology*, v. 50, 1952, pp. 88-96; S. L. Bethell, “Gracián, Tesouro and the Nature of Metaphysical Wit,” *Northern Miscellany of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, 1953, pp. 19-39; and F. J. Warnke, “Marino and the English Metaphysicals,” *Studies in the Renaissance*, v. 2, 1955, pp. 160-175. For a possible French influence, see Alan Boase, “Poètes anglais et français de l’époque baroque,” *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 55-56, 1949, pp. 155-84. Robert Ellrod argues that the originality of Donne’s poetry cannot be due to Italian, Spanish, or French influences (*Poètes métaphysiques*, v. 3, ch. 5). Like Ellrod, Mario Praz, *Secentismo e marinismo in Inghilterra*, Florence, La Voce, 1925, insists on the essential difference between Donne and the Italians, but argues that Crashaw, a central figure among the English Metaphysicals, belongs more properly to continental *concettismo*. F. J. Warnke (ed.), *European Metaphysical Poetry*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 1-86, contends that English Metaphysical poetry is one in a cluster of related styles designated collectively as Baroque, while O. de Mourgues, *Metaphysical, Baroque and Précieux Poetry*, Oxford, 1953, on the contrary, defines Baroque in contradistinction to the Metaphysical style. While arguing, like Warnke, for the existence of a particular European-wide Metaphysical tradition beginning with Petrarch, A. J. Smith emphasizes the distinctness of the English variant (*Metaphysical Wit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 106-241). Donne and the Metaphysical poets clearly did not develop in a vacuum, but they did create a highly unique body of work.

<sup>55</sup> “To Mr. S. B.,” in *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters of John Donne*, ed. W. Milgate, Oxford, Clarendon, 1967, p. 66, lines 9-10.



soft and smooth-flowing. There is a complete disregard, even disdain, for harmony, no attempt to combine syllables pleasingly. The consonants “grate” on each other, and regularity of accent is ignored. Unlike the womanly poetry, which according to Ben Jonson “runs and glides, and only makes a sound,”<sup>56</sup> this poetry is almost completely unmusical (it “talks against the music,”<sup>57</sup> it sounds “like *ex tempore* speech,”<sup>58</sup> it “is not sung, but spoken”<sup>59</sup>), and could be deemed rhetorically effective only perversely, that is, insofar its discordance is an irritant to the nerves.<sup>60</sup> The sensuous and the pictorial, so characteristic of earlier Elizabethan poetry, are also disregarded. “Not only is there nothing of the splendid imagery of Shakespeare’s sonnets,” writes J. B. Leishman, “there are none of the conventional, though often charming, ornaments which we usually associate with Elizabethan poetry: no references to Greek or Latin legend or mythology, no shepherds and shepherdesses, no beds of roses, no flowery meads, silver fountains, gentle zephyrs.” Donne “does not, like the sonneteers, ransack heaven and earth for comparisons to describe the transcendent beauty of his mistress; he does not say that her beauty scorches him like the sun, or that her coldness freezes him like ice. For all these things he seems to have had a profound contempt.”<sup>61</sup> What Donne did, instead, was to replace both the music and the image of the poem with sheer thought. If ideas were unessential to the enjoyment of Spenserian poetry, which instead pleased by its workmanship and the niceness of its phrases, by the lavish wealth of narration and description, where “fluid, easy movement leaves the surface unruffled, and scene after scene, pictured fully, comes and goes,”<sup>62</sup> the poetry of Donne makes the thought, the idea, the insight, its focus. Unlike the poetry of Spenser, but also that of Marlow and Shakespeare, which “expands imaginatively to take in great tracts of experience, Donne works tortuously towards a single, barely accessible point: his solution of a baffling intellectual problem.”<sup>63</sup> Instead of trying to mirror nature and external beauty (and “Donne is almost an ascetic in his disregard of physical beauty,”<sup>64</sup> complaining of the “insipid dullness”<sup>65</sup> of the English countryside, completely unconcerned and sexually unexcited by the physical characteristics of the girl he is referring to), he seeks beauty—if at all—in relentless argument. By the end of each of Donne’s poems “something new has been stated, proved, resolved.”<sup>66</sup> He “does not idealize his experiences or transform them by association into splendid visions; he grapples with them, carefully analyses them, and often tries to interpret them by means of intellectual conceptions.”<sup>67</sup> According to Bradford Smith, “Intellect controls this poetry. Passion is examined and probed, not eulogized. Imagery is used not because it is pretty but because it fits the idea.”<sup>68</sup> This poetry is not to be heard but understood. What thus takes precedence in Donne is not *how* things are said, but *what* is being said, not the form but the content. It is “the *rhythm*

<sup>56</sup> *The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Oxford, Clarendon, 1947, v. 8, p. 585.

<sup>57</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954, p. 551.

<sup>58</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 548

<sup>59</sup> Praz, *The Flaming Heart*, p. 190.

<sup>60</sup> Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden*, p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> J. B. Leishman, *The Metaphysical Poets*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1934, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Sharp, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> James Winny, *A Preface to Donne*, London, Longman, 1981, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> H. Grierson, *Cross-Currents in 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature*, Gloucester, Peter Smith, 1965, p. 145.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, London, W. Heinemann, 1899, vol. 1, p. 219.

<sup>66</sup> Alvarez, *The School of Donne*, p. 133. Cf. p. 50.

<sup>67</sup> Leishman, p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> W. Bradford Smith, “What is Metaphysical Poetry?,” *The Sewanee Review*, v. 42 (1934), #3.

*of thought* itself,” according to Praz, which in Donne “attracts by virtue of its own peculiar convolutions.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of playing with words, Donne and his followers now play with *knowledge*, and, if anything, it is *how* they play with knowledge that is the most defining aspect of their poetry. This is their wit.

Before Donne, the English term “wit” meant quite simply “intellect” or “mind,” and, by extension, “judgment,” “understanding,” or “wisdom.” This is the meaning we still preserve in the expression such as “to lose one’s wits.” The other meaning of wit that we use today, the one referring to a person who is witty, is something that appeared only in the later sixteenth century, and which became largely associated with the poetry of Donne and of his followers. Namely, it is then that wit started to refer to a quickness of mind in perceiving and expressing resemblances between things widely dissimilar. If Donne was not the sole origin of this meaning of wit, provided such pure origins exist at all, his poetry took this meaning farther than any other poetry before or after him, to the point that a radical break with the tradition (“Copernicus in Poetrie”) was obvious even to contemporaries.<sup>70</sup> Thus, unlike the contrived and formulaic Spenserian poetry, which operated with familiar phrases and was written in clear reference to literary tradition, the imitation of which was considered flattering, that of Donne thrived on surprise, on making the familiar appear strange, or on bringing the strange into an uncanny intimacy with the reader. Donne put the conventional situation, the typical mood, or the expected emotion behind him, and began where Sidney or Spenser would have left off; he “took for granted the equipment of his readers, and in his poetry started them on a further journey.”<sup>71</sup> It is in that sense that we could say for Donne’s poetry to be “twice born,” for, as Lewis says perceptively, “it uses discords on the assumption that your taste is sufficiently educated to recognize them. If the immemorial standard of decorum were not in your mind before you began reading, there would be no point, no ‘wit,’ only clownish insipidity.”<sup>72</sup> This fact must not be overlooked. If we want to understand the dramatic impact that Donne and his followers made not only on English poetic expression, but also on linguistic expression in general, and how daring it was at the time, we must gauge the power of decorum against which they rebelled, and which they “wittily” put to use. Above all, we must never suppose, says Lewis, that Donne and his followers are writing at the time when decorous dissociations of high from low, or of the strange from the familiar, did not exist. On the contrary, at no period would it have been harder to achieve this dissociation than in the 1590s. Decorum was in their bones:

The desire [to avoid clashes and shocks], in some form, goes back to prehistoric times. This will be obvious if we reflect on the fact that while ancient life (and ancient comic poetry) was full of obscenities, yet ancient epic (save for a very few passages which are, significantly, intended to be funny) could almost all have been read aloud to a mixed audience in the reign of Queen Victoria. Certain things, well known to every ancient poet and perhaps disapproved

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*, New York, The Viking Press, 1971, p. 120.

<sup>70</sup> W. Milgate, “The Early References to John Donne,” *Notes and Queries*, #195, 1950, pp. 229-31, 246-7, 290-2, 381-3, and *Notes and Queries*, #198, 1953, pp. 421-4. On Donne’s habit of pushing already existing qualities to extremes, see Sharp, pp. 3-4, 13-14ff.; Leishman, p. 21; Praz, *The Flaming Heart*, pp. 198-199; C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954, p. 539-541. P. J. Finkelpearl speaks of Donne’s “highly original, virtually revolutionary poetry,” in *John Marston of the Middle Temple*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969, p. 30.

<sup>71</sup> Sharp, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1954, p. 541.

by none, are from the first kept out of the grave kinds of poetry. In the world of fact, and in the stream of consciousness, all sorts of things jostle together: but the organized sensibility which we call taste had put some things apart by the time Homeric poems were composed. It continued to hold them apart. Douglas's ninth prologue states the rule of *decorum* as it existed by the end of the Middle Ages. The tendency of humanism was certainly not to relax this rule: it lies behind Scaliger's complaint that the Homeric Andromache is 'low.' Dryden, writing when the rule was once more in full vigour, says that 'the metaphysics' have no place in love-poetry. Chaucer's Pandarus would have agreed with him: he had warned Troilus not to use 'termes of physike' in a love letter. The desire for recondite comparisons lays a poet under the necessity of breaking such prohibitions. But the new poets welcomed this necessity. The rule of decorum exists to avoid clashes or shocks to organized sensibility: but it was an early discovery that an occasional defiance of the rule, resulting in a shock, can give pleasure; a pleasure rich in tragic or comic possibilities... [Donne] deliberately produced poetic shocks by coupling what was sacred, august, remote, or inhuman with what was profane, hum-drum, familiar, and social...<sup>73</sup>

What Donne does in his iconoclasm, therefore, is to revitalize English poetry which, in its own triviality, had become overrefined, stale, and infertile by the end of the sixteenth century. But, more significantly, what Donne ends up doing is actually to create "a kind of poem that had never been heard before,"<sup>74</sup> with Donne's older contemporary, Ben Jonson, going so far as to call him "the first poet in the world"<sup>75</sup> in some things. The shock of Donne ("For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love"<sup>76</sup>—that kind of shock) was, in fact, to undo the entire history of poetry, to show for the first time that poetry did not demand harmony, that art did not demand beauty, at least not one classically defined. It redefined the medium of art by shifting aesthetic experience away from the senses and closer to the intellect (according to Bradford Smith, for example, Donne "has a way of making his image and his idea become one"<sup>77</sup>). The impact of Donne, according to Sharp, was to invigorate poetry "by deepening its moods, by intellectualizing its images, and by making use of contemporary philosophy and science." It was to "energize poetry, to bring it up-to-date and make it reflect a new sensibility." It "attempted to rid poetry of those 'servile weeds'—imitative moods and phrases, superficiality, facility, and the sensuousness which is always antithetical to intellectual content."<sup>78</sup> Revolting with its roughness against Spenserian and, generally, Elizabethan rime and euphony, with its terseness against their sweet eloquence, with its jerkiness against their graceful composure, Donne's poetry revolted, most fundamentally, with its pronounced, even eccentric, heady, at times tortured, intellectuality against their sensuality and conventional sentimentality. Donne delighted in thought. With an excitement of a child he found ways to weave philosophical ideas and the latest facts of science even into his most personal love poetry. No realms of knowledge and human experience, regardless of how abstract or rare, were too distant to be brought in and set into interaction with each other, as if being the most natural neighbors, and even if only for the briefest of moments. For what mattered at that point was not they themselves, but the sudden spark they together created. It is only natural, therefore, that ambiguity, antithesis, and paradox

<sup>73</sup> C. S. Lewis, p. 539-541.

<sup>74</sup> C. S. Lewis. p. 548.

<sup>75</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 150.

<sup>76</sup> John Donne, "The Canonization."

<sup>77</sup> W. Bradford Smith, "What is Metaphysical Poetry?"

<sup>78</sup> R. L. Sharp, "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," p. 498.

would be Donne's poetic habitat. Much like early twentieth-century modernists, whether in literature or music or the fine arts, Donne, too, strove to upset his reader's established and unquestioned sense of decorum, to wake him up from his idyllic slumber, and to attune him to what was actually going on in the world. So striking was his poetry that soon all poetry—all poetic writing as such—the very art of writing poetry—started to become identified with the wit of Donne. To be a poet at the turn of the seventeenth century meant to be a wit in the particular sense inaugurated by Donne.<sup>79</sup> He had no match but in Shakespeare himself.

#### IV

What was it then that was perceived to be such a threat in this new form of writing that would still cause the entire seventeenth century, and even the first decades of the eighteenth, to shudder in reaction? Was Donne not merely "reflecting" the changes that English society was undergoing at the time, under the impact of great geographical discoveries, the development of science, etc.? After all, Donne's writing can be placed well within the larger English and European-wide movement away from the prose-style of Cicero and closer to that of Seneca, away from the efflorescence of epideictic oratory and rhetoric, of Gorgias and Isocrates, and closer to Socrates, to scientific brevity and a penchant for describing facts, whether of nature or of history. Initiated on the continent by Erasmus, Budé, and Pico della Mirandola, more firmly established by Muret, Lipsius, Vives, and Montaigne, and taken up by Francis Bacon in England, this movement, both in Latin and in the vernacular, contributed to the growing positivism of the age, and to the high regard it had for rendering visible the actual processes of thought.<sup>80</sup> More particularly, Donne's dense, "masculine" style ("my words' masculine persuasive force"<sup>81</sup>), its restrained, incisive, significant lines, where matter is valued more than words and where words are used sparingly, has a deep affinity with the tradition of the so-called plain style of poetry, which came into being at the time Donne began writing, and which was fully in the spirit of the new times.<sup>82</sup> In contrast to what has been called the golden style (Lewis), or the ornate or decorative style (Winters), or the eloquent style (Peterson), all of which identify more or less the same "defeated" tradition of the sixteenth century,<sup>83</sup> the style of Donne, with all its peculiarities, belongs undoubtedly to a new tradition that produced Ben Jonson, the founder of English neo-classicism, and which would eventually become the preeminent style of English poetry: a style reasonable, simple, direct, and intellectual. In certain ways, for example in his espousal of the so-called "strong lines," Jonson could even be seen as a follower of Donne.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism*, New York, Knopf, 1957, p. 229.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. M. W. Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1966, pp. 167-202.

<sup>81</sup> John Donne, "Elegy: On His Mistress," in H. J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1995, p. 187, l. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Frances Austen, *The Language of the Metaphysical Poets*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 6-8.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English*, Chicago, Alan Swallow, 1967, pp. 1-120, and Douglas L. Peterson, *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne: A History of the Plain and Eloquent Styles*, New Jersey, Princeton UP, 1967, esp. pp. 285-348. In the preface to the 1990 edition of his book, Peterson says that "the advent of the English version of the classical plain style indicates a cultural revolution of a kind" (p. xxxii).

<sup>84</sup> See George Williamson, "Strong Lines," *English Studies*, v. 18, #1-6, 1936, p. 154, and F. P. Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945, p. 54.

Cunningham, in fact, goes so far as to see the relationship between Jonson and Donne as “that of Horace to Lucilius, perfector to inventor.” With the advent of Donne’s poetic style, Cunningham tells us, “there remained only for a Ben Jonson to recognize it, perfect and establish it, and in the forms that Donne had pioneered.”<sup>85</sup>

Making things more complex, Donne’s poetry was in many ways not only compatible with the newly emerging attitude towards the world, but it was in fact also an expression of it. According to Ellrodt, the scientific image in Donne’s poetry “was not merely animated by the poet’s passion or self-dramatization: it often achieved a throbbing life of its own through the imaginative excitement aroused by the scientific fact itself, by those anatomies, those maps, and the net thrown over heaven and earth by man’s calculating mind.”<sup>86</sup> Like the new science, Donne’s poetry, too, eschews the abstract for the sake of the concrete. It strives to replace vacuous speculation with the thing itself, with the actual object seen and described from various angles, examined from without and from within, placed in radically different environments, in order to discover its essential qualities and composition. It endeavors to relate the experience of the author, in all its complexity, to the one—often mundane—subject at hand. Unlike Spenser’s poetry, where “the poet takes us and lays us in the lap of a lovelier nature, by the sound of softer streams, among greener hills and fairer valleys,” where “we wander in another world, among ideal beings,”<sup>87</sup> Donne’s poetry drops us into the midst of our world, even if by way of cosmology. Donne’s poems are not merely the result of their author’s *reflection* upon concrete experience; instead, according to Leishman, they are *themselves* “intensely realistic; they try to convey as directly as possible, and without idealization or adornment, a particular experience in all its complexity and concreteness.”<sup>88</sup> When Donne writes a love poem, we are told, his beloved “is not the distant figure seen in a glimpse against the sky, hardly more human than the sun and the evening star to which she is compared. Such was the lady of the sonneteers [“If I were a mistress,” Sidney himself admitted once, sonneteers “would never persuade me that they were in love”<sup>89</sup>], but Donne’s lady is so much of a flesh-and-blood presence that she can be invited to ‘act the rest.’”<sup>90</sup> So much, in fact, do Donne’s lyrics imply a concrete situation, so much do they sound colloquial, so much is their language familiar and even intimate, direct, that in them we have a poetry that is almost exactly opposite to that of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*:

In Shakespeare each experience of the lover becomes a window through which we look out on immense prospects—on nature, the seasons, life and death, time and eternity. In Donne it is more like a burning-glass; angelology, natural philosophy, law, institutions are all drawn together, narrowed and focused at this one place and moment where a particular man is mocking, flattering, browbeating, laughing at, or laughing with, or adoring, a particular woman. And they all have, for Donne in the poem, no value or even existence except as they articulate and render more fully self-conscious the passion of that moment.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> J. V. Cunningham, “Lyric Style in the 1590s,” in *The Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham*, Chicago, The Swallow Press, 1976, p. 324.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Ellrodt, “Scientific Curiosity and Metaphysical Poetry in the Seventeenth Century,” *Modern Philology*, v. 61 (1964), #3.

<sup>87</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, London, Taylor and Hessey, 1818, see lecture II, pp. 26-57.

<sup>88</sup> Leishman, pp. 32-33, 35.

<sup>89</sup> Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1966, pp. 69-70.

<sup>90</sup> Praz, *The Flaming Heart*, p. 190.

<sup>91</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature*, p. 549.

Concerned with neither Shakespeare's majestic and solemn bird's-eye view, nor Spenser's vacuous and frigid sentimentality and pure melody, Donne strives after a true rendition of human experience as he finds it, "with all its confusions and denials and beliefs."<sup>92</sup> Most fundamentally, his poetry operates with an understanding of language as able to represent "the immediate play of mind" directly, and of style "as the instantaneous expression of thinking" about the world and the individual within it.<sup>93</sup> True, Donne's desire for profound realism, for conveying the full density of the moment, as well as for concision, is often achieved at the expense of clarity, and so his poetry does at times verge on the obscure. As Leishman remarks somewhat humorously, Donne "often illustrates a complex mood or feeling by reference to what is for most readers still more complex."<sup>94</sup> Indeed, analyzing the readership of Donne's poems, Cruttwell contends that "even for contemporary readers they must have required a remarkably alert and inquisitive knowledgeable about local and contemporary events."<sup>95</sup> And this is true. What must be added however is that Donne expected his readers to *enjoy* his difficulty. After decades of mellifluous Elizabethanism, after centuries of the literary tyranny of contrived Ciceronianism and of the lofty formality of public speech, Donne did indeed indulge, almost in a childlike way, in the ability to express his thought spontaneously (the "thought that doubled back, corrected itself, broke off in passionate interjections,"<sup>96</sup> that "constantly qualified, ramified, repeated with shifting emphasis, and at the same time denied and controverted statements just made"<sup>97</sup>). But he was not mistaken in the judgment that his readers would find value in it as well. After all, literary obscurity was not unknown to the English at the time. On the contrary, it had had a long tradition (at least as old as Tacitus), was greatly respected (by Francis Bacon among others), and was even deemed fashionable.<sup>98</sup> Chapman, for example, thought in 1595 that "poetry, like prose, should be close-packed and dense with meaning, something to be 'chewed and digested,' which will not give up its secrets on a first reading."<sup>99</sup> As for the readers, they, too, wanted to feel special. Jasper Mayne says in his 1633 elegy on Donne how "we are thought wits, when 'tis understood."<sup>100</sup> In short, Donne's poetry "does not attempt to attract the lazy, and its lovers have always a certain sense of being a privileged class, able to enjoy what is beyond the reach of vulgar wits."<sup>101</sup> His poetry is indeed aimed at a small circle of intellectuals and literary amateurs, and not at the common reader, it is made for an elite, for connoisseurs, it was—to quote T. S. Eliot quoting Mallarmé—"an

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<sup>92</sup> W. Bradford Smith, "What is Metaphysical Poetry?"

<sup>93</sup> Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*, New York, The Viking Press, 1971, p. 120.

<sup>94</sup> Leishman, p. 31.

<sup>95</sup> Patrick Cruttwell, "The Metaphysical Poets and their Readers," *Humanities Association Review*, v. 28, 1977, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> Kermode, p. 120, emphasis added. Cf. M. W. Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>97</sup> R. L. Sharp, "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," p. 503.

<sup>98</sup> R. L. Sharp, "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," esp. pp. 499-502; Cf. A. Alvarez, *The School of Donne*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1961, pp. 29-30; R. L. Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden*, p. 25; George Williamson, "Senecan Style in the Seventeenth Century," *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 15, #4, 1936, pp. 322-323; Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>99</sup> Helen Gardner, "Introduction," in *Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner, London, Oxford UP, 1967, p. xx. Cf. George Chapman, preface to "Ovid's Banquet of Sence," in *The Poems of George Chapman*, ed. P. B. Bartlett, London, Oxford UP, 1941, pp. 49-50.

<sup>100</sup> John Donne, *Poems*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, Oxford, 1912, p. 382.

<sup>101</sup> Helen Gardner, "Introduction," in *Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner, London, Oxford UP, 1967, p. xx.

amusement for superior people.”<sup>102</sup> But, as we can see, this was socially expected of Donne precisely in order to distinguish him from the easily accessible, whining, drawn-out, and outdated style of Spenser. By all accounts, then, the poetry of Donne was not only well within the current literary norms, but at the time was even deemed a standard measure of good poetry. Not only was its style not at variance with that of the new science, and of the new attitude to facts in general, but, on the contrary, it fully embraced them, making them the very tissue and texture of poetry. In fact, we are told that “the facility in discovering resemblances, often in wholly unexpected objects or events, which was the essence of ‘wit,’ was normal and habitual among the educated classes in the early seventeenth century.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore, if we had to summarize the achievement of Donne, we could say, together with Alvarez, that it was “to take a poetry over which the academic theorists were fiercely haggling, and break down the constrictions of mere aesthetic criteria; to take a dialectical form which had become rigid in centuries of scholastic wrangling, and break down its narrow casuistry; to take the sciences in all the imaginative strength of the new discoveries, and bring them all together as protagonists in the inward drama of his own powerful experience.”<sup>104</sup> And yet Donne and, especially, his followers will meet a destiny that few, if any, poets have ever met. The uproar they created, with men like Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke turning against them, as well as the Royal Society and countless other more or less forgotten individuals and groups, is possibly without precedent. What could the poets of wit possibly have done to elicit such hostility, to be condemned to centuries-long oblivion, to be practically banished from the history of literature?

Now, it is true that the wit displayed by Donne had undergone many changes later in the century, particularly at the hands of lesser talents. In Sharp’s view, “superficial virtuosity replaced real feeling and served to conceal the lack of genuine inventive power. Consequently, wit assumed the importance of an end rather than a means; it became the whole poetic process.” The poems of many later followers of Donne, instead of being difficult due to their learning and subtlety, depth and intensity, sincerity and complexity of mood, became “knotty and perplexing because of their jumbled syntax, their dread of simple statement, their elliptical and crowded lines.”<sup>105</sup> They became artfully complicated, excessive, merely extravagant, often grotesque. According to Grierson, Donne’s later followers “move in a more rarefied atmosphere; their poetry is much more truly ‘abstract’ than Donne’s, the witty and fantastic elaboration of one or two common moods, of compliment, passion, devotion, penitence.”<sup>106</sup> And Cruttwell, for example, finds in the later followers “a tone of bravado, of uneasy assertion and self-conscious flippancy, which is a symptom of insecurity.”<sup>107</sup> In a way, then, while believing to be working within the same “school” of Donne, these later followers in fact opposed it fundamentally. The painfully sane and rigorous poetry of Donne, and of his best followers such as Herbert or Marvell, was thereby turned into a merely clever playfulness. Instead of “bringing together and harmonizing the conflicting variety of

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<sup>102</sup> Cruttwell, p. 26.

<sup>103</sup> W. F. Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1962, p. 159.

<sup>104</sup> Alvarez, pp. 22-23.

<sup>105</sup> Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden*, pp. 38, 42; cf. pp. 39, 41, 43, 57.

<sup>106</sup> H. J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> Cruttwell, p. 40.

experience,” they were merely “exploiting the possibilities of words.”<sup>108</sup> Taking the example of John Cleveland, one of Donne’s later imitators, Alvarez finds in his lines nothing more than a linguistic ruse to give the appearance of learning without ever sustaining it, or even requiring it. If the formal method of Donne was to yoke heterogeneous ideas violently together, Cleveland on the other hand found satisfaction in merely “joining up as many ideas and images as possible, heterogeneous or not, by their accidents of sound and sight.”<sup>109</sup> Since the whole point of Cleveland’s language, and of his poems in general, became one of flaunting his ingenuity and resources, he and his followers “never really managed to say anything for themselves. They were too busy straining after cleverness and nudging their readers into the appreciation of their esoteric jokes.”<sup>110</sup> Finally, Beljame delivers what is perhaps the harshest indictment of the Restoration wit-writers when he describes them as engaged in “a perverted and deliberate search for the smutty and the bawdy; with a cold-blooded, intentional study of the lewd and licentious, with a refinement of unwholesome thinking on the part of debauchees who have drunk of life too deeply.”<sup>111</sup> In short, what the later followers of Donne did, presuming all the while to remain within his school, was precisely to turn his “masculine” poetry, characterized so uniquely by its rugged intelligence, its colloquial voice, and its realism, into a “feminine” sensation for the ear and the eye. No wonder, in fact, that Blackmore could eventually accuse the poetry of wit, as he saw it in Dryden, Congreve, Southerne, Wycherley, Garth, or Vanbrugh, of seducing young men.<sup>112</sup> For by the end of the seventeenth century, what used to be a poetry of the mind had indeed been transformed into a mere game of word-association, the independent act of understanding into a passive appreciation of fancy. Most interestingly, however, unlike Donne, who “uses the terms employed by an astronomer, a lawyer, a tradesman,” whose poetic wit is a form of tough colloquial realism already characteristic of the “highly intelligent professional class,” and whose “first and most formative audience was made up of the young, literary, middle-class intellectual elite who, like Donne himself, were to become the leading professional men of the time,”<sup>113</sup> Donne’s later followers, both imitators and readers, were almost exclusively men of the court. Not only was Donne *not* a man of the court, evincing no sympathy whatsoever with the court as a cultural institution (no one, according to him, is “as proud, as lustful, and as much in debt, as vain, as witless, and as false as they which dwell at Court”<sup>114</sup>), he was, even more, “an outsider who speaks of the world of courtly and political preferment with all the vehemence of one whose expectations in that world... have been disappointed.” In short, Donne was the most representative of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century poets whose style was “indicative of the more general dissatisfaction... with the decadence (or what was presumed to be

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<sup>108</sup> Alvarez, p. 134.

<sup>109</sup> Alvarez, pp. 140, 136.

<sup>110</sup> Alvarez, pp. 141-142. This is in agreement with *The Poems of John Cleveland*, ed. Morris and Withington, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967, p. lxxv.

<sup>111</sup> Alexandre Beljame, *Men of Letters and the English Public in the Eighteenth Century 1660-1744*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, tr. E. O. Lorimer, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>112</sup> Richard Blackmore, *Satyr against Wit*, p. 7, ll. 124-125.

<sup>113</sup> W. Bradford Smith, “What is Metaphysical Poetry?”; Alvarez, pp. 160-161, 45. Cf. Lauro Martines, *Society and History in English Renaissance Verse*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 26 & ff; I. A. Shapiro, “The ‘Mermaid Club,’” *Modern Language Review*, vol. 45 (1950), #1, pp. 6-17.

<sup>114</sup> John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, ed. W. Milgate, Oxford, Clarendon, 1967, p. 14.



decadence) of a court society.”<sup>115</sup> And yet, by a strange inversion, his style became appropriated as a mannerism by the powerful elite, as a way of self-recognition and self-flattery, as an entry ticket into the exclusive society surrounding the court. The style of Donne’s poetry—more precisely, the perversion of his style—became a style of life of for the very people whom Donne had rejected and had tried to discourage from reading his “obscure” lines. His wit became their—English?—witticism, not merely a manner of speech, but an entire way of looking at, and operating in, the world.

Notwithstanding, therefore, what Donne’s wit had eventually become at the hands of others, de facto its own opposite, with one commentator calling it the “sublimation of the trivial,”<sup>116</sup> it would seem unfair to seek in Donne the cause of this later perversion. It is especially unfair given that the fashion of wit—the pose, the affectation—was also an outgrowth of the general licentiousness of the later seventeenth century, of its overreaction to the abortive experiment in republicanism and the austerity of Puritanism (“The nasal whine and sober dress of the godly,” says Wilson, “gave way to the careless laughter and gaudy plumes of the cavaliers... Sin, which had flourished openly in the days of James and Charles I, came jauntily out of hiding”<sup>117</sup>). But when Praz, for example, says that Donne’s “lyrical poems are not able to maintain the initial gusto” but tend to “degenerate into laborious and convoluted labyrinths of thought,”<sup>118</sup> he thereby does seem to insinuate as much. So does Winters when he claims how Donne “is given to over-dramatizing himself even to the point of dismal melodrama.”<sup>119</sup> Even more direct in his judgment is Alvarez, for whom “Donne’s own wit had made way for the deliberately obscure, degenerate wit of the writers of later strong lines.... Consequently, the Restoration critics viewed Donne from a very low eminence, and with the irrefutable hindsight of those who have seen the *reductio ad absurdum* of a style.”<sup>120</sup> According to Sharp, “the metaphysical tradition encouraged eccentricity, and in the hands of lesser poets it resulted in a poetry which could not grow further. It ended in the blind alley of its own extravagance.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, what we perceive in twentieth-century readers of Donne is an inclination, even if subtle, to comprehend the advent of Donne and the eventual defeat of the language of wit as the rise and fall of one and the same—though internally highly differentiated and even contradictory—tendency. And, in a way, they are right. Or, at least, they are right with respect to what the critics of wit thought at the time.

## V

Blackmore was by no means the only one, or even the first one, to assail wit in the name of sense, and to seek in its multiple forms its essentially perverse character. His was, in fact, merely the final onslaught, which removed once and for all the old language from

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<sup>115</sup> Peterson, *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne*, 1967, pp. 287, 170.

<sup>116</sup> John Palmer, *Comedy*, New York, George H. Doran, 1914, p. 33.

<sup>117</sup> Wilson, p. 3. Cf. J. W. Krutch, *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration*, pp. 24-47.

<sup>118</sup> Praz, *Secentismo e marinismo in Inghilterra*, Florence, La Voce, 1925, p. 102.

<sup>119</sup> Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English*, Chicago, Alan Swallow, 1967, p. 74.

<sup>120</sup> Alvarez, p. 164.

<sup>121</sup> Sharp, pp. 4, 57.

center stage. By his time, the die was cast, indeed the battle was in many ways already won, which is probably what allowed him to be so explicitly ideological and righteous in his attack. We find opposition to the language of wit already in John Locke, for example. Like Blackmore, he too traces the distinction between wit and sense (which he prefers to call “judgment”) to a distinction between two different kinds of man, or two different kinds of mind. More precisely, wit and judgment are for Locke two distinct powers of the mind that are rarely found together in the same person, since they are contrary. While judgment is, on his account, the power of the mind to discern among the several ideas impressed upon it by sensation, wit is the power to reach into the memory and put together, “with quickness and variety,” different ideas ready at hand. While judgment can tell us of the agreement or disagreement of our ideas with the “real” world, and prevent us from being “misled by similitude,” from taking “one thing for another,” wit does not concern itself with reality but only with “pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy,” i.e. with the fictions of our mind.<sup>122</sup> Consequently, “if we would speak of things as they are,” that is, “where truth or knowledge are concerned,” wit is good “for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment.”<sup>123</sup> Like all similes (i.e. the “aptness to jumble things together wherein can be found any likeness”) wit “always fail[s] in some part, and come[s] short of that exactness which our conceptions should have to things, if we would think aright.”<sup>124</sup> The reason why wit is acceptable to people, according to Locke, is that “no labour of thought” is required “to examine what truth or reason there is in it”; without looking any further, the mind “rests satisfied with the agreeableness of the picture,” the beauty of which “appears at first sight.”<sup>125</sup>

Hobbes, however, who was prior to Blackmore most vocal in his opposition to wit, influenced by far the greatest number of poets and critics in this regard. Recognizing that, in his time, men had come to admire wit more “than they do either judgment, or reason, or memory, or any other intellectual virtue,”<sup>126</sup> Hobbes was not satisfied merely to distinguish wit from these other faculties of mind, specifically from judgment, the way Locke would do, but was keen on redefining wit so as to include judgment as its essential part. Thus, we learn in the *Leviathan* that, in the case of poetry, wit ought not to be merely “celerity of imagining (that is, swift succession of one thought to another),” the way it had commonly come to be understood after Donne, but that it requires “a steady direction to some approved end”; more precisely, that “in a good poem, whether it be epic or dramatic, as also in sonnets, epigrams, and other pieces, both judgment and fancy are required.” On the other hand, in “demonstration, in counsel, and all rigorous search for truth,” i.e. in the non-poetic activities of the mind, where “the goodness consisteth in the method,” judgment alone must dominate. Thus, in the case of common discourse, or in the writing of history, for example, Hobbes found no place for fancy at all, except possibly in matters of slight embellishment—though he made sure to add how, in that

<sup>122</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, Bk. II, Ch. xi, §2, p. 156.

<sup>123</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. III, Ch. x, §34, p. 508.

<sup>124</sup> Locke, “Of the Conduct of the Understanding,” in *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*, ed. J. A. St. John, London, George Bell & Sons, 1905, v. 1, pp. 87-88.

<sup>125</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, Ch. xi, §2, pp. 156-157.

<sup>126</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, p. 70.

case, judgment is “commended for itself, without the help of fancy,” and that the reverse did not apply. In short, the point Hobbes made is that judgment “without fancy is [still] wit, but fancy without judgment, not.”<sup>127</sup> His conclusion, namely that if wit is to have any value whatsoever it must conform to judgment, was generally accepted by poets and critics such as Shadwell, Mulgrave, Dennis, Samuel Butler, and Robert Wolseley. Thomas Rymer, almost paraphrasing Hobbes, stated how “reason must consent and ratify whatever by fancy is attempted in its absence, or else ‘tis all null and void in law.”<sup>128</sup> Most radical was Dryden, however, who would eventually come to identify wit completely with judgment, and eliminate fancy from poetry altogether.<sup>129</sup>

Hobbes was, in fact, the first one to have seriously followed up on a distinction originally made by Bacon<sup>130</sup> between the mind’s capacity to observe differences and the capacity to observe resemblances, a distinction that would become essential in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critiques of wit, and thus in neo-classical literary criticism in general. As elaborated by Hobbes, this distinction would be taken up not only, as we have seen, by Locke and Blackmore, but also by Robert Boyle, William Temple, and especially Addison.<sup>131</sup> In *Human Nature*, for example, Hobbes speaks of the curiosity and the “quick ranging” of the mind, which leads it to compare things with one another, to find in seemingly dissimilar things “unexpected similitude,” or in things seemingly alike a “sudden dissimilitude.” The former capacity, namely fancy, generates “similies, metaphors, and other tropes, by which both poets and orators have it in their power to make things please or displease.” The latter capacity, namely judgment, is, on the other hand, “that by which men attain to exact and perfect knowledge.”<sup>132</sup> In *De Homine*, Hobbes makes a distinction, by now familiar to us from Blackmore and Locke, between two different kinds of people, and their different dispositions (“due to the mobility of the animal spirits”): on the one hand, there are the people of judgment, whose disposition “is suitable for resolving controversies, and for philosophy of all kinds (that is, for reasoning),” while on the other hand there are the people of fancy, whose dispositions is suitable “for poetry and invention.”<sup>133</sup> In a remarkable passage in “Answer to Davenant,” Hobbes presents judgment and fancy as two sisters born of memory, with judgment begetting the strength and structure of a poem, and fancy begetting merely its ornaments. While judgment, “the severer sister,” busies herself “in a grave and rigid examination of all parts of nature, and in registering by letters their order, causes, uses, differences, and resemblances” (note the change now: differences *and* resemblances), fancy on the other hand does not need to venture even a step outside herself, but “finds her materials at hand and prepared for use.” (“So that when she seemeth to fly from one Indies to the other, and from Heaven to Earth, and to penetrate into the hardest matter and obscurest places, into the future and into her self, and all this in a point of time, the

<sup>127</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. VIII, 1-10, pp. 38-40.

<sup>128</sup> Spingarn, v. 2, p. 185. Cf. p. 192.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, New York, Russell & Russell, 1961, v. 1, pp. 8, 107, 186, 190, 256, vol. 2, pp. 223-24. On Dryden’s admiration of Hobbes, see John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. O. L. Dick, London, 1975, p. 175. On the importance of judgment in Renaissance criticism prior to Hobbes, cf. Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1947, pp. 392-393.

<sup>130</sup> *Novum Organum*, Bk. I, Aph. 55 (Spingarn cites § lv)

<sup>131</sup> See *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, Nos. 58-63.

<sup>132</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, Oxford, Oxford UP, Ch. X, 5, pp. 61-62.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, tr. C. T. Wood, ed. B. Gert, New York, 1972, p. 63.

voyage is not very great, her self being all she seeks.”) Building on this distinction—which he will describe a few pages later as that between “knowing well” (judgment) and merely “knowing much” (fancy)—, Hobbes concludes that whoever undertakes to write a good poem “must not only be the poet, to place and connect, but also the philosopher, to furnish and square his matter, that is, to make both body and soul, colour and shadow of his poem out of his own store.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, here as in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes attempts to limit, as much as possible, the part played by fancy in poetic creation, by clearly distinguishing it from judgment, and by reverting to the older definition of wit as essentially intelligence (but now of the more empirical and utilitarian sort). He will in fact go so far as to say, in his preface to Homer’s *Odyssey*, that “the virtues required in an heroic poem, and indeed in all writings published, are comprehended in this one word, *discretion* [judgment].”<sup>135</sup> Hobbes thereby lays the groundwork for Restoration criticism, and it is not surprising that Spingarn will compare his position in England to that of Descartes in relation to French neo-classicism.<sup>136</sup>

Of course, what motivates Hobbes’s involvement in these matters, seemingly so distant from the themes he would eventually become known for, is his concern, like that of Bacon and Locke, with a serious employment of words, and not so much with poetry itself.—“It is almost necessary in all controversies and disputations,” says Bacon, “to imitate the wisdom of the mathematicians, in setting down in the very beginning the definitions of words and terms.”<sup>137</sup> “Let us look into the books of controversies of any kind,” urges Locke his reader, for “there we shall see that the effect of obscure, unsteady, or equivocal terms, is nothing but noise and wrangling about sounds, without convincing or bettering a man’s understanding.” It is mathematics, according to Locke, that can help us “abstract” or “disentangle” our minds from mere names, “from the cheat of words.”<sup>138</sup>—These statements are clearly in agreement with Hobbes’s own insistence upon clear definitions, and in conformity with his espousal of mathematics as a model of discourse. “True and false are attributes of speech,” Hobbes tells us, “not of things. And where speech is not, there is neither truth nor falsehood.”<sup>139</sup> Unlike reason, which is “the *pace* [i.e. movement forward, progress], increase of *science* [knowledge], the *way*, and the benefit of mankind, the *end*,” metaphors and other “senseless and ambiguous words” are, on the other hand, “like *ignes fatui* [a fool’s fire], and reasoning upon them is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities”; they are, therefore, “not to be admitted” in “reckoning and seeking of truth.”<sup>140</sup> Hence “a man that seeketh precise *truth*,” says Hobbes, “had need to remember what every name he uses stands for, and to place it accordingly, or else he will find himself entangled in words; as a bird in lime twigs, the more he struggles, the more belimed.”<sup>141</sup> He needs to keep in mind, in other words, that though knowledge cannot be without language, the language he uses must be “by exact

<sup>134</sup> In *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn, Oxford, Clarendon, 1908, vol. 2, pp. 59-60, 63.

<sup>135</sup> In *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, p. 67. On the equation of judgment and discretion in Hobbes, see *Leviathan*, Ch. VIII, 3, p. 38.

<sup>136</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1, p. xxviii.

<sup>137</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. ii.

<sup>138</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. iii, Ch. xi, §6, p. 510; *Ibid.*, Bk. iv, Ch. iii, §30, p. 561 (cf. §20, p. 552); Letter to Molyneux, Dec. 26, 1692, cited in Aarslef, “Leibniz on Locke on Language,” p. 166.

<sup>139</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. iv, 11, p. 18.

<sup>140</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. v, 20, pp. 26, 25.

<sup>141</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. iv, 12, p. 19.

definitions first snuffed [made clearer] and purged from ambiguity.”<sup>142</sup> What vexes Hobbes, besides metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures, are also words that, according to him, signify nothing (such as “hypostatical,” “transubstantiate,” “consubstantiate,” “eternal-now”), and for that reason he is particularly irritated by the scholastics. Betraying exasperation reminiscent of the kind felt by readers of certain contemporary theories, Hobbes cites Suarez and then asks: “When men write whole volumes of such stuff, are they not mad, or intend to make others so?”<sup>143</sup> Such complaints abound in Hobbes. In “Answer to Davenent,” for example, we read that “there be so many words in use this day in the English tongue, that though of magnifique sound, yet (like the windy blisters of a troubled water) have no sense at all, and so many others that lose their meaning being ill coupled, that it is hard to avoid them.” Then, as if referring directly to Donne and the poets of his type, he continues: “To this palpable darkness I may also add the ambitious obscurity of expressing more than is perfectly conceived, or perfect conception in fewer words than it requires. Which expressions, though they have had the honor to be called strong lines, are indeed no better than riddles, and, not only to the reader but also after a little time to the writer himself, dark and troublesome.”<sup>144</sup> He takes even Descartes to task for his imprecise use of language, for daring to think that one could ever speak meaningfully of a thing—even if it were merely a simple triangle, let alone the concept of, say, infinity—that does not *actually* exist (“If a triangle does not exist anywhere, I do not understand how it has a nature. For what is nowhere is not anything, and so does not have any being or nature”).<sup>145</sup> “There is nothing universal,” he says, “but names,”<sup>146</sup> and thereby further reduces the already rigorous Cartesian precept that only what is evidenced by our reason should be believed.

It is apparent, therefore, that Hobbes’s concern with speech, with language, and especially with wit, was motivated by a larger concern for perception, knowledge, and truth, which he claimed was not taken sufficiently seriously, or was ignored, in England at the time. Hobbes can be said to distrust language, because he distrusts traditional learning, not only that of the scholastics and of his philosophical contemporaries, but even that of the Greeks and Romans (“For words are wise men’s counters,” he says, “they do but reckon with them; but they are the money of fools, that value them by the authority of an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas, or any other doctor whatsoever, if but a man”<sup>147</sup>). The natural philosophy of the Greeks, says Hobbes elsewhere, “was rather a dream than science”). His favorite ancient author is, in fact, not a “thinker” at all, but a historian, Thucydides, who was more than anyone else in his time concerned with facts, with concrete causes and effects. Hobbes was such an empiricist and a nominalist (“there is no conception in a man’s mind which had not at first, totally or by part, been begotten upon the organs of sense”<sup>148</sup>), his world reduced to bodies and motions, his philosophy to science, that he conceived of language as a computation with words, strictly following

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<sup>142</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. v, 20, p. 26.

<sup>143</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. VIII, 27, p. 46.

<sup>144</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, p. 63.

<sup>145</sup> Hobbes’s objection to *Meditations*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984, vol. 2, p. 193. On infinity, *Leviathan*, Ch. III, 12, p. 15.

<sup>146</sup> *Human Nature*, Ch. V, 6, p. 36.

<sup>147</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. iv, 13, p. 19.

<sup>148</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. I, 2, p. 6.

the force of experience, of the five senses, and of arithmetical “reckoning.” Everything else he considered to be “mere sound.”<sup>149</sup> That he considered any discussion of God impossible, and that the language of theologians, of metaphysicians as much as of metaphysical poets, he found strongly suspicious, is only natural.<sup>150</sup> What is also natural, consequently, is that the distinctive feature of English poetry in the decades after Hobbes, i.e. of the poetry written under his domineering empirical bias, is its “abrupt abandoning of a conceptual vocabulary in favor of a sensory descriptive one.”<sup>151</sup> While descriptions of natural objects are, prior to Hobbes, “almost always... the tools of intellectual or spiritual argument,” where “thou and I and God are more important than the summer’s day, the flowers and the mountains,”<sup>152</sup> in the poetry after Hobbes they become almost an end in itself. “Beyond the actual works of nature,” Hobbes says, “a poet may now go; but beyond the conceived possibility of nature, never.”<sup>153</sup> Or, more to the point: “Resemblance of truth is the utmost limit of poetical liberty.”<sup>154</sup> And so already in 1650, even before Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, William Davenant criticizes Virgil for taking us “where nature never comes, even into Heaven and Hell... till by conversation with Gods and Ghosts he sometimes deprives us of those natural probabilities in story which are instructive to humane life.”<sup>155</sup> Poetry, says Dryden in 1668, “must resemble natural truth,”<sup>156</sup> and Joseph Warton praises a poet “for ‘new and original images which he painted from nature itself’ and which were more truthful than the observations of ‘poets who have only copied from each other.’”<sup>157</sup> This suspicion of all unnatural and unrealistic imagery led, in fact, to the descriptive poem becoming the central genre of English neoclassicism, and by 1701 there was nothing odd in issuing a call—in this case by Granville—for poetry to be cleansed of anything that could in any way distort the truth of material reality:

But Poetry in Fiction takes Delight,  
 And Mounting up in Figures out of Sight,  
 Leaves Truth behind in her audacious Flight;  
 Fables and Metaphors that always lie,  
 And rash Hyperboles, that soar so high,  
 And every Ornament of Verse, must die.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. IV, 21, p. 21.

<sup>150</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. XII, 7, p. 65.

<sup>151</sup> Josephine Miles, “Toward a Theory of Style and Change,” *JAAC*, v. 22, 1963, p. 64.

<sup>152</sup> Ray Frazer, “The Origin of the Term ‘Image’.”

<sup>153</sup> “Answer to Davenant,” p. 62.

<sup>154</sup> “Answer to Davenant,” p. 62.

<sup>155</sup> “Preface to Gondibert,” pp. 4, 2.

<sup>156</sup> “Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy,” in *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, vol. 1, New York, Russell & Russell, 1961, p. 121.

<sup>157</sup> Ray Frazer, “The Origin of the Term ‘Image’.”

<sup>158</sup> “An Essay Upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry,” in *Spingarn*, vol. 3, pp. 202-203. The descriptive poem does not imitate the ideal of nature, nor the nature of the artist’s soul, but nature as it (supposedly) is. It should therefore not be confused with classical *mimesis*, where the goal of the artist is for his work to correspond, as much as possible, to the ideal of truth in the Platonic sense. Nor should it be confused with the (“Christian”) idea of *mimesis* advocated, e.g. by Erasmus—the kind of “imitation that aids rather than hinders nature,” where the purpose is “not just adding to your speech all the beautiful things that you find, but digesting them and making them *your own*, so that they may seem to have been born from *your mind*.” Erasmus, “Cicernianus or A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking,” tr. Izora Scott in ead., *Controversies over the Imitation of Cicero*, New York, Teachers College, 1910, pt. 2, p. 123, emphasis added. See also Richard McKeon, “Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity,” *Modern Philology*, v. 34 (1936), #1, pp. 1-35.

What is important to realize, however, is that Hobbes bases his concern for clarity in language, and for truth, on a further and still more fundamental claim: namely that all subversion of language, and thus of truth, is at the same time a subversion of the state, and of the sovereign. Like most other things, language, too, is in Hobbes's view a mere means, and not an end in itself, as it is with the poet. Words can "charm the weak and pose the wise," says Hobbes, they can gain "reputation with the ignorant," they can "deceive by obscurity."<sup>159</sup> All metaphors, all senseless, ambiguous, and obscure words, have "for their end," according to him, "contention and sedition, or contempt."<sup>160</sup> Hobbes again takes the example of the scholastics ("Ecclesiastics, by certain charms compounded of metaphysics and miracles, have been accustomed to take from young men the use of natural reason, so that they would obey their commands blindly"<sup>161</sup>), though his fear is more general, namely the susceptibility of the mind to fall, through linguistic manipulation, under the control of others. Having conceived of man as a creature driven by intense egoistic passions, Hobbes sees in all ambiguities of language sites of potential conflict, opportunities for demagogues, for various religious and other "enthusiasts" and fanatics, to further their own aims at the expense of the established order. That poetry, at a time when prose writing, as an art form, was yet to appear and when most other arts, besides being non-linguistic, were in any case considered inferior, would attract such attention from Hobbes is thus not surprising. For behind the images that poetry conveys, just as behind the very surface of a seemingly peaceful society, may lie anarchy, violence, and savagery. Not only should poetry thus make sure to educate men in the virtues necessary for a peaceful civic society, but, as Mazzeo remarks, "it should also be written in an 'exemplary' language, one reflecting social standards of civilized restraint in expression and thought. Wit and judgment, fancy and clear thought, had to be blended in just those proportions that would please a reasonable, sober, urbane man without violating his sense of reality."<sup>162</sup> In that sense, Hobbes can himself be seen as participating in a struggle over the minds of men, over the habits of their thought, with the meaning of words—and his theory of language in general—as his weapons. What, after all, is his discussion of wit, if not an attempt to steer the opinion of his contemporaries? By trying to infuse the meaning of "wit" with judgment, he is being more "subversive" than Locke, who is content merely to carve out for judgment a domain free of wit. While insisting on the scientific character of his reasoning, Hobbes is in fact engaged in a distinctly rhetorical struggle, and his own frequent use of similes and metaphors attests to that. (What after all is the Leviathan, according to Hobbes, if not one big "fiction of the mind," thought out in terms of analogies with God's creation of nature, with the parts of the human body, with pieces of machinery, etc?). The last thing Hobbes wanted poetry to do was to ravish its readers, and so Hobbes made sure, in his turn, to instill in his own readers, at every occasion and in terms most plastic and colorful, the Dantean horrors of upsetting the calm of the placid, ordinary citizen. No wonder, then, that the greatest virtue of the work Hobbes praised so much, William Davenant's *Gondibert*, is—at least when read today—its *virtus dormitiva*.

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<sup>159</sup> *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, p. 63; *Leviathan*, Ch. VIII, 27, p. 46.

<sup>160</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. V, 20, p. 26.

<sup>161</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. XLVII, 20, p. 487.

<sup>162</sup> Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, New York, Pantheon Books, pp. 237-238.

## VI

Quentin Skinner is correct to say that *Leviathan* is a “belated but magnificent contribution to the Renaissance art of eloquence.” After attempting in his *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* “to challenge and overturn the central tenets of the *ars rhetorica*,” Hobbes, in “consequence of brooding in the 1640’s about the causes of the English Civil War,” returns, according to Skinner, to his youthful “deep absorption in the rhetorical culture of Renaissance humanism” in order “to revise his views about the place of rhetoric in public debate.”<sup>163</sup> Victoria Silver goes so far as to call Hobbes’s work “a science of words, not of facts,” and a form of “verbal engineering.” According to her, Hobbes’s “resolute, even perfected simplicity of statement,” his “deceptively inconspicuous discourse,” and “his uncanny talent for credible expression,” allows him completely to mask the artifice of his own rhetoric, to “camouflage his constant verbal contrivance,” and so “to create the formal *semblance* of axiomatic truth and disinterested inquiry,” the “verbal *facsimile* of truth.”<sup>164</sup> This rhetorical struggle, one very much utilizing metaphor and ambiguity, pitting scientific discourse against poetry, satire, and oratory, did not pass unnoticed by contemporaries. In almost all contemporary attacks on Hobbes, says Samuel Mintz, “there is an undercurrent of resentment against the general excellence of his style.”<sup>165</sup> Even Locke, whose writing was considerably more somber than that of Hobbes, was taken to task for it. For example, in an imaginary dialogue written by Matthew Prior, Montaigne is made to confront Locke on that very issue: “And you make similes while you blame them. But be that as it will, Mr. Locke, arguing by simile is not so absurd as some of you dry reasoners would make people believe.”<sup>166</sup> Finally, prior to both Locke and Hobbes, Francis Bacon, that most prominent propagator—if not the father—of the scientific method, and a great critic of rhetoric (“eloquence and other impressions of like nature, which do paint and disguise the true appearance of things”<sup>167</sup>), in reality involved rhetoric quite intimately with science, not merely “externally,” in order to obtain acceptance for science in society at large, but “internally” as well, in the very need of science to communicate facts to itself.<sup>168</sup> It has been suggested, in fact, that Bacon practiced several styles of writing, each used

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<sup>163</sup> *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 2-3, 4, 257, 431.

<sup>164</sup> “The Fiction of Self-Evidence in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *ELH*, vol. 55 (1988), pp. 351-379, emphasis added. Cf. David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1986; Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1985, ch. 6.

<sup>165</sup> *The Hunting of Leviathan*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1962, pp. 37-38.

<sup>166</sup> *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, ed. H. B. Wright and M. K. Spears, Oxford, 1959, vol.1, p. 625. On Locke’s employment of rhetoric, see Peter Walmsley, *Locke’s Essay and the Rhetoric of Science*, Bucknell, Pa., Bucknell UP, 2003. On Locke’s rhetoric in his political writing, see Theodore Redpath, “John Locke and the Rhetoric of the Second Treatise,” in H. S. Davies, ed., *The English Mind*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1964, pp. 55-78. For Locke’s own views on rhetoric, see Wilbur Samuel Howell, “John Locke and the New Rhetoric,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 53 (1967), pp. 319-333.

<sup>167</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, ed. Spedding, p. 382. Cf. *De augmentis*, II, ii, 428.

<sup>168</sup> This is ably argued in Paolo Rossi, *From Magic to Science*, tr. S. Rabinovitch, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, esp. the last three chapters. See also John Briggs, *Francis Bacon and the Rhetoric of Nature*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1989, esp. pp. 150-174; Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse*, Cambridge, 1974, chs. 9-13; Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1968, pp. 141-201, 211-231; *idem*, “Bacon’s Use of Theatrical Imagery,” in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 1971, #1, pp. 189-226; and Karl Wallace, *Francis Bacon on Communication and Rhetoric*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1943.



according to the occasion, in an attempt “to seduce the intellectual community into the movement on behalf of the advancement of learning.”<sup>169</sup> What this flirtation of seventeenth-century English empiricists, and of Hobbes in particular, with rhetoric reveals, at least for our purposes here, is only the extent to which they conceived of wit or fancy, and ultimately of imagination in general, as a threat to their project. So much so that even rhetoric, that age-old enemy of science and philosophy, of true knowledge and, more recently, of peace and order, was therefore to be enlisted in the service of defeating it. Hobbes relied here undoubtedly on Bacon, whom he served as personal secretary in his youth, and who himself conceived of imagination as a distorting or an “enchanted” mirror, an obstacle to the mind’s perfect reflection of the world. According to Bacon, what we call imagination is really a result of man’s inability to understand the natural world, of the tendency of the mind to deceive itself about the true nature of things, to trick itself into believing its own dreams and phantoms.<sup>170</sup> As such, imagination, unlike reason, is not bound to things as they are, but unites them and separates them at will, completely disregarding the integrity of the images provided by the senses.<sup>171</sup> It is thus “ungovernable,” it “usurps” authority for itself, setting “reason to nought” and offering it nothing but “violence.”<sup>172</sup> Imagination deforms reality, it corrupts reason (it is a “venom which the serpent [of the Garden of Eden] infused into it”), and which must be “discharged” if knowledge of things is to be possible.<sup>173</sup> In the hierarchy of the scientific method (“that derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all”<sup>174</sup>), which ought to lead to “inevitable conclusions,”<sup>175</sup> Bacon left no room whatsoever for imagination. The fact that (1) science actually does rely heavily on imagination (witness the anthropomorphism implicit in thinking of falling stones as “obeying” the “law” of gravity, or of metaphors such as “the heart is a pump,” “light is a wave,” “nature is a machine”), especially when it comes to constructing physical models and formulating effective working concepts, i.e. when it comes to bridging the gap between perception and understanding, as well as the fact that (2) Bacon underestimated the role of hypothesis, and never asked himself how axioms are actually arrived at, which might have led him to reconsider the role of imagination, are not of interest to us here.<sup>176</sup> What is important, instead, is that his view was largely inherited by Hobbes, who would make it the dominant attitude toward imagination in seventeenth century England, and the bearer of a new understanding and evaluation of poetry, indeed of a new aesthetics.

It is true, of course, that imagination had always been suspect, even before Hobbes and Bacon. Plato had, in fact, inaugurated the long tradition of distrust in it, especially so in

<sup>169</sup> James Stephens, *Francis Bacon and the Style of Science*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp.

<sup>170</sup> See *Advancement of Learning*, pp. 285-289, 394-395; *Novum Organum*, I, 41, 47, 109.

<sup>171</sup> “A Description of the Intellectual Globe,” in *Philosophical Studies*, ed. Graham Rees, Oxford, Clarendon, 1996, pp. 97-98.

<sup>172</sup> *Of the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, ed. Spedding, 1889-1892, IV, 406.

<sup>173</sup> *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan, Oxford, Clarendon, 2006, p. 106; *Distributio Operis*, in Spedding, v. 1, 131.

<sup>174</sup> *Novum Organum*, Book I, aph. 47.

<sup>175</sup> *The Great Instauration*, p. 20.

<sup>176</sup> By using the example of Galileo, Thomas Young, Einstein, Bohr, and Fermi, Gerald Holton has demonstrated the presence, in fact, of *three* kinds of imagination—visual, metaphoric, and thematic—in the process of scientific discovery. *Einstein, History, and Other Passions*, Woodbury, NY, American Institute of Physics, 1996, pp. 160-184. See also Ernan McMullin, “Enlarging Imagination,” *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie*, v. 58 (1996), #2, esp. pp. 252-259.

his earliest dialogues. Aristotle, too, whose treatment of imagination in *De anima* was less prejudiced, appears not completely comfortable with it, concluding how “imaginings [*phantasiai*] are for the most part false.”<sup>177</sup> We find the same distrust in the Stoics and, though admittedly to a lesser extent, in the Neoplatonists. The entire tradition of Christian teaching, starting with Augustine and including the Scholastics, considered imagination inferior to intellect and a source of illusion. The same is true of the moderns as well. The belief that fetal deformity was caused by the mother’s imagination had its origin, for example, as early as Empedocles, but was still seriously considered throughout the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.<sup>178</sup> “I am one of those,” writes Montaigne in the sixteenth century, with a tone of confession, “by whom the powerful blows of the imagination are felt most strongly. Everyone is hit by it, but some are bowled over. It cuts a deep impression into me: my skill consists in avoiding it, not resisting it.”<sup>179</sup> And this age-old unease with imagination is, in modernity, extended and formalized, built into the very worldview of the modern age. Thus, after initial enthusiasm for imagination in his early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes turns against it in his mature work, *A Discourse on the Method*, and especially in the first, second, and the sixth meditations. Not only does he claim there that imagination leads us away from truth (it is at best a merely reproductive power, rather than a productive one, and at worst it is the “evil genius” that casts doubt over all of our knowledge), but he even excludes it from the very essence of man, qualifying its presence merely as a result of the mind being joined to the body. Imagination, says Malebranche, following on the heels of Descartes, “continually interrupts the mind,” it “casts an obscuring pall over all the soul’s ideas,” it excites “unruly desires,” it corrupts the heart, it “upsets and scatters.”<sup>180</sup> It is “a fool who is pleased to be the fool,” “a madwoman in a house of reason” (*la folle du logis*).<sup>181</sup> “Those who have a strong and vigorous imagination,” he writes, “are completely unreasonable,” are “enemies of reason and common sense.”<sup>182</sup> It is thus “necessary to silence the imagination.”<sup>183</sup> Pascal, Condillac, and Voltaire all write in the same vein. Pascal calls imagination the “proud, powerful enemy of reason,” and the “mistress of error and falsehood.”<sup>184</sup> For Condillac, madness is nothing but an imagination which associates “the most disparate ideas.”<sup>185</sup> As for Voltaire, he speaks of a tendency of imagination—one especially common to *le bas peuple, le peuple ignorant*, and animals—to “assemble incompatible objects,” to act independently of reflection and to manipulate the will.<sup>186</sup> Not much different are the views of Spinoza (*On the Improvement of the Understanding*), or Leibniz (*New Essays in Human Understanding*), or Hume (*A Treatise of Human Nature*). According to Locke, “Madness seems to be nothing but a disorder in

<sup>177</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, tr. D. W. Hamlyn, Oxford, Clarendon, 1993, 428a, 11-12, p. 54.

<sup>178</sup> See Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1993.

<sup>179</sup> *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, tr. and ed. M. A. Screech, London, Allen Lane, 1991, p. 109.

<sup>180</sup> *Treatise on Ethics*, tr. Craig Walton, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, pp. 127-133.

<sup>181</sup> *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, tr. D. Scott, ed. N. Jolley, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, p. 4. Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, New York, Coventry House, 1932, vol. 1, p. 124.

<sup>182</sup> *The Search After Truth*, tr. Lennon and Olscamp, Columbus, Ohio State University, 1980, pp. 161, 166.

<sup>183</sup> *Treatise on Ethics*, p. 127.

<sup>184</sup> *Pensées and Other Writings*, tr. Honor Levi, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 16-17.

<sup>185</sup> Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, tr. Hans Aarsleff, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 34-35, also pp. 30, 57, 58, 64.

<sup>186</sup> “Imagination, Imaginer,” in Diderot et al., *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences des Arts et des Métiers*, Stuttgart, Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1967, v. 8, pp. 560-563.

the imagination.”<sup>187</sup> In short, then, the fact that Bacon and Hobbes were distrustful of imagination should not, in and of itself, surprise us at all; the opposite should, in fact, be the case. They stand squarely within a tradition, one that would find perhaps its most memorable expression in Shakespeare’s identification of the poet with the lunatic, in whom imagination is the common denominator (cf. *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*, 5. 1. 2-8).

And, yet, Bacon and Hobbes did inaugurate a shift of no small importance within this tradition. It is true, for example, that Plato’s distrust of imagination was emphatic, and yet we still see in some of his work—in the *Ion*, the *Meno*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Apology*—a concession to the power of imagination to recall to the mind the eternal forms of beauty. In fact, in one of his late dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, Plato gives imagination the upper hand over reason, and is “quite exceptionally conscious of the value of the imaginative, as against the rational, power of the human soul.”<sup>188</sup> If Aristotle will lend his ambivalent view of imagination to Christian teaching, we should recall that “the Philosopher” also granted imagination a distinct epistemic role, as an intermediary between sense and thought, and that he was followed in this by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. With the Renaissance, on the other hand, with Ficino, Bruno, and Paracelsus, we witness the first attempts to transcend the passive role assigned to imagination by the scholastic “faculty psychology,” and to conceive of it as a productive power. For Dante, Mazzoni, Tasso, or Ronsard, imagination is not only an instrument of truth, a mere messenger, but a power that allows man to grasp the essence of things. Is the *Divine Comedy* not itself, one may ask, an early monument to the idea that poetry, namely imagination, offers privileged access to what lies beyond this world and beyond human life? One need only have a look at *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, austere founder of the Jesuits, to see the extent to which imagination was revalued by the middle of the sixteenth century. There we are asked “to see in imagination the synagogues, towns and hamlets through which Christ our Lord went preaching,” to see “in imagination the road from Bethlehem, in its length and breadth” (“Is it level or through valleys or over hillsides?,” we are asked; is the place of the Nativity “spacious or cramped, low or high? How is it furnished?”), even to imagine hell by seeing it, hearing it, smelling it, and feeling it as if we were there ourselves.<sup>189</sup> A similar tendency can be discerned in Renaissance England. George Puttenham, for example, not long before the time of Bacon and Hobbes, would claim that imagination (the “phantasticall part of man”) presents “the best, most comely, and beautiful images or appearances of things to the soul and according to their very truth.” It presents “visions, whereby the inventive part of mind is so much helped, as without it no man could devise any new or rare thing.” Not only is “a feigned matter” more pleasing, according to him, but it “works no less good conclusions for example then the most true and veritable: but often times more, because the poet hath the handling of them to fashion at his pleasure.”<sup>190</sup> According to Sidney, the poet, in so far as he “couples the general notion with the particular example,” and in so far as he frames “his example to that which is most reasonable,” manages to

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<sup>187</sup> *Journals: 1675-1679*, ed. Dewhurst, London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963, p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> R. Hackforth, in the introduction to *Phaedrus*, London, Cambridge UP, 1972, p. 61.

<sup>189</sup> Tr. T. Corbishley, London, Burns & Oates, 1973, pp. 42, 47, 36.

<sup>190</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. G. D. Willcock and Alice Walker, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1936, p. 19.

illuminate higher truths (“by the speaking pictures of poesie”) than, say, the historian, who is “so tied... to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draws no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.” Unlike the philosopher, who “shows you the way,... informs you of the particularities, as well as of the tediousness of the way,” the poet “does not only show the way, but gives so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it.” Unlike the philosopher, whose “knowledge stands so upon the abstract and general,” and who “teaches, but teaches obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him,” the poet, on the other hand, “is the food for the tenderest stomachs.” It is thus the poet, according to Sidney, who is “of all sciences... the monarch,” who is “peerless,” and who is in reality the “right popular philosopher.” Poetry, in turn, “is of all human learning the most ancient and of most fatherly antiquity, as from whence other learnings have taken their beginnings.”<sup>191</sup> According to Chapman, poetry is not “fantastic or mere fictive; but the most material, and doctrinal illations of truth.” It is in the very imagination of the poet, he says, that “truth builds.”<sup>192</sup> And according to Fulke Greville, poetic imagination does not merely imitate the world but “makes” a world, “shows nature how to fashion herself again” by “framing” ideas and “raising” entire structures “on lines of truth.”<sup>193</sup> Finally, when Shakespeare speaks, in *Much Ado*, of the recollection of a loved woman (“The idea of her life shall sweetly creep / Into this study of imagination...”), the memory of her is an idea filled with life (“And every lovely organ of her life / Shall come apparell’d in more precious habit / More moving-delicate and full of life / Into the eye and prospect of his soul / Than when she lived indeed”). It is in the “studious” imagination of her lover, according to Shakespeare, that this woman will live more “moving-delicate and full of life,” it is in his imagination that she will be living *more*, more intensely, than when she was alive. In short, what we witness leading up to and around the time of Bacon and Hobbes is an increasing willingness to recognize the creative power of imagination in its own right, and its intimate relationship with truth. What we witness in Bacon and Hobbes, on the other hand, is an attempt to counter this tendency. Bacon and Hobbes are not adopting the traditional distrust of philosophy towards imagination, and towards poetry and wit in particular, as a mere formal element in their work, a homage to the profession. Distrust of imagination is, instead, at the very core of their thinking, permeating the furthest reaches of their work. This is particularly true for Bacon, who, in that regard, is more severe than Plato himself. Bacon’s entire opus—an opus that is conceived really as an outline of a vast interdisciplinary project that surpasses the abilities and lifetime of any single researcher, namely the project of restoring reason to man—is necessitated, in Bacon’s view, by the corruption of reason by the imagination. Unlike Puttenham or Sidney, for whom poetry was a form of knowledge—in fact, the highest possible knowledge—, for Bacon poetry ceases to be knowledge at all (“poesy is as a dream of learning,” “imagination hardly produces sciences,” “the understanding must not therefore be supplied with wings, but rather hung with weights, to keep it from leaping and flying”<sup>194</sup>), and is relegated to mere frivolous play (“For as all knowledge is the exercise and work of the mind, so poesy may be

<sup>191</sup> Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, pp. 32-40, 48.

<sup>192</sup> *The Poems of George Chapman*, ed. P. B. Bartlett, London, Oxford UP, 1941, pp. 407, 386.

<sup>193</sup> *Poems and Dramas*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1945, vol. 1, p. 182.

<sup>194</sup> De augmentis, in *Works*, ed. Spedding, vol. 4, p. 336 (Book III, Ch. i); De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum, in *Works*, 1900, vol. 9, p. 62 (Book V, Ch. i); *Novum organum*, 1<sup>st</sup> book of aphorisms, # civ.

regarded as its sport”<sup>195</sup>). If the power of poetry to evade nature and create a world of its own was for them praiseworthy (Sidney: “Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with vigour of his own invention, does grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature”<sup>196</sup>), for Bacon this was the very reason for its condemnation. *Contra* Aristotle, Bacon infused poetry completely with imagination (and, because of this, could be praised by a misguided and shortsighted reader, who might think poetry benefited thereby), but took away from imagination everything that ever lent it dignity. “All depends,” Bacon says, “on keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature and so receiving their images simply as they are. For God forbid we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world.”<sup>197</sup> Like no other thinker before him, Bacon downgraded the human mind in relation to nature, more so than the scholastics ever did in relation to God; he made it subservient to it.

In fact, rather than being merely at the core of Bacon’s thinking, distrust of imagination seems to have been at the core of his very being—something that could certainly not be said of, say, Montaigne, Pascal, or Voltaire, or even Hobbes. “There is never any indication,” writes L. C. Knights, “that Bacon has been *moved* by poetry or that he attaches any value to its power of deepening and refining the emotions.”<sup>198</sup> Here is a man who thinks, we are told, “in terms of prose rather than poetry”:

He is uninterested in imaginative detail—in that concrete visualization of thought, as in the myths of Plato, or in Dante, which in a flash transcends rational processes. Bacon is interested in the image merely as the visible symbol of a rational concept. He would have preferred Aesop to Plato, and the *Pilgrim’s Progress* to *Paradise Lost*. In Bacon one deals with a thinker who, from the first to the last is a rationalist.<sup>199</sup>

In Bacon we find, Mazzeo tells us, “the utter absence of romantic sentiment.” In fact, he continues, “it is hard not to be somewhat amused when Bacon humorlessly points out that young men need women to take care of concupiscence, middle-aged men need them for company, and old men need them as nurses.... The simple fact about Bacon is that he was completely unresponsive to the heroic, whether to the great lover, the noble warrior, or to the magnificent rebel.”<sup>200</sup> Where does this peculiar sensibility come from? It is hard to answer this question in merely intellectual terms. But if we are pressed to venture a response, we could say that, in the final analysis, being “the work of the imagination,” poetry, according to Bacon, is “concerned with individuals,” and this, it seems, is its gravest and unforgivable error, the one thing that makes it so repulsive to him. By being concerned with individuals, poetry places itself in direct confrontation with philosophy which, on the other hand, “being the office and work of reason,” Bacon contends, “discards individuals.”<sup>201</sup> Unlike poetry—which is “concerned with individuals invented in imitation of those which are the subject of true history”—and which in fact

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<sup>195</sup> *Works*, ed. Spedding, vol. 5, p. 503.

<sup>196</sup> Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1966, p. 23.

<sup>197</sup> The Great Instauration. “Plan of the work,” in *Works*, IV, pp. 32-3.

<sup>198</sup> *Explorations*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1958, p. 105.

<sup>199</sup> M. W. Bundy, “Bacon’s True Opinion of Poetry,” pp. 254, 257.

<sup>200</sup> Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution*, p. 207.

<sup>201</sup> *De augmentis*, II, i (*Works*, IV, p. 292).

“commonly exceeds the measure of nature, joining at pleasure things which in nature would never have come together, and introducing things which in nature would have never come to pass”—unlike poetry, then, philosophy does not “deal with the impressions immediately received from them [individuals], but with the abstract notions derived from these impressions.”<sup>202</sup> The fact that poetry, and imagination in general, is concerned with the individual, and that philosophy “discards” the individual and substitutes him with “abstract notions,” with impersonal techniques, with a method, is, in fact, not only Bacon’s central idea, but a central idea of the entire century lying at that hazy boundary between the “pre-modern” and the “modern” era. Says Warhaft:

If the mind is “an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture,” if man is plagued by “dullness, incompetency, and deceptions of the senses,” if there is “no soundness in our notions whether logical or physical,” and if truth is gauged simply by fruits and works, then the whole realm of the subjective—feeling, intuition, wish, desire, fantasy—everything that makes up the inner self, has to be abandoned. Imagination especially, because it makes “unlawful matches and divorces of things” and is not tied to laws of matter, disappears into the questionable shadows of fancies and vanities. As for the major product of imagination, poetry, it too is suspect and becomes at best a kind of didactic tool, a “Feigned History” used “to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it.” In Bensalem [Bacon’s utopian city described in *New Atlantis*] there is excellent poetry, says Bacon, but this “excellence” seems to invest little more than occasional hymns and rhymed religion. As for the other arts, they get no mention whatsoever in brave New Atlantis, and in Bacon’s other works they receive short and derogatory notice. Thus the puritanical tyranny of things forces the abandonment of one whole side of life in the interest of usefulness and certainty, and the artist is cut off by “inclosures of particularity” from the only truth and reality that matter to him. To achieve the “real truth” one must not “devise mimic and fabulous worlds of [his] own, but to examine and dissect the nature of this very world; must go to facts themselves for everything.”<sup>203</sup>

And, according to Knights:

What Bacon ignores completely is the creative and vital forces of the mind itself; and it is relevant to notice the inadequacy and barrenness of his reflections in the *Essays* (they are naturally not much considered in the *Advancement*). In the essays, “Of Parents and Children” and “Of Marriage and Single Life,” for example, he reduces personal relations to schematic generalizations, handling them almost entirely from the “public” point of view. Although the tenth essay is headed, “Of Love,” it is mainly concerned with the dangers attending “the mad degree of love,” which in turn becomes confused with normal sexual feeling, for this too seems to come under the head of “weakness” or “folly.” And not only does Bacon in this essay refuse to admit the validity of subjective estimates of worth—“It is a strange thing to note the excess of this passion, and how it braves the nature and value of things, by this, that the speaking in a perpetual hyperbole is comely in nothing but love”—he seems to think it possible to compartmentalize one’s feeling and actions: “They do best, who, if they cannot but admit love, yet make it keep quarter, and sever it wholly from their affairs and actions of life.” This by itself would not have much significance (though Bacon was accustomed to weigh his words). But the whole trend of Bacon’s work is to encourage the relegation of instinctive and emotional life to a sphere separate from and inferior to the sphere of “thought” and practical activity.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> De augmentis, II, i (*Works*, IV, p. 292).

<sup>203</sup> Sidney Warhaft, “Science Against Man in Bacon,” *Bucknell Review*, vol. 7, #3, 1958, pp. 170-171.

<sup>204</sup> Knights, *Explorations*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1958, pp. 107-108.

Besides Bacon's abandonment of the realm of the subjective and the creative, but also that of the private, so well perceived here by Warhaft and Knights, there is still one more important consequence, however, to the radical split between philosophy and the individual. Namely, if we could ever speak of the "essence" of imagination, then it would have to be the imagination's dissatisfaction with things as they are. Its *raison d'être* is precisely to be unsatisfied with reality, to think of the ways that reality could be but is not, or of the ways in which reality is essentially wanting. When a poet creates his work, for example, he seeks to bring about a world such as does not exist anywhere, and perhaps cannot exist anywhere, but ought to exist. He creates an artificial existence, but one no less real, to make up for this lack. In that particular (ontological) sense, every poet, every artist, every man that imagines, is a rebel, and goes against the existing order, the existing routine, pattern, method, or opinion; he goes against the current. As Bacon himself admits, "imagination, which, not being bound by any law and necessity of nature or matter, may join things which are never found together in nature and separate things which in nature are never found."<sup>205</sup> But Bacon's entire life-effort, both as a thinker and as a statesman, was spent precisely in devising ways in which order, i.e. law and necessity—both that of nature and of the monarchical state—could be respected and protected. Hence, all forms of unpredictability, arbitrariness, and spontaneity, and, most importantly, the primacy of the individual to evaluate *his own* experience, were seen by Bacon not only as enemies of reason and knowledge, but of the very project of human rehabilitation after the Fall. Imagination is for Bacon, in McCreary's words, "that tempter which seduces men to think that things are *as they want them to be* instead of as God has made them and as they are in fact."<sup>206</sup> Indeed, what arrogance! This "desire to control and exert power over human experience"<sup>207</sup> is one of the most fundamental facts of the English seventeenth century. After Christianity had long enjoined upon him the conquest of the flesh, the Englishman, or at least Bacon, set out to conquer nature, but this had to be done only through a parallel conquest of the mind. "For however men may amuse themselves, and admire, or almost adore the mind," says Bacon, "it is certain, that like an irregular glass, it alters the rays of things, by its figure, and different intersections."<sup>208</sup> The fundamental flaw of the mind, according to Bacon, is that it bears "reference to man and not to the universe."<sup>209</sup>

This distrust of imagination, and thus of human subjectivity and creativity more generally, is present in seventeenth century England both in major and in minor thinkers. Locke, for example, the defender of individual rights and one of the founders of liberalism, had an opinion of imagination and of poetry, of art itself, that was even more disparaging than that of Bacon. As in Bacon, only at the other end of the century, this was more than a mere philosophical position—the fact that, for example, he made "no provision for

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<sup>205</sup> *Descriptio Globi Intellectualis*, Ch. i (Works, vol. X, p. 404)

<sup>206</sup> E. P. McCreary, "Bacon's Theory of Imagination Reconsidered," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, v. 36 (1973), #4, pp. 317-326.

<sup>207</sup> E. P. McCreary, "Bacon's Theory of Imagination Reconsidered."

<sup>208</sup> *The Great Instauration*, "Distribution of the work," in Devey (ed.), *The Physical and Metaphysical Works of Lord Bacon*, 1901, p. 15.

<sup>209</sup> *The Advancement of Learning*, V, ch. 4, in Devey, p. 207.

aesthetic values”<sup>210</sup>—, but rather part of a deeper sensibility. One of Locke’s biographies says that in his journal, Locke recorded “only bare and mostly dull facts,” and that he was “surprisingly unperceptive.” He “had no gift for describing natural beauty, no sense of history, and his immediate response to splendid architecture was to measure the building and leave it at that.”<sup>211</sup> Elsewhere we read even harsher pronouncements. According to Willey, it is questionable whether “any kind of philosophy has ever been, in all its implications, more hostile to poetry than that of Locke and his school.”<sup>212</sup> Locke went so far, in fact, as to advise parents to have the poetic talent of their children “stifled and suppressed as much as may be,” adding that “it is to me the strangest thing in the world that the father should desire or suffer” this talent “to be cherished or improved.”<sup>213</sup> Nor did Locke have a better opinion of other arts: “Music I find by some mightily valued,” he says, “but it wastes so much of one’s time to gain but a moderate skill in it, and engages in such odd company, that I think it much better spared. And amongst all those things that ever come into the list of accomplishments, I give it next to poetry the last place.”<sup>214</sup> Like architecture, therefore, which Locke evaluated from the standpoint of size, and like poetry, which he evaluated from the standpoint of a profitable career, music too is “measured” solely in terms of its social value, as a skill, an opening onto a particular milieu, an accomplishment. Like architecture devoid of its architectonics, and poetry of its poetics, music too is emptied by Locke of its content, and approached with a completely extrinsic and unsubtle standard of judgment. It is thus not surprising that his language reflects the same blandness of character and, according to George Saintsbury, “for almost the first time makes English prose positively *mean* in every point of style, and in rhythm most of all.” English prose, says Saintsbury, “had stammered and shown lack of the rudiments; it had been incorrect, gaudy, unequal, awkward, dull. But it had never, in the hands of a man of anything like Locke’s powers, so fulfilled the words of that very intelligent patriarch, Photius, seven centuries before, when he said that the use of merely straightforward periods brings style down to flatness and meanness.”<sup>215</sup> Even more drastically, Robert Burton, the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and himself a rather imaginative type, identified imagination (*ratio brutorum*, animal reason) as the cause of madness, even of death, but also of phantoms, apparitions, incubuses, fantastic beings, monstrous births, obsessive affections, migraines, dizziness, apoplexy, stroke, cramps, convulsions, catarrhs, rheums, revelations, visions, lycanthropy, hydrophobia, etc.<sup>216</sup> Thomas Browne, the author of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), the aim of which was to inquire into the origin and nature of “vulgar and common errors,” saw imagination as subject to the work of Satan himself. According to Browne, the very first error ever made, the error from which all others stem, was the error committed by Adam and Eve. Imagining that they could be like God, but falling prey to Satan speaking through the serpent, i.e. “deceived through the conduct of their senses, and by temptations from the object itself,” Adam and Eve were “so weakly deluded in the clarity of their perception,”

<sup>210</sup> E. L. Tuveson, *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism*, Berkeley, University of Californian Press, 1960, p. 77.

<sup>211</sup> Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography*, London, Longmans, 1959, p. 163.

<sup>212</sup> Basil Willey, *The English Moralists*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1964, p. 204.

<sup>213</sup> “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” in *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. J. L. Axtell, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1968, p. 284.

<sup>214</sup> Letter to Edward Clarke, 1 September, 1685, in *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, p. 358.

<sup>215</sup> *A History of English Prose Rhythm*, London, Macmillan, 1912, p. 299.

<sup>216</sup> *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961, vol. 1, pp. 159-160, 253-258.



that “they first transgressed the rule of their own reason” and subjected it to a beast. Consequently, due to the “the common infirmity of human nature,” human understanding is, according to Browne, “perverted by sensible delusions” and “impaired by the dominion of... appetite,” thus allowing “the irrational and brutal part of the soul” the upper hand “over the sovereign faculty.”<sup>217</sup> Writing in 1656, under the influence of Burton, Meric Casaubon also saw in imagination the source of psychological disturbance.<sup>218</sup> Joseph Glanvill dedicated a chapter of his *Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661) to showing the deceptive nature of imagination: “we err and come short of science,” he claimed, “because we are so frequently misled by the evil conduct of our imagination, whose irregular strength and importunity doth almost perpetually abuse us.”<sup>219</sup> In the 1664 preface to the same work, Glanvill opposed “toyishness of wanton fancy” and “the caprices of frothy imagination” to “manly spirit and genius, that plays not tricks with words.”<sup>220</sup> Condemning “imaginary ideas of conceptions,” conceptions “that are [in] no way answerable to the practical ends of life,” Thomas Sprat (1667) extolled the experimenter who, he says, “invents not what he does out of himself, but gathers it from the footsteps and progress of nature.”<sup>221</sup> And even Henry More, the most mystical of the Cambridge Platonists, the sworn enemy of Hobbes and materialism, published a work in 1662, in which he denounced imagination as a dangerous form of “enthusiasm,” a mental disease, a deadly antagonist to reason (“By *Reason* I understand so settled and cautious a composure of Mind as will suspect every high-flown and forward fancy”<sup>222</sup>), one closely allied to atheism. More’s writing, in turn, influenced Jonathan Swift’s censure of “enthusiasm” in *Tale of a Tub*, and that of John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>223</sup>

Baconian distrust of imagination found its full expression, however, in Hobbes’s identification of imagination, or fancy, with judgment. Unlike Bacon before him, or Locke after him, Hobbes did not want merely to relegate imagination to poetry, to give it its own little playground, under the condition that it stayed there and did not bother the mind when the latter was engaged in more important, “rational,” “scientific,” truth-acquiring pursuits. Hobbes could not allow for any autonomous regions of the mind that might serve, sometime in the future, as potential breeding grounds of sedition and fracture. Like the state itself, the mind had to be one, subject to one main purpose, clearly in the control of one center, namely judgment, with all regions of the realm fully transparent and answering to it. Hobbes therefore pulled imagination back into the cognitive process, from its exile in poetry and rhetoric, only now to equate it with memory. Imagination was now, according to him, a “decaying sense,” decaying not in

<sup>217</sup> *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins, Oxford, Clarendon, 1981, pp. 5-9, 15-21.

<sup>218</sup> *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme*, Gainesville, Fla., Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970, pp. 115-17.

<sup>219</sup> *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, Hove, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1970, Ch. xi.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Sprat, pp. 26, 334.

<sup>222</sup> *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, Los Angeles, W. A. Clark Memorial Library, 1966, p. 38. Cf. Frederic Burnham, “The More-Vaughan Controversy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 35 (1974).

<sup>223</sup> Cf. Michael Heyd, “*Be Sober and Reasonable*”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995, esp. pp. 89-108, 185-86, 197-202; Phillip Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism*, Chicago, 1961, pp. 54-6, 58, 62-5, 68-9, 73-5, 96-8, 103-4, 122-6, 143; “Swift and Some Earlier Satirists of Puritan Enthusiasm,” *PMLA*, v. 48 (1932), #4, 1141-1153.

that it is corrupt, but in so far as the objects of sense are no longer present.<sup>224</sup> It now registered, reflected, combined, it imaged, and in poetry it embellished. Depriving poetry of its monopoly on imagination, granted to it by Bacon, and depriving imagination of its creative power, granted to it by Sidney, Puttenham, and other Renaissance poets and critics, Hobbes now formally inaugurated a sensibility that would dominate England well into the eighteenth century. (As late as 1774, Alexander Gerard, in his *Essay on Genius*, could write: “The imagination produces an abundance of glaring, brilliant thoughts; but not being conducive to any fixed design, nor organized into one whole, they can be regarded only as an abortion of fancy, not as the legitimate progeny of genius.”<sup>225</sup>) We say formally, because the authority of no single man is sufficient to instill a sensibility in an entire people, in so many diverse regions of its activity, and for such a long time, even if Hobbes, with the strength of his conviction, his rhetorical flair, his obsession with definitions, his genius for simplification, and his long life, came closer to it than perhaps any other modern thinker. The fact is, as Basil Willey puts it, that in England “the whole philosophic movement of the [seventeenth] century told against poetry,”<sup>226</sup> and it was Hobbes who gave it its most intelligent and lasting form.

For nearly two hundred years after *The Advancement of Learning*, until Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, this—at best passive, merely reproductive, though commonly disparaging—view of imagination remained dominant. What a shock it must have been, therefore, at the end of the eighteenth century, to read that synthesis “is the mere result of the power of imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever.”<sup>227</sup> The imagination, to use a well-known metaphor, finally ceased to function as a *mirror* reflecting external reality, and became a *lamp* projecting its own light. Meaning ceased to be a property of things, and became a product of the human mind. But, then again, this was an insight which, at least in some respects, in Fichte, Hegel, and Marx, in Schiller and the Romantics, later in the Existentialists, betrayed profound unease with the way society had developed since the seventeenth century and which aimed to transcend it. We should, therefore, take a closer look at this peculiar sensibility that seems to have defined England in the century of Hobbes, and which sealed the fate of the men such as John Donne.

## VII

In an essay written in 1920, T. S. Eliot made an interesting observation related to our present discussion. According to him,

with the end of Chapman, Middleton, Webster, Tourneur, Donne, we end a period when the intellect was immediately at the tips of the senses. Sensation became word and word was sensation. The next period is the period of Milton (though still with a Marvell in it); and this period is initiated by Massinger. It is not that the word becomes less exact. Massinger is, in a wholly eulogistic sense, choice and correct. And the decay of the senses is not inconsistent

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<sup>224</sup> *Leviathan*, ch. II, 3, pp. 8-9; *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, p. 27. Cf. *idem*, *Physics*,

<sup>225</sup> “An Essay on Genius,” in Scott Elledge, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1961, v. 2, p. 886.

<sup>226</sup> *The Seventeenth Century Background*, New York, Columbia UP, 1958, p. 291.

<sup>227</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 112.

with a greater sophistication of language. But every vital development in language is a development of feeling as well. The verse of Shakespeare and the major Shakespearean dramatists is an innovation of this kind, a true mutation of species. The verse practised by Massinger is a different verse from that of his predecessors; but it is not a development based on, or resulting from, a new way of feeling. On the contrary, it seems to lead us away from feeling altogether.<sup>228</sup>

Eliot elaborated on this point a year later. Speaking of Donne, he noted that

the poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the *Country Churchyard* (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the *Coy Mistress*.

Further qualifying this transition, Eliot added:

It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.<sup>229</sup>

Now, the idea of a unified sensibility should not, as such, be attributed to Eliot. In one form or another, we encounter it already in Wordsworth, in Shelley, in Coleridge, or Poe, or in critics such as Joshua Reynolds or Herbert Grierson. Rémy de Gourmont, a critic and the leader of the French Symbolist movement, and a dedicated student of Nietzsche, cites Goethe and Mozart as cases in point.<sup>230</sup> The significance of Eliot lies rather in his effort to identify in English history the moment of transition, around the time of Milton, between the typically unified sensibility and a typically dissociated one—the latter, in his view, having since then remained dominant. It is this transition, according to Eliot, a transition that was rather sudden, that accounts for the fact that one must have a different approach to the literature written up to the middle of the seventeenth century, and to that written since then, for they are two different kinds of artifacts, created by two different kinds of men. In the case of Milton, it means the necessity of reading the work such as *Paradise Lost* at least twice: “first solely for the sound, and second for the sense,” once for the verse, and once for the meaning, the two not being tied naturally anymore but by

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<sup>228</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950, pp. 185-186.

<sup>229</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 247. Cf. *idem*, “Milton II,” in *On Poetry and Poets*, 1957.

<sup>230</sup> “Subconscious Creation,” in *idem*, *Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas*, New York, 1921, pp. 188-208. Cf. T. R. Rees, “T. S. Eliot, Rémy de Gourmont, and Dissociation of Sensibility,” in *Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Waldo F. McNeir, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 1962, pp. 186-198.

force.<sup>231</sup> This particular insight was soon followed by Herbert Read's, who identified the breakdown in Milton of "the emotional apprehension of thought" present in Donne, resulting in a "dualism" that would plague poetry for a long time ("His thought was a system apart from his poetic feeling," he "merely expounded thought in verse").<sup>232</sup> And a few years later, Middleton Murry, undoubtedly with an earlier poet like Donne in mind, expressed his surprise "that a poet so evidently great," such as Milton, "should have so little intimate meaning for us. We cannot make him real. He does not, either in his great effects or his little ones, touch our depths. He demonstrates, but he never reveals. He describes beauty beautifully; but truth never becomes beauty at his touch."<sup>233</sup> What Eliot, Read, or Murry had in mind was, in short, a distinction between the poetic immediacy of a Donne and the heavy, lifeless, and stylized poetry of a Milton a few decades later. "It surely could be agreed," says Ian Robinson more recently, "that if we put together Shakespeare's tragedies and the [English] Bible, belonging to the same decade and the same language, we have an *association of sensibility* which generations of readers have found to be the characterizing expression of the genius of the English language. Only fifty years after the Bible and the Folio Shakespeare sensibility, or the language, had changed so drastically that both were of the old, vanished, unreproducible world." To convey the force of this change, and the way it affected careers of single authors, Robinson takes the example of Marvell, in whose poems of the 1650s, he says, "one still sees the Shakespearean association of sensibility," but who just a decade later "fell in verse into comparative triviality."<sup>234</sup> In fact, even though the thesis of dissociation was first elaborated by Eliot, we encounter critics already at the close of the nineteenth century who noticed that in the English seventeenth century "a merely intellectual poetry finally overcame a poetry in which emotion always accompanied thought."<sup>235</sup> Not only did English literature in the seventeenth century require "a prose which conformed to the true law of prose," said Matthew Arnold, but moreover it "compelled poetry... to conform itself to the law of prose likewise."<sup>236</sup> In that sense, "though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are," according to Arnold, "not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose."<sup>237</sup>

We, of course, need not subscribe to this view in all of its aspects. For one thing, historical change, in any form of human practice, is much more complex than "moments" of transition can explain. If anything, such moments should be conceived only as unusually intense periods, or unusually complex intersections, of otherwise longer developments, which in turn are pregnant with unusually diverse possibilities. Neither did Bacon sprout out of nowhere, nor were poets before Donne, like Petrarch or Virgil, immune to the offense Eliot ascribes to Milton. In other words, one need not be committed to the exact dating, down to a poem, of Eliot or Read, and certainly not to

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<sup>231</sup> T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, London, Faber and Faber, p. 143.

<sup>232</sup> Herbert Read, *Reason and Romanticism*, Faber and Gwyer, 1926, pp. 35, 51-52.

<sup>233</sup> *Studies in Keats New and Old*, London, Oxford UP, 1930.

<sup>234</sup> "Prose and the Dissociation of Sensibility," in *From Donne to Marvell*, ed. Boris Ford, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 264, 267-268.

<sup>235</sup> S. A. Brooke, *English Literature*, London, Macmillan, 1896, p. 115.

<sup>236</sup> "Johnson's Lives" (1881), in *id.*, *Essays in Criticism: Third Series*, Boston, The Ball Publishing Co., 1910, p. 212.

<sup>237</sup> *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, London, New York, Macmillan, 1888.

their critical agendas at the time, to their own tastes and preferences, in order to agree that the seventeenth century in England was, in certain respects, a watershed in poetry or, more generally, in the way people approached literature and the human mind. That the particular conception of imagination as something that corrupts reason, as a failure to control one's passions, even a sickness, must have had and, in fact, did have consequences for language is something that we have tried to show above, especially in relation to poetry. One need not be a primitivist, longing wistfully for the Middle Ages, when man was supposedly whole and integrated, and spoke in verse, in order to recognize the dramatic impact this shift has had on man's conception of reality and of himself. It is, therefore, not an accident that no other period of history has subsequently met with such a violent backlash and resentment from poets themselves than the seventeenth century and what it stood for. In his *Jerusalem*, for example, Blake facetiously makes reason exclaim: "I am God, O sons of Men! I am your Rational Power! Am I not Bacon and Newton and Locke who teach Humility to Man, who teach Doubt and Experiment?"<sup>238</sup> "May God us keep," he bids elsewhere, "from single vision and Newton's sleep!"<sup>239</sup> Keats, in turn, declares how he is "certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affection and the truth of the imagination,"<sup>240</sup> and, alluding to Newton's *Opticks*, writes these memorable lines:

Do not all charms fly  
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?  
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—  
Unweave a rainbow.<sup>241</sup>

This feeling that the seventeenth century deprived poetry of its ancient dignity, and especially of its epistemic worth (after all, Bentham found poetry, very much like Stalin's general Zhdanov, worth no more than a pushpin), is shared by Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Lamb, Campbell, Poe, and others. "No man was ever yet a great poet," Coleridge lashed back defiantly, "without being at the same time a profound philosopher,"<sup>242</sup> while Wordsworth insisted that poetry was "the most philosophic of all writing."<sup>243</sup> For the former, imagination was the "shaping spirit," "the living power and prime agent of all human perception," the "reconciling and mediatory power" that in itself incorporates reason.<sup>244</sup> For the latter, imagination "Is but another name for absolute power / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason, in her most exalted mood."<sup>245</sup> It is in the same vein that Shelley declared, in his *Defence of Poetry*, that

<sup>238</sup> *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 1966, p. 685. See also p. 707.

<sup>239</sup> *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 46.

<sup>240</sup> *The Letters of Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1958, v. 1, p. 184.

<sup>241</sup> "Lamia," in *John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1990, pp. 320-321.

<sup>242</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1983, ch. 15.

<sup>243</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, Oxford, Clarendon, v. 2, p. 394.

<sup>244</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. J. Beer, London, Dent, 1986, p. 282; *Biographia Literaria*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1983, vol. 1, p. 304; *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, Princeton UP, 1972, p. 29.

<sup>245</sup> *The Prelude*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, London, Oxford UP, 1933, Bk. 13, Conclusion, ll. 189-192, p. 233.

“reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.”<sup>246</sup> And it is in that same vein that Yeats despised the growing culture of “shopkeeping logicians.”<sup>247</sup> So strong, in fact, was the vengefulness and fear of the poets regarding the encroachment of the spirit of the seventeenth century, of Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke (and of Newton), that they increasingly started to insist on the prerogatives of poetry in distinction to that of science. “It is never what a poem *says* which matters, but what it *is*,” claimed Richards, and rightly so.<sup>248</sup> But instead of bringing back to life in this way the old glory of poetry, the poets only confirmed the separation of imagination and “poetic truth” from understanding and science—“One power alone makes a poet,” said William Blake, “imagination, the divine vision”<sup>249</sup>—until they completely isolated themselves in the idea of *l’art pour l’art*, and of poetic language as a purely formal, self-referential one. “Poetry admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant and unpoetical,” says F. R. Leavis of the Victorian age (but really passing judgment on the twentieth century as well), “and that no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal.”<sup>250</sup> For, after all, who today can deny that poetry has lost its audience, that it strikes most people as a mere relic of past times, a minor element of culture that demands too much labor from the reader for the amount of knowledge, insight, entertainment, or social prestige, it affords? Who can deny that we no longer think in terms of poetry, that it does not come to us as naturally as prose, that we do not experience the world poetically? “We live prose, we breathe prose, and we drink, alas, prose,” complained one author more recently.<sup>251</sup> A poem, says a classic English textbook in philosophy, “tells us, or should tell us, nothing.”<sup>252</sup>

It is, then, this fundamental change in the relationship to truth, one that the seventeenth century experienced more than perhaps any other, which marked the fate of the poetry of John Donne. In terms of actual knowledge, Donne was a very educated man for his time. In his *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England*, F. R. Johnson claims that Donne was more knowledgeable in astronomy than Bacon, for example.<sup>253</sup> It is actually quite astonishing how *little* Bacon knew. He appears to have been completely ignorant of some of the most important discoveries of his time, and when he did know of them, he actually denied their verity. “It is the absurdity of these opinions,” he claimed, “that has driven men to the diurnal motion of the earth, which I am convinced is most false.”<sup>254</sup> Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood, Napier’s logarithms, Gilbert’s *De Magnete*, even the work of Archimedes and Apollonius, were, for one reason or another, *terra incognita* to him.<sup>255</sup> It is quite likely that Donne also knew more mathematics than Bacon, whose knowledge was quite scant in that field as

<sup>246</sup> *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley*, ed. R. J. White, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1953, p. 199.

<sup>247</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, London, Macmillan, 1972, p. 207.

<sup>248</sup> I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry*, London, Kegan Paul, 1935, p. 31.

<sup>249</sup> *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, p. 782. See also pp. 775, 776.

<sup>250</sup> *New Bearings in English Poetry*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1954, p. 15.

<sup>251</sup> William Logan, “Poetry: Who Needs It?,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 15, 2014, SR 5.

<sup>252</sup> Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, London, 1949, p. 158.

<sup>253</sup> Baltimore, 1937, pp. 245-246. On Donne’s familiarity with contemporary science, see Charles Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, New York, Columbia UP, 1937. Also M. H. Nicolson, *Science and Imagination*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1956, pp. 46-57.

<sup>254</sup> See Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1974, p. 77.

<sup>255</sup> See James Spedding, “Preface to the De Interpretatione Naturae Prooemium,” in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. *idem* et al., vol. 3, 1870, pp. 510-517.

well. Donne was, in fact, thirsty for knowledge to the extent that Bacon never was. “No contemporary, on the face of his writings, both secular and sacred,” says Hiram Haydn, “possessed a wider learning or a livelier intellectual curiosity and virtuosity than Donne.”<sup>256</sup> And, yet, it is Bacon who is considered one of the fathers of modern science, a prophet of modernity, while Donne, his contemporary, the last vestige of medievalism (we should recall that the reason why T. S. Eliot liked Donne was not because Donne was modern, but because he found Donne to be pre-modern). For Donne’s main interest, unlike that of Bacon, lies not in the world in its own right, but in *his own* experience of that world. The world, no matter how vastly conceived by Donne, is for him only a background for the vicissitudes of his own life and of the lives of those around him, those close to him, those that *meant* something to him. It is a majestic frame that exhausts its purpose in the objects that it frames. Consequently, Donne approaches nature, the “external” world, without the submissive piousness of Bacon, who merely desired to reflect it, but with an almost blasphemous playfulness which treats nature as a function of his own desires, intentions, and moods. It is in that sense, if in any at all, that Donne goes “meta” nature, earning him the title of a “metaphysical” poet. Donne betrays nature, he is not its slave.

This particular relationship to nature results in the fact that Donne treats knowledge and argument quite differently than Bacon or Bacon’s follower, and not nearly as seriously as they do. Unlike them, who try—even if not always with much success—to extricate science from magic, invention from scholastic “cobwebs,” truth from medieval lore, Donne seems to rejoice in the diversity of the forms of thought, and to treat them with an equal respect, or disrespect, quite frivolously. Copernicus, holy fathers, poetic fancy, all share the same world, that of Donne, and are all there at his disposal, for the sake of the effect he is trying to create. His choice of them at any given time is aesthetic and personal, and not scientific and impartial. He judges his performance by the level of virtuosity he achieves, and by the effect on the reader, rather than by a necessary external standard. The coherence is his own, and not of the world. Consequently, the arguments embedded in his poems are, in a way, a mockery of arguments, for they neither take their own ideas seriously, nor do they apply to them the logic of the world as it is, the only relevant logic being that of the poem in question. If anything, Donne seems to be wonderfully amused by the ways in which he can conceal a logical error, give coherence and even necessity to unreality, make the impossible seem true. As Frank Kermode says, “arriving at the point of wit by subtle syllogistic misdirections, inviting admiration by slight but significant perversities of analogue, which re-route every argument to paradox,” Donne’s poems “depend on our wonder outlasting our critical attitude to argument.”<sup>257</sup> And, frankly, is there not something perverse about building an entire structure of theses, antitheses, and syntheses, of various distinctions and sub-distinctions, of bringing in stars, meteors, and Aristotle, merely in order to bring attention to and flatter, say, one woman’s breasts? “The highest powers of the mind” are in Donne’s poetry “put to base use,” says Kermode, “but enchantingly demonstrated in the process.”<sup>258</sup> Even if that might not have been his actual intention, Donne was thus

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<sup>256</sup> *The Counter-Renaissance*, Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith, 1966, p. 111.

<sup>257</sup> *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*, New York, The Viking Press, 1971, p. 121.

<sup>258</sup> *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne*, New York, The Viking Press, 1971, p. 122.

making a highly intelligent mockery of the seriousness with which the new science was approaching the world; and not only the world, but human reason as well. At the time when Thomistic confidence in reason, at least in its capacity to grasp the divine, had been shaken, if not shattered—by Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Nicholas of Cusa, and more recently by Luther and Calvin, and by the rediscovery of Pyrrho of Elis—, and yet before confidence in one rational and moral god could be replaced by confidence in one law-abiding natural world, and in the human key to it in the form of the scientific method—in that disorienting interval we conveniently call the “waning of the Middle Ages” appeared Donne who built into his work the elements of the old and the new.<sup>259</sup> Skeptical by now of the received learning, but not yet fully convinced by the new one, he used reason in a way that undermined its rationality.

It has been commonplace to mark this age of Donne’s life—namely, the age between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the age that, as we have seen, is conspicuously fuzzy even in literary history, and whose only distinction appears to be that it lies *between* ages—as an age of crisis. (“It sometimes seems as if the seventeenth century,” writes Ivo Schöffer, “wedged between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, has no features of its own. With Renaissance and Reformation on the one side, Enlightenment and Revolution on the other, for the century in between we are left with but vague terms like ‘transition’ and ‘change.’”<sup>260</sup>) Ever since G. N. Clarke it has been common to refer to the seventeenth century as a watershed.<sup>261</sup> Whitehead and other historians of science have early on drawn attention to the spiritual aspect of this crisis, to its secularization of consciousness, and the substitution of the *vita activa* for the *vita contemplativa*.<sup>262</sup> Alexandre Koyré has focused on the elimination from science of all considerations based upon value-concepts, such as perfection, harmony, aim, etc., and the divorce of the world of value and the world of facts.<sup>263</sup> Eric Hobsbawm has brought attention, on the other hand, to the economic aspect of this crisis, especially in England, and Hugh Trevor-Roper to its “political” aspect, the crisis in relation between society and the state.<sup>264</sup> More recently, Jared Israel has argued that neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation (both of which he qualifies as “really only adjustments, modifications to what was essentially still a theologically conceived and ordered regional society”) had transformed European consciousness to the extent that the “unprecedented turmoil” of the mid-seventeenth century had.<sup>265</sup> And Jan de Vries, writing over a half a century after Hobsbawm, gives general support to the latter’s thesis.<sup>266</sup> What the many works dealing with this issue<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, New York, Oxford UP, 1981, pp. 231-260.

<sup>260</sup> “Did Holland’s Golden Age Coincide with a Period of Crisis?” in G. Parker and L. M. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1978, p. 83. Cf. Niels Steensgaard, “The Seventeenth-Century Crisis,” in *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>261</sup> *The Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1929, ix.

<sup>262</sup> A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925. Cf. E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, New York, 1925; J. H. Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, Boston, 1926.

<sup>263</sup> *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press.

<sup>264</sup> Both reprinted in Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*, Garden City, NY, 1967.

<sup>265</sup> *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, Oxford, 2001, pp. vi, 1-17.

<sup>266</sup> “The Economic Crisis of the Seventeenth Century After Fifty Years,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, v. 11, #2, 2009, pp. 151-194. Cf. Niels Steensgaard, “The Seventeenth-Century Crisis and the Unity of Eurasian History,” *Modern Asian Studies*, v. 24, 1990, p. 684.

<sup>267</sup> For a bibliography, see Philip Benedict and Myron P. Gutmann, eds., *Early Modern Europe: From Crisis to Stability*, Newark, Del., 2005, pp. 25-30. For a critical discussion, see Miroslav Hroch and Josef Petrán, *Das 17.*



tend to leave out, however, even though their thesis is generally correct, is the more personal aspect of the crisis, the way the crisis was experienced by individuals living in this period of time. Even though intellectual turmoil, overproduction, and increased state bureaucratization might very well have taken place, it is quite natural that the individual did not necessarily, or at all, experience the crisis in those terms themselves. Considered from the “subjective” standpoint, what characterized this age most distinctly, more than any other before it, more even than the fifteenth century, was a certain sense of the wretchedness of man’s condition. Within a few decades alone, roughly corresponding to the relatively short life of Donne, the entire world seemed to crumble and nearly everything lost its meaning, and it is this more than anything else that pierced the consciousness of contemporaries. After all, the life of the late Elizabethans, we should recall, was marked by the experience of an essential unity of creation, an extraordinarily complex order in which everything, regardless of how small and humble, or vast and majestic, had its designated place and purpose, and its dignity. This was not merely a highbrow conception, but a deep-seated assumption that permeated the life of every individual in his or her relationship to their body and mind, and to people and nature around them. What also characterized this order was an essential interdependence of its parts, where nothing, save for God himself presumably, had any meaning apart from everything else. The individual too was, in that sense, inconceivable in his own right, solely by himself, but derived his function and meaning only from his relation to entities both near and far, animate and inanimate, most complex and most primitive. It is, therefore, not as eccentric as it might seem at first sight that Donne would connect his beloved and the stars, that he would so easily move between the most diverse elements of creation. “It is too little to call Man a little World,” says Donne in his *Devotions*: “Man consists of more pieces, more parts, than the World... The whole world hath nothing, to which something in man doth not answer.”<sup>268</sup> There perhaps may be no words as beautiful and memorable, in fact, as these of Donne that convey to us this fundamental assumption which defined Elizabethan times as much as those of the Middle Ages:

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls, may be so ill, as that he knows not if it tolls for him; and perchance I may think my self so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The Church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head which is my head too, and engrafted into that body, whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: All mankind is of one Author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another: As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon preacher only, but upon the congregation to come; so this bell calls us all... If we understand aright the dignity of this bell, that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours, by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours, as well as his, whose indeed it is... Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet

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*Jahrhundert—Krise der Feudalgesellschaft?*, Hamburg, 1981, esp. pp. 11-61, and Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change & Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2013, esp. pp. 1-25.

<sup>268</sup> John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Penguin Books, 1987, pp. 104-105.

when that breaks out? who bends not his ear to any bell, which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell, which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends, or of thine own were; Any death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.<sup>269</sup>

Like the last and beautiful spark at the very end of an entire epoch, of a seeming eternity, before it was all to shatter into a thousand pieces never to be joined together again, what do these noble words have in common with, say, those of Hobbes? For only several decades later, it should be recalled, Hobbes would speak for his contemporaries of a world in which men are naturally antagonistic, whose natural state of life is one of war of all against all, one characterized fundamentally by “continual fear and danger of violent death,” making the life of each man “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>270</sup> How is it then possible that these two men, Donne and Hobbes, could ever have shared the same century, and that their lives could even have overlapped? This is, in fact, a fundamental question of European history, and not only of the seventeenth century, or of political thought. What is extraordinary about the seventeenth century, however, and what interests us here, is the conspicuous coexistence of these opposing standpoints, making this indeed an age of crisis *par excellence*. The significance of Donne, moreover, is that in his work we perceive the subtle realization of this crisis unparalleled in any other poet of the time, with the possible exception of Shakespeare. Both as a poet and as an individual (as if the two could be separate!), Donne embodies a heightened sensitivity to the conditions then obtaining—among which were likely those elaborated upon by Hobsbawm, Trevor-Roper, and others—, with the effect of heightening for him the tensions already existing in the basic assumptions of his worldview. This refers, most of all, to the idea of the inevitable corruption of man—corruption which was built into the general order of things, but which was until then kept at bay through piety and trust in God’s benevolence—, but which idea could not but awaken in the individual his deepest fears and incline him to resignation when faced with unfavorable circumstances. This is the origin of the extraordinary phenomenon of early seventeenth-century (or Jacobean) melancholy, an attitude that would—just like his relationship to nature and knowledge—distinguish Donne sharply from Bacon, Hobbes, or Locke, indeed from “modernity” itself.

It is clear even to a superficial student of history that the seventeenth century was marked by unusual turmoil. “During the early part of the Renaissance in England,” says Cameron Allen, “we come on man universally merry for the last time in the modern world. He dresses like a gamecock and like Chanticleer calls up the sun with his crowing. He struts in the lanes of London in bower and in hall; and he delights to make grand spectacles at which he is both the observer and the observed.” Then, continues Allen, “suddenly it is all over. There was no noise, no tumult; it was an apocalyptic end. One day they were eating and drinking and listening to the lute, and the next day they

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<sup>269</sup> John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Penguin Books, 1987, pp. 125-126.

<sup>270</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. XIII, pp. 74-78.

were struck with infinite despair.”<sup>271</sup> The end of the sixteenth century had already set the stage, however, for dissensions hiding behind the seeming calm of a universal order. This order, it should be recalled, referred not only to the natural world, and to the relationship between the individual, God, and the Church between them, but, just as importantly, to human society and the institution of government as well. Religious controversies instigated in the sixteenth century, the aftershocks of the Reformation, the questioning of the established faith as much as of the divine right of kings, even the humanistic bliss of the Renaissance, with its renewed stress on the beauty, the pleasure, and the significance of this world rather than of the heavenly one, all came to haunt the seventeenth century. While their various effects are too many even to name let alone to survey, it is only one effect that is of concern to us here. What distinguished the first decades of the seventeenth century, perhaps more than anything else, was the awareness of the profound and increasing disparity between appearance and reality: the appearance of the spirit and the reality of the world, the appearance of belief and the reality of truth, the appearance of good and the reality of evil. Theodore Spencer has argued convincingly that this disparity is, indeed, a necessary key to understanding the conception of character in, as well as the dramatic structure, and the language and imagery, of *Hamlet* as well as of other major works of Shakespeare, especially *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Troilus and Cressida*.<sup>272</sup> Wherever one turned—or so it seemed to the man of the early seventeenth century—the old medieval antitheses between the body and the soul, between man’s ignorance and the vastness of truth, the antitheses upon which the very foundations of medieval metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics were built, seemed to sharpen and even become absolute. What this man came to perceive, most of all, was the intensification of the ancient antithesis, long kept in a precarious balance, between order and mutability. It is this antithesis, of all the others, that seemed to sum up best his experience, and one that seemed most capable of explaining his current condition. Instead of addressing this or that “sphere” of the order (because regardless of which one of them was affected, the fact that they were so closely related, so involved with one another, meant that the destruction of one resulted in the destruction of them all)—instead of addressing them, therefore, separately, the idea of the mutability of the world served as a means for a comprehensive diagnosis. Thus, as early as 1576, the English poet George Gascoigne writes his *Drum of Doomsday*, in which he revives the idea of the increasing corruption of man, and therefore of the entire material world, and at least a dozen other authors also address this issue in England before the close of the century. It is in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, however, that the literature of this type—literary, philosophical, theological, “scientific”—reaches its peak.<sup>273</sup> What is common to it all is the idea that the Fall of man is not merely a fall from original perfection, as it is typically conceived within Christian doctrine, but a continual process of deterioration that affects both human morality as well as nature as far as the heavens. So dramatic, in fact, were the changes in the world in which these men lived that, within the course of those several decades, we see them turning every stone for signs of decay which could explain and justify their situation. Man, they believed, was becoming increasingly weaker and shorter in stature, his diseases more virulent, his life shorter in length. Nature

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<sup>271</sup> “Style and Certitude,” *ELH*, v. 15 (1946), #3, p. 167.

<sup>272</sup> “Hamlet and the Nature of Reality,” *A Journal of English Literary History*, vol. 5, #4, 1938.

<sup>273</sup> See Victor Harris, *All Coherence Gone*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 87, 149-150.

experienced more earthquakes, continents were breaking up into islands, seas and rivers were becoming more violent, forests were disappearing, mountains were wearing down, monsters were increasingly turning up, the soil was becoming less fruitful and its fruits less nutritious, wood was given to rotting, wheat was covered in mildew, brass became tarnished and iron rusted. Heat, cold, wind, were all becoming intemperate and unseasonable, famine and plague were overtaking entire populations. (Interestingly enough, it has been shown that the seventeenth century did in fact go through what has, since then, been termed a Little Ice Age which affected both mortality and food production.<sup>274</sup> The price of food, for example, rose between 1500 and 1640 by an entire 644%.<sup>275</sup>) Worst of all, the corruption of man, having reached such unprecedented levels, infected the rest of the universe as well, reaching even beyond the earth. What had been conceived as far back as Aristotle as immutable and incorruptible, the one constant in man's life upon which the entire created order was founded, the one thing that man could always look to for reassurance, namely the heavens, themselves finally succumbed to the rot spread by man. Tycho Brahe and Galileo, less as scientists and more as diagnosticians, broke the news to the world that changes were now taking place even in the celestial regions, and not merely in the immediate surroundings of the earth. What a shock it must have been to learn that the earth was no longer the only center of motion, that Jupiter, too, had its satellites, and that even the Sun, which used to stand for perfection, was blemished by spots! All this, and finally the inevitable and imminent end of the world, was caused—they held—by the sinfulness of man, the perversion of his judgment, his wickedness, vanity, dissolute passions, his self-love and insatiable ambition. Men would “rather go with music to the gallows,” writes the noted naturalist Edward Topsell, “then with mourning to a sermon: they choose rather to go singing to hell, then weeping to heaven.” And Thomas Adams, the “Shakespeare of the Puritans,” declares pithily: “We are sick of sin, and therefore the world is sick of us.”<sup>276</sup> “Avarice,” “covetousness,” “dishonest gain,” “the exceeding luxuriousness of this gluttonous age” in which “all things are put to sale,” when even “honour is bought with gold,” are some of the recurring reasons cited for this downward spiral of man after the Fall.<sup>277</sup> In what little regard man was held at the turn of the seventeenth century is perhaps best conveyed by the playwright John Marston, who saw the earth, once the pride of the universe, as “the only grave and Golgotha wherein all things that live must rot; ‘tis but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption; the very muckhill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements.”<sup>278</sup> Originally created for man, the universe has thus turned against him, and will bring him down together with its own self-destruction. Never again will an era be so skeptical of man's worth, so pessimistic of his prospects, so fundamentally unsure of man's place in the world. Never again will man ponder his own death in such depth. Never will he, in fact, ponder it again. It will cease to be his own, a part of him.

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<sup>274</sup> Jan de Vries, “Measuring the Impact of Climate Change on History,” in Rotberg and Rabb, eds., *Climate and History*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 19-50. Also Geoffrey Parker, “Crisis and Catastrophe,” *American Historical Review*, vol. CXIII, 2008, p. 1077.

<sup>275</sup> Peter Bowden, “Agricultural Prices, Farm Profits, and Rents,” in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1500-1640*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1967, p. 594.

<sup>276</sup> Victor Harris, *All Coherence Gone*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 113, 137.

<sup>277</sup> Victor Harris, *All Coherence Gone*, pp. 134, 139, 111, 135, 114.

<sup>278</sup> *The Malcontent and Other Essays*, ed. Keith Sturgess, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1997, 4.2, ll. 137-40, p. 161.

This, we said, was the origin of seventeenth-century melancholy. Even a puritan optimist such as Milton could not avoid its impact.<sup>279</sup> While the objective causes of the seventeenth-century crisis may be understood without taking this element into consideration (and some, like L. C. Knights and Lawrence Babb, have given plausible explanations for the melancholy in terms of economic factors, thus lending further support to Hobsbawm's thesis<sup>280</sup>), its resolution cannot, for it is mediated by this unique experience of the individual. And this, we said, is where the significance of Donne lies most of all, because as a poet he managed to embody in his work, before and better than anyone else, with unparalleled maturity, the common experience of the time, thus greatly facilitating our understanding of this period of transition. Like his contemporaries he, too, was suddenly made aware of an unprecedented mutability entering his world:

I need not call in new philosophy, that denies a settledness, and acquiescence in the very body of the Earth, but makes the Earth move in that place, where we thought Sun had moved; I need not that help, that the Earth itself is in motion, to prove this, That nothing upon Earth is permanent; The assertion will stand of itself, till some man assign me some instance, something that a man may rely upon, and find permanent... In the elements themselves, of which all sub-elementary things are composed, there is no acquiescence, but a vicissitudinary transmutation into one another; Air condensed becomes water, a more solid body, And air rarified becomes fire, a body more disputable, and in-apparent. It is so in the conditions of men too...<sup>281</sup>

And like his contemporaries, Donne held the view that the changes then taking place have detrimental consequences, that the seasons of the year, for example, are "irregular and distempered; the Sun fainter, and languishing; men less in stature, and shorter-lived." In each new season he saw only "new species of worms, and flies, and sicknesses, which argue more and more putrefaction of which they are engendered."<sup>282</sup> "We are scarce our Fathers shadows cast at noon," he says elsewhere. In this regard, then, he is very much like his contemporaries, like most other commentators. Unlike them, however, Donne was able to penetrate beyond matters of doctrine into the significance of these changes (both real and imagined—and no less really experienced if imagined) for the individual's perception of himself and of the world around him. In *An Anatomie of the World*, for example, characterized by Nicolson as the most somber poem ever written in the English language,<sup>283</sup> Donne conveys or, rather, recreates for us the sense of utter collapse in the most memorable terms (the pretext being the death of a young, innocent girl):

Then, as mankind, so is the world's whole frame  
Quite out of joint, almost created lame:  
For, before God had made up all the rest,  
Corruption entered, and depraved the best:  
It seizes the angels, and then first of all

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<sup>279</sup> Cf. Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Studies in the Humanities, No. 9, 1945, p. 91.

<sup>280</sup> L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, 1962, pp. 315-332; Lawrence Babb, "Melancholy and the Elizabethan Man of Letters," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 1941, #3, pp. 247-261.

<sup>281</sup> *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. J. Hayward, London, The Nonesuch Press, 1930, pp. 674-75.

<sup>282</sup> *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. J. Hayward, p. 619.

<sup>283</sup> M. H. Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle*, NY, Columbia UP, 1960, p. 81.

The world did in her cradle take a fall,  
 And turned her brains, and took a general maim,  
 Wronging each joint of the universal frame.  
 The noblest part, man, felt it first; and then  
 Both beasts and plants, curst in the curse of man.  
 So did the world from the first hour decay,  
 That evening was beginning of the day,  
 And now the springs and summers which we see,  
 Like sons of women after fifty be.  
 And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
 The element of fire is quite put out;  
 The Sun is lost, and the earth, and no mans wit  
 Can well direct him where to look for it.  
 And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
 When in the planets, and the firmament  
 They seek so many new; they see that this  
 Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
 All just supply, and all relation:  
 Prince, subject, Father, Son, are things forgot,  
 For every man alone thinks he hath got  
 To be a Phoenix, and that then can be  
 None of that kind, of which he is, but he.<sup>284</sup>

But not only is the world, according to Donne, “spent,” the Sun “lost,” and the whole frame of the universe “quite out of joint”; not only do things such as “prince,” “subject,” “father,” or “son”—now that all relations have been dissolved and when the “new philosophy” calls all in doubt—no longer mean anything, giving the individual the illusion that he stands apart from history and the species,—but furthermore we are told, in *Second Anniversary*, that even something so personal as love—our emotions and the most intimate affinity with another human being—is being fundamentally undermined:

Poor cozened cozener, *that* she, and *that* thou,  
 Which did begin to love, are neither now;  
 You are both fluid, changed since yesterday;  
 Next day repairs, (but ill) last days decay.  
 Nor are, (although the river keep the name)  
 Yesterday's waters, and today's the same.  
 So flows her face, and thine eyes, neither now  
 That Saint [i.e., your mistress], nor Pilgrims [i.e. yourself], which your loving vow  
 Concerned remains; but whilst you think you bee  
 Constant, you are hourly in inconstancy.<sup>285</sup>

In the midst of this impermanence, then, what is man? After waters and trees and the falcon in the skies, and the very stars, and even the fair face of the beloved, have all been torn away from man, what is left? Dust, Donne says.

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<sup>284</sup> An Anatomie of the World.

<sup>285</sup> Second Anniversary.

Ask where that iron is that is ground off of a knife or axe; Ask that marble that is worn off of the threshold in the church-porch by continual treading, and with that iron, and with that marble, thou mayst find thy Fathers skin and body; *Contrita sunt*, The knife, the marble, the skin, the body are ground away, trod away, they are destroyed, who knows the revolutions of dust?<sup>286</sup>

In *A nocturnal upon St Lucy's Day*, Donne acknowledges that he is, in fact, not a man any longer. *Were I a man...*, he states pointedly and then concedes that, far from being a man, he is not even an "ordinary nothing" (*If I an ordinary nothing were...*), for even an "ordinary nothing" such as a shadow, he holds, must be a shadow of something, while no sun throws its light upon him anymore ("nor will my Sun renew"). "Let man be something!," he cries, but finds in man no substance: "How poor and inconsiderable a rag of this world is man!... Man, of whom when David had said (as the lowest diminution that he could put upon him) *I am a worm and no man*, he might have gone lower and said, I am a man and no worm; for man is so much less than a worm."<sup>287</sup> Everywhere he turns, in fact, Donne cannot but see nothingness and, therefore, misery: "The heavens contain the Earth, the Earth cities, cities men. And all these are concentric; the common center to them all is decay, ruin."<sup>288</sup> "This worlds general sickness doth not lie," he says, "in any humour, or one certain part"; instead, it is "rotten at the heart."<sup>289</sup> He speaks of "everlasting dissolution, dispersion, dissipation."<sup>290</sup> He speaks of the "variable, and therefore miserable condition of man."<sup>291</sup> "Man hath no centre but misery," he says elsewhere, "*there* and only *there*, he is fixed, and sure to find himself."<sup>292</sup> Elsewhere yet he exclaims: "O perplexed discomposition, O riddling distemper, O miserable condition of Man!"<sup>293</sup> And one poem he ends by asking

What are we then? How little more alas  
Is man now, then before he was? he was  
Nothing; for us, we are for nothing fit;  
Chance, or our selves still disproportion it.  
We have no power, no will, no sense; I lye,  
I should not then thus feel misery.<sup>294</sup>

Nothingness, decay, ruin—in a word, death—is, therefore, never too far from Donne. It is not something external to life, something that merely ends life, the other side of life. Instead, death is Donne's very life, its own internal dynamic and driving force. His very own being is composed of death:

The worlds whole sap is sunk:  
The general balm th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,  
Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunk,  
Dead and entered; yet all these seem to laugh

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<sup>286</sup> Sermon XCV.

<sup>287</sup> *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, pp. 593-594.

<sup>288</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa, Montreal, McGill-Queen's UP, 1975, p. 51.

<sup>289</sup> The First Anniversary.

<sup>290</sup> *Selected Prose*, p. 172.

<sup>291</sup> *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. Hayward, p. 507.

<sup>292</sup> *Selected Prose*, p. 133.

<sup>293</sup> The end of the first of the *Devotions*.

<sup>294</sup> The Calm, in Grierson, 1912, pp. 179-180.

Compared with me, who am their epitaph.

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I am re-begot  
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.<sup>295</sup>

So miserable for man is the loss of life that life itself occasions (“How much worse a death than death, is this life!”<sup>296</sup>), that even death seems like a relief to Donne, perhaps a truer life. “My body is my prison,” he says, “and I would be so obedient to the Law, as not to break prison; I would not hasten my death by starving or macerating this body: But if this prison be burnt down by continual fevers, or blown down with continual vapours, would any man be so in love with that ground upon which that prison stood, as to desire rather to stay there, than to go home?”<sup>297</sup> “Methinks I have the keys of my prison in my own hand,” he says elsewhere more pointedly, “and no remedy presents itself so soon to my heart as mine own sword.” These words were written by Donne in his treatise *Biathanatos* in 1608, the first defense of suicide ever written in the English language.<sup>298</sup>

In short, what Donne experiences, and increasingly so as the century progresses, is a profound sense of homelessness. His world is lost, gone, spent, dissolved, and he is now alone. And, as someone would say centuries later, one could never feel lonelier than in the midst of a crowd. It is not that the world of Donne and his contemporaries simply disappeared—this they would no sooner have welcomed—; instead, what was lost, spent, or dissolved was its substance, its connecting tissue. For the first time in human history, nature became essentially alien to mind.<sup>299</sup> It became, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.”<sup>300</sup> Everything stayed right where it used to be, only now standing all by itself in a hollow space. The warm and reassuring light had dimmed, the circle which contained everything within it had been broken, as had all form, proportion, and harmony, and in its place came the infinite, dark, indifferent space through which from now on only a cold wind would blow. What a terrifying picture that must have been! At a time when the old tune could still occasionally be heard, like an eerie echo of past innocence (“Man is everything, and more,” sang George Herbert, “He is a tree, yet bears more fruit; a beast, yet is, or should be more”), Donne is forced to admit that he is nothing (for “To be no part of any body, is to be nothing”).<sup>301</sup> He was, indeed, present at the death of a world, and if we have said that the cosmic sweep of his poetry, where the most miniscule things are brought into connection with the most tremendous ones, the closest ones with the furthest ones, is a reflection of the worldview in which he was brought up and schooled, it is also a frantic search for the unity lost. When Donne writes how “One might almost say, her body thought,”<sup>302</sup> he is not being

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<sup>295</sup> A nocturnal upon St Lucy’s Day.

<sup>296</sup> *Selected Prose*, p. 315.

<sup>297</sup> *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 589

<sup>298</sup> Ed. Michael Rudick and M. P. Battin, New York, Garland Publishing, 1982, p. 39.

<sup>299</sup> Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1976, p. 7.

<sup>300</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925, p. 77.

<sup>301</sup> “Man”; “To Sir. H. Goodere,” in *John Donne. Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. J. Hayward, p. 456.

<sup>302</sup> “The Second Anniversary,” l. 246.



merely “witty,” as the critics later in the century held; he is, instead, infusing matter with mind, and tracing out the unity of being, in a way which is no longer comprehensible to them. If the world itself ceased to be an artwork, Donne would at least try to recreate the world in his own work, to imbue it with meaning and thought (“Not a flea dies in Donne but for a cause,”<sup>303</sup> says Rosamond Tuve), with a pattern, to make silence sing. It would be to find formal coherence in universal incoherence. Indeed, this has been the task of art ever since.

It is not necessary to lay particular stress on how foreign this world of Donne’s must have seemed to Bacon and his followers who, as zealous as any converts, beamed with optimism and confidence. If we have come to accept and validate these prophets of the “new philosophy” and the “new science” as fathers of our own world, and to situate them within a longer emancipatory tradition, within the story of modernism and progress, we should not forget the force of their resentment, as well as the righteousness and the blind confidence with which they promoted their new cause.<sup>304</sup> There was undoubtedly an element of fanaticism in these men, as in most others who have ever felt to be participants in the founding of a new religion, in forging a new path for humanity. If the world had been emptied of its substance, and was now standing hollow, populated solely by cold individual bodies, this was for them not an occasion to mourn but to rejoice, an opportunity finally to discover and explain the true nature of things. Most importantly, it was an occasion to restore to man his God-given ability, lost by Adam’s fall, to dominate the natural world. “My dear, dear boy,” says Bacon in an early work, “what I purpose is to unite you with *things themselves* in a chaste, holy and legal wedlock; and from this association you will secure an increase beyond all the hopes and prayers of ordinary marriages, to wit, a blessed race of Heroes or Supermen who will overcome the immeasurable helplessness and poverty of the human race... and will make you peaceful, happy, prosperous and secure.”<sup>305</sup> “It is not the pleasure of curiosity,” says Bacon elsewhere, “nor the quiet of resolution, nor the raising of the spirit, nor victory of wit, nor faculty of speech, nor lucre of profession, nor ambition of honour or fame, nor enablement of business, that are the true ends of knowledge; some of these being more worthy than other, though all inferior and degenerate: but it is a restitution and reinvesting of man to the sovereignty and power (for whensoever he shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again command them) which he had in his first state of creation.”<sup>306</sup> “The true and lawful goal of the sciences,” says Bacon in yet another place, “is simply this, that human life be enriched by new discoveries and

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<sup>303</sup> *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Chicago, Chicago UP, 1947, p. 173.

<sup>304</sup> “Very nearly every statement of Hobbes,” says Willey, “can be reduced either to hatred and contempt of schoolmen and clerics, or to fear of civil war and love of ordered living in a stable commonwealth. A certain belief is of the kind which discourages enquiry, or weakens the authority of kings, therefore it is false and pernicious. Another belief, on the contrary, favors ‘speculation of bodies natural,’ the favorite pursuit in which Hobbes had been interrupted by the civil commotions; or it buttresses the lawful authority of sovereigns—therefore it is true. Contempt is one of the commonest of Hobbes’s emotions; contempt for all upholders of what he calls ‘Aristotelity,’ and for their doctrines. He is unable to conceive—and scarcely can we, as we read him—that schoolmen and theologians can be anything but madmen or knaves. This contempt gets into his prose-rhythm, and flashes out in many a ‘brutally-telling’ image... [W]e can hear the voice of a man to whom only one kind of truth—his own—is conceivable, but whose scorn for his deluded or deceiving foes is mingled with fear of their power.” *The Seventeenth Century Background*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>305</sup> *The Masculine Birth of Time*, ch. 2, in Farrington, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, 1964, p. 72.

<sup>306</sup> Valerius Terminus, *Works*, iii, p. 222.

powers.”<sup>307</sup> And, to cite Bacon just once more, “The end of our foundation,” he also says, “is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.”<sup>308</sup> This worldly and pragmatic attitude permeates Bacon’s entire work, it is the red thread that connects all his varied interests, and one that motivates all his efforts. He was clearly not a scientist (Koyré goes as far as calling Bacon’s theoretical contribution to the Scientific Revolution “completely negligible,” while Steven Weinberg calls it “most overrated”<sup>309</sup>), but neither would the work of any scientist have achieved what his did. For Bacon was most of all a propagandist and a systematizer. His task was to banish despair, to instill confidence in men, to promise them imminent success and well-being if only they would follow his prescriptions. His role, the way he saw it, was that of a prophet leading the people in critical times. “The most astonishing aspiration of Bacon’s,” says Christopher Hill, “was that his scientific method would in certain respects liberate mankind from the consequences of the Fall.... He proposed to reverse the whole course of human history as previously understood.”<sup>310</sup> Unlike Donne, for whom new discoveries and the increasing obsolescence of scholasticism only deepened his skepticism of all knowledge and truth, Bacon infused his followers with a healing sense of certainty. By the middle of the century the world was pronounced dead, its organism transformed into a mechanism, and man given a different sense of importance. The Moon, once firmly marking the boundary between ether and air, between the heavens and nature, was now, in the words of Milton, riding aimlessly “Like one that had been led astray / Through the Heavens wide pathless way.”<sup>311</sup> Instead of being the center of a meaningful and animate universe, man was now standing alone in a giant void, as if at the bottom of a dried up sea, alone able to survey the countless objects remaining, to approach them for what they were—rock, skeleton, and filth, in other words merely different forms of matter, rather than the alluring and awe-inducing mysteries they used to be. The universe, says Hobbes, “is corporeal, that is to say, body, and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth, and depth... and consequently every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe.”<sup>312</sup> Even man was now merely a form of matter: “What is the heart,” asks Hobbes rhetorically, “but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer?”<sup>313</sup> In short, man indeed shrank from his previous stature, and so did the world. Devoid of all its non-material “unreality,” devoid of mind, mute and colorless, governed by mechanical laws, kept in motion by springs, strings, and wheels, the whole universe, like the recently discovered New World itself, lay now at the complete disposal of this little man with great appetites. In a way, everything was now up for grabs, like a treasure left unguarded; speaking of nature in the manner typical of conquest, Bacon

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<sup>307</sup> *Novum Organum*, aphorism 81.

<sup>308</sup> *New Atlantis*.

<sup>309</sup> *Galileo Studies*, Hassocks, Harvester, 1978, p. 1; *To Explain the World: The Discovery of Modern Science*, New York, Harper Collins, 2015, p. 201. See also M. R. Cohen, *Studies in Philosophy and Science*, New York, Frederick Ungar, 1949, pp. 99-106. A more balanced view is given in T. S. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension*, Chicago, Chicago UP, 1978, pp. 31-65.

<sup>310</sup> *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1965, p. 89. Cf. *Works*, ed. Spedding, (new ed., 7 vols, 1879-1890), vol. 4, pp. 28, 127, 251, 252; vol. 5, pp. 211, 507. *Novum Organum*, Bk. II, aph. 52.

<sup>311</sup> II Penseroso.

<sup>312</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. XLVI.

<sup>313</sup> *Leviathan*, Introduction.

urged his countrymen “to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds.”<sup>314</sup> (An echo of this view, in essence a millenarian one, is found even in Milton: “Nature would surrender to man as its appointed governor, and his rule would extend from command of the earth and seas to dominion over the stars.”<sup>315</sup>) Unlike Donne, who looked at the heavens and still saw his own reflection in them, and whose gaze would always relay something also about himself, always returning to him no matter how far it ranged, the new man was now presented with an endless array of foreign bodies, requiring an inexhaustible drive, an endless shift of attention, an endless pursuit and maneuver. His gaze found no refuge, but kept seeking further and further, extending itself into the outside world, bouncing off of things, until lost in hazy a distance. (No wonder that this period sees the advent of the “collector,” the man obsessed with so-called rarities and curiosities, in love with objects, often mere trash, things such as marbles, coins, medals, cocoa nuts, ostrich eggshells, petrified wood or grass, “the great silver box that Nero kept his beard in.”<sup>316</sup> No wonder, too, that Hobbes dispelled the dark cloud of sin from the senses, and from sensuality in general, making sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch the basic facts of human nature, the necessary instruments for one’s wellbeing in a society immersed in material life.<sup>317</sup> Finally, it is no wonder that historians speak of the late seventeenth century in England as the age of the first “consumer revolution,” driven not so much by increased productivity, but by an unprecedented mania for acquiring objects.<sup>318</sup>) Whereas periods of deflated enthusiasm for life and for the world would take place even after Bacon, never again would the melancholic individual be representative of the times. The optimistic attitude, the belief that historical development is a redemptive process, that man has the capacity to increase his power indeterminately, has been shared since then by the most diverse of thinkers. It was as proper to the materialism of the French Enlightenment as it was to German idealism, to the utilitarianism of J. S. Mill and to the irrationalism of Henri Bergson, to the determinism of Herbert Spencer and the voluntarism of John Dewey. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that this “bourgeois” optimism is present even when the intention is to challenge it, for example in the work of Rousseau or Marx. “Though there are minor dissonances,” says Niebuhr, “the whole chorus of modern culture learned to sing the new song of hope in remarkable harmony. The redemption of mankind, by whatever means, was assured for the future.”<sup>319</sup> No wonder then that, at the beginning of the twenty first century, all major accounts of melancholia—what is now called depression—assume nothing wrong with the world, but fault the individual instead—the individual’s chemical makeup or the individual’s inability to face the world in a correct way. For Aaron Beck, for example, what Donne experienced so painfully as a poison of his environment—“But what have I done,” Donne says at one place, “either to breed or to breathe these vapors? They tell me it is my melancholy; did I infuse, did I drink in melancholy into myself? It is my thoughtfulness; was I not made to think? It is my study; doth not my calling call for that? I have done nothing willfully, perversely toward

<sup>314</sup> “Of the Dignity and Advancement of Learning,” in *Collected Works*, London, Routledge, 1996, v. 7, p. 373.

<sup>315</sup> Quoted in Webster, *The Great Instauration*, London, Duckworth, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>316</sup> Dorothy Stimson, *Scientists and Amateurs*, New York, Henry Schuman, 1948, p. 35.

<sup>317</sup> Cf. *Leviathan*, Chs. I, VI.

<sup>318</sup> Cf. Carole Shammas, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America*, Oxford, 1990; Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 1978; Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington, 1982.

<sup>319</sup> *Faith and History*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949, p. 6.

it, yet must suffer in it, die by it”—this kind of pain is now a result of one’s own cognitive error. For Martin Seligman it is a predicament of passive individuals who lose confidence in themselves. For Randolph Nesse it is the inability of the individual to give up an unreachable goal. And for the proponents of the so-called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy it is the inability of the individual to stop worrying about the past or future, and focus on the present moment (“be present”) instead. The fault, in other words, is always in the mistaken thoughts of the individual, often blamed on wrong levels of serotonin, but never on the mistaken structure, or the false promise, of the world. Melancholia is now merely an illness of one’s judgment of an object, and never of the object itself.<sup>320</sup>

In brief, it is in the seventeenth century, with Bacon, Hobbes, and later with Locke, that we have a major source of our contemporary smiling society, with its imperative of (at least outward) cheerfulness, even exaltedness. (In the seventeenth century, says Joan Webber, “it was desirable that a saved man, even in the midst of St. Paul’s sufferings, should be full of cheer.”<sup>321</sup>) We *can* learn about nature, we *can* obtain things, we *can* find solutions, if only we keep going. The enchanting vision of infinite expansion is laid before everyone’s eyes. Only the one who gives up—a loser—has a reason to despair. And the only thing that seems to stand in the way, namely the end of the individual’s physical existence, is pushed completely out of sight. Extreme unction gives way to “anointing of the sick,” death to “passing,” funeral to “celebration of life.”

## VIII

It may seem perverse to suggest that these thinkers of the seventeenth century, supposed heralds of modernity and of modern subjectivity, men who supposedly liberated the individual from the grip of the Middle Ages, in fact stifled individuality. Did they not presage, even inaugurate, one may ask, the age when philosophy would finally turn to the individual, no longer to inquire into the “laws of ecclesiastical polity” or “*doctrina Christiana*,” but—as keywords figuring in the titles of some of the major works of the time suggest—into man’s “nature and faculties” (Timothy Nourse), his “understanding” and “toleration” (Locke), his “characteristics..., manners, opinions” (Shaftesbury), his sense of “beauty and virtue,” “passions and affections” (Hutcheson), his “nature,” “understanding” and “morals” (Hume) or his “moral sentiments” (Smith)? We have already suggested, however, ways in which individuality, as conceived on the example of Donne, did in fact constitute an obstacle to certain tendencies in their thinking. We have seen how imagination, and even creativity as such, became suspect, on account of its spontaneity and unpredictability; how personal experience was condemned when suspected of being given priority over the reality of things as they are in nature; and how personal expression was seen as being incompatible with the acquisition of knowledge.

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<sup>320</sup> Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and Emotional Disorders*, Madison, Ct., International University Press, 1975; Martin Seligman, *Helplessness: On Depression, Development and Death*, New York, W.H. Freeman, 1975; Randolph Nesse, “Explaining Depression: Neuroscience is not Enough, Evolution is Essential,” in Nesse *et al.*, eds., *Understanding Depression*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 17-36. For a sociological critique, see George Brown and Tirril Harris, *Social Origins of Depression: A Study of Psychiatric Disorder in Women*, London, Tavistock, 1978. For the Donne quote, see *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward, pp. 528-529.

<sup>321</sup> *The Eloquent “I”*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, p. 137.

In short, the interior world of the individual was placed in the position of inferiority in relation to the exterior world of nature, while truth, once permeating all of being, was now torn away from man altogether. Lastly, we have seen how any interiorization of the individual was deemed completely contrary to the aims and attitudes of the emerging society, or at least to the worldview of its principal propagandists. That such an interiorization was not only likely but even widespread, due to the conditions—the “crisis”—obtaining at the turn of the seventeenth century, there is ample evidence. “One of the most striking signs of the spiritual transformation of Europe in the period from 1575 to 1650,” we are told by M. W. Croll, “was the voluntary withdrawal of so many of its representative men from the affairs of the world, to seek unity of mind and moral self-dependence in a contemplative retirement, either philosophical or religious. The external activities of the Renaissance had lost the power to satisfy their minds; it was inward weakness that demanded their attention.” And again: “The sense of strength and unity of mind which men of the high Renaissance had been able to enjoy without effort, by mere conformity with the world, or in unreflective industry, had now to be studied in the quietness of thought and a rigorous discipline of self-examination.”<sup>322</sup> That this was the case should not surprise us. On the contrary, it seems only to confirm the conclusions we have reached so far. Namely, it is between the years 1575 and 1650, roughly speaking, that the Renaissance and, ultimately, the Christian worldview collapsed, and collapsed in England more resoundingly than anywhere else. The “mind and world” of the educated Englishmen in 1600 was still “more than half medieval” according to Douglas Bush; by 1660 it was already “more than half modern.”<sup>323</sup> S. L. Bethell speaks of “the almost violent contrast” between the first and the second half of the seventeenth century, and expresses incredulity at the fact that Donne and Dryden were separated by a span of only fifty years.<sup>324</sup> Along with the very idea and experience of a meaningful and purposeful universe and, ultimately, of God, what was on the way out in the course of these several decades was also a particular idea and experience of man, and of the individual. “Our world of quality and sense perception, the world in which we live, and love, and die,” was substituted, according to Koyré, by “another world—the world of quantity, of reified geometry, a world in which, though there is a place for everything, there is no place for man.”<sup>325</sup> In a world in which goodness, beauty, or love were now at best secondary qualities, and not elements of reality itself; in a world made up of extension, mass, and atoms, subject only to the impressed force of a first cause—an increasingly ghostly  $x$ —, and thereafter to mathematical laws and the principle of inertia; in this world, there was no place for man as a complex spiritual, material, and social being. Instead, the world of man was being split up into a sphere of reason and a sphere of faith, therefrom fragmenting further into lesser spheres, e.g., of economy, politics, and science.<sup>326</sup> Instead of living in a world that was Christian in design, as he used to, man now lived increasingly in a world where Christianity was limited to the spiritual and moral life (and

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<sup>322</sup> *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, pp. 155, 162.

<sup>323</sup> Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, 1945, p. 1. See also W. R. D. Jones, *The Tudor Commonwealth, 1529-1559*, London, 1975, p. 226.

<sup>324</sup> *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, London, Dennis Dobson, 1951, p. 13.

<sup>325</sup> “The Significance of the Newtonian Synthesis,” in *Newtonian Studies*, 1965, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1965, p. 23.

<sup>326</sup> On the relationship between reason and faith, cf. R. S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1958, pp. 162-192.

increasingly only on Sundays), and theology was reduced to just one subject among many others springing up at the time. Theology and natural philosophy, poetry and astronomy, science and mysticism, medicine and astrology, music and mathematics, all used to be one when the world was one. But now, after man was reduced to a physical entity like any other, and God himself relegated to far beyond the heavens, the individual increasingly moved in his daily life through multiple worlds all at once, just as he was increasingly becoming an object of study of multiple sciences. For the first time since antiquity, this man could be “political man” or “economic man,” “private” or “public.” Even the followers of Donne could no longer be poets both sacred *and* profane (more precisely: writers of poetry in which such a distinction made no sense), but were forced to choose one or the other, and were thus split up into two mutually exclusive groups. Like the world to which he used to belong, man was now fragmented, and would remain so ever after. No wonder, then, that these decades between 1575 and 1650 were marked by the withdrawal of so many men from the affairs of the world, in an attempt to regain, as it were, the unity of their mind. For they had already lost the unity of their life.

Bacon and Hobbes, on the other hand, found not much of interest in the individual, especially when compared to all the attractions of the outside world. Even the individual’s own reason—the one faculty which one would think would be held in high regard, as a bulwark against mere belief and blind submission to authority—was highly suspect, and suspect precisely because of the element of the personal in it. We should not forget, after all, that for the Elizabethans reason included faith, intuition, and feeling, that it was a composite, as Bethel says, “the total mind operating upon a complex and fully representative human experience.”<sup>327</sup> Instead of being a mere tool at one’s disposal, reason was for the Elizabethans considered a vital agency behind all human functions, the most divine part of the soul (“the candle of the Lord”), the very part which man had in common with the angels and with God, and what distinguished him from beasts. Not only was reason therefore the essence of humanity, it was also “part of and a microcosm of the universal order.”<sup>328</sup> It was, as Henry More would say, “a sort of copy or transcript of that reason or law eternal which is registered in the mind divine.”<sup>329</sup> As such, reason was for the Elizabethans bound by no limit—at least not from the theoretical standpoint—as to the extent or to the varieties of knowledge which it could attain: truth for them was mathematical as much as it was aesthetic, ethical, or emotional. It is this conception of reason that came under attack in the post-Restoration world, and that subsequently “lost much of its authority.”<sup>330</sup> Reduced to “mathematical deduction, combined with the inductive but strictly quantitative reasoning necessary for physical science,” in the hands of Bacon and Hobbes reasoning became “a process that ideally ignores the human element.” As a consequence, the mind’s “means of deepest experience and understanding” were now discarded. More precisely:

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<sup>327</sup> *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, p. 58.

<sup>328</sup> “The Reason of the English Enlightenment,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, v. 27 (1963), pp. 1737-1740.

<sup>329</sup> *Enchiridion Ethicum*, New York, The Facsimile Text Society, 1930 (1690), Bk. I, Ch. 3, v, p. 15. Cf. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1962, pp. 55-69, 78-80, 133-155.

<sup>330</sup> Alan Saunders, “The state as highwayman: from candour to rights,” in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 252.

*faith*, though a precondition, was not a part of the process; *intuition*, though useful in suggesting hypotheses [though Bacon found no use for hypotheses precisely because they depended on intuition], had no function in their demonstration; *feeling*, even a sort of austere aestheticism, could accompany, but could not enter into, the methods of reasoning; and the whole great range of human experience knowable only through faith, intuition and feeling—*spiritual experience, human passion, the beauties of nature and art*—was no longer proper material for rational thought. The universe that reason could properly explore had narrowed to the calculable aspects of material existence: this was the real, the rest was epiphenomenon, manageable in part—the social aspects of human life—by a “common sense” which aped the categorical exactitude of true reason, but in the main left to the incalculable caprice of “enthusiasts” and sentimentalists.<sup>331</sup>

Deemed to be in constant danger of becoming too personal and therefore unpredictable and uncontrollable, reason remained, in fact, suspect even in this reduced form, as a mere instrument of inquiry. R. F. Jones speaks of the plain “distrust of reason”—and even of the mind as such—on the part of Bacon, and of its relegation in his work to a position subordinate to the senses. Not only did the individual have to be purged of anything proper to himself, to his own life experience, even what was left over was now expected to refrain from every opinion or theory, from any intellectual operation, and completely surrender to purely sensuous knowledge.<sup>332</sup> According to Robert Merton, reason became “subservient and auxiliary to empiricism.”<sup>333</sup> Man was forced to open up to this new alien world, to strip himself naked, to admit his intrinsic corruption, to admit that he had been involved in contriving useless, misleading, and harmful abstract generalities, of generating mere words rather than knowledge, of spreading error or mere contentions, and to promise his unconditional allegiance to the facts of the natural world. In the extreme, the mind was expected to cease making any conjectures, and instead serve merely to register.

However paradoxical it may sound, therefore, the truth is that the so-called Age of Reason really began as a movement *against* reason. Ever since Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, since Edmund Spenser and John Milton, since the Cambridge Platonists such as Whichcote, Cudworth, and More—all of whom still defended the old conception of reason—, any reference to this conception has “become a pious anachronism in a new kind of world.”<sup>334</sup> Not only were the functions of reason simplified and its scope and power greatly limited, more importantly reason was excised from the realm of soul, where for many centuries it had resided, and, once and for all, relocated to mind. Cleansed of extraneous matter, with its “spiritual” residues left for the theologian, reason now became the province of the psychologist, a convenient object of empirical study, no longer as essence, but as mere phenomenon, no longer as something inherited, but as acquired, a part of the world of accident.<sup>335</sup> Most characteristically, in the work of Hobbes reason became nothing but the process of attaching names to products of

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<sup>331</sup> Bethell, pp. 63, 64, emphasis added.

<sup>332</sup> *Ancients and Moderns*, St. Louis, Washington University Studies, 1961, pp. x, 43, 47, 49-53. Cf. Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 122.

<sup>333</sup> “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England,” *Osiris*, v. 4, 1938, p. 451.

<sup>334</sup> Robert Hoopes, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1962, p. 2.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. “The Reason of the English Enlightenment,” pp. 1749-1750; Ernest Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton UP, 1951, pp. 12-15.

sensations or, in his own words, “nothing but *reckoning* (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts.” When man reasons, says Hobbes, “he does nothing else but conceive a sum total from *addition* of parcels, or conceive a remainder from *subtraction* of one sum from another.” In other words, when man reasons—and Hobbes here means reasoning in politics and law as much as in geometry and logic—he does nothing else but engage in arithmetic. Wherever “there is place for *addition* and *subtraction*,” he says, “there is also place for *reason*; and where these have no place, there *reason* has nothing at all to do.”<sup>336</sup> Elsewhere he states this point even more pithily: “By ratiocination,” he says, “I mean *computation*... so that all ratiocination is comprehended in these two operations of the mind, addition and subtraction.”<sup>337</sup> (It is telling that Hobbes’s conception of reason, rightly deemed “revolutionary,”<sup>338</sup> is also said to be the “prophetic launching” of the field of artificial intelligence.<sup>339</sup> For Hobbes, as for many of his contemporaries, the human and the artificial were increasingly starting to look the same.) In other words, not only did the Englishman lose his soul in the course of the seventeenth century, but he also lost his reason, which had gradually become merely “reasoning” or “ratiocination,” “a calculating process dependent upon the data of sense and reflection.”<sup>340</sup> So much so that by the beginning of the eighteenth century it was nothing exceptional for David Hume to declare that “Reason being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination.”<sup>341</sup> Or to say, in a later work, how reason “is and ought to be nothing but the slave of the passions, pretending to no other office but to serve and obey them.”<sup>342</sup> Reason indeed continued to be exalted as man’s essential faculty, as that which distinguished man from beasts. It in fact rose so high in the course of the seventeenth century as to challenge, and successfully undermine, the claims to authority—epistemological, ecclesiastic, and political—of the apostolic tradition (the Roman Catholic Church), of Scripture (orthodox Protestants), and of mystical inspiration (Anabaptists, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, Ranters, etc.). By the end of the century, in the hands of Deists, it even claimed absolute sovereignty over faith itself. And yet, by that point, reason was completely devoid of all its objectivity, of all content, denied power to deliberate about and choose between ends, and reduced to an expedient of the individual’s own mundane needs and drives. From a semi-divine agency, reason—or whatever little was left of it—became a strictly passive, mechanical process. Set in motion by Hobbes, with his blunt claim that “ratiocination” meant nothing other than “computation,” this transformation became complete, it has been argued, in the 1690s with the publication of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>343</sup>

<sup>336</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. V, ii, pp. 22-23.

<sup>337</sup> *Body, Man, and Citizen*, ed. Richard S. Peters, New York, Collier Books, 1962, pp. 24-25.

<sup>338</sup> Catarina Dutilh Novaes, *Formal Languages in Logic: A Philosophical and Cognitive Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2012, p. 79.

<sup>339</sup> John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea*, MIT Press, 1989, p. 23.

<sup>340</sup> “The Reason of the English Enlightenment,” *Studies on Voltaire*, p. 1741.

<sup>341</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I. V.

<sup>342</sup> *Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. 2, pt. 3, sec. 3 (p. 415 in ed. Selby-Bigge, 1960).

<sup>343</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1996, p. 326. Cf. Locke, *Essay*, ed. Nidditch, Bk. IV, chap. xvii, secs. 1-3, pp. 668-670, and chap. xviii, sec. 2, p. 689.



In short, when the world itself used to be fully permeated by the divine and the natural and the human, and when man in his entirety was reflected in all of the world, reason too used to reflect the complexity and the unity of the world. Reason was suitable to the object it had to apprehend, so to speak. In a world where knowledge and virtue, the true and the good, facts and values, used to be identical—the world of Socrates and Plato, of Cicero, of Aquinas, the world of Erasmus and Renaissance humanists—in such a world, reason was at the same time “a mode of knowing, a way of doing, and a condition of being.”<sup>344</sup> It was a form of “philosophic conscience” that allowed man not only to understand how to get from A to B, but to understand justice, goodness, and love, as well as his own very purpose in life and society, and his place in the universe.<sup>345</sup> Instead of being merely formal and discursive—picking out bits and pieces of data derived through the senses, and organizing them in a narrow, logical fashion, regardless of their content—, reason was a faculty endowed with the ability to distinguish between good and evil, to guide man to act, and not just to act in any sort of way, but to act freely, wisely, and virtuously. This was the time when knowledge was not mere information, but a process of one’s self-transformation; the time when the failure to act according to knowledge was, in turn, not merely one’s own mistake, but a rip in the very tissue of the universe itself. But once this world vanished, its reason, too, had to go. The mind could no longer range effortlessly among the most distant corners of the world, achieving fruitful relationships between them, since, in the words of Bethell, there was now “no coordinating ultimate principle” upon which relationships could be grounded. There was instead only a common method, a method “originating in the special requirements of one subordinate sphere, that of the lowest, inanimate, order of being,” a method merely “*assimilating* the various fields of study without *relating* them either in correspondence or organically.”<sup>346</sup> In other words, within the course of just several decades, and before the end of the seventeenth century, the Elizabethan conception of reason was literally dismantled. The wide variety of possible modes of knowledge, and of thinking in general, which had until then existed was now reduced to a very specific one. Once the world was fragmented, reason itself also had to suffer fragmentation.

## IX

How far this new regime and its suspicion of and frequent contempt for individuality extended is best seen in the domain of language, in the medium of thought itself. We have already conveyed the degree to which Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke were averse to metaphor and other tropes; the degree to which they insisted on a mathematical sort of clarity; the degree to which Bacon, and especially Hobbes, worked on confining poetry within the narrow bounds of its proper domain, and on reforming poetic expression along the lines of new reason. “Men began to hunt more after words than matter,” Bacon complained of the Renaissance cult of eloquence, “more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence... than after the weight of

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<sup>344</sup> Robert Hoopes, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1962, p.1.

<sup>345</sup> Douglas Bush, *Paradise Lost in Our Time*, New York, Peter Smith, 1948, pp. 37-40. Cf. *idem*, “Two Roads to Truth: Science and Religion in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *ELH*, vol. 8 (1941), #2, p. 82; Rita Marie Bushman, “Right Reason in Stoicism and in the Christian Moral Tradition up to Saint Thomas,” unpublished dissertation, St. Louis University, 1947, pp. 287-288.

<sup>346</sup> *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 98-99.

matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention or depth of judgment.” In the same league with Renaissance eloquence Bacon placed the work of the scholastics and the ancients which, relying so much on words and logic rather than on “matter,” had in his view generated endless disputes rather than knowledge. “The philosophy we principally received from the Greeks,” he claimed in one place, “must be acknowledged puerile, or rather talkative than generative—as being fruitful in controversies, but barren of effects.”<sup>347</sup> In another, he called Aristotle “the highest deceiver of all ages.”<sup>348</sup> For the scholastics, whose “degenerate” learning was built upon “subtle, idle, unwholesome, and... vermiculate questions,” Bacon had even less patience: “their wits being shut up in the cells of a few authors (chiefly Aristotle their dictator) as their persons were shut up in the cells of monasteries and colleges,” they could not produce, according to him, anything but “cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit.”<sup>349</sup> Bacon’s distrust of language is perhaps most obvious, however, in his identification, in *Novum Organum*, of language as the worst of the four “idols,” the worst of the four great sources of error that possess the human mind. The problem, though, was not merely in a particular use of language, or in the use of it prevalent at the time. Instead, being a creation to which all men contributed collectively, language was, for Bacon, of necessity a creation of mostly ordinary minds (“framed and applied according to the conceit and capacities of the vulgar sort”<sup>350</sup>) and, as such, was a prison bound to confine even the most learned. It was filled with illusions, prejudices, false associations, unwarranted mental habits, all of which were embedded in the very conception of reality to which we were accustomed through language from our infancy. In a way, then, language confined us to its own false reality, and barred us from a true knowledge of things. It stood between mind and nature, between observation and description, it made it impossible for nature to be transparent to us. The problem, in other words, was in language as such. Contrary to both the ancients and the scholastics, not to mention the Renaissance rhetoricians, who could produce only a semblance of knowledge because they confined their mind only to working “upon itself,” Bacon insisted that, left to itself, “the understanding...ought always to be suspected,”<sup>351</sup> and that the only way to true knowledge lay in directing the mind to “work upon matter” instead. “Our method,” he never tired of saying in different ways, “is continually to dwell among things soberly.”<sup>352</sup> Words were, according to Bacon, nothing “but the images of matter,” and to think otherwise, namely to “study words not matter,” was to involve oneself in what he called “the first distemper of learning.”<sup>353</sup> Those who “determine not to conjecture and guess, but to find out and know; not to invent fables and romances of worlds, but to look into, and dissect the nature of this real world, must consult only things themselves.”<sup>354</sup> More precisely, they must employ their utmost endeavors “towards restoring or cultivating a just and legitimate familiarity between the mind and things.”<sup>355</sup>

<sup>347</sup> Preface to *De Augmentis*, p. 3 (Bohn ed.).

<sup>348</sup> *De Augmentis*.

<sup>349</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>350</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II.

<sup>351</sup> Preface to *De Augmentis*, p. 6 (Bohn ed.).

<sup>352</sup> Preface to *De Augmentis*, p. 8 (Bohn ed.).

<sup>353</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, p. 24 (Everyman ed.). “compounded sciences chiefly of a certain resplendent or lustrous mass of matter, chosen to give glory... to the subtlety of disputations.” See other ref. to scholastics 2-3 pp. later.

<sup>354</sup> Preface to *De Augmentis*, p. 16 (Bohn ed.).

<sup>355</sup> *Magna Instauratio*, opening sentence.

With these and similar assertions, Bacon would not merely set the tenor for seventeenth-century discourse on language, but would sound an early call for what increasingly became the culture war that would rage in the latter part of the century, and with which we began this study. His claim that language, far from being God-given, was an arbitrary creation of the most common of mortals, would later find an echo in both Hobbes and Locke. At first, Hobbes argued that it was in fact God himself who had devised language in a purely arbitrary manner, but in the *Leviathan* he would subsequently maintain that the arbitrariness of language derived from its haphazard creation by ordinary people seeking to meet their own ordinary needs.<sup>356</sup> Locke would support this view, by denying any difference between the way Adam supposedly devised words and the way—“the same liberty”—any other man has done so ever since. Words have “received their birth and signification from ignorant and illiterate people,” he would say.<sup>357</sup> Furthermore, Bacon’s claim that language, rather than facilitating, in fact inhibited our thinking, and his consequent insistence on a reform of language, starting with his own practice of a new style, also found many supporters. “No man ever spoke more neatly, more pressly, more weightily, or suffered less emptiness, less idleness, in what he uttered,” wrote Jonson of Bacon in 1641. “His hearers could not cough, or look aside from him, without loss. There was not a clause in which it was safe for the hearer to let his attention go astray: everything had a purpose. The thoughts were more numerous than the words.”<sup>358</sup> So great was the impact of Bacon that, by 1629, the motif of words versus things would resound even in English poetry, with John Beaumont advising poets to seek “Strong figures drawn from deep invention’s springs / Consisting less in words and more in things.”<sup>359</sup> Hobbes echoed the same allegiance to succinctness and “matter” when he praised Thucydides, in the same year, for being “so full of matter, that the number of his sentences [thoughts] doth almost reach to the number of his words.”<sup>360</sup> Robert Greville—appropriately, an army general—declared in 1641: “I aim not at words, but things; not loving to fight with shadows.”<sup>361</sup> “Expect not here from me rhetorical flourishes,” another author warned in 1645, “I study matter, not words: *Good wine needs no bush*.”<sup>362</sup> So strong was this impact that, even two hundred years later, J. S. Mill would still make sure to preface his *System of Logic* by reminding the reader that names “shall always be spoken in this work as the names of things themselves, and not merely of our ideas of things.”<sup>363</sup> In other words, by the middle of the century, Englishmen became simply obsessed with “things,” searching for them in all corners of their life, and increasingly prone to see in both the human mind and human language nothing but obstacles to their worldly affairs. “Modern suspicion of propaganda,” says Ray Frazer, “profound though it may be, seems thin in comparison to the suspicion of language itself

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<sup>356</sup> “Computation or Logic,” in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. William Molesworth, London, John Bohn, 1839, v. 1, p. 16; *Leviathan*, Ch. iv, 2.

<sup>357</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. iii, Ch. vi, §25, p. 452.

<sup>358</sup> *Discoveries*, ed. Castelain, 1906, p. 47. (Or: *Ben Jonson*, eds. Herford/Simpson, 1947, v. 8, pp. 590-1.)

<sup>359</sup> “To His Late Majesty, Concerning the True Form of English Poetry.”

<sup>360</sup> “Of the Life and History of Thucydides,” in Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 578. Hobbes is here actually quoting from Cicero’s *De Oratore*.

<sup>361</sup> “Discourse Opening the Nature of That Episcopacie, Which is Exercised in England,” in Haller (ed.), *Tracts on Liberty*, v. 2, p. 45.

<sup>362</sup> Quoted in George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 276.

<sup>363</sup> London, 1961, p. 15.

held by the people of the Restoration.”<sup>364</sup> “It is difficult for us to realize the extremes to which this distrust of language was carried,” says R. F. Jones.<sup>365</sup> At every step we encounter writers accusing their medium of inherent corruption, calling for a more direct and accurate manner of expression, stressing the need for “perspicuity,” for “the marriage of words and things.” This Baconian problem is put quite simply by Locke, in his long disquisition on the imperfection of language: Because knowledge, though it terminates in things, cannot exist independently of words—which are “like the medium through which visible objects pass”—the “obscurity and disorder” of words “cast a mist before our eyes” and befuddle our understandings.<sup>366</sup> That many of the writers who would take up this problem were engaged in scientific discourse, where accurate recording of physical phenomena is of primary importance, is not surprising. A good example is Thomas Sprat, the official historian of the newly founded Royal Society. In a book written in 1667, upon the request and with the subsequent approval of the Society, and under the strong intellectual influence of Bacon, Sprat admits that “the evil is now so inveterate, that it is hard to know whom to blame, or where to begin to reform.”<sup>367</sup> As for the origin of the problem, not surprisingly he finds it in poetry. When the poetry of Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus, and Homer used to soften “men’s natural rudeness” and to allure men to be instructed in the doctrines of philosophers, it in fact performed a valuable role, according to Sprat, for men were “delightfully deceived to their own good.” The problem, however, is that the ancient poets thus left a stamp on the whole of posterity, which gave them “occasion ever after of exercising their wit, and their imagination, about the works of nature, more than was consistent with a sincere inquiry into them.”<sup>368</sup> Their “fantastical forms were revived and possessed Christendom, in the very height of the Schoolmen’s time: An infinite number of fairies haunted every house; all churches were filled with apparitions; men began to be frightened from their cradles.”<sup>369</sup> Consequently, “this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue,” has for centuries stood in the way of the men who seek true knowledge, who need to pass through the wall of language in order to reach things in their purity. “Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties, these specious tropes and figures have brought on our knowledge?,” Sprat asks rhetorically, and demands, in the spirit of Hobbes, “that eloquence... be banished out of civil societies, as a thing fatal to peace and good manners.”<sup>370</sup> Fortunately, however, “the wit of the fables and religions of the ancient world is well-nigh consumed,” he says; “They have already served the poets long enough, and it is now high time to dismiss them, especially seeing they have this peculiar imperfection that they were only fictions at first: whereas truth is never so well expressed or amplified, as by those ornaments which are true and real in themselves.”<sup>371</sup> Therefore, to try and improve the prospects of the man of knowledge, but also of society at large (“whereby mankind may obtain a dominion over things”), Sprat proposes a radical

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<sup>364</sup> “The Origin of the Term ‘Image,’”

<sup>365</sup> *The Seventeenth Century*, p. 148.

<sup>366</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. III, Ch. ix, §21, p. 488.

<sup>367</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 112. On the influence of Bacon, cf. H. Fisch and H. W. Jones, “Bacon’s Influence on Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society*,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, v. 12 (1951), #4, 399-406, and Charles Webster, “The Origins of the Royal Society,” *History of Science*, v. 6, 1967, pp. 106-127.

<sup>368</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 6.

<sup>369</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 340.

<sup>370</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>371</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, pp. 414, cf. pp. 152-153, 340.

reform of language, “to separate the knowledge of nature from the colours of rhetoric, the devices of fancy, or the delightful deceit of fables.”<sup>372</sup> To “the plain and undigested objects” of nature, hunted down by the Baconian experimenter, Sprat matches a language purged of “all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style,” “a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses; a native easiness... as near the mathematical plainness” as possible. In brief, “a primitive purity and shortness,” a delivery of “so many things, almost in an equal number of words,” not “names, but things.”<sup>373</sup> Towards this end, Sprat proposes the founding of “a fixed and impartial court of eloquence, according to whose censure all books or authors should either stand or fall,” one which “would set a mark on the ill words, correct those which are to be retained, admit and establish the good.”<sup>374</sup> This, according to Sprat, is the only way towards “the discovery of the true world,”<sup>375</sup> and he makes sure to set an example by the style of his own writing. Which style, says one of his contemporaries

hath all the properties that can recommend any thing to an ingenious relish: For it is manly, and yet plain; natural, and yet not careless: The epithets are genuine, the words proper and familiar, the periods smooth and of middle proportion: It is not broken with ends of Latin, nor impertinent quotations; nor made harsh by hard words, or needless terms of art: Not rendered intricate by long parentheses, nor gaudy by flaunting metaphors; nor tedious by wide fetches and circumferences of speech, nor dark by too much curtness of expression: It is not loose and unjointed, rugged and uneven; but as polite and as fast as marble; and briefly, avoids all the notorious defects, and wants none of the proper ornaments of language.<sup>376</sup>

Sprat’s critique of language is, in essence, a wholesale critique of the human mind, and his call for a reform of one is really a call for a reform of the other. Mazzeo is right when he says that Sprat’s critique goes further than that of Plato, for it is aimed at both poetry *and* philosophy. “The Plato of the *Republic* saw an irreconcilable conflict between philosophy and poetry,” he says, “St. Thomas Aquinas saw a radical opposition between the metaphors of theology and the metaphors of poetry, but Sprat goes further than either in opposing the experimental manipulation of things to any productions of the ‘unaided’ mind.”<sup>377</sup> He distrusts logic almost as much as rhetoric, fearing it could “heat... the mind beyond due temper.”<sup>378</sup> Sprat had, however, not a particularly original mind, and most of his conceptions come from other sources; like Locke, but on a smaller scale, he was good at collecting and synthesizing views current at the time—and that is precisely why he is important, because he stands as a reliable indicator of a dominant mood. A year before the publication of Sprat’s *History*, for example, another member of the Royal Society, Samuel Parker, published a book in which he ridiculed the claim of the Platonists that there is a knowledge not attainable through the senses. Like Sprat, Parker profoundly distrusted all hypotheses, extolled “experience,” claimed how “experimental knowledge is of all others the safest and most unquestionable.” Like Sprat, Parker detested metaphor: “All those theories in philosophy which are expressed only in metaphorical

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<sup>372</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 62.

<sup>373</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, pp. 334, 113, 105.

<sup>374</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>375</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 340.

<sup>376</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Plus Ultra*, Gainesville, Fla., Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1958, pp. 84-85.

<sup>377</sup> “Seventeenth-Century English Prose Style,”

<sup>378</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, p. 91.

terms, are not real truths, but the mere products of imagination, dressed up (like children's babies) in a few spangled empty words.... Thus their wanton and luxuriant fancies climbing up into the bed of reason, do not only defile it by unchaste and illegitimate embraces, but instead of real conceptions and notices of things, impregnate the mind with nothing but airy and subventaneous phantasms."<sup>379</sup> Untroubled by the bold sexual metaphors he himself was using, and perhaps inspired by Sprat, Parker would go on to recommend, in a book published in 1671, that an act of Parliament declaring a ban on metaphors "might perhaps be an effectual cure to all our present distempers."<sup>380</sup> John Wilkins, a *spiritus movens* of the Royal Society, and later master of Trinity College, Cambridge, insisted as early as 1646 that language "must be plain and natural," and that "the greatest learning is to be seen in the greatest plainness." Like countless others at the time, including Newton, he wrote a treatise in 1668 in which he advocated the creation of a universal language based on a scientific description of the objects of nature, a language free from all the irregularities, exceptions, and imperfections of natural languages.<sup>381</sup> John Webster, an ardent follower of Bacon, declared in 1677 that "words are but the making forth of those notions that we have of things, and ought to be subjected to things, and not things to words: if our notions do not agree with the things themselves, then we have received false *Idola* or images of them."<sup>382</sup> Finally, Robert Boyle, the most prominent scientist of Restoration England besides Newton, often revealed his exasperation with the ambiguity and the frivolousness of literary language:

I find those specious and boasted allegations, the apothegms of the sages, the placits [dicta] of the philosophers, the examples of eminent persons, the pretty similes, quaint allegories, and quick sentences of fine wits...such two-edged weapons, that they are as well applicable to the service of falsehood as of truth, and may by ready wits be brought equally to countenance contrary assertions.

And:

It is pleasant to observe in how many of such copies of verses the themes appear to have been made to the conceits, not the conceits for the themes; how often the words are not so properly the clothes of the matter, as the matter the stuffing of the words; how frequently sublime nonsense passes for sublime wit; and... how commonly confused notions, and abortive or unlicked conceptions are, in exotic language, or ambiguous expressions, exposed to uncertain adoption of the courteous reader.<sup>383</sup>

Many more examples could be invoked to demonstrate that a large-scale transformation was taking place in the second part of the seventeenth century of the way in which men thought about language. By 1672, we are told, even the sentences of the members of the Society "were reduced from an average of 61 words to a little less than one-half that

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<sup>379</sup> *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, New York, AMS Press, 1985, pp. 44-5, 57, 75-76.

<sup>380</sup> Quoted in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 285.

<sup>381</sup> "Gift of Preaching," in Edward Williams, ed., *The Christian Preacher*, London, Thomas Tegg, 1843, pp. 25-26. On universal languages see, e.g., Robert Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth Century England: Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, Lewisburg, Pa., Bucknell UP, 1995.

<sup>382</sup> *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft*, London, 1677, p. 21.

<sup>383</sup> Robert Boyle, "Some Considerations touching the Style of the Scriptures," in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward Davis, London, Pickering & Chatto, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 439, 461.

length. Some of the younger writers had periods averaging so low as 24 words.”<sup>384</sup> Chapter V, Article IV, of the statutes of the Society enacted in 1663, reads: “In all reports of experiments to be brought into the Society, the matter of fact shall be barely stated, without any prefaces, apologies, or rhetorical flourishes, and entered so into the register-book, by order of the Society.”<sup>385</sup> In a way, this was merely a testament to Bacon, an act of institutionalization of his own prescriptions (“Never cite an author except in a matter of doubtful credit,” he used to say, “never introduce a controversy unless in a matter of great moment. And for all that concerns ornaments of speech, similitudes, treasury of eloquence, and such like emptiness, let it be utterly dismissed. Also let all those things which are admitted be themselves set down briefly and concisely, so that they may be nothing less than words”<sup>386</sup>). The epistemological and methodological developments taking place in seventeenth century England thus determined the need for great changes in the ways of communication. “The problem facing reformers of language,” according to Formigari, “was not how to do away with the artificiality and conventionality of communication systems, but rather how to set up systems that were completely artificial and therefore free from the fortuitousness which distinguishes all existing languages, the bearers of idols.”<sup>387</sup>

## X

It would be a mistake to conclude from the foregoing, however, that the reform of language was an affair strictly limited to the members of the Royal Society, or even to the nascent scientific community as a whole. The extraordinary, and somewhat puzzling, thing is that, during the same period of time, we encounter the same tendency even in religious discourse, one seemingly so far removed from (indeed, often thought of as being at the opposite end of) anything taking place in the halls of a scientific society. Robert South, for example, a bishop and an outspoken enemy of the Royal Society, complains in one of his sermons, in a manner not much different from that of Bacon or Hobbes, how “most of the writings and discourses in the world are but illustration and rhetoric, which signifies as much as nothing to a mind eager in pursuit after the causes and philosophical truth of things.” Like Bacon or Hobbes, South is deeply suspicious of language, and holds that “the generality of mankind is wholly and absolutely governed by words and names,” that “there is a certain *bewitchery* or fascination in words, which makes them operate with a force beyond what we can naturally account for.” Consequently, he takes to task preachers who fill their sermons “with difficult nothings, rabbinical whimsies, and remote allusions, which no man of sense and solid reason can hear without weariness and contempt,” because, in the end, “all obscurity of speech is resolvable into the confusion and disorder of the speaker’s thoughts,” “all faults or defects in a man’s expressions must presuppose the same in his notions first.” South also takes to task—again in words strikingly reminiscent of Bacon or Hobbes—the long and windy sort of preaching: “It is the work of fancy to enlarge,” he says, “but of judgment to

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<sup>384</sup> P. H. Hembdt, “The Influence of Early Science on Formative English, 1645-1675,” *Journal of Chemical Education*, v. 3, #9, 1926, p. 1054.

<sup>385</sup> C. H. Weld, *A History of the Royal Society*, London, John W. Parker, 1848, v. 2, p. 527.

<sup>386</sup> *Novum Organum*.

<sup>387</sup> *Language and Experience in 17<sup>th</sup>-century British Philosophy*, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1988, pp. 60-61. Cf. Maurizio Gotti, *Investigating specialized discourse*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 107-139.

shorten and contract; and therefore this must needs be as far above the other, as judgment is a greater and a nobler faculty than fancy or imagination.” And a little later: “In brevity of speech, a man does not so much speak words, as things; things in their precise and naked truth, and stripped of their rhetorical mask, and their fallacious gloss.” Finally, in opposition to an obscure and roundabout style of preaching, and of such expression in general, South invokes the clarity and perspicuity, as well as the plainness and simplicity, of the Scriptures themselves. There is in the discourse of the apostles nothing “of the fringes of the North star,” he says, “nothing of nature’s becoming unnatural, nothing of the down of angels wings, or the beautiful locks of cherubims: no starched similitudes, introduced with a ‘Thus have I seen a cloud rolling in its airy mansion,’ and the like.” Christ and his apostles well knew, according to South, “that the great truth delivered by them would support itself, and that barely to deliver it would be abundantly sufficient to enforce it; nakedness (of all things) being never able to make truth ashamed.” Their subject was, in short, incapable of any greater luster than to appear just as it is, so that “all vain, luxuriant allegories, rhyming cadencies of similar words,” “little affected sentences,” and other embellishments, would merely debase and emasculate the divinity, make quibble and trifle of truth and immortality. Accordingly, the apostles used a language that was “easy, obvious, and familiar, with nothing in it strained or far fetched.” It was a language similar to that of a prince: commanding in “sober, natural expressions,” possessing “majesty in plainness.”<sup>388</sup>

Robert South is neither alone, nor an extreme case among English divines in this respect (on the contrary, in his sermons he was perhaps the most “rhetorical,” even eccentric, of preachers). Before South, Richard Sibbes spoke of plainness in terms that would often be repeated: “Truth feareth nothing so much as concealment, and desireth nothing so much as clearly to be laid open to the view of all: When it is most naked, it is most lovely and powerful.”<sup>389</sup> Richard Baxter, echoing Sibbes, is equally explicit on the virtues of plainness: “All our teaching must be as plain and evident as we can make it,” he writes in *The Reformed Pastor*. “Truth loves the light and is most beautiful when most naked. It is a sign of an envious enemy to hide the truth, and a sign of a hypocrite to do this under pretence of revealing it; and therefore painted obscure sermons (like painted glass in windows that keeps out the light) are too oft the marks of painted hypocrites.”<sup>390</sup> Elsewhere he says: “The plainest words are the profitablest oratory in the weightiest matters... If we see a man fall into fire or water, we stand not upon mannerliness in plucking him out, but lay hands on him as we can without delay.”<sup>391</sup> In his *Directions Concerning the Matter and Style of Sermons*, James Arderne warns would-be preachers not to “suffer your fancy to be tempted towards following of poetic or romantic writings, the latter being good for nothing, and the other best in its own measures.”<sup>392</sup> John Eachard claims metaphors to be “undoubtedly useless and empty,” and judged “absolutely ridiculous... by every man in the Corporation that understands but plain

<sup>388</sup> *Three Restoration Divines: Barrow, South, Tillotson. Selected Sermons*, ed. Irène Simon, Paris, Société d’Editions “Les Belles Lettres,” 1976, pp. 121, 136, 160, 161, 245, 323, 324, 325.

<sup>389</sup> *The Bruised Reed and Smoking flax*, Menston, Scolar Press, 1973 [1630], p. 76.

<sup>390</sup> Ed. Hugh Martin, London, SCM Press, 1956 [1655], pp. 72-73.

<sup>391</sup> Quoted in F. J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter, 1615-1691*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924, pp. 282, 283.

<sup>392</sup> Ed. John Mackay, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1952 [1671], p. 23.



English and common sense.”<sup>393</sup> In his rant against the use of metaphor, simile, conceit, word play, and other “sportfull flashes of imagination”—against that “brutish, shallow and giddy power, able to perform nothing worthy much regards”—in short, against “freakish wit”—, Isaac Barrow refers to those who indulge in it as worthless “flies,” “insects of glory,” mere “bubbles of vanity.”<sup>394</sup> Jeremy Taylor, himself no stranger to ornate prose and poetic fancy, cautions preachers to “use primitive, known, and accustomed words,” and Simon Patrick censures those who use “new-found words, affected expressions, and odd phrases” instead of “plain and proper language.”<sup>395</sup> In *An Essay Concerning Preaching*, Joseph Glanvill defends plainness—the “manly unaffectedness and simplicity of speech”—against “hard words,” “affectations of wit,” “finery, flourishes, metaphors, and cadencies.” It is plainness, according to him, that is “for ever the best eloquence, and ‘tis the most forcible.” Speaking elsewhere of the “plainness of the Gospel,” and of God valuing “simplicity and integrity above all natural perfections,” Glanvill gives the example of St. Paul (he “flights the affected eloquence of the orators and rhetoricians; he spoke in plainness and simplicity”) and recommends this style for everyone: “If things were stated in clear and plain words, many controversies would be ended.”<sup>396</sup> Elsewhere he warns against “things themselves [getting] lost in a crowd of names and intentional nothings,” and even apologizes for his own previous verbosity (“faults committed in an immaturity of age”).<sup>397</sup> Other important preachers, too, such as John Hales, William Chillingworth, Thomas Fuller, George Bull, Gilbert Burnet, or James Ussher, practiced and actively promoted the plain style. That most of these names carry little significance today should not obscure the fact that, in seventeenth century England, no other literary form, indeed no other form of spoken or written expression, exerted an influence on popular opinion as direct and as immense as did the sermon. Precursor, in a way, to modern mass media—only commended by more hallowed authority—, accessible in its spoken form to vast segments of the population in a way that books and stage plays were not, making up by far the greatest part of all published material, and read to the extent that no other material was, the sermon constituted not only a major determinant of literary taste, and thus a prime literary influence, but was the very norm of prose style, and of the form of thinking and feeling that accompanied it. “At no time probably in world’s history,” says Mitchell even more to the point, “has preaching played so important and disproportionate a part in political and social life as it did in England during the decade 1645-55.”<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> “The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy” [1670], in *An English Garner*, ed. Edward Arber, London, Archibald Constable and Co., vol. 7, 1909, p. 267.

<sup>394</sup> “Against Foolish Talking and Jestings,” in *The Works of Isaac Barrow*, New York, J. C. Riker, 1845.

<sup>395</sup> “Rules and Advices to the Clergy,” in *Works*, ed. Herber and Eden, Longmans, 1883, v. 1, p. 109; “A Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Non-Conformist” [1669] in *Works*, ed. Alexander Taylor, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1858, v. 5, p. 303.

<sup>396</sup> [1678], in Spingarn, ed., *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 2, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1908, pp. 273, 276; “The Usefulness of Real Philosophy to Religion,” in *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion*, New York, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970, pp. 41, 39, 26.

<sup>397</sup> *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, Hove (Sussex), The Harvester Press, 1970, p. 151. For the apology, cf. “An Address to the Royal Society,” in *ibid*, n.p.

<sup>398</sup> *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 255, also pp. 3, 352, 379, 380, 397. Cf. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, Wokingham, Van Nostrand, 1980, pp. 63-67, and *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, pp. 31-37.

This critique of “witty” and “metaphysical” preaching<sup>399</sup>—thus called for the same reason that Donne’s poetry was called witty and metaphysical—came largely from within the Church of England itself. In other words, from within the establishment. What is interesting, however, is that at the same time an important contribution in the crusade for plainness came from what was in many other respects—not least of which were theology and ecclesiastical doctrine—a staunchly opposing party, namely the Puritans. Baxter and Barrow, cited above, were Puritans for example. Sibbes, though he continued to worship according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, was a moderate Puritan. Probably the greatest Restoration divine, John Tillotson, started out as a Puritan and remained one in his plain style of preaching. Joseph Hall—“commonly called our English Seneca, for the pureness, plainness, and fullness of his style”<sup>400</sup>—was strongly influenced by Puritanism. Henry Smith, whose sentences were “short, compact, and crisp in an astonishingly modern degree,” and whose vocabulary was “so extremely simple that scarcely a word of it requires explanation today,” was London’s first great city preacher, and a Puritan.<sup>401</sup> Puritan was also Anthony Tuckney, whose plain prose influenced the Cambridge Platonists. Finally, William Perkins, the most important of early English divines, the man who at the time was held in as high regard as Calvin, was a Puritan and the author of a manual with which generations of Puritan and Anglican preachers were schooled throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. An excellent early example of the radical change in the attitude of the English towards their self-expression, as well as in their self-conception, this manual, *The Art of Prophesying*, laid out the task of the preacher numerically as follows:

1. To read the text distinctly out of the canonical scriptures.
2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read, by the scripture itself.
3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the natural sense.
4. To apply, if he have the gift, the doctrines rightly collected to the life and manners of men in a simple and plain speech.<sup>402</sup>

In connection with foregoing discussion, two things stand out in Perkins’s manual and inform his four-point method. First of all, he insists that only one sense is proper to any passage of Scripture. “The Church of Rome,” he says, “maketh four senses of the scriptures, the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical,... but this her device of the fourfold meaning of the scripture must be exploded and rejected. There is only one sense and the same is the literal.” Secondly, the preacher—the individual—must efface himself: “Human wisdom must be concealed,” he says, “whether it be in the matter of the sermon or in the setting forth of the words, because the preaching of the word is the testimony of God and the profession of the knowledge of Christ and not of human skill: and again, because the hearers ought not to ascribe their faith to the gifts of man, but to the power of God’s word.”<sup>403</sup> In a word, as John Cotton would say, “God’s altar needs not our polishing.”<sup>404</sup> Consequently (there being one and only one meaning of the

<sup>399</sup> Cf. Horton Davies, *Like Angels From a Cloud: The English Metaphysical Preachers, 1588-1645*, San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library, 1986.

<sup>400</sup> Thomas Fuller, cited in Audrey Chew, “Joseph Hall and Neo-Stoicism,” *PMLA*, v. 65, # 6, 1950.

<sup>401</sup> G. P. Krapp, *The Rise of English Literary Prose*, New York, Frederick Ungar, pp. 198-199.

<sup>402</sup> In *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward, Appleford (England), The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970, p. 349.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338, 345.

<sup>404</sup> In the preface to his *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956, not paginated.

Scripture, which meaning the preacher must never hope to enhance), the style of writing and speaking recommended by Perkins, and one that would come to dominate the pulpit in the second half of the seventeenth century, was characterized by a lack of style, as it were, aspiring to be as transparent and inconspicuous as possible, to simulate its own non-existence, a lack of any character of its own, and hence of any character of the speaker himself. It was a style thoroughly bald and a priori, eschewing artfulness or any mark of the preacher himself. Not only did the presence of emotion, of devotional feeling, of pictorialism and of poetry, all so proper to the Anglo-Catholic tradition, thus come to an end according to Mitchell (“all the tenderness, love, and adoration of [the previous] sixteen centuries was lost”), but the dogmatism of the new attitude “practically forbade” even the exercise of the intellect. It precluded “any thought of struggle,” its calm and modulated prose giving off a sense of universal acquiescence.<sup>405</sup> Here is how Hippolyte Taine describes this new norm:

What a style! and it is the same throughout. There is nothing lifelike; it is a skeleton, with all its joints coarsely displayed. All the ideas are ticketed and numbered. The schoolmen were not worse. Neither rapture nor vehemence; no wit, no imagination.... The dull argumentative reason comes with its pigeon-holed classifications upon a great truth of the heart or an impassioned word from the Bible, examines it “positively and negatively,” draws thence “a lesson and an encouragement,” arranges each part under its heading, patiently, indefatigably, so that sometimes three whole sermons are needed to complete the division and the proof, and each of them contains in its exordium the methodical abstract of all the points treated and the arguments supplied.<sup>406</sup>

And here is a description by Perry Miller:

The Puritan work is mechanically and rigidly divided into sections and subheads, and appears on the printed page more like a lawyer’s brief than a work of art.... [It] quotes the text and “opens” it as briefly as possible, expounding circumstances and context, explaining its grammatical meanings, reducing its tropes and schemata to prose, and setting forth its logical implications; the sermon then proclaims in a flat, indicative sentence the ‘doctrine’ contained in the text or logically deduced from it, and proceeds to the first reason or proof. Reason follows reason, with no other transition than a period and a number; after the last proof is stated there follow the uses or applications, also in numbered sequence, and the sermon ends when there is nothing more to be said.<sup>407</sup>

Keeble speaks of an “almost naïve” disregard on Baxter’s part “for literary propriety,” of a “zeal” that overwhelms “all sense of decorum or proportion.” So “anxious” is Baxter “to give a clear plan” to his reader, “to order the progress of his argument,” that he will first outline it in the contents, and then keep reminding the reader throughout the book “of what stage he has reached, of what has gone before and what is yet to come, and of the congruity of earlier directions with present and later ones,” all the while using “tabulation and numeration” in order “to delineate the progress of the book,” and keep it moving in a “strictly logical” fashion. So obsessed, in fact, is the Puritan writer with

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<sup>405</sup> *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrews to Tillotson*, pp. 258-259, 274.

<sup>406</sup> *History of English Literature*, tr. Van Laun, Philadelphia, Henry Altemus Company, 1908, v. 3, p. 101.

<sup>407</sup> *The New England Mind*, New York, 1939, pp. 332-333.

order, that to read him, according to Keeble, “is often to be in danger of losing sight of the wood for the trees.”<sup>408</sup>

Taine, Miller, and Keeble are not exaggerating. “The temptation of the preacher as an intellectual and a technician,” says William Haller, “was to spend most of his time dividing and subdividing his text and spinning doctrines out in hairbreadth distinction.”<sup>409</sup> Consider this passage from a 1664 sermon by Tillotson, for example:

Having thus explained the words, I come now to consider the proposition contained in them, which is this: That *religion is the best knowledge and wisdom*. This I shall endeavour to make good these three ways.

1. By a direct proof of it;
2. By showing on the contrary the folly and ignorance of irreligion and wickedness;
3. By vindicating religion from those common imputations which seem to charge it with ignorance or imprudence. I begin with the direct proof of this...<sup>410</sup>

Perhaps the best summary of Puritan prose style is given by Harold Fisch, when he says that “an extreme sobriety of language was the natural corollary of the Puritan sobriety in dress and diet.” According to him, Puritan “resistance to the allurements of the imagination came to be regarded as an essential part of the defensive armament of the true Christian warrior.” The task of the preacher was now, among other things, “to remove from the poetry of the Old Testament all its imaginative colour and, by a novel system of exegesis, to reduce it to a sterile argument.”<sup>411</sup> Consequently, morality, conscience, and divinity were increasingly dealt with in the English language in such a bare and matter-of-fact way as if they were, as Taine observed, “a subject of export and import duties,... as port wine or herrings.”<sup>412</sup>

In spite of all the differences between Puritans and other factions in the country, which differences eventually led to a civil war and the military defeat of the former, it is this ideology of self-effacement—of the suspicion, ultimately, of anything that the individual is thought to bring to reality from within himself—that would unite England all the same. “He is a strong personality attempting self-effacement,” says Joan Webber of Richard Baxter, calling him “a Puritan Anglican.”<sup>413</sup> “He has no *persona*,” says another commentator.<sup>414</sup> Baxter in fact prided himself on being, as he says, “a Christian, a mere Christian... of that party which is so against parties.”<sup>415</sup> This confirms Mitchell’s conclusion that “when in the eighteenth century evangelical preaching became distinguished from that of the Establishment, it was in thought rather than manner that the difference was to be observed.”<sup>416</sup> Namely, below the seeming variety, and even adversity, lay the same foundation, the same mood, one that would unite not only the Anglicans and the Puritans, but also religion and science, as well as science and moral

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<sup>408</sup> N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 62-63, 65.

<sup>409</sup> *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York, Columbia UP, 1938, p. 134.

<sup>410</sup> “The Wisdom of being Religious,” in *Three Restoration Divines*, p. 367.

<sup>411</sup> “The Puritans and the Reform of Prose-Style,” *Journal of English Literary History*, v. 19, #4, 1952, pp. 232, 235.

<sup>412</sup> *History of English Literature*, p. 103.

<sup>413</sup> *The Eloquent “I”*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, p. 115.

<sup>414</sup> N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 61.

<sup>415</sup> Quoted in N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 23-24.

<sup>416</sup> *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 275.

philosophy. Whether proper to a sermon, or to a report of an experiment, or to philosophical speculation, particular techniques of language are, by the second half of the seventeenth century, decidedly “losing their distinctive characteristics and are being merged together as a standard for all men of good taste.”<sup>417</sup> Donne’s belief, for example, that “the Holy Ghost in penning the Scriptures delights himself, not only with a propriety, but with a delicacy, and harmony, and melody of language; with height of metaphors and other figures which may work great impressions upon readers, and not with barbarous, or trivial, or market or homely language”—this belief had no place in the new constellation. Within the course of just a few decades, the “metaphysical” preacher, such as the great Lancelot Andrewes, the preacher whose skill was marked by “the greater ingenuity with which he adapted his examples, the more unexpected parallels which he produced, and the more subtle, psychological, and learned images which he employed,”<sup>418</sup> was literally banished from the land. But along with the metaphysical poet and the metaphysical preacher, what was banished, more importantly, was an entire attitude towards language, thought, and individuality.

## XI

Of course, it is not that the “plain” style of writing and speaking did not exist before the Restoration. On the contrary, we have already said that Donne’s own poetry belonged to a long tradition of (“Attic,” “Senecan,” “Anti-Ciceronian”) plain style, that “matter” was more important to him than words. After all, it was already Socrates who made it a point to speak plainly. But there was now an essential difference, one that is well stated by Wesley Trimpi:

The difference between the plainness sought by the Royal Society and that of the classical plain style is that the former was a style in which the writer himself intruded as little as possible in the description of the physical world, a language as near to mathematics as possible. The classical plain style was developed to reveal the writer himself, to analyze and to portray the individual personality... The conscious exclusion of the writer’s personality—even his mind if that were possible—in the language of mathematics is directly opposed to the cultivation of the individual and psychological search for philosophic truth.<sup>419</sup>

To be more precise, unlike the new plain style advocated by Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, by the Royal Society and the priestly elite, the old style portrays, to borrow the words of Morris Croll,

the process of acquiring the truth rather than the secure possession of it, and expresses ideas not only with clearness and brevity, but also with the ardor in which they were first conceived.... [I]t owes its persuasive power to a vivid and acute portrayal of individual experience rather than to the histrionic and sensuous expression of general ideas.

While it might seem, according to Croll, that it “expresses naively the candor of the soul,” the fact is that the old plain style relies on “subtle art to reveal the secret experiences of arduous and solitary minds, to express, even in the intricacies and

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<sup>417</sup> “The Puritans and the Reform of Prose-Style,” pp. 247-248.

<sup>418</sup> *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 149.

<sup>419</sup> *Ben Jonson’s Poems*, Palo Alto, 1962, p. 90.

subtleties of its form, the difficulties of a soul exploring unfamiliar truth by the unaided exercise of its own faculties.” Instead of expressing “a contented sense of the enjoyment and *possession*” of truth, the old plain style preferred “forms that express the energy and labor of minds *seeking* truth.” Instead of expressing the soul’s “states of rest,” it preferred to engulf itself in “the *motions* of souls.” The writer “deliberately avoided the processes of mental revision in order to express his idea when it is nearer the point of its origin in his mind.” In a nutshell, the old plain style preferred “to portray, not a *thought*, but a mind *thinking*,” it preferred to capture “the moment in which truth is still *imagined*,” that is, in the form in which it occurred, and not in the cold and sterile form of the finished product.<sup>420</sup> Finally, Robert Adolph addresses this question in several places in his *Rise of the Modern Prose Style*. According to him, we should talk about two different plain styles, one personal and the other impersonal. Regarding the latter:

It is clear from stylistic theory and practice that as the seventeenth century ran its course, and especially after the Restoration, “plain” came to describe what we shall call for now an impersonal style in which the emotional attitudes of the observer did not appear. ...[T]he new style had the utilitarian intention of presenting “things” plainly to the reader or listener. The revelation of the inmost thoughts and feelings of the writer was not sought.

What was also not sought, according to Adolph, was for the new plain style “to reveal the motions of the mind in its difficult quest to define itself.” Thus we should never confuse the plain style of, say, Socrates with that of Locke, nor their respective condemnations of rhetoric. While Socrates attacks sophistry because it is used merely to persuade men rather than to reveal their soul, Locke, on the other hand, denounces rhetoric precisely insofar as “it reveals the mind of its author too much and at the expense of the real purpose of language, which is clear, useful discourse.”<sup>421</sup> Not surprisingly, Adolph singles out Bacon—Bacon the essayist, the correspondent, the aphorist, the epigrammatist, the apothegmatist—no difference—as the epitome of the new, “bloodless,” impersonal style, “cool and unrevealing.” Unlike the practitioner of the old plain style, who constructed “a mental edifice of his own according to some ideal pattern or looking within himself to relate the physical world to his own private concerns,” the Baconian writer, says Adolph, submits his mind to “objective physical reality and its causes, existing before and after the writer’s perception of them and independently of him.”<sup>422</sup> In other words, rather than trying to grasp the private and personal, the new plain style strives to grasp the general, that which is generally known. The free play of the mind is distrusted and discouraged, and the “self” of the new style is therefore no longer the author himself, but rather the reader, the audience, an abstract “gentleman.” The goal now is not to reveal one’s own self, real or ideal, but merely to transplant “knowledge into another.”<sup>423</sup>

Take, by contrast, the example of Thomas Browne’s introduction to *Religio Medici*. Referring to the work that is before the reader, Browne states:

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<sup>420</sup> *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, pp. 89, 95, 208, 209, 210. All but the last emphasis added.

<sup>421</sup> Cambridge, MA, The M.I.T. Press, 1968, pp. 130, 176, 237.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168, 172, 174, 272-273.

<sup>423</sup> *Advancement*.

He that shall peruse that work, and shall take notice of sundry particularities and personal expressions therein, will easily discern the intention was not public: and being a private exercise directed to my self, what is delivered therein was rather a memorial unto me then an example or rule unto any other: and therefore if there be any singularities therein correspondent unto the private conceptions of any man, it doth not advantage them; or if dissentaneous thereunto, it no way overthrows them.<sup>424</sup>

Later in the same work, he states:

The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other I use it but like my globe, and turn it around sometimes for my recreation.<sup>425</sup>

Or take the example of Robert Burton. Though in some respects he already conforms to the new literary standard (“I neglect phrases, and wholly labour to inform my reader’s understanding, not to please his ear”), and to the new philosophy (e.g. his censure of imagination), Burton too, like Browne, warns the reader that what is before him is, ultimately, an invitation into a personal world, a wholly unique landscape:

It is not my study or intent to compose neatly, which an orator requires, but to express myself readily and plainly as it happens. So that as a river runs, sometimes precipitate and swift, then dull and slow; now direct, then winding; now deep, then shallow; now muddy, then clear; now broad, then narrow; doth my style flow: now serious, then light; now comical, then satirical; now more elaborate, then remiss, as the present subject required, or as at the time I was affected.

Hence, he tells the reader,

I shall lead thee over steep mountains, through treacherous valleys, dew-clad meadows and rough plowed fields, through variety of objects, that which thou shall like and surely dislike.<sup>426</sup>

Like Browne, Burton is thus not so much laying out a map of the world as it is, but a map of the idiosyncratic and irregular—at times exotic and even bizarre—world of the author. This is not to say that his cultivation of a personal style was dissociated from seeking truth. On the contrary, “by avoiding the appearance of dogmatizing, by presenting his arguments as valid in his own eyes but not necessarily binding on others, and by appearing to speak only his own opinion,” a writer such as Brown “might paradoxically persuade his reader more effectively than through open persuasion, by describing a personal search for truth rather than arguing from first principles.”<sup>427</sup> Though the problem of truth “absorbs Browne’s attention more than any other issue,” the stance of his writing “is not that of an objective disquisition, but reflects a particular man’s contours of response.”<sup>428</sup> Both Browne and Burton, their differences notwithstanding, ask the reader for patience before they take him on a strenuous journey, which journey

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<sup>424</sup> Ed. L. C. Martin, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1964, no pagination.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, second part, section xi.

<sup>426</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961.

<sup>427</sup> John Steadman, *The Hill and the Labyrinth*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 107.

<sup>428</sup> Leonard Nathanson, *The Strategy of Truth: A Study of Sir Thomas Browne*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp. 60, 80-81

they judge to be important in itself, and in no need of further justification. They bid the reader come into their world, and refuse to meet him outside, as it were, on a supposedly neutral, familiar, well-established turf. The new style, on the other hand, is built upon an understanding which, in the words of Robert Merton, neglects “the qualitatively unique, the individually variable aspects of phenomena,” and regards the individual event “in terms of what it makes possible rather than in intrinsic terms.”<sup>429</sup> In extreme cases, the author and all the properties that pertain to his world, least of which is the style in which he writes, are irrelevant and worthless, unless they are found to betray and buttress a broader regularity. In the particular case of writing and speech, this meant that any form of individualism in style was now “checked by the formulation of general standards to which the individual was obliged to submit and by which he was disciplined if he rebelled.”<sup>430</sup> In short, it meant the creation of one acceptable, approved, and obligatory “public” style. One could now be a Puritan or an Anglican, a poet or a scientist, a businessman or a statesman, a Whig or a Tory, a Hobbesian or an anti-Hobbesian, materialist or an idealist, perhaps even such a weird thing as a Quaker, or one as repulsive as a Catholic, an atheist, or an anti-monarchist, but only as long as one kept oneself within the parameters of one legitimate form of discourse, with its own format and logic.

This, then, is the second crucial difference between the old and the new plain style. The old plain style—as the ancients had already recognized—was only one among the various styles available to a speaker or a writer. “The way we speak,” said Cicero, “is sometimes grand, sometimes plain, and sometimes we hold to a middle course. Thus, the style of our speech follows our thought as we have established it, changing and turning to delight the audience’s ears in every way, and to stir up all kinds of emotions in their souls.”<sup>431</sup> The style of the Elizabethan Philip Sidney varied, therefore, according to need, “almost exactly as Quintilian would have approved.”<sup>432</sup> It is the particular requirement of his subject matter—the writing of history—that made the Elizabethan Roger Ascham recommend a “plain and open” style, but not without conceding that “higher and lower” styles were sometimes more appropriate, “as matters do rise and fall.”<sup>433</sup> To avoid speaking “like a Pope” when the matter is light, and “like a parrot” when it is grave, George Puttenham likewise believed that “the style ought to conform with the nature of the subject.”<sup>434</sup> It should come as no surprise that, presented with various options, astronomers, too, would have chosen the plain style even prior to the seventeenth century.<sup>435</sup> So would those writers of penny literature, the ones targeting “al young gentlemen, marchants, citizens, apprentices, yeomen, and plaine country farmers.”<sup>436</sup> Or those whose duty it was to instruct the common people in religious matters.<sup>437</sup> But they

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<sup>429</sup> “Science, Technology, and Society in Seventeenth-Century England,” pp. 587-588.

<sup>430</sup> George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble*, p. 341.

<sup>431</sup> *On the Ideal Orator*, tr. and ed. James May and Jacob Wisse, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2001, p. 278.

<sup>432</sup> Kenneth Myrick, *Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1935, p. 63.

<sup>433</sup> *English Works*, ed. W. A. Wright, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1904, p. 126. Cf. W. F. Staton, “The Characters of Style in Elizabethan Prose,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, v. 57 (1958), #2, pp. 197-207.

<sup>434</sup> *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. G. D. Willcock and Alice Walker, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1936, p. 151.

<sup>435</sup> F. R. Johnson, *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1937, pp. 91-92, 130-132, 169-171, 206, 290-297.

<sup>436</sup> E. H. Miller, *The Professional Writer in Elizabethan England*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1959, pp. 216-220.

<sup>437</sup> R. F. Jones, “The Moral Sense of Simplicity,” in *Studies in Honor of Frederick W. Shipley*, ed. by his colleagues, St. Louis, Washington University Studies, 1942, pp. 265-287.



all knew that they were choosing one style over another for the particular purpose at hand. The early seventeenth-century English preacher Robert Harris “could so cook his meat,” we are told, “that he could make it relish to every palate.”<sup>438</sup> In the case of Fulke Greville, on the other hand, the main consideration was not so much his subject matter as the skill which he thought he possessed. Because he was unable to produce a style as grand as the subject matter seemed to have required—having “ventured upon this spreading ocean of images,” he tells us, “my apprehensive youth... did easily wander beyond proportion”—, he admits to having considered various styles before settling on the style most suitable for him.<sup>439</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the plain style—the new plain style, cleansed of all personality and particularity—ceased to be an option, regardless of one’s skill or subject matter, and became a requirement. It became identified with communication itself. Those who could not or would not, for whatever reason, fit the mould, remained outside of discourse. They were deemed unintelligible. They could simply no longer represent themselves.

If at the center of the middle ages was the word, as spoken by the Bible, the end of the middle ages could be said to have begun when the word itself became an object of distrust. After all, so imperfect, and even corrupt, a creation as the English language could not have possibly originated with God.<sup>440</sup> The seventeenth-century distrust of the word was, therefore, not a phenomenon significant solely for the history of linguistics or literary theory. If this distrust resembled the age-old quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric in some way, it must by no means be subsumed under it, for the two had very little in common.<sup>441</sup> Instead, what the distrust of the word really meant was a distrust of reason, a distrust of imagination, of individual subjectivity, a distrust of man. This was clearly the end of the humanistic vision of the world, of the world where man could still communicate with God, and the beginning of something entirely different. It is, in fact, safe to say that no other century in recorded human history had such different, in many ways opposite, worlds at its ends as did the English seventeenth century. “Since the rise of Christianity, there is no landmark in history that is worthy to be compared with this,”<sup>442</sup> said Herbert Butterfield. This was a century of revolution before the Age of Revolution a hundred years a later. It was a revolution in the very conception of what was considered true, what was considered natural, and what was considered knowable, not merely in the physical world, but also in the social one. For once the word was brought down, and access to the secrets of nature opened up, it was only a matter of time when the question of revealing the secrets of the social world would be raised as well. The seventeenth century was, in short, the century of the death of man at the dawn of modernity.

## XII

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<sup>438</sup> Samuel Clarke, *Collection of the Lives of Ten Eminent Divines*, London, William Miller, 1662, p. 311.

<sup>439</sup> *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1907, pp. 151-154.

<sup>440</sup> Cf. Margreta de Grazia, “The Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 41 (1980), #2, pp. 319-329.

<sup>441</sup> Cf. Mazzeo, “Seventeenth-Century English Prose Style,” *Mosaic*, v. 6 (1973), #3, pp. 140-142.

<sup>442</sup> *The Origins of Modern Science 1300-1800*, London, G. Bell, 1949, p. 174.

Literary historians have long been aware that an abrupt change in language had taken place in the second part of the seventeenth century. “There are good reasons,” says James Sutherland, “for claiming that after 1660 English prose made a fresh start, and that by the end of the century a new style of writing had become general.”<sup>443</sup> “In the third quarter of the century,” says F. P. Wilson, “the plain style triumphed. It triumphed so completely that elaborate prose was driven out, and for some generations Milton, Browne, and [Jeremy] Taylor had no notable successors.”<sup>444</sup> The mid-seventeenth-century reformers treated English, we are told, “as if it were a foreign language,” a “new language” that “must be studied as if for the first time.”<sup>445</sup> Other authors agree on when that change occurred even down to the year.<sup>446</sup> What they also seem to agree on is that this was not an unconscious substitution of one sort of language for another, in which language passively reacting to other changes at the time. Instead, as Jones says, “the substitution of a plain, direct, unadorned style for the elaborate and musical style of the Commonwealth was a change of which the age was quite conscious, and for which many stoutly battled.”<sup>447</sup> “We now take modern prose so much for granted,” says Ian Robinson, “as to make it worth remarking that there was nothing inevitable about the particular style modern prose took, though one may certainly call it fatal. The losing side threw up other possibilities,” he says, and gives the examples of Marvell, Bunyan, and Cromwell.<sup>448</sup> English prose, says G. P. Krapp in the same vein, “has been not merely discovered but conquered.”<sup>449</sup> It was “a revolution so sudden and so complete,” says Wilson.<sup>450</sup> “The victory was complete,” echoes Brian Vickers.<sup>451</sup> Where literary historians do not seem to agree however, where they seem, in fact, to be somewhat at odds, concerns the reason why this change happened in the first place. In a series of spirited articles, Jones has argued that the source of the change—the sole source of the change—was the rise of experimental science. It was science and, more particularly, the scientists gathered around the Royal Society, who, according to him, single-handedly imposed the change on religious and literary language.<sup>452</sup> Basil Willey and Marjorie Nicolson, though not directly concerned with linguistics, wrote a number of studies on the way seventeenth-century science, and scientific attitude more generally, transformed English literature, thus lending support to the thesis put forth by Jones.<sup>453</sup> Jackson Cope, on the other hand, has argued the contrary, namely that the change originated in contemporary religious discourse, and from there spread to that of science.<sup>454</sup> Still

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<sup>443</sup> *On English Prose*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965, p. 67.

<sup>444</sup> *Seventeenth Century Prose*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960, p. 5.

<sup>445</sup> Murray Cohen, *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins Press, 1977, pp. 7, 10.

<sup>446</sup> Cf. Ian Robinson, *The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 159; Ray Frazer, “The Origin of the Term ‘Image’.”

<sup>447</sup> *The Seventeenth Century*, p. 112.

<sup>448</sup> “Prose and the Dissociation of Sensibility,” in *From Donne to Marvell*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 266-268.

<sup>449</sup> *The Rise of English Literary Prose*, New York, Frederick Ungar, 1963, p. 544.

<sup>450</sup> *Seventeenth Century Prose*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960, p. 5.

<sup>451</sup> “The Royal Society and English Prose Style: A Reassessment,” in *idem* and Nancy Struever, eds., *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, Los Angeles, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1985, p. 62.

<sup>452</sup> Articles collected in *The Seventeenth Century*. Also his *Ancients and Moderns*, St. Louis, Washington University Studies, 1961 [1936].

<sup>453</sup> Most notably Willey’s *The Seventeenth Century Background* (1934) and Nicolson’s *Newton Demands the Muse* (1946).

<sup>454</sup> Cf. *Joseph Glanvill, Anglican Apologist*, St. Luis, Washington University Studies, 1956.

differently, Robert Adolph has maintained that it was neither in science nor in religion that the new style originated, and has instead found the ultimate catalyst for the change in the ethic of utility that came to dominate English society in the seventeenth century.<sup>455</sup> Stanley Fish, in turn, found the ultimate basis not in ethics, but in epistemology, in a new understanding of the human mind and its capabilities, the new conviction “that the mind, either in its present state or in some future state of repair, is adequate to the task of comprehending and communicating the nature and shape of reality.”<sup>456</sup> An altogether different approach has been taken by W. J. Ong, according to whom the new plain style and, indeed, the scientific method itself, originated in the reformation of traditional logic and rhetoric in the hands of Peter Ramus and his followers.<sup>457</sup>

It is more likely, however, that the change in question is not attributable to one factor alone, no matter how fundamental it is. And certainly no explanation is satisfactory if it neglects the economic factors that were involved. (This is something that William Haller suggested already in the 1930s, but unfortunately did not pursue. In his chapter on the Puritan “rhetoric of the spirit,” Haller observed that metaphysical or witty preaching might have been eclipsed because a growing number of people of “wealth and influence”—people “whom it was important to please”—lacked the erudition and the rhetorical background necessary to understand such preaching. This population, to which “the learning and the language of the orthodox Anglican pulpit seemed alien, newfangled and pretentious,” was, moreover, “no longer inclined,” the way it had been, “to accept with resignation the imputation of ignorance and of intellectual inferiority.” Therefore, like the playwrights and translators, who were increasingly willing to accommodate this population—Haller gives the example of Milton—, preachers, too, jumped on this opportunity as it were. After all, says Haller, “we must not forget that they had also to fill their bellies,” that they, too, “were mendicants and had like the wits and playwrights to coin their gifts and learning in order to live.”<sup>458</sup>) Be that as it may, the important thing, for our purposes at least, is not so much the cause of this profound shift in sensibility, as the effect it had on society at large. The question, then, is: Where did this leave the English language?

For one thing, the shift dealt a serious blow to the long-standing and deep-rooted mystique of “forbidden knowledge.” Legitimized for centuries by what was thought to be St. Paul’s condemnation of intellectual curiosity—but what was really a mistranslation of his warning against moral pride (the Greek *μη ὑψηλοφρόνει*, in the Vulgate *noli altum sapere*, rendered “be not high-minded” or “do not seek to know high things” in the King James version)—the claim of forbidden knowledge had often been used as an excuse for a labyrinthine language said to protect the secrets of God, nature, and power, from the unworthy and the vulgar.<sup>459</sup> On this view, the deepest truths belonged to the select few, to the enlightened or the initiated, and its protection from the masses was in everyone’s best interest. “I wish it were lawful for me to enlarge my self in this point for religions

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<sup>455</sup> *The Rise of Modern Prose Style*, Cambridge, Mass., The M.I.T. Press, 1968.

<sup>456</sup> *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 377.

<sup>457</sup> *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1958.

<sup>458</sup> *The Rise of Puritanism*, 1938, pp. 128, 132-133.

<sup>459</sup> Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, “High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Past & Present*, #72, 1976, pp. 28-41.

sake,” said Thomas Vaughan, the brother of the “metaphysical” poet Henry Vaughan, “but it is not safe, nor convenient that all ears should hear even the mysteries of religion... [T]hese are things that ought not to be publicly discussed, and therefore I shall omit them.”<sup>460</sup> We find an echo of this view even in Milton: “But knowledge is as food,” he says, “and needs no less / Her temperance over appetite, to know / In measure what the mind may well contain, / Oppresses else with surfeit, and soon turns / Wisdom to folly, as nourishment to wind.”<sup>461</sup> Statements such as these were characteristic of the age, and the new language, with its pronounced aversion to metaphor, allegory, and any sort of obfuscation, did a great deal to expose their vacuity and deny them respect. Unlike Robert Harris, who “could so cook his meat” to the satisfaction of most various “palates,” the Englishmen of the later seventeenth century were increasingly prone to pride themselves on being unwilling, and even unable, to “cook” for anyone but the common man. “As it is beyond my skill,” says the preacher Thomas Hooker, “so I confess it is beyond my care to please the niceness of men’s palates with any quaintness of language. They who covet more sauce than meat, they must provide cooks to their mind.”<sup>462</sup> One’s writing is “not to dazzle,” the author says in another place, but to “direct the apprehension of the meanest.”<sup>463</sup> According to Robert South, speech is to be “easy, obvious and familiar,” and never “above the reach or relish of an ordinary apprehension,” while Increase Mather urges his fellow preachers to “to apply our selves to the capacity of the common auditory, and to make an ignorant man understand these mysteries in some good measure.”<sup>464</sup> Still another preacher recommends that words used in the sermon “be simple and in common use; not savouring of the Schools, nor above the understanding of the people.”<sup>465</sup> “But indeed,” says the celebrated Henry Smith in a similar vein, “to preach simply is not to preach rudely, nor unlearnedly, nor confusedly, but to preach plainly and perspicuously, that the simplest man may understand what is taught, as if he did hear his name.”<sup>466</sup> John Toland, in his *Christianity not Mysterious*, promises likewise “to speak very intelligibly,” so as to render things “perspicuous” even to the most vulgar.<sup>467</sup> And this commitment to the common man we start seeing not only in religious discourse, but in most other areas of culture as well. In the introduction to his study of American Indians, for example, Daniel Gookin assures his readers that he will write in the way “that the most vulgar capacity might understand.”<sup>468</sup> Joseph Addison, in turn, praises poetry for being able “to make hard things intelligible, and to deliver what is abstruse of itself in such easy language as may be understood by ordinary readers.”<sup>469</sup> This commitment to the common (ordinary, average, mean, simple) man should not be confused, however, with egalitarianism. One must remember that none of the above authors necessarily denied his superior knowledge. On the contrary. “The more I have to do with the ignorant sort of people,” says Richard Baxter, “the more I find that we cannot

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<sup>460</sup> *The Works*, ed. A. Rudrum, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 468, 471. Cf. Michael Srigley, “The Lascivious Metaphor,” *Studia Neophilologica*, v. 60 (1988), pp. 179-192.

<sup>461</sup> *Paradise Lost*, ed. Anna Baldwin, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2009, VII, ll. 126-130.

<sup>462</sup> *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline*, New York, Arno Press, 1972, n. p. (the preface).

<sup>463</sup> *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline*, New York, Arno Press, 1972, n. p. (the preface).

<sup>464</sup> Quoted in Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, p. 350.

<sup>465</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 393.

<sup>466</sup> Quoted in G. P. Krapp, *The Rise of English Literary Prose*, New York, Frederick Ungar, pp. 198-199.

<sup>467</sup> Ed. Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison, Richard Kearney, Dublin, The Lilliput Press, 1997, pp. 9-10.

<sup>468</sup> *Historical Collections of the Indians in New England*, New York, Arno Press, 1972, p. 3.

<sup>469</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 297.

possibly speak too plainly to them.” And he continues: “If we do not speak in their own vulgar dialect, they understand us not.” Therefore, he says, his writing is “not for the judicious but for the special use of the most senseless ignorant sort.”<sup>470</sup> The following statement by Robert South is even more telling. According to South, the “multitude or common rout [rabble], like a drove of sheep, or an herd of oxen, may be managed by any noise, or cry, which their drivers shall accustom them to. And he, who will set up for a skillful manager of the rabble, so long as they have but ears to hear... may whistle them backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards, till he is weary; and get up upon their backs when he is so.”<sup>471</sup> The presumption, in other words, is not that of equality or brotherhood. Nor are equality and brotherhood the goal of language reform. The goal, instead, is to make communication simpler, and to be able to spread one’s ideas more efficiently. It is also to show one’s allegiance. When Sprat encourages his fellow members of the Royal Society to prefer “the language of artisans, countrymen, and merchants,”<sup>472</sup> then he is also making a statement that clearly carries a social connotation. So is Isaac Barrow when he reproaches facetious speech because it serves “only to obstruct and entangle business, to lose time, and protract the result.” When this divine says in his sermon how “the shop and the exchange will scarce endure jesting in their lower transactions,” then we know that the one he has in mind is likely not the squire and his lady. When, in his sermon, he reproaches one who “for his sport neglects his business,” and warns that his business will therefore “fail of substantial profit,” then there is little doubt regarding whom Barrow is keen to address.<sup>473</sup> The example of John Eachard, twice the vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, is perhaps even more to the point. In a well-known letter of 1670, Eachard states how “an ordinary cheesemonger, or plumb-seller, that scarce ever heard of an university, shall write much better sense, and more to the purpose than those young philosophers, who injudiciously hunting only for great words, make themselves learnedly ridiculous.” A few pages on, Eachard points to constables and “unlearned tradesmen and their young apprentices” as the ultimate reference of good English and common sense, and even equates the marketplace with virtue (“honest and well-meaning” men).<sup>474</sup> Of course, an entire world-view is built into these sentences (Werner Hüllen is very perceptive when he notes that Sprat, for example, “always discusses style of speaking together with style of thinking...and style of thinking together with style of life”<sup>475</sup>), and to ignore its novelty would deny us a fuller understanding of this critical moment in the evolution of the English language. The English language made a radical break in the seventeenth century, and from then on it would remain pitched, as James Sutherland says, “at such a level that it could make sense, and *immediate sense*, to the average man.”<sup>476</sup> The consequences of this have been far reaching.

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<sup>470</sup> Quoted in F. J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter*, 1924, pp. 283-284.

<sup>471</sup> “The Fatal Imposture and Force of Words” (1686), in *Three Restoration Divines*, v. 2, p. 160.

<sup>472</sup> Sprat, p. 113.

<sup>473</sup> “Against Foolish Talking and Jestng,” in *The Works of Isaac Barrow*, New York, John C. Riker, 1845, vol. 1, p. 159.

<sup>474</sup> “The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion,” in *An English Garner*, ed. Edward Arber, London, Archibald Constable, 1909, vol. 7, pp. 259-260, 264, 267.

<sup>475</sup> “Style and Utopia,” in *Papers in the History of Linguistics*, ed. Hans Aarsleff et al., Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1987, p. 249.

<sup>476</sup> *On English Prose*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965, pp. 57-58, emphasis added.

It must be borne in mind that there is, in fact, no such thing as a language of immediate sense. As I. A. Richards observed long ago, “*Thought [itself] is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison.*” We cannot get through “three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without” metaphors, and even “in the rigid language of settled sciences we do not eliminate it without great difficulty.”<sup>477</sup> “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature,” say more recent theorists, adding that even concepts such as “up,” “down,” “time,” or “space,” derive their meaning from metaphors.<sup>478</sup> In his discussion of metaphor, Kenneth Burke points to the fact that when Newton, for example, “conceptualized a planet’s orbit by the use of two alternative forces acting against each other,” what he actually did was to substitute the *fact* of motion—“a total, single, or unified event”—for metaphors. For a planet, says Burke, “does not continually strike some kind of bargain between pulling away and falling back,” but instead “*moves in a path.*”<sup>479</sup> One could similarly think of Newton’s “spirits,” “active principle,” or “electric and elastic spirit,” invoked in the *Principia* to account for attraction.<sup>480</sup> In any case, the importance of metaphor in science, let alone everyday discourse, is well-established.<sup>481</sup> (In her analysis of the work of Bacon, Newton, Dalton, Lamarck, Darwin, Pasteur, Faraday, and others, Jeanne Fahnestock has demonstrated the way figures of speech *other* than metaphor—figures of repetition (*plöche*, *polyptoton*), series-making figures (*incrementum*, *gradatio*), antithesis, and antimetabole (“inverted clauses”)—have also helped generate scientific concepts and theories.<sup>482</sup>) More generally, Michael Polanyi has observed that any language, even the most scientific, must always rely on knowledge that is tacit and personal. Like any form of craftsmanship, scientific inquiry is, according to Polanyi, “an action that requires skill,” an art which can never “be specified in detail” and “transmitted by prescription.” Because we often “know more than we can tell,” science, like craftsmanship, “tends to survive in closely circumscribed local traditions.” Despite all its minute rules and overall rationality, it can ultimately be passed on, like the making of a Stradivari violin, “only by example from master to apprentice.” Neither money (regardless of the amount), nor instruments (regardless of their sophistication), nor methodology (regardless of its comprehensiveness) will ever be sufficient conditions for good quality research, or for reliable diagnostics, if we disregard the essential element of the personal, of a form of slow and painstaking apprenticeship (“indwelling”) that involves the novice with the world—and the language—of inquiry.<sup>483</sup> This is something that occasionally even a

<sup>477</sup> *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1936, pp. 89-90.

<sup>478</sup> G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, “Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Usage,” in M. Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p. 287.

<sup>479</sup> *Permanence and Change*, Los Altos, Ca., Hermes Publication, 1954, pp. 92-93.

<sup>480</sup> See Simon Shaffer, “Godly Men and Mechanical Philosophers: Souls and Spirits in Restoration Natural Philosophy,” *Science in Context*, vol. 1, 1987, pp. 55-85.

<sup>481</sup> See M. Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame UP, 1966; R. March, *Physics for Poets*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1970; R. Jones, *Physics as Metaphor*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982; D. Bohm and D. Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity*, New York, Bantam, 1987. For the role of metaphor in the science of economics, see Donald McCloskey, “The Rhetoric of Economics,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 21 (1983), pp. 481-517, and *idem*, “Storytelling in Economics,” in Christopher Nash, ed., *The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy and Literature*, London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 5-22.

<sup>482</sup> *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1999. For Steven Weinberg’s claim that, in physics, a historically conditioned sense of beauty plays a significant role in discovering and judging the validity of theories, see his *Dreams of a Final Theory*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1992, esp. pp. 132-165.

<sup>483</sup> *The Tacit Dimension*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 3-25, and *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, esp. pp. 18-20, 49-65.

contemporary of Newton's sensed, often with a humorous take on the pretensions of the language reformers. In *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, Jonathan Swift makes his hero pay a visit to the Grand Academy of Laputa—a clear reference to the Royal Society—where he learns about their project for the creation of a universal language. “The other project was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever,” says Gulliver in all seriousness, “and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity.” “Since words are only names for things,” he reminds us, “it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on.... [M]any of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things.”<sup>484</sup> The poet and playwright Thomas Shadwell, in turn, mocks the obsession of the new science with exactness, transparency, and formality. The plum, before it turns purple, says Shadwell, “comes first to fluidity, then to orbiculation, then fixation, so to angulization, then crystallization, from thence to germination or ebullition, then vegetation, then plant-animation, perfect animation, sensation, local motion, and the like.”<sup>485</sup> Now, the fact that, for all their efforts, the preachers, scientists, and literary critics of the later seventeenth century did not—nor possibly could—create an English of immediate sense, does not mean, however, that their attempt was not successful in another respect, one just as significant. It is beyond controversy that the insistence on plain, simple, and unadorned speech (“easy, obvious, and familiar”), such that even the most vulgar of simple minds could understand, contributed greatly to the creation of a more public, universally accepted style of discourse, a style which would make public sphere, national politics, or the first scholarly journals possible. But what is important to notice is that this effort also put lasting *restrictions* on the English language.<sup>486</sup> Or, more to the point, since its very inception in the seventeenth century, since its first full embodiment and masterpiece, *The Leviathan*, modern English prose has been restrictive, and it has been particularly restrictive in regards to the agency of the human subject—of the writer or speaker, and even more so of the reader or listener.

The association of Hobbes with a public style should not come as a surprise. More than any other writer of the seventeenth century, including Bacon and Locke, Hobbes exhibits an enviable clarity (“perspicuity”) of language and thought. For all its use of metaphor, no other work embodies the reforming tendencies of the English language to the extent that *The Leviathan* does. No work of the seventeenth century could also be said to have exerted, by its own example, such an influence on English prose as did *The Leviathan*, regardless of what readers might have thought of its content. And, yet, the curious fact about Hobbes's prose is that the same clarity that makes it so distinctly “public” and accessible also subdues the reader and, in effect, discourages him from participation. His prose is painstakingly deliberative and logical. It is curt, its arguments made up of simple clauses and spare diction. It orders reality most gradually, laying out its parts, all little blocks, before the reader's eye, and stacking them up, one by one, in the strict order of complexity and relevance. It guides the reader most patiently through each move, going out of its way to repeat—always repeat—and summarize. It anticipates questions, it

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<sup>484</sup> Section 4 of the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter.

<sup>485</sup> *The Virtuoso*, IV, 3.

<sup>486</sup> See Ian Robinson, “Prose and the Dissociation of Sensibility,” p. 269.

allays doubts. It does everything to come across as sincere and transparent in its dealing with the reader, as respectful of his time and his intellect. And therein lies the problem. For the prose of Hobbes, forceful and direct as it is, creates the impression in the reader that what the author is saying is indisputable, that his conclusions are not only self-evident but inevitable, that no other truth is conceivable. After not having hidden anything from the reader, after having practically thought along with the reader, in front of him, by his side, and not merely presented him with the end results, Hobbes makes the reader feel compelled to accept the conclusions as a matter of fact. So real, in fact, are they to the reader that they almost cease being perceived as words and sentences, the mere tissue of language, and an argument, but acquire the quality of things, the elements of the reality itself. By this point, the reader is compelled to accept the conclusions not only because of Hobbes, i.e., because he was argued into it and convinced, but because he feels that he owes it to himself, to his own innate sense of natural order. If he were not to accept the conclusions made by Hobbes, he feels he would thereby reject his own conclusions, that he would find himself in a contradiction.

It is presumably this quality of Hobbes's prose that made Miriam Reik call it "outrageously frank" and at the same time "almost intellectually coercive."<sup>487</sup> Faced with *The Leviathan*, says Victoria Silver, "we not infrequently find ourselves condoning views that are at the very least heterodox and occasionally repulsive."<sup>488</sup> But more than merely coercive, there are qualities to it that make it almost suffocating. The prose of Hobbes does not open up horizons, it contracts them. It is self-contained and it never suggests anything outside itself. There are no leaks or loose ends, no windows. "Seldom, if ever, is anything left even partially unresolved," notes Thomas Kishler; instead, everything is "categorized and disposed of." Unlike the prose of Thomas Brown, for example, which "reflects a mind in the process of discovery, a mind pursuing the subtle ramifications of an idea, a mind not made up but open to speculation and to the possibility of qualification," the prose of Hobbes, on the other hand, always strives to qualify an idea "more clearly, to delimit it, not to suggest its possibilities for reflection and interpretation."<sup>489</sup> By making his words exceptionally palpable, and by articulating the full extent of each of his propositions, "Hobbes leaves no inference or circumstance of the argument to his reader's imagination." Instead, each further clause "merely adds a discrete, constituent idea to that proposition, which we accumulate and digest with minimal exertion of mind."<sup>490</sup> In the guise of full transparency, Hobbes "disarms the reader," says Samuel Mintz, paraphrasing one of Hobbes's astute contemporaries.<sup>491</sup> But it was perhaps Herman Melville, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, who best characterized Hobbes's prose. Speaking ironically of "the unimprovable sentences of Hobbes of Malmesbury, the paragon of perspicuity," Melville aligned Hobbes with the Patriarch Jacob, the son of Isaac and a swindler: "Every time he comes in he robs me... with an air all the time, too, as if he were making me presents."<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> *The Golden Lands of Thomas Hobbes*, Detroit, Wayne State UP, 1977, pp. 159, 71.

<sup>488</sup> "The Fiction of Self-Evidence in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *English Literary History*, v. 55 (1988), #2, pp. 351-379, p. 364.

<sup>489</sup> "Hobbes's 'Answer' to Davenant: Some Aspects of the Style," *Language and Style*, v. 9 (1976), #2, pp. 131, 134.

<sup>490</sup> "The Fiction of Self-Evidence in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," p. 354.

<sup>491</sup> *The Hunting of Leviathan*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1962, p. 38.

<sup>492</sup> *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2003, pp. 79, 90.



That Hobbes's language seems geared to produce such an effect in the reader—namely, to preclude argument, dissent, and the use of imagination—should also not come as a surprise. For all the occasional appearance to the contrary, neither Hobbes nor any of the other language reformers, be they members of the Royal Society, priests, poets, grammarians or logicians, were guided in their efforts by purely epistemological or aesthetic considerations. Indeed, it would be safe to say that there was likely nothing disinterested about their efforts, regardless of the way in which they justified them. We have already seen that Hobbes considered language explicitly as a site of political battles (“contention and sedition, or contempt”), and that he was a dedicated student of rhetoric. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, for all the appearance to the contrary, the entire seventeenth century in England was an exceptionally fertile ground for the study of rhetoric, and that nobody opposed it as such, at least not in practice. It flourished in England among the scientists as much as among the Puritans or the Latitudinarians. What really characterizes the age, instead, is the unprecedented recognition—and deployment—of language as an essential means to social and political ends, where the rhetoric of “truth,” of “science,” of “reason,” of “objectivity,” or of “impartiality,” was now used by nearly everyone against everyone else (though mostly by the twin powers of the establishment—the Church of England and the Royal Society—against Nonconformists) in a quest for dominance.<sup>493</sup> Rhetoric did not disappear. Instead, it was used to present oneself as being above not only the opponent's hopeless entanglement in false ideas, but also above all factional and, therefore, one-sided and partial thinking. The word “rhetoric” (or “eloquence”), with the connotation of contrivance, opaqueness, deception, and vacuity, became a weapon in an all-around rhetorical smear campaign, which often had least to do with the actual style of the opponent, and much more with his ideology. This was not the age of anti-rhetoric, but of the *rhetoric* of anti-rhetoric. In the end, few felt any inconsistency in simultaneously professing devotion to plainness, themselves using homely similitude, and viciously assailing others for doing the same. “The preachers,” says William Haller, “moved by the spirit of godliness, professed to appeal not at all, like other wielders of words, to imagination but to absolute truth in scripture and the inescapable facts of human experience. What they said was not rhetoric or poetry but science and law... Actually it was an intensely imaginative hortatory prose.”<sup>494</sup> Similarly, Sprat, Glanvill, Parker, and other members of the Royal Society, flaunted Hobbes's ideal of “perspicuity” against the alchemists, astronomers, and other “enthusiasts.” In this context, the fate of language was not much different from that of reason. We may recall the claim, made by Christopher Hill, that in seventeenth century England “there was no longer universal agreement on what was ‘reasonable.’”<sup>495</sup> Instead, says Lotte Mulligan, “proponents of widely different traditions, arguing their cases against each other, competed to establish a monopoly for their own perceptions of the conclusions to be reached by the operation of their right reason.”<sup>496</sup> According to Frederick Beiser, a large part of the explanation for the rationalism of the English

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<sup>493</sup> See Brian Vickers, “The Royal Society and English Prose Style,” in *idem* and Nancy Struever, eds., *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, Los Angeles, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1985, esp. pp. 41, 62.

<sup>494</sup> *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York, Columbia UP, 1938, p. 129. See also p. 140.

<sup>495</sup> *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 254.

<sup>496</sup> “‘Reason,’ ‘Right Reason,’ and ‘Revelation’ in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England,” in Brian Vickers, ed., *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, p. 396.

Church, for example, was “simply the pressure of polemics.” Reason simply “proved to be the most effective weapon for the Church to establish its authority and legitimacy against its many enemies,” such as the Puritans, Catholics, “fanatics,” etc. In that sense, “rationalism was not so much the secret credo of the Church as merely its preferred armament.”<sup>497</sup> Like reason, therefore, language too found itself at the center of polemics, and a convenient tool for wielding power. To be more precise, just like reason, which in order to be released from the grip of faith, feeling, and intuition, and most of all imagination, had to be emptied of its content, and held so abstract and vacuous as the reason of all reasons, as the highest instance, so language too had to be reformed and purged of all impurities, of all attempts at using it for anything other than, supposedly, the purposes of the society as a whole. Language needed to be dissociated from mere jargon, turned over to general terms and universal definitions, supposedly no longer standing for any one view in particular, for any particular meaning of, say, truth or virtue, reason or faith. In short, like reason, language too needed to become an empty shell, to be depoliticized.<sup>498</sup> The fear of sedition necessitated a reform of the mind, and the reform of the mind depended on the successful reform of language. For men like Hobbes, and for Hobbes most of all, if there was to be no subversion of the social order, the new language had to help prevent the very thought of discord and controversy, to be inaccessible to dissent. In particular, it had to be purged of any ambiguity.

Hobbes and his linguistic comrades in arms, it would not be an exaggeration to say, were terrified of ambiguity. We have already seen that, for Hobbes, “the light of human minds” is possible only after language is “first snuffed and purged from ambiguity,” and that the ultimate end of all “senseless and ambiguous words” is sedition. We have also seen Robert Boyle express exasperation with the ambiguity of literary language. In another place, his attempt to define the science of chemistry, Boyle attacks alchemists for “the intolerable ambiguity they allow themselves in their writings and expressions.”<sup>499</sup> Ambiguity was feared in religious discourse as well. After having declared that “the words of the doctrine must be ever delivered in proper, significant, perspicuous, plain, usually known words and phrase of speech,” an influential handbook for ministers, for example, warns against using anything that is not “apt and fit to express the thing spoken of to the understanding of the hearers without ambiguity.”<sup>500</sup> This sudden fear of ambiguity, and not only in language, is actually one of the most remarkable aspects of seventeenth century England, and, in a way, lies at the core of the preoccupation with obscurity and deception, and hence with metaphor and other figures of speech, that we have examined thus far. What makes it particularly remarkable is that, prior to that time, ambiguity seems to have been very much an integral part of human life, and not only in England. In a study of Tacitus, for example, Ronald Syme notes that the “verbal disharmonies” of his language are not a sign of his “incompetence,” but deliberately “reflect the complexities of history” itself, and of all “that is ambiguous in the behaviour of men.”<sup>501</sup> The ambiguity of human behavior, and of history itself, is in fact not

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<sup>497</sup> *The Sovereignty of Reason*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1996, pp. 10-11.

<sup>498</sup> See Robert Markley, *Style and Ideology in the Comedies of Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 30-55.

<sup>499</sup> “The Sceptical Chymist,” in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, p. 291.

<sup>500</sup> Richard Bernard, *The Faithful Shepard*, London, 1621, pp. 252-253. See also pp. 254, 281.

<sup>501</sup> *Tacitus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958, p. 347.

something that would have been foreign either to the ancients or to medieval Christians. On the contrary, they often indulged in ambiguity. The ancient folklore of fauns, centaurs, nymphs, and satyrs, those mythical creatures living somewhere ambiguously between earth and air, dream and wakefulness, is one example. After all, according to Christian teaching, man was himself a composite being, i.e., neither an angel nor a beast, but poised, as it were, between the two. A spiritual as well as a physical being, both worldly and otherworldly, man could not but have had an ambiguous relationship to the world in which he lived. On the one hand, he knew not to love the world nor the things that are in the world. "For all that is in the world," he was told, "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2:15-16). To engage in the world meant being taken away from contemplation and prayer, and possibly succumbing to the world. "Martha, Martha," said Jesus to the sister of Mary, "you care and trouble about many things, but only one thing is necessary" (Luke 10: 41-42). Therefore, a part of this man pulled away from the world. On the other hand, this man knew that the world was the creation of a God who was good, and that the world and the body could thus not have been inherently evil. If matter was corrupt, matter was also bread and wine, without which one could not celebrate Mass and seek salvation. If the contemplation of God was deemed man's most meaningful end, the Gospel also reminded this man of the importance of charity. Was this man not to feed the hungry, to tend to the sick, clothe the naked? Was he not to instruct the ignorant, and to love his neighbor? Therefore, this man continued to maintain an interest in the world, and could not but experience its beauty, though always wary of its temptations, always trying to strike a careful balance. In the meantime, he continued to live in the shadow of many other ambiguities of the Bible. Did the Fall, for example, affect only man, or did it affect other living beings as well? Did it not perhaps affect the entire earth, too, and even beyond the earth, the sun and the moon, and other heavenly bodies? Is the Fall, in turn, an event that took place once and for all, or is it a never-ending process? The answers to these questions, like many others, depended on what passage of the Bible one read, and how one understood its ambiguous language. If one read, say, Psalm 19:1 ("The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handywork") or 104:3 (God, "who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind"), one might have been tempted to say that there could be no such a thing as a cosmic Fall. But if, instead, one gave priority to the statements made by St. Paul, say in Romans 8:22 ("The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together"), one might have come to a different conclusion. So, too, if one read Psalm 102:26, which warns that the heavens "shall perish... shall wax old like a garment." Consequently, the medieval and the Renaissance man could not but have felt that he was always living a sort of an ambiguous existence. On the one hand was his dignity, on the other his wretchedness; on the one hand was the call to contemplation, on the other the call to action. No sooner was he told to look at his own body with suspicion and even contempt, that he was reminded that he was created in the image of God. Permanently unsure of his condition, and of the condition of the world around him, permanently unsure of how exactly to live his life, he could not but have experienced himself, human history and, ultimately, reality as such as being essentially ambiguous. Owen Barfield has argued, in fact, that the ancients and the medievals had both lived in a world where phenomena were neither what man perceived wholly from within himself, nor what forced itself on man from without, "but something

between the two.” This seems to be what Charles Taylor, too, has in mind when he speaks of the “porous” self of the Middle Ages. One of the big differences between the medieval and the modern man, according to Taylor, is that the latter lives with a much firmer sense of the boundary between the self and other. The modern self is what Taylor calls a “buffered” self.<sup>502</sup> Barfield, on the other hand, following Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, calls this phenomenon “participation.” Medieval man, he says, *participated* in representations; he lived them to an extent unimaginable by us. Hence “the extreme preoccupation of medieval learning with words—and with grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, logic and all that has to do with words. For words—and particularly nouns—were not then, and could not then, be regarded as *mere* words.” Living in that ambiguous space between words and things, between the literal and the symbolic, medieval man, Barfield reminds us, also did not live in a world of theories, which claim truth for themselves, but in that of multiple hypotheses, the truth or falsity of which was irrelevant. According to Barfield, the Greek and medieval astronomers, for example, “were not at all disturbed by the fact that the same appearances could be saved by two or more quite different hypotheses, such as an eccentric or an epicycle or, particularly in the case of Venus and Mercury, by supposed revolution round the earth or supposed revolution round the sun.” The real turning point, according to Barfield, was only when Copernicus “began to think, and others, like Kepler and Galileo, began to affirm” that the heliocentric hypothesis—which is at least as old as the third century B.C., and was perfectly familiar to the medievals—was not a mere hypothesis, but the ultimate truth.<sup>503</sup>

This willingness to embrace ambiguity—or, rather, the failure to see it as a problem, or even be aware of it—was an important aspect of the Elizabethan world as well, and has not passed unnoticed by critics. Analyzing the sociopolitical discourse of the time, William Sherman, for example, takes note of its exceptional “diversity and ambiguity.”

In a wide range of sources—from policy papers to utopian novels—Elizabethan representations of the polity prove to be full of tensions and marked by a profound sense of flexibility on both formal and ideological levels. In them we find a sophisticated manipulation of terms and genres; a willingness to adapt traditional rhetorics, to experiment with new ones, and to combine strategies which for us fall into radically different spheres. Above all they reveal the extent to which Elizabethan writers (both inside and outside the ruling elite) believed that the “commonwealth” was—far from being platitudinous—a fluid and highly charged term, subject to the pressures of both linguistic and economic change.<sup>504</sup>

Like Sherman, Wilson notes that many have been “baffled by the contrarities found in the men of this age and have felt that they exceeded the measure of inconsistency to be allowed to human nature in all ages,” and then gives the example of the historian Walter Raleigh: “Now we find him despising the vanity of human effort... and now eager to be a man of action... We find this so-called atheist proclaiming that in the glorious lights of heaven we perceive a shadow of God’s divine countenance.... And we find this man of

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<sup>502</sup> See *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007.

<sup>503</sup> *Saving the Appearances*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957, esp. pp. 31-32, 48-51, 53-54, 61-62, 73, 75, 84, 86-87, 119, 123, 126-129, 142-143.

<sup>504</sup> “Anatomizing the Commonwealth: Language, Politics, and the Elizabethan Social Order,” in Elizabeth Fowler and Roland Greene, eds., *The New Project of Prose in Early Modern Europe and the New World*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, p. 105.

science with an enthusiasm for experiment believing also in the decay of nature and the approaching dissolution of the world.”<sup>505</sup> Writing elsewhere of the early seventeenth century, of the time of Donne, Wilson contends that this was a particularly “tentative” age, one that necessitated a style of writing “that could express the mind as it was in movement, could record the thought at the moment it arose.”<sup>506</sup> Bradford Smith, in turn, notes that what concerned Donne and his followers was “a true rendition of human experience as they find it, with all its confusions and denials and beliefs,”<sup>507</sup> while Praz, from a different angle, compares Donne to a lawyer, to someone who is not after a universal truth, but is after “the fittest argument for a case in hand.” Finding in scientific theories “only a value of conjectures or plausible speculations,” Donne, according to Praz, does not see in them “a world entirely distinct from the world of fancy.”<sup>508</sup> Diversity, tension, flexibility, contrariety, inconsistency, tentativeness, movement, confusion, conjecture, speculation—are but some of the descriptions of the age from this very brief survey. Many more could be added—Knights finds in Donne’s poetry the implicit recognition of the “many-sidedness” of man’s nature, while Grierson speaks of the remarkably “divergent” elements built into his love verses<sup>509</sup>—but these should suffice to point out how radically different the latter part of the century would prove to be. Reflecting on this later period, Stanley Fish gives an apt comparison: “No one is now willing to say, with Donne, that he intends ‘to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgment’; and indeed everyone is loudly professing exactly the opposite intention, not to trouble the judgment, but to conform in every way possible to its procedures, to dispose arguments in a methodical and orderly progression.”<sup>510</sup> And this becomes true in every corner of life. The Protestants—and not merely the Puritans—start insisting on the correct, the one and only one, interpretation of the sacred texts, and profound questions of religion start becoming oversimplified.<sup>511</sup> In tune with the “striking change in mentality,” sexually nonconformist practices cease being a “temptation” common to everyone, an inclination present—at least potentially—in all men, given their common fallen nature, and instead begin to be conceived of as “a characteristic of certain individuals only and not of others.”<sup>512</sup> The fear of ambiguity, and the obsession with certitude permeates even ethics, with Hobbes and Locke arguing for a science of human behavior modeled on mathematics, and capable of demonstration.<sup>513</sup> The art of rhetoric—needless to say—becomes disdained as a form of “soft” thinking, “thinking attuned to unpredictable human actuality and decision,” as opposed to “hard” thinking, “attunable to unvarying physical laws.”<sup>514</sup> Everywhere we turn we suddenly encounter profound discomfort with any sort of unpredictability and indeterminacy, with ambivalence or fuzziness, with inconclusiveness, distrust of anything

<sup>505</sup> *Elizabethan and Jacobean*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945, p. 13.

<sup>506</sup> *Seventeenth Century Prose*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960.

<sup>507</sup> “What is Metaphysical Poetry.”

<sup>508</sup> *The Flaming Heart*, Gloucester, Peter Smith, 1966, p. 194.

<sup>509</sup> “On the Social Background of Metaphysical Poetry,” p. 42; “Introduction,” in *The Poems of John Donne*, vol. 2, p. xlvii.

<sup>510</sup> *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, p. 380.

<sup>511</sup> See Gerald Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960, p. 72, and Norman Sykes, *The English Religious Tradition*, London, SCM, 1953, pp. 55-56.

<sup>512</sup> Allan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, New York, Columbia UP, 1995, pp. 104-114.

<sup>513</sup> See, e.g., Locke, *Essay*, Bk. III, Ch. XI, §16, p. 516; Bk. IV, Ch. III, §20, p. 552; Bk. IV, Ch. XII, §7, and Hobbes, *Body, Man, and Citizen*, ed. Peters, 1962, pp. 28-29.

<sup>514</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1971, p. 8.

that is not discrete, that cannot be defined, clearly outlined, segregated from everything else, placed without any reservations, without any leftover, into its own category, and isolated.

This, of course, is especially the case with language. To preclude any ambiguity, any elusiveness, any possible connotation or polysemy, writers of the later seventeenth century begin insisting on a direct relationship between word and referent. In order to have full control over meaning, they now strive to reduce the function of each word to its mere denotation. Hobbes is, again, at the forefront of this effort, and sets an example with his own writing. According to Silver, he “seeks to endow political science, and indeed all discursive disciplines, with the axiomatic or demonstrable certainties of mathematics, in which signs can constitute a coherent, self-contained proof of their own validity.”<sup>515</sup> He “wants to invent a new language of certainty,” says Victoria Khan, “that will effectively exclude all further rhetoric,” that will “substitute...and foreclose all further rhetorical debate.”<sup>516</sup> Echoing Hobbes, Locke dedicates the entire third Book of his *Essay* to this project of monoreferentiality. “[S]o far as words are of use and signification,” he tells us there, “so far is there a constant connection between the sound and the idea; and a designation that the one stands for the other.” However, if there is not such an “application of them, they are nothing but so much insignificant noise.” In another place, Locke tells us that “to make words serviceable to the end of communication, it is necessary... that they excite, in the hearer, exactly the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker.” And in yet another place, we are told how “the first and most palpable abuse is the using of words without clear and distinct ideas.”<sup>517</sup> Like Hobbes, Locke abhors the inexactitude present in rhetoric, poetry, or the language of the marketplace, and looks to mathematics as a model to follow. Like Hobbes, he recoils in horror from metaphor, because metaphor, as Kenneth Burke observes, “is a device for seeing something in terms of something else.” Metaphor, he says, “brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this,”<sup>518</sup> and this shifting of perspectives, this interpenetration of meanings, this ambiguity, amounts, in the eyes of Hobbes and Locke, to the dissolution of objective reality, and this not merely linguistically.

It is, of course, in scientific language that this form of restrictiveness comes most to the fore. Since the very beginning, since the first scientific reports, and the first issues of the Proceedings of the Royal Society, scientific discourse has followed the precepts of Hobbesian English. In its effort to be plain and “perspicuous,” to avoid any indirect meaning, any metaphors and other rhetorical figures, to be transparent and unambiguous, its essential quality has become its impersonality. It represents the world in terms of things, in terms of objects and materials, in terms of concepts and processes, in terms of analyses: it is thing-oriented, rather than subject-oriented. It suppresses the human subject, and installs in its place the passive voice or, at the very best, active constructions

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<sup>515</sup> “The Fiction of Self-Evidence in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” p. 361.

<sup>516</sup> *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1985, pp. 154, 158.

<sup>517</sup> Bk. III, 2, 7, p. 408; Bk. III, 9, 6, p. 478; Bk. III, 10, 2, p. 490.

<sup>518</sup> *A Grammar of Motives*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1945, pp. 503-504.

with impersonal subjects, to emphasize what was done instead of who did it.<sup>519</sup> It conceals all trace of authorship, of conditions and processes of production, of any contingency, thus making the physical world seem to speak for itself or, conversely, making the text seem merely to mirror the object as it is in the “real” world.<sup>520</sup> It “cancels responsibility, hides identity, and numbs the reader.”<sup>521</sup> This “great heresy of science,”<sup>522</sup> impersonal language is not merely proper to scientific discourse narrowly conceived, but is in fact an essential aspect of most academic, bureaucratic, and corporate writing. In their analysis of the language of the World Bank’s annual reports, for example, Franco Moretti and Dominique Pester note its increasing codification, self-referentiality, and detachment from everyday life, as well as a lack of any determinants of place and time (not to mention its obsession with acronyms), all “encouraging a sense of admiration and wonder rather than critical understanding.”<sup>523</sup> One could similarly think of all pretentious and self-important academic writing, and its ever-increasing tediousness, especially in the humanities, which conceals the author (if not also the lack of content), and seeks disciples rather than interlocutors. However, the single greatest achievement of the seventeenth-century reform of English is its near-total occupation of the spoken language, all the way down the social ladder. “This dreary dialect, the language of leading articles, White Papers, political speeches, and BBC news bulletins, is undoubtedly spreading,” says George Orwell, with quite a bit of alarm. What is thus spreading, according to Orwell, is the tyranny of ready-made phrases (“in due course,” “deepest regret,” “explore every avenue,” “legitimate assumption,” “leaves much to be desired”) “which may once have been fresh and vivid, but have now become mere thought-saving devices, having the same relation to living English as a crutch has to a leg.”<sup>524</sup> What alarms Orwell, in other words, is that language becomes a means not for extending the range of thought, but for its opposite, for restricting it, for concealing it or inhibiting it. Instead of the subject doing the thinking, the “thinking” is done by the language *for* the subject. In place of the subject comes the anonymity of language—“long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else,” and “generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious”—, which makes “thinking” easy, and which smoothly facilitates basic communication without requiring any mental strain. “The appropriate noises are coming out” of the subject’s larynx, says Orwell, “but his brain is not involved.” The subject becomes used to repeating the same clichés, the same old platitudes, arranging words in the same formulaic manner. “One often has a curious feeling, that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy.” What alarms Orwell most of all, however, are the socio-political consequences of this direction of the English language. Surrounded by, and himself using such a language, where words “group themselves automatically into the familiar pattern,” the speaker, the writer, or the reader “anaesthetizes a portion of his brain,” and is brought to a “reduced state of consciousness.” Things can now be named without the subject ever “calling up

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<sup>519</sup> See Dan Ding, “Historical Roots of the Passive Voice in Scientific Discourse,” in John Battalio, ed., *Essays in the Study of Scientific Discourse*, Stamford, Conn., Ablex Publishing, 1998, pp. 117-135.

<sup>520</sup> See Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkey, *Opening Pandora’s Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists’ Discourse*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984, p. 56, and Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Fact*, London, Sage, 1979, pp. 176-177, 240.

<sup>521</sup> Sheridan Baker, “Scholarly Style, or the Lack Thereof,” *AAUP Bulletin*, v. 42 (1956), #3, p. 466.

<sup>522</sup> Patrick Meredith, *Instruments of Communication*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1966, p. 13.

<sup>523</sup> “Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports,” *New Left Review*

<sup>524</sup> *The English People*, London, Collins, 1947, p. 34.

mental pictures of them,” without ever assuming a vantage for reflection, without ever going further than the purely verbal level of discourse.<sup>525</sup> Famously, Orwell anticipates the extreme results of this tendency in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There, a philologist not unlike Hobbes praises the wisdom of “cutting the language down to the bone”—“It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words”—and “all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning” along with it. “Don’t you see,” says this man, “that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller.”<sup>526</sup> That even this, seemingly most far-fetched, and even outlandish, of Orwell’s fears was not unfounded was confirmed only several years earlier, and not in an imaginary totalitarian state, but in England. It was in 1943 that Winston Churchill set up a cabinet committee to develop further and promote the theory of C. K. Ogden, which aimed at reducing English down to some 850 words.<sup>527</sup> Churchill “outlined the steps which the Government would take to develop Basic English as an auxiliary international and administrative language through the British Council, the B.B.C., and other bodies... [Ogden] was requested to assign his copyright to the Crown which he did in June 1946 and was compensated by £23,000... The Basic English Foundation was established with a grant from the Ministry of Education in 1947.”<sup>528</sup>

When Charlemagne set out “to unify his diverse and polyglot empire,” one of the first things he did, we are told, was to order the creation of a uniform notation to capture sound. In his “urge to uniformity,” Charlemagne realized that the uniformity of human expression—and church music was one of its most dominant forms at the time—was essential to his project.<sup>529</sup> So was the case with language. The invention of the printing press, which made language an object of rapid standardization, offered—perhaps more than anything else before or since—a vision of a world that is consistent, universal, and manageable. In England, this vision was carried furthest by the language reformers of the seventeenth century, from Bacon to Locke, with Hobbes being its most forceful advocate. All subsequent efforts towards increasing uniformity—say, the desexing of English since the 1970s, or the institutional pressure to follow certain rigid patterns in writing an article or a book—find their true origin in the seventeenth century, regardless of any additional factors that might have emerged since then. Orwell is therefore right, for example, not to seek a grand metaphysical background to the tendency of English towards uniformity and anonymity. He sees nothing profound in it, nothing that should strike us with awe. It is not a mysterious truth of our being in the world, of our inhabiting a world that is a “text” and our prison. Orwell does acknowledge this point of view,

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<sup>525</sup> “Politics and the English Language,” in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950, pp. 77-92.

<sup>526</sup> New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949, esp. pp. 49-55.

<sup>527</sup> *Basic English: A general Introduction with Rules and Grammar*, London, Kegan Paul, 1944.

<sup>528</sup> “Ogden, Charles Kay,” in *Dictionary of National Biography 1951-1960*, ed. E.T. Williams and Helen M. Palmer, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1971, p. 779. See also I. A. Richards, *So Much Nearer: Essays Toward a World English*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, pp. 240-270.

<sup>529</sup> Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Capturing music*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, pp. 51-52.



though: “it is generally assumed,” he says, “that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we can shape for our own purposes.”<sup>530</sup> It is assumed “that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it,” “that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light.” But this assumption, Orwell believes, is wrong. The process of dumbing down language is not a permanent and necessary condition of man, not even of the Englishman. It is a condition that is reversible, but only if one is constantly on guard, if one actively resists “this invasion of one’s mind.” He recommends, for example, that we train ourselves to stay away from words for as long as possible, and think instead in terms of pictures, and of “metaphors that really call up a visual image.” The point is always to challenge language as ready-made, to reinvigorate a “lifeless, imitative style” that is always “favorable to political conformity” and to all sorts of orthodoxy. “Words ought to be a little wild,” said John Maynard Keynes once, “for they are the assault of thoughts upon the unthinking.”<sup>531</sup>

Let us in the end compare two versions of the same text, a passage from the *Book of Common Prayer*, one from 1549, the other from 1980.

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|---|---|
| <p>Almyghtie GOD father of oure Lord Jesus Christ, maker of all thynges, iudge of all men, we knowledge and bewaile our manyfold synnes and wyckednes, which we from tyme to tyme, most greuouly haue committed, by thought, word and dede, against thy diuine maiestie, prouoking most iustely thy wrath and indignacion against us, we do earnestly repent and be hartely sory for these our misdoings, the remembraunce of them is greuouus unto us, the burthen of them is intolerable: haue mercye upon us, haue mercie upon us, most mercyfull father, for thy sonne our Lorde Jesus Christes sake, forgeue us all that is past, and graunt that we may euer hereafter, serue and please thee in neunes of life, to the honor and glory of thy name: Through Jesus Christe our Lorde.</p> | <p>Almighty God, our heavenly Father,<br/>we have sinned against you and against our fellow men,<br/>in thought and word and deed,<br/>through negligence, through weakness,<br/>through our own deliberate fault.<br/>We are truly sorry,<br/>and repent our sins.<br/>For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us,<br/>forgive us all that is past;<br/>and grant that we may serve you in newness of life<br/>to the glory of your name. Amen</p> |
|---|---|

First of all, gone is repetition and synonymy: “From tyme to tyme,” “synnes and wyckednes,” “honor and glory,” “the remembraunce of them is greuouus unto us, the burthen of them is intolerable,” “haue mercye upon us, haue mercye upon us.” Gone is therefore not only the emotional power (after all, this is repentance), but also the rhythm which this repetition engenders. Gone is all appeal to the feelings and to physical sensation. Gone are “wrath and indignacion,” gone is “greuouus,” gone is “burthen.” “Hartely sory” now becomes “truly sorry.” Gone is finally the need, created by the repetition, the rhythm, the punctuation, and the very bodily vocabulary, to read the text slowly and therefore linger on its meaning, to feel and suffer, as it were, each word. In their place we now have a text that practically begs to be read quickly, memorized and rattled off, as something merely to get through and over with. Words simply glide,

<sup>530</sup> This and following from “Politics and the English Language.”

<sup>531</sup> “National Self-Sufficiency,” *The Yale Review*, vol. 22 (1933), #4, p. 767.

moving effortlessly from one to another. All “unnecessary” words, phrases, and grammatical structures are taken out, what remains is a drab and lifeless text. Appropriately, it is named “Rite A.”<sup>532</sup>

### XIII

We began this study with Donne. Donne’s style, we observed, was harsh and rugged, abrupt and metrically irregular, unmusical. It showed no deference to the typical, the conventional, or the expected. It disdained harmony. It thrived on surprise, and on making the familiar appear strange. Ambiguity was its home, as were paradox and antithesis. It left nothing unquestioned and unqualified, often contradicting and denying what had just been said. Nothing, in other words, was easy or smooth, or rhythmical. It was difficult, it required one’s full attention and intellectual strain, it made no concessions to the reader. It seems it could not care less about the reader. The poems of Donne were not written, it seems, for the reader. If the eyes of a reader happened to chance upon them, that seemed to have been more of an accident than a need. Donne’s poetry was intensely personal, and therefore idiosyncratic, to an extent that no poetry in England had ever been. This is not to say, however, that Donne did not care about the world, that he turned his back on it, that he felt or even desired to be self-sufficient. On the contrary, Donne’s desire to join the world was so great and so persistent, that one can read him as an essentially “social” poet, one much more so than Sidney, Spenser, and their ilk. In their flowing narration and description, with extensive references to the literary tradition and elements of mythology and folklore, and with an unquestioned sense of decorum, the latter were indeed “social.” But they were often social in an “anonymous” sense. They worked with what is familiar, what is easily recognizable, what is widely shared. They merely confirmed the identity, the emotion, and the mood of the typical reader. What stood before the reader was the poem, not so much the poet. Donne, on the other hand, was a social poet in so far as he was at variance with society, in so far as society presented itself as a problem for him. He was always in dialogue with society, he was always speaking to someone, arguing. There is barely anything that he wrote that is not suffused with his longing to make society his home, and with his failure to do so. And it is this painful discrepancy that drives this already sensitive soul towards an ever-increasing awareness of personal inadequacy, and therefore of interiority. His own self becomes a problem for him.

Donne’s introspectiveness should not be subsumed, however, under the old precept to know oneself. Donne was not pondering the depths of his own self to learn more about his abilities, about his faults and limitations, or about the ways to control his passions and recognize his emotions. He was not testing himself. His goal, in other words, was not to learn how to live an ordered, well-regulated, and responsible life, how to manage his affairs better, how to avoid hubris and live wisely and virtuously. Nor was Donne driven to introspection by the need for salvation, to find an image of God in himself, and to recognize his frailty, his depravity, his temptations, and his sinfulness, and to accuse himself. If Donne’s introspectiveness was not Socratic or Stoic, it was neither a form of

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<sup>532</sup> See Roger Elliott, *“Discourses that Pretend to Inform or Instruct”*: Rhetoric, Empiricism and Religion, Doncaster, Engl., The Brynmill Press, 1987, esp. pp. 27-34.

Christian confession. These forms of knowledge of oneself, both secular and religious, all had as their ultimate aim the aligning of the individual, of his character or his soul, with something that is at the same time external to him and objective, something that he is a part of, that he is derived from, something that he participates in and is dependent on. The aim was always to bring the individual into harmony with a certain standard or an expectation, whether it be the laws and customs of the native land, or the life of Christ, or nature, or a particular station in the universal order. To deny Donne some of these concerns, or the impact they might have left on him, would be foolish. But not to see the ways in which he goes beyond them, while perhaps incorporating them, would mean to be blind to the complexity of the man and his work. For, by means of his work, Donne presents us with a man who is so intensely absorbed in his own self, so seized by the intricacies of his own psychology, so given to the feeling that what is most individual in him is also wholly particular to him, and to him alone, that we cannot but conclude that, for him, the discovery of who he is becomes an end more fundamental than any other. More importantly, however, we get a glimpse of a man who is coming to the realization that who he is—his own self—is so uncertain, so unstable, so elusive, that to know himself is, ultimately, impossible. Donne's is such a strong personality precisely because he is unable to identify fully who he actually is.

“If any who decipher best,” and who “what we know not, our selves, can know,” Donne implores at one place, “let him teach me that nothing.”<sup>533</sup> “And I discern by favour of this light,” he says elsewhere, “My selfe, the hardest object of the sight.”<sup>534</sup> Places such as these abound in Donne, often where they do not even seem to have a place, a result of an overbearing urge or impulse, a reminder that something more fundamental lies beneath all other concerns. Donne is so true to his own experience, whatever that may be at the moment, that his poetry often feels like a record of a rambling consciousness, with all its tweaks and ticks, rather than a composed work, or even a diary. Mitchell calls him a “subtle, self-torturing intellect” and “fiercely individualistic.”<sup>535</sup> According to Eliot, “Donne would have been an individual at any time and place.”<sup>536</sup> Robert Ellrodt, who has perhaps done more than anyone else to explore Donne's interiority, goes so far as to call him “a landmark in the history of consciousness from Greek Antiquity to the seventeenth century.”<sup>537</sup> But to focus on Donne's uniqueness, no matter how justified, would be misleading. While it may be true that, in certain respects, we find no equal to Donne after Augustine, and certainly not before Petrarch, and that only Montaigne is his peer among contemporaries, it is important to realize that the times in which he lived were ripe for the appearance of introspective, self-analytical types. Donne might, indeed, have been an individual at any time and place, but not just any time and place would have produced in Donne the depth of individuality that it did at the turn of the seventeenth century. It is no accident that we hear of “the inner deep-seated changes in the psyche during the early seventeenth century,” of the “reorientation” of the “mental structure” and

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<sup>533</sup> “Negative Love.”

<sup>534</sup> “Obsequies to the Lord Harrington.”

<sup>535</sup> *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 181.

<sup>536</sup> *Selected Essays*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950, p. 252.

<sup>537</sup> *Seven Metaphysical Poets*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000, p. 293. See also pp. 25-46, 293-319.

“the formation of a new type of personality” at this time.<sup>538</sup> “It is an age of lonely and divided souls,” we are told.<sup>539</sup> An age of “individualistic soul-searching and suspicion of conventionality,” which mirrors “a general loss of faith in society.”<sup>540</sup> An age when the “private speaker” becomes “the norm of consciousness, of integrity in a world lacking clear-sightedness, a world corrupt.”<sup>541</sup> It is “an age which favoured and fostered introspection, as no previous epoch in our history had done.”<sup>542</sup> In other words, Donne was unique indeed, but his uniqueness was made possible by the conditions in which he lived. If he was unique, he was so not in opposition to the tendencies prevailing around him, but as their ultimate realization, their “extreme” case. After all, the interest in human interiority at this time appears in multiple forms and is most visible. Biography, for example, ceases to be purely didactic, moralizing, and adulatory, celebrating its subjects for their fulfillment of ideal types, and instead pays increasing attention to the subjects’ individual character traits. Instead of focusing, as did even the best of earlier biographies—such as those by Thomas More, George Cavendish, or William Roper—, on the similarities between exemplary individuals, biography now sets in sharper focus the differences among them. Like the portrait painting of Hans Holbein, which strives to capture that which is particular about its subject, to reveal the subject’s personality and distinguish it from a mere type, biography replaces stylized, conventional treatments with more candid representations of the subject’s private life. Such, indeed, is the difference in biography between the middle of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century, that one historian speaks of “profound epistemological changes.”<sup>543</sup> It was therefore only a question of time before Englishmen would turn their attention not only to the private lives of contemporary intellectuals, scientists, and poets (rather than merely saints, kings, and warriors), but also to themselves, to their own life histories, their own thoughts and feelings. The first substantial autobiography was written in 1576, one year before the first English self-portrait, thus marking the birth of a genre that would see rapid development, especially in terms of the language and vocabulary of introspection. The fact that significant contributions to the genre were made by people from all walks of life, and from all social classes, makes one historian conclude that “some deep change in British habits of thought must have occurred.”<sup>544</sup> Indeed, autobiography of the early modern period in England has been seen as an early manifestation of the “individualist self,” of the person “who... regards himself as his own telos.”<sup>545</sup> It is not a coincidence, therefore, that this period saw the appearance of such couplings as “self-praise” (1549), “self-love” (1563), “self-pride” (1586), “self-contained” (1591), “self-regard” (1595), “self-knowledge” (1613), “self-preservation” (1614), “self-pity” (1621), etc., and that the word “self” acquires for the first time a predominately positive connotation.<sup>546</sup> “My self

<sup>538</sup> Frances Yates, “Bacon and the Menace of English Literature,” *New York Review of Books*, 27 March 1969, p. 37; Zevedei Barbu, *Problem of Historical Psychology*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, pp. 154, 146.

<sup>539</sup> J. B. Leishman, *The Metaphysical Poets*, p. 3.

<sup>540</sup> G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist and Courtier*, 1962, p. 11.

<sup>541</sup> Earl Miner, *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley*, New Jersey, Princeton UP, 1969, p. 29.

<sup>542</sup> Margaret Bottrall, *Every Man a Phoenix*, London, Murray, 1958, p. 4.

<sup>543</sup> Allan Pritchard, *English Biography in the Seventeenth Century*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 7. See also Donald Stauffer, *English Biography Before 1700*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1930, pp. 34-35, and Richard Altick, *Lives and Letters*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1965, pp. 3-45.

<sup>544</sup> Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 19.

<sup>545</sup> Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>546</sup> See Peggy Rosenthal, *Words and Values*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1984, pp. 8-18.

am center of my circling thought,” said the poet John Davies in 1599, “Only my self I study, learn, and know.”<sup>547</sup>

Behind the advent of autobiography, especially of the secular kind, and the deep transformation of biography around the turn of the seventeenth century lie at least two developments. First, there arose a sudden and pervasive sense among people that their identity was open to both individual and social shaping. There was a sense—one could perhaps even speak of a discovery—that one’s self was limited by, or at least always acting in relationship to, various forms of authority, be it the court, the church, etc. After a very long period during which an Englishman would not even consider the provenance of his choices problematic, but before the time when he would feel that he was “autonomous” in the choices he made (the way he would come to feel in subsequent centuries), he found that he was free only in so far as he could position himself in relationship to various authorities. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, identifies “an increased self-consciousness,” in the course of the sixteenth century, “about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process,” and analyzes the strategies available and employed for one’s own self-fashioning.<sup>548</sup> The second (though of course related) development that served as a background to the changes in literary genres was the sudden and pervasive sense that human interiority was itself something elusive, perplexing, contradictory, or mysterious. Living in a world where, like never before, they had to make important choices, especially those concerning religion, but also ones related to virtue and vice and to many long-held beliefs and assumptions in general, Donne’s contemporaries realized that they had very little guidance in these matters, and were increasingly forced to deliberate over them on their own. The old world was crumbling before their eyes, but the new one was not yet formed. Indeed, one of the reasons for the heightened sense of ambiguity in this period is that, without a clear structure around them, and with little experience, many found themselves espousing incompatible beliefs. It is not surprising that, as Ruth Anderson notes, the writers of the period were inclined to represent life as “a series of conflicting purposes and inexplicable actions.”<sup>549</sup> What should also not come as a surprise is that, in their attempt to find some sort of unity in their everyday life, Donne’s contemporaries were forced to look for it within themselves. But there they found none. Thomas Wyatt, says Greenblatt, was caught up “in a series of suspensions, or alternately, passages from one state to another,” while for Spenser “each self-constituting act is haunted by inadequacy and loss.”<sup>550</sup> According to Richard Helgerson, Thomas Lodge was “able neither to integrate his two worlds, nor to choose one over the other.” Lodge “swung compulsively back and forth, from pleasure to profit, from deliberate outrage to careful conciliation, from self-proclamation to self-abasement, never quite able to find a role that would satisfy both himself and the world.” Helgerson speaks of “the divided consciousness of the 1580s,” of men “locked in an unending battle against themselves,” of their “mixture of rebellion and submissiveness, so inimical to a stable identity.”<sup>551</sup> Speaking of the “very essentials of the satyr character” at this time, Alvin Kernan names “instability, incoherence,

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<sup>547</sup> *Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Claire Howard, New York, Columbia UP, 1941, p. 120.

<sup>548</sup> *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 2.

<sup>549</sup> *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare’s Plays*, p. 174.

<sup>550</sup> *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 147, 179.

<sup>551</sup> *The Elizabethan Prodigals*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, pp. 105-110.

wildness, uncertainty, contradiction.”<sup>552</sup> The best literary example is Hamlet. Essential about him, famously, is that he cannot make up his mind. His mind is so deeply torn by conflicts between various ideas and feelings that in the end he fails to do anything at all in the course of the play. His will is incapacitated. The same inner discord plagues most other Shakespeare’s heroes: Coriolanus, Antony, Othello, Romeo, Lear, Tarquin, though not always of course to the same extent.<sup>553</sup> Indeed, so intently is Hamlet focused on the goings on in his inner world that, in the end, he fails even to discover who he himself is. This is the most important aspect of Hamlet, and the question whether he was or was not already a “modern subject” seems to be secondary, even scholastic.<sup>554</sup>

A consequence of these two momentous developments, a consequence that is most relevant to our present subject, is that one’s interiority became at this time—and perhaps for the first time—a social problem. If the self is unstable and beset by contradictions; if, more fundamentally, there is “something” there that is unstable and contradictory in the first place, and that requires attention and care, then how does one ever know who another person is? How does one know what the other thinks, feels, or intends to do? If my own thoughts and passions are not fully present to me, if they perplex me, they surely must be just as perplexing to another person, and likely even more so. In short, there must be a part of me that is *invisible* to the public eye. According to Anne Ferry, Donne, just like Hamlet, has an interiority “which escapes show.” This, in her view, “is not because he deliberately cloaks it,” but because the inward and the outward are now seen as “in themselves radically distinct and widely distanced.” The implication, says Ferry, is “that what is in the heart cannot be interpreted or judged by outward signs, among which language is included,” “cannot...be truly shown, even by the speaker’s own utterances in prayers or poems,” “cannot be defined by them, even to himself.”<sup>555</sup> This realization, perhaps more than any other, marks the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century in England. It is what accounts for a pervasive sense at the time of a discrepancy, as Katherine Maus says, “between ‘inward disposition’ and ‘outward appearance,’” between “what a person is and what he or she seems to be to other people,” between “an unexpressed interior and a theatricalized exterior.”<sup>556</sup> In other words, what marks the period of Donne’s life is a sudden gulf, or at least a sudden realization of a gulf, between one’s “real” identity—an arena of one’s conscience and opinions, of one’s “heart”—and of one’s social identity. It is this gulf that would now allow people more consciously to form their identities, or multiple identities, and to try and impose select images on their public personas. It is this gulf that makes Hamlet so novel as a character, for he maintains through the entire play his inner self in separation from the self that he is expected to project. But it is also this gulf that would start breeding suspicion in all corners of society. For people now realize that anyone can withhold a part of themselves from public scrutiny, that anyone can merely act a part (“Thus play I in one person many people,” says Richard II), and that therefore no one could be trusted. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that it was at this time that “the various grammatical forms of

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<sup>552</sup> *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1959, p. 116.

<sup>553</sup> See *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare’s Plays*, pp. 154-176.

<sup>554</sup> See John Lee, *Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 5-91.

<sup>555</sup> *The “Inward” Language*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 249.

<sup>556</sup> *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 13, 210, 2.

*sincere, sincerely, sincerity* (sometimes *sincereness*) were introduced into English.”<sup>557</sup> It is also not surprising that this time witnesses an unprecedented fascination with theater, with role playing, with villains on stage, with masks and masquerades. When Donne defends his sincerity, for example, we are told that “he means something more than that he is not a Pharisee or a dissembler, not an Iago.” Nor does he mean “that his thoughts are upright and unfeigned.”<sup>558</sup> Instead, what he means when he says that he is sincere is that in his case there exists “the conformity of outward show to what is truly in the heart.” But how do we know what is in his heart? And how do we know that he is really sincere, i.e., that he is not feigning his sincerity? These are questions that preoccupied the people of this time. The characters of John Marston, for example, fulfill themselves, we are told, “though deceit and live behind illusions.” Behind their “many courtly arts and roles lies in fact an utterly valueless interior, a ‘queer substance, worthless, most absurd.’”<sup>559</sup> And, of course, the same is the case with Shakespeare. “Hamlet has no sooner heard out the Ghost,” says Lionel Trilling, “than he resolves to be what he is not, a madman. Rosalind is not a boy, Portia is not a doctor of law, Juliet is not a corpse, the Duke of Vicentio is not a friar, Edgar is not Tom o’ Bedlam, Hermione is neither dead nor a statue. Helena is not Diana, Mariana is not Isabella.” And it is precisely “dissimulation in the service of evil,” says Trilling, “that most commands the moral attention” of the age.<sup>560</sup>

This, of course, raises an important question. If man’s interiority is indeed invisible, and, furthermore, if it is so unstable and contradictory and prone to deception, then how is society at all possible? How could there ever be loyalty and obligation? To put it even more bluntly, if there is anarchy inside the individual—in the heart, in the mind, or in the soul—, then how is there not to be anarchy in society as well? There is no doubt that Puritanism sought to provide an answer to precisely this question. After all, Calvin himself had cautioned against the dangers of inner deception. “The human heart,” he said, “has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself.”<sup>561</sup> There is equally no doubt that, whether or nor it actually inspired English republicanism of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Machiavelli’s work came to figure prominently in the imagination and the thinking of the later Elizabethan age. Faced, as they thought, with the possibility of deception at every corner, lurking behind each flattery and profession of eternal servitude, Sidney, Spenser, and Bacon, among others, turned in their political works to crass utilitarianism, to calculation and intrigue, while the duplicitous “Machiavellian” began haunting the English stage.<sup>562</sup> There is, finally, no doubt that the

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<sup>557</sup> *The “Inward” Language*, p. 247.

<sup>558</sup> *The “Inward” Language*, p. 247.

<sup>559</sup> A. D. Cousins, “The Protean Nature of Man in Marston’s Verse Satires,” pp. 521-522.

<sup>560</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, Harvard UP, pp. 13, 14.

<sup>561</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, tr. F.L Battles, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1960, v. 1, p. 554. On Luther’s and Calvin’s role in articulating the concern with sincerity, see John Martin, “Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe,” pp. 1330-1333.

<sup>562</sup> See Sydney Anglo, “The Reception of Machiavelli in Tudor England,” *Il Politico*, v. 31 (1966), #1, pp. 127-138; Irving Ribner, “Sidney’s *Arcadia* and the Machiavelli Legend,” *Italica*, v. 27 (1950), #3, pp. 225-235, and the author’s two other articles on Sidney cited therein; Edwin Greenlaw, “The Influence of Machiavelli on Spenser,” *Modern Philology*, v. 7 (1909), #2, pp. 187-202; Vincent Luciani, “Bacon and Machiavelli,” *Italica*, v. 24 (1847), #1, pp. 26-40; Theodore Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, esp. pp. 30-76; Edward Meyer, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama*, New York, Burt Franklin, 1967; Praz, *The Flaming Heart*, pp. 90-145;

entire opus of Thomas Hobbes springs from this same concern. Hobbes's (secular, amoral, and materialist) political thought has its origin in an increasing awareness of the impact of the social environment on the individual; its obsession with order has its origin in Hobbes's profound discomfort with the disorderliness of the individual's inner life. It is not only in reaction to the Civil War that Hobbes became a philosopher of order, but in reaction to the kind of man who would rebel and start a war in the first place. The kind of man who would pretend and scheme, an obscure and ambiguous kind of man. Hobbes called this man pre-social; in truth, however, this was the man of the late Elizabethan age. The important point is that for Hobbes these two were one and the same. That is, neither of them was, on his view, yet in a society. If there was going to be a society at all, this man—pre-social and Elizabethan—had to become the proper material for it. He had to become a sincere man, a man visible and transparent, a public man. A vast change across the entire field of human activity and self-expression would need to take place.

We have looked at the way in which this change took place in the seventeenth-century conception of reason and of imagination and, most importantly, of language and have concluded that it is characterized by a particular ideology of self-effacement. These were not, however, the only areas that were affected. On the contrary, the pressure to efface oneself penetrated so deeply and so quickly into the pores of English society at this time that we can find it in all walks of life. Science is only the most conspicuous example. In his study of the particular theory of certainty developed in England between 1630 and 1690, in both science and in theology, Henry van Leeuwen has shown the consensus that existed among major thinkers—Boyle, Newton, Wilkins, Glanvill, Locke, Tillotson, and Chillingworth—concerning the need to keep the senses and the mind constantly in check due to their inherently deceptive nature.<sup>563</sup> According to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, what takes place starting with the eighteenth century, and reaching its apogee in the late nineteenth, is the emergence of a particular sort of *scientific* self, one that continually struggles to reign in its “own temptation to impose systems, aesthetic norms, hypotheses, language, even anthropomorphic elements” on the objects of its study. What becomes necessary is constant self-surveillance, constant confrontation with “inner enemies,” with one's own passions, prejudices, beliefs, and imagination. Subjectivity itself becomes the enemy which must be bridled and controlled. “The only way,” say the authors, “for the active self to attain the desired receptivity to nature was to turn its domineering will inward—to practice self-discipline, self-restraint, self-abnegation, self-annihilation, and a multitude of other techniques of self-imposed selflessness.” The self, in other words, was made to actively will its own passivity, its own impersonality.<sup>564</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn of the profound asceticism of the first scientists. One author speaks of the “self-denial” of Newton, “more heroic than any other recorded in the annals of intellectual pursuits.”<sup>565</sup> A biographer notes that Newton's “scrupulosity, punitiveness, austerity, discipline, industriousness, and fear associated with a repressive morality were early stamped on his character.”<sup>566</sup> Both Newton and Boyle, we are told,

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Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, v. 2, pp. 379-429, vol. 4, pp. 54-69, 145-180, and Daniel Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple: Ben Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1968.

<sup>563</sup> *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1963.

<sup>564</sup> *Objectivity*, New York, Zone Books, 2007, pp. 174, 186-87, 198-99, 203-04, 210, 227-32, 246, 300-01.

<sup>565</sup> George Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties*, London, Murray, 1858, p. 10.

<sup>566</sup> Frank Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1963, p. 54.



“led existences that verged on compulsive asceticism, sealing themselves off from many of the experiences of a world they studied intently... Their asexuality, in this regard, is not mere prudery but symptomatic of a deep-seated ambivalence towards a science based on ‘Experience.’”<sup>567</sup> Scientific “disinterestedness” (just as the aesthetic one, and the timing must not be seen as coincidental), has its origin in this particular milieu taking shape in England at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>568</sup> But the impact of self-effacement is far from being limited to science alone. According to R. F. Jones, the insistence on plainness, while most consistently revealed in religious and scientific works, “is discovered in connection with all kinds of historical, expository, and even literary writings,” and in fact “penetrates every domain of intellectual activity.”<sup>569</sup> Barbara Shapiro has shown, furthermore, how during this period an entire “culture of fact,” a culture defined in opposition to personal opinions and values, was generated and spread into the spheres of law, historiography, theology, travel writing and news reporting. (She also traces the way in which, in the course of the same period, the concept of fact transitioned from its original meaning, primarily involving human acts—Latin *facere*, “to do” or “to make”—, to the meaning still prevalent today, of facts that exist “out there” independently of us. It was Francis Bacon, according to her, who “was a central agent in the transformation of ‘fact’ from human to natural phenomenon.”<sup>570</sup>) But the impact of self-effacement can also be seen outside of discourse, scientific or otherwise, in areas as different as clothing, music and architecture, in drama and painting, indeed in the entire realm of material and visual culture, and in the very configuration of space. The period after the Restoration, until at least the first third of the nineteenth century, tolerated no excess, no boldness and vigor, so common to the art of the continent. There is no El Greco in England, says Pevsner. There is “no Bach, no Beethoven, no Brahms. There is no Michelangelo, no Titian, no Rembrandt, no Dürer or Grünewald.”<sup>571</sup> There was practically no Baroque in England (“All the great movements in European painting during the seventeenth century passed Britain by,”<sup>572</sup> says Waterhouse, and thus makes a statement true for English literature as well, with the exception—to some extent—of Crashaw, Milton, and Dryden), and even the Renaissance was delayed. Building on Pevsner, Praz goes a step further, saying that the English artist lacks the sense of the third dimension (“even architecture... is two-dimensional in England”), space being perceived as “linear and flat.”<sup>573</sup> We only need to look at the canvases of Gainsborough to recognize the truth of this insight. Others have noted this quality in poetry as well (“Pope’s verse is static, its movement rectilinear and therefore stiff, confined to the restrictive two-dimensional plane”).<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Robert Markley, “Objectivity as Ideology: Boyle, Newton, and the Languages of Science,” *Genre*, v. 16, 1983, pp. 364-365.

<sup>568</sup> See Peter Dear, “From Truth to Disinterestedness in the Seventeenth Century,” *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 22, 1992, pp. 619-631; Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” pp. 131-143.

<sup>569</sup> “The Moral Sense of Simplicity,” in *Studies in Honor of Frederick W. Shipley*, p. 280.

<sup>570</sup> *A Culture of Fact: England 1550-1720*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2000, p. 107.

<sup>571</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 80, cf. pp. 78-79, 206.

<sup>572</sup> E. K. Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1994, p. 125.

<sup>573</sup> Mario Praz, “Baroque in England,” *Modern Philology*, v. 61 (1964), #3, pp. 169-170. See also Rudolf Wittkower, *Palladio and English Palladianism*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 174.

<sup>574</sup> B. Fehr, “The Antagonism of Forms in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” *English Studies*, vol. 18, 1936, #1-6, p. 194.

To be sure, there was a Baroque in English architecture. It came to England late, it never took hold, and died out soon after. But this was by no means the Baroque of Bernini or Borromini, of Guarini or Cortona, of the Asam brothers in Germany or Fischer von Erlach in Austria. This was not the Baroque on the heels of Michelangelo, ponderous and full of movement and exuberance, a Baroque dramatic, unpredictable and adventurous. Instead, in the hands of its main practitioners—of Wren, Hawksmoor, Archer, Gibbs, or Vanbrugh—, English Baroque was hopelessly static and even Classicist, too heavy and clumsy to throw its surfaces into play, too serious to be emotional, too proper—and, frankly, asexual—to be licentious. “There are two causes of beauty,” said Christopher Wren. There is, on the one hand, “customary beauty,” which “is begotten by the use of our senses.” This form Wren deemed inferior. There is also “natural beauty,” one derived from geometry and “consisting in uniformity...and proportion,” and this, Wren claimed, was by far the superior form.<sup>575</sup> Here is already visible, then, in the founder of the English Baroque, the seed of the movement’s quick dissolution, for it never really learned, nor did it have the necessary temperament, to challenge geometry, uniformity, and proportion. Most of all, it lacked the warrant of society at large for such an undertaking. The poet James Thomson spoke of its “detested forms” that “corrupt, confound, and barbarize.”<sup>576</sup> The architect Colen Campbell called it “affected and licentious,” “wildly extravagant,” “debauched,” “odd and chimerical.”<sup>577</sup> Shaftesbury found it “false” and “deformed,” and called instead for a style “independent of fancy.”<sup>578</sup> If anything, then, rather than prepare the ground for Rococo, the way it did on the continent, Baroque in England prepared the ground for a century-long dictatorship of “correctness” and “good sense.” With relatively minor variations, this was going to be an architecture of simplicity, of regularity, and of symmetry. It would be cool and reserved. Any ostentation and extravagance that Baroque might have displayed would be replaced by limpid formality, all sweep and movement arrested before it could commence. Anything excitable and eccentric, any enthusiasm or exaggeration, would immediately be deemed repugnant. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, English architecture became embarrassed even by its own mass, by its own three dimensions, which it now deemed uncouth and inauthentic, and began pretending to be no more than a set of well-appointed lines, a pictorial rather than a plastic art. In short, this was architecture conventional and doctrinaire, obsessed with its purity and transparency, and thus often vacuous, dull, and uninspired. It dominated all royal and civic construction, and all the private as well. Regardless of their scale, location, or purpose, all buildings in England acquired the same, uniform look, all bearing the same stamp. In the countryside this meant the quasi-Classical, “Palladian” and “Vitruvian” mansions, most often completely unsuitable for domestic life.<sup>579</sup> In London, and increasingly in most other

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<sup>575</sup> Quoted in Robert Tavernor, *Palladio and Palladianism*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 148.

<sup>576</sup> *Liberty, The Castle of Indolence, and Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 145.

<sup>577</sup> See H. E. Stutchbury, *The Architecture of Colen Campbell*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 1967, p. 6.

<sup>578</sup> *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2001, vol. 3, p. 247, and Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1995, p. 103.

<sup>579</sup> A long line of immense country houses, many of which are still standing, is witness to this era: Colen Campbell’s Wilbury House (1710), Wanstead House (1714), Houghton Hall (1722), and Mereworth Castle (1722), Lord Burlington’s Chiswick Villa (1723), Roger Morris’s Marble Hill (1724), William Kent’s Holkham Hall (1734), Henry Flitcroft’s Wentworth Woodhouse (1734), Isaac Ware’s Wrotham Park (1754), Robert Adam’s Kedleston (1760) and Osterley Hall (1761), John Carr’s Constable Burton Hall (1762), George Steuart’s Attingham Park (1783), Thomas

urban areas, it meant endless rows of perfectly ordered brick houses, standardized by Acts of Parliament, and giving entire streets and neighborhoods a proper, uniform, neat look: narrow, rectangular structures, often not wider than 24 feet, each with a classical door case painted in white, with bands at floor levels, a sloping roof hidden behind parapets, a cornice supported by modillions, uniform window openings with a jack arch, and double-hung sash windows, each with twenty-four or (later) twelve panes and a set-back frame. In each case, plans and elevations were readily available in pattern-books and manuals, approved by arbiters of taste regarding their orthodoxy, and digested into easy formulas. As long as one applied them, one could rightfully claim the station of an aristocrat, of a country gentleman, or of a member of the middling sort. Rules gave everyone their safety and secured general approval for those who conformed. A villa in Ayrshire, for example, “was to project the image of a gentleman of stoic stability, free from greedy or passionate display, unmoved by the confusion of urban life, and submissive to an emerging order of respectability that reckoned restraint as its hallmark.”<sup>580</sup> The orderliness of the mind was thus reflecting in the orderliness of architecture, the discipline of society in the discipline of style.

These strictures of discipline did not bypass any form of natural or built environment. The same tendency that produced the country villas and the sprawling suburbs of London also produced the famed English garden. Supposedly free and informal, a “natural” alternative to the overly “rational” French variety, the English garden was in fact by far more contrived than any garden in Europe had ever been. “Your attention will be called in this busy part of the park, almost every step you take,” said a visitor to one such place. “In advancing a few steps from the last seat to another,” he continued, “you will find the face of everything changed again.”<sup>581</sup> “Now *there* [pointing his finger],” said Lancelot “Capability” Brown, the most famous and prolific of eighteenth-century landscape designers, “I make a comma, and there... where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon: at another part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.”<sup>582</sup> Like a literary composition, an English garden was so carefully contrived that it hid its own artifice, letting the story flow “naturally,” from one event to another, allowing its guest to believe its truthfulness and enter its reality. In reality, however, the commas, colons, and full stops of Brown and his patrons were often times extreme undertakings, and least of all literary. Entire villages were obliterated, hills leveled or built up, rivers diverted and dammed, public roads and footpaths closed or rerouted, lakes and waterfalls created, retaining walls carefully hidden, caves dug out, just to give the semblance of peace, quiet, and tranquility, and to erase any presence of man. “[N]either art, nor the conceit or caprice of man,” were to spoil, in Shaftesbury’s words, nature’s own “genuine order.”<sup>583</sup> Nor did these strictures of discipline reach eighteenth-century England merely as a fad, an echo of that continental mania for antiquities that produced Winckelmann. The strong tendency to

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Harrison’s Chester Castle (1788), Benjamin’s Latrobe’s Hammerwood Lodge (1790), and William Wilkins’s Grand Park (1808), are only some of the most outstanding examples.

<sup>580</sup> David Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995, p. 343.

<sup>581</sup> Joseph Heely, *Letters on the Beauties of Hagley, Envil and the Leasowes* [1777], ed. J. D. Hunt, New York, 1982, p. 204.

<sup>582</sup> See Peter Willis, “Capability Brown in Northumberland,” *Garden History*, vol. 9, 1981, #2, p. 158.

<sup>583</sup> *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 2, p. 220.

reject both emotional intensity and heightened intellectualizing, to reduce built form to the simplest possible contours, and to frown upon any exceptions to narrowly conceived conventions, was coming into its own in England already towards the middle of the seventeenth century, and not from sketches of Rome or Spalato, of Herculaneum and Pompeii, but from English artisans and merchants, from bricklayers and carpenters. It was what Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw have called an “unassuming merchant-gentry habit of building,” a form of “simple solids and mathematical proportions,” of plain surfaces and minimal ornamentation, a manner impersonal, proper, and undemanding. It is the manner that filled English provinces with simple brick or stone houses, “rectangular units with regular fenestration and perhaps a tame pediment.” But it was also the manner which “fixed London’s squares into a pattern of dull, decent regularity.” That the authors call this “Puritan Minimalism” should not mislead, for one of the men most responsible for giving London this format in the 1660s, the then Surveyor General of the King’s Works, was anything but Puritan, “a hard gambling Irishman.” This was not a revenge of Dissenters, an act of defiance of a subculture. It was a manner that was coming to define life itself in England at the time.<sup>584</sup>

England entered the eighteenth century having defeated Dissenters, having passed the Act of Uniformity, and for a while even the term “Protestant” was used with hesitation.<sup>585</sup> It was the time when anything that dissented, protested, or did not fit into uniform molds was suspect. People built their houses, chose their furniture, laid out their gardens, and dressed themselves in a manner that would not stand out from what was “generally” accepted. Red brick, as opposed to gray or yellow, became suspect, accused of being “troublesome,” “fiery and disagreeable.”<sup>586</sup> Curves, too, became a liability. The frugality of eighteenth-century furniture can therefore “be startling,” says a historian. It was now lighter, legs straight and tapered, lines tidier without unnecessary swirls. “The type persisted throughout the century, brought up to date in detail by influential pattern-books. Chippendale, for example, published a design for a ‘Library Table’ in the 1760s that, apart from a simple band of ornament that could be discarded without prejudice, is functional simplicity itself.”<sup>587</sup> This tendency we find in most other cabinet-makers. Hepplewhite, we are told, “contrived to impart to plain, useful objects a sober elegance.” The designs of Henry Holland were marked by “august simplicity,” and a “predilection for rectangular forms.” The furniture designed by Robert Adam displayed “to such a high degree the classical virtues of proportion, restraint and fitness.”<sup>588</sup> Thomas Sheraton became particularly sought-after for the straight, rectangular lines of his designs. This was also the case with ceramics and glass. We read about the “desire for flat surfaces” and “shallow relief.” The first consideration was “fitness for purpose,” away from “the extravagances of shape and decoration” that characterized contemporary continental productions. The designs of Josiah Wedgwood, for example, substituted “a sophisticated and pedantic refinement for the more spontaneous creative energy of the earlier

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<sup>584</sup> *Architecture Without Kings*, Manchester UP, 1995, esp. pp. 1-6, 25-26, 60, 71.

<sup>585</sup> See Martin Briggs, *Puritan Architecture*, London, Lutterworth Press, 1946, p. 27-28.

<sup>586</sup> Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture*, Farnborough, England, Gregg Intl. Publishers, 1971 [1768], p. 61.

<sup>587</sup> John Morley, *The History of Furniture*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1999, p. 263. Ole Wanscher, *The Art of Furniture*, London, 1968, pp. 277-279, speaks of the furniture of “common sense.”

<sup>588</sup> Peter Ward-Jackson, *English Furniture Designs of the Eighteenth Century*, London, HMSO, 1958, pp. 4-5, 22, 24, 25, 27.

potters.”<sup>589</sup> Indeed, one author sees in the wares of Wedgwood nothing but another form of Georgian town houses.<sup>590</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, “a restrained rigidity of style” was also apparent “in the dress of both sexes.”<sup>591</sup> According to an author writing in 1693, “Cloth among men is the general and almost the only wear. And that with so much plainness and comeliness, with so much modesty and so little prodigality, that the English, formerly so apish in imitating foreign nations in their garb, might go now for a model.”<sup>592</sup> The frock coat, which had been a staple of the working man’s wardrobe, became by the 1730s the norm for all men in both town and country, and by the 1780s was “worn everywhere except at court.” What characterized the frock, we are told, was “functional simplicity of style, demonstrated by the absence of stiffened side pleats, by its plain or slit cuff and its small, turned-down collar.” The overall trend in the course of the century was “towards sobriety in color and cut,” and this was true for women as well.<sup>593</sup> The dress of 1720, says a nineteenth-century author, “may be traced to have almost imperceptibly glided into that of 1800; the various trimmings and trappings being abandoned, and the showy colours and rich materials giving place to more sober and less costly ones.”<sup>594</sup> Even court dress “was influenced by the move towards simplicity,” with one foreign visitor calling the English court “the residence of dullness.” As early as 1669, Edward Chamberlayne noted that “since the Restoration of the King now reigning, England never saw, for matter of wearing apparel, less prodigality, and more modesty in clothes, more plainness and comeliness.”<sup>595</sup> At his inauguration, King William “probably wore a simple cinnamon-colored suit” and “presented a rather modest, certainly civilian, surely benign picture” of royalty.<sup>596</sup> The so-called Windsor uniform, worn by the court in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, “was very plain compared with the more lavish European styles.” Indeed, by the 1770s, the mood in England was one of “agreeable negligence in dress.”<sup>597</sup> The clothes of the period have been described as “mellowed,” “sedate,” and “somber,”<sup>598</sup> as “subdued and rather uneventful,” of “cool clarity and hard-edged precision,”<sup>599</sup> “of almost child-like simplicity.”<sup>600</sup> “So bland was this English style (one Frenchmen described it as slovenly) that, for a brief period, it became appropriated in France as a fashion statement, a conscious *chic*. “But in its trimming and attention to detail (the work of the *modiste*),” there was evident in this French appropriation, we are told, “a fully-committed inventiveness and thoughtful

<sup>589</sup> Roger Fry, ed., *Georgian Art, 1760-1820*, London, B. T. Batsford, 1929, pp. 6-7, 40-41.

<sup>590</sup> Jules Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1995, p. 221.

<sup>591</sup> Aileen Ribeiro and Valerie Cumming, *The Visual History of Costume*, London, 1989, pp. 31-32.

<sup>592</sup> G. M. *The New State of England*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Clavell, Mortlock & Robinson, 1693, p. 33.

<sup>593</sup> Ribeiro & Cumming, *The Visual History of Costume*, pp. 31-32. Also Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, New York, Holms & Meier, 1979, pp. 203-204, 207; James Laver, *Modesty in Dress: An Inquiry into the Fundamentals of Fashion*, London, Heinemann, 1969, p. 44; Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 27-29.

<sup>594</sup> Alexander Andrews, *The Eighteenth Century*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1856, p. 26.

<sup>595</sup> *Anglia Notitia, or the Present State of England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, pp. 58-59.

<sup>596</sup> Lois G. Schwoerer, “The Glorious Revolution as a Spectacle,” in Stephen B. Baxter, ed., *England’s Rise to Greatness, 1660-1763*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 133.

<sup>597</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2002, pp. 4, 181, 190, 196, 211-212, 217. See also *ead.*, *Dress and Morality*, Oxford, Berg, 2003, p. 111.

<sup>598</sup> C. Willett and Phillis Cunningham, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century*, London, Faber & Faber, 1957, pp. 13, 20, also 17-18.

<sup>599</sup> Geoffrey Squire, *Dress and Society, 1560-1970*, New York, The Viking Press, 1974, p. 128.

<sup>600</sup> Elizabeth Ewing, *Everyday Dress, 1650-1900*, London, B. T. Batsford, 1984, p. 71.

precision—a serious attitude to frivolity,” an attitude quite unlike that in England.<sup>601</sup> To describe this English attitude by reference to a mentality would be only to mystify this very particular and historical phenomenon. Only a century earlier, Queen Elizabeth, it has been said, “robed herself in costly dresses, varying them almost every day,” leaving two thousand of them at her death. “She wore jewelry in her hair, on her arms and wrists and ears and gowns; when a bishop reproved her love of finery she had him warned not to touch on that subject again, lest he reach heaven aforesaid.”<sup>602</sup> Was Elizabeth therefore not English enough? Or is it rather the case that certain traits of the English have been created and enforced at specific times? The remark by a social historian of clothing, that the simplicity and uniformity of the English fashion in the eighteenth century betrays the “quality of non-commitment to clear alternatives,” is quite telling in this regard.<sup>603</sup> It was not only in the matters of clothing that English preferred not to commit after the Civil War. Rather, the commitment to non-commitment—the insistence on “fitting in” by being inconspicuous, or by being conspicuous in socially accepted ways—was a distinction of the age. Everywhere we turn we see a tendency to impose order not only on the way the individual looks, and on the way he builds or furnishes his house, but on the way he thinks, behaves, feels, and speaks. Like never before, not even in the high society of the court, is the appearance and the demeanor of the “free-born Englishman” as scrutinized and as prescribed, and increasingly so, as it was in the decades following the Restoration.

Nothing, however, equaled the discipline and the level of impersonality imposed on the English language. We have already spoken of the growing insistence on plainness in the course of the seventeenth century, of the aversion to metaphor, and of the discomfort with fortuitousness and ambiguity. What takes place in the eighteenth century, in turn, can only be described as an undisguised dictatorship over all forms of discourse, both spoken and written, mundane and specialized, in the most thorough of ways. In his *Structural History of English*, John Nist dedicates a chapter to the period between 1650 and 1800, and entitles it simply “Authoritarian English.”<sup>604</sup> What used to be abstract discussions by Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, tying language to philosophical anthropology, to man’s fallen state, to the nature of his mind and its relationship to physical reality and to truth; what used to be a topic for debate in the hallowed rooms of the Royal Society, or a concern among select theologians, had by now trickled down, as it were, to grammarians, lexicographers, rhetoricians, language and literature instructors, novelists, dramatists, and poets, journalists and pamphleteers, and from there further down to all “men of quality,” their ladies and chambermaids, to anyone who read and wrote, anyone who was concerned with how to speak, and concerned with propriety. And what they were all concerned with could be summarized by one word alone: correctness. There was in the eighteenth-century England a mania for correctness. Like all other things that were supposed to be correct—like buildings, landscapes, and furnishing, like one’s clothing and demeanor, and the way one carried oneself—all so as not to stand out, i.e. be individual—, language too became subject to incessant cleansing and rule-making.

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<sup>601</sup> Geoffrey Squire, *Dress and Society, 1560-1970*, New York, The Viking Press, 1974, p. 128, also p. 103.

<sup>602</sup> Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1961, p. 11.

<sup>603</sup> Squire, *Dress and Society*, p. 127.

<sup>604</sup> New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1966, pp. 269-300.

Unlike the Renaissance, which “was in some ways characterized by unbridled enthusiasm for linguistic innovation,” this new age was characterized by “a prevailing concern with order and discipline,” by “concerted efforts” to codify language “and reduce it to a body of immutable rules.”<sup>605</sup> So distrustful of English, for its supposed lack of rules, was John Dryden for example that he often wrote first in Latin before translating it into his native tongue. Jonathan Swift desired to see English, which “offends against every part of grammar,” permanently “fixed” and “rid of gross improprieties.”<sup>606</sup> Addison compared the laws of English to those of the English constitution, and called for the introduction of “superintendents of our language, to hinder any words of a foreign coin from passing among us.”<sup>607</sup> Samuel Johnson saw his role of a lexicographer as that of a conqueror, needing to “civilize part of the inhabitants... to reduce them wholly to subjection, and settle them under laws.”<sup>608</sup> Daniel Defoe proposed the creation of a special “authority for the usage of words,” the task of which would be “to explore the innovations of other men’s fancies.” According to him, this authority “should preside with a sort of judicature over the learning of the age, and have liberty to correct and censure the exorbitance of writers.” Its representatives, he said, would be “judges of style and language,” so that “no author would have the impudence to coin without their authority,” a crime that would be equivalent to that of counterfeiting money.<sup>609</sup> These authors and many others, such as Richard Steele, John Evelyn, or Thomas Cooke, “approached most questions,” we are told, “in the belief that they could be solved by logic and that the solution could be imposed upon the world by authoritative decree. Hence the constant attempt to legislate one construction into use and another out of use.”<sup>610</sup> The concern, in other words, was not with how the majority of people *actually* spoke, but with how they *ought* to speak. The eighteenth-century critics, says Sterling Andrus Leonard, “found a thousand positions in logic and grammar to use as points of sortie against the usage of their time.”<sup>611</sup> Distinctions such as those between “between” and “among,” “that” and “which,” “lie” and “lay,” “shall” and “will,” the preference for “different from” as opposed to “different than” or “different to,” the prohibition of the objective case in “It’s me,” of the nominative case in “Who did you ask?,” of the double negative, or the preference for not splitting the infinitive, all of which are still being drilled into every pupil’s mind, have their origin in this legislative frenzy of the eighteenth century. It is what James and Lesley Milroy have called “the ideology of standardization,” the chief linguistic characteristic of which “is suppression of optional variation at all levels of language—in pronunciation (phonology), spelling, grammar (morphology and syntax) and lexicon.”<sup>612</sup> The grammar of language was to be, in the words of Joseph Priestly, “as indisputable in its principles as the grammar of nature.”<sup>613</sup> The goal was to make everyone express themselves in the same clear, easy, smooth, conversational, and polite English. And this goal was very much achieved. There is between 1660 and 1760, says

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<sup>605</sup> Georges Bourcier, *An Introduction to the History of the English Language*, Stanley Thornes, p. 204.

<sup>606</sup> *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1957, vol. 4, pp. 1-21.

<sup>607</sup> *The Spectator*, no. 165. See also no. 135.

<sup>608</sup> *Johnson on the English Language*, ed. G. J. Kolb and R. Demaria, New Haven, Yale UP, 2005, p. 58.

<sup>609</sup> *An Essay Upon Projects*, Menston, England, The Scholar Press, 1969, pp. 236-237. See also S. Tucker, *Protean Shape: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary and Usage*, London, Athlone Press, 1967, esp. pp. 33-48.

<sup>610</sup> Albert Baugh, *A History of the English Language, 1700-1800*, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall, 2002, p. 286.

<sup>611</sup> *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700-1800*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1962, p. 35.

<sup>612</sup> *Authority in Language*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 28-30.

<sup>613</sup> *The Rudiments of English Grammar* [1761], Menston, England, The Scholar Press, 1969, p. vi.

Ian Gordon, “a remarkable measure of agreement between writer and reader—whatever their social class—of what constituted an acceptable way of writing.” During this time, “one can read dozens of books by men and women, ranging from the fully professional to the writer of private memoranda, without coming across a single page that deviates from the essentially colloquial norm of the time.” *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, the *Spectator*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*—these were all written as if they were bound by a tacit agreement. So strong indeed was this “agreement,” that it could bind even people—such as Swift and Defoe—coming from opposing socio-economic and religious backgrounds. “English prose,” says Gordon, “has never been written at such a high uniform level” as it was in the eighteenth century.<sup>614</sup> “One would hardly know,” says Ian Watt, “from *An Essay on Man* that Pope was a Tory, or from *Tom Jones* that Fielding was a Whig; both works appeal—like *The Spectator* and *The Rambler*—to the same kind of audience—sceptical, observant, worldly-wise, widely read, and essentially conservative; they have a similar tone of voice—rational, polite, controlled; and their common aim is to remind man of his proper place in the total scheme of things.”<sup>615</sup> This state of affairs, finally, has prompted Terry Eagleton to say that “modern criticism in England was born ironically of political consensus. It is not, of course, that the eighteenth century was any stranger to strife and rancour, or that we should imagine the bourgeois public sphere as an organic society of universal agreement. But the ferocious contentious of essayists and pamphleteers took place within the gradual crystallization of an increasingly self-confident ruling bloc in English society, which defined the limits of the acceptably sayable.”<sup>616</sup>

This insistence on “natural” and “colloquial” forms of expression should therefore not be confused with egalitarianism—no more at least than the fact of everyone wearing a frock should. On the contrary, one could argue that it is precisely when outward expressions of status or class, either visible or audible, are muffled that power acquires its more menacing form. For all its supposed naturalness and colloquialism, the English of the century following the Restoration is, just like the graceful lines of the “Queen Anne chair,” unequivocally the language of an English gentleman, and not that of a peasant or a domestic. Robert Boyle, for one, makes this clear as early as 1661. “I have almost all along written these dialogues,” he says, “in a style more fashionable than that of mere scholars is wont to be. I hope I shall be excused by them that shall consider, that to keep a due decorum in the discourses, it was fit that in a book written by a gentleman, and wherein only gentlemen are introduced as speakers, the language should be more smooth, and the expressions more civil than is usual.”<sup>617</sup> As James Sutherland remarks somewhat acerbically, this sort of prose, “smooth” and “civil,” descends from those “who wrote with ease partly because they *were* gentlemen and so were accustomed to speaking their mind at leisure and with authority, and partly because they rarely had anything very difficult or profound to express.”<sup>618</sup> This may be unfair to say of Boyle (or of Addison,

<sup>614</sup> *The Movement of English Prose*, London, Longman, 1981, pp. 133-137.

<sup>615</sup> “Introduction,” in *idem*, ed., *The Augustan Age*, Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, 1968, p. 23.

<sup>616</sup> *The Function of Criticism*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>617</sup> “The Sceptical Chymist,” in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, pp. 211-212. See also Maurizio Gotti, *Robert Boyle and the Language of Science*, Milan, Guerini scientifica, 2001, pp. 85-90.

<sup>618</sup> “Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Prose,” in *Essays on the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945, p. 95.



whom Sutherland was referring to), for he was a thoughtful man. But to say that what was deemed natural and colloquial in the age of Boyle and Addison “comes near to being the unhurried conversation of an eighteenth-century gentleman,” is on the whole true. Indeed, for all their supposed colloquialism, these gentlemanly legislators of English were especially keen on attacking colloquialisms, precisely because they were “associated with lower-class usage.”<sup>619</sup> Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, one of the century’s most prominent means of codification (“I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr. Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship,”<sup>620</sup> said Lord Chesterfield), never hesitated to label a word or an expression “vulgar,” “barbarous,” “low,” “unworthy,” “ludicrous,” “impure,” or “used by beggars and vagabonds,” defining “oats,” for example, as “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.” In fact, Johnson stated openly to have excluded from his dictionary the vocabulary of miners, sailors, or artificers—in other words, of laborers—because it “cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation.”<sup>621</sup> Called a “linguistic weedkiller”<sup>622</sup> for its effort to discourage the words of the unrefined and the uneducated, Johnson’s *Dictionary* was not an exception in this respect. On the contrary, the highly controlling and elitist approach to language permeated the work of most other authors, such as Robert Lowth, George Campbell, or Lindley Murray.<sup>623</sup> Thomas Sheridan for example, in his *Course of Lectures on Elocution*, held that the only proper English was that of the Court: “All other dialects,” he said, “are sure mark either of a provincial, rustic, pedantic, or mechanic education; and therefore have some degree of disgrace annexed to them.”<sup>624</sup> David Hume, a great proponent of the plain style, based his criticism of the figures of classical eloquence not, as one would expect, on the basis of a philosophical argument, but on the basis of pure social etiquette. His concern, unlike that of Hobbes, was not that figures were deceptive, but that they were not polite.<sup>625</sup> The case of Adam Smith is even more telling. A true descendant of the critique of rhetoric in the tradition of Boyle, Sprat, and Locke,<sup>626</sup> Smith rebuked Shakespeare and Milton for their use of metaphor and other figures, and generally showed no patience for poetry. Unlike prose, which appeared along with “opulence and commerce,” poetry, he thought, was an archaic product of “rude” and “barbarous least civilized nations.” Unlike prose, in which “all the common affairs of life” were made, poetry was difficult and vacuous and time-consuming. “Prose is the language of business,” he said with the characteristically utilitarian attitude, “as poetry is of pleasure and amusement.” Smith therefore dedicated his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* to the art of writing and speaking “in the most concise, proper, and precise manner,” which he identified with

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<sup>619</sup> Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 28. Cf. Dieter Berger, *Die Konversationskunst in England 1660-1740*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1978, pp. 71-72.

<sup>620</sup> Quoted in Sebastian Domsch, *The Emergence of Literary Criticism in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2014, p. 78.

<sup>621</sup> *Johnson on the English Language*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>622</sup> William Wimsatt, “Johnson’s *Dictionary*,” in *New Light on Dr. Johnson*, ed. F. Hilles, New Haven, Yale UP, 1959, p. 66.

<sup>623</sup> See E. Finegan, *Attitudes toward English Usage*, New York, Teachers College Press, 1980, pp. 18-30.

<sup>624</sup> London, Strahan, 1762, p. 30.

<sup>625</sup> See Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1994, esp. p. 73.

<sup>626</sup> See Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1971, p. 541.

none other than that of the upper-class resident of London. “Our words,” he said, “must not only be English and agreeable to the custom of the country but likewise to the custom of some particular part of the nation... It is the custom of the people that forms what we call propriety, and the custom of the better sort from whence the rules of purity of style are to be drawn.” Smith is, of course, here addressing his fellow Scots, who had recently joined the union with England and are eager to be accepted into English society. Having studied at Oxford, where he worked diligently on improving his English (his prose was later praised by Hume and Gibbon for its “perspicuity”<sup>627</sup>), Smith realized that speaking well was more than merely a technical matter. If an oat-eating Scot wanted to mingle with the right circles in London, be taken seriously and treated as a rightful citizen of the new country, his English had to be that of the “better sort” of people, of a Bollingbroke or a Swift, English “easy” and “natural.” It had to be marked, as Smith said, by “a calm, composed, unpassionate serenity,” admitting of no “extravagances.” This was not going to be the English of the “rabble,” but of “the most polite persons,” indeed only of those “who go to the opera.”<sup>628</sup>

Not many Scots went to the opera in the eighteenth century. Not many people anywhere went to the opera in the eighteenth century or at any other time. This shows how narrow the definition of good English was for Smith and his contemporaries. The “natural” and “easy” English was the English that very few Englishmen, and even fewer Scots, Welsh, or Irish, spoke or found easy. This English, “one in the character of a gentleman,” had to be so plain and simple and direct, that the meaning intended by the author or the speaker, says Smith, would “flow naturally upon our mind without our being obliged to hunt backwards and forwards in order to find it.” So “perspicuous” did it have to be “that one half asleep may carry the sense along with him.” Indeed, Smith scolds any author or speaker who requires of us to apply “great attention,” and be “altogether awake,” in order to discover what he intended to say.<sup>629</sup> He even scolds Samuel Johnson for failing “to distinguish the words apparently synonymous,” and thus allowing for the ambiguities of connotation.<sup>630</sup> Smith, says Barbara Warnick, “viewed discourse as essentially reproductive; it should narrate events as they occurred, leave no gaps, portray characters true to life, avoid digression, connect causes to events, and include only what was relevant.”<sup>631</sup> But most people did not speak or write in this way. The people of “the lower class,” Smith admits, involve themselves in constant repetitions, “the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> sentence” often containing “nothing more than is contained in the 1<sup>st</sup> only turned into other words.” “There is nowhere more use made of figures,” he says in another place, “than in the lowest and most vulgar conversations.”<sup>632</sup> Failing therefore to speak “natural” and “colloquial” English, namely the conversational English of the upper class, the vast majority of the population was faced with the need to conform to a language, and the ways of thinking and reasoning that it implied, substantially foreign to them. And

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<sup>627</sup> Quoted respectively in John Rae, *The Life of Adam Smith*, New York, August M. Kelley, 1965, p. 287, and Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 191-192.

<sup>628</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, pp. 136-137, 55, 4-5, 198.

<sup>629</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>630</sup> *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. Wightman and Bryce, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, pp. 232-33.

<sup>631</sup> *The Sixth Canon: Belletristic Rhetorical Theory and Its French Antecedents*, University of South Carolina Press, 1993, p. 59.

<sup>632</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, pp. 117, 34.

this especially if they nourished any hope of being treated as equals, let alone of advancing in life. In her study of the “politics” of English language between 1791 and 1819, Olivia Smith notes that in the course of those years, “Parliament dismissively refused to admit petitions because of the language in which they were written.”<sup>633</sup> As late as 1880, a Bill was thrown out of Parliament “simply because one of its words had not been recorded by Dr. Johnson.”<sup>634</sup> One was simply deemed inarticulate, and treated like an infant, if one did not speak and write in an exceedingly particular way. How this “polite” English sounded and read, we still have plenty of opportunity to witness and, unfortunately, to practice ourselves today. One author, writing as early as 1816, noted the following: “It is the applying of words only in a certain *authorized* manner that gives to composition that worn-out character—that badge of meanness, poverty and absolute pauperism which literature wears in the old age of inventiveness: the garb is indeed very fine, very fashionable, well-brushed, neatly made, fitted and put on; but it is miserably old, thin and thread-bare; it evidently came out of a second-hand shop, or belongs to a poor gentleman in reduced circumstances.” English indeed became “proper,” “natural,” and “colloquial,” but only when it became permanently second-hand, for, as this author noted, “too much freedom of style would be very dangerous to the whole etiquette of true taste, tender delicacy, and all the retinue of literary despotism.”<sup>635</sup>

What passes for the mentality of the English is therefore in important ways a distinctly eighteenth-century category. What emerged after 1660, gained impetus after 1688, and came to fruition towards the end of the following century, was an intricate administration of the individual’s own conception of himself. Like the Baroque façade, the individual too now had to be purified of anything that was not clear and simple and restrained. Like the Palladian villa, like the English garden, or like the streets and squares of London, he too was to shed anything that was a cause for attention, anything that might unsettle and agitate. Whether he was a banker or a country gentleman, a joiner or a farmer, an owner of a mill or of a tavern, he too was to become neat and polished like the London townhouse, able to fit seamlessly in an endless row. He was to become agreeable, amiable, and affable. Like that medieval abbess of Hohenbourg, who carefully painted each one of her sixty sisters, and made sure to write down each of their names, but who in reality reproduced the same exact image over and over again, so the modern Englishman took great pains, like the society in which he lived, to paint himself indistinguishable. No wonder a man like Rousseau, so expressive of his individuality, would be met in England of this time with profound hostility. Rousseau was deemed “unfashioned, indelicate, sour, gloomy,” “vain” and “eccentric.” He was “uncontrolled,” “profligate” and “dangerous,” an “apostle of immorality” and “an enemy to society.” He was “an escapist dreamer,” “carried away by an irregular fancy,” “misled and infatuated by caprice and the affectation of peculiarity.” His “erotic misadventures,” his “love of singularity,” his “self-indulgence” beyond the bounds of “social accommodation and compromise,” were all deemed an abomination to any stable society.<sup>636</sup> No wonder, too, that eighteenth-century Englishmen obsessed over things polite, for what the word used to mean in the

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<sup>633</sup> *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>634</sup> John Nist, *A Structural History of English*, p. 278.

<sup>635</sup> James Gilchrist, *Philosophic Etymology or Rational Grammar*, London, 1816, p. 219.

<sup>636</sup> See Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979.

centuries prior to then was, quite literally, “neat” and “polished.” Whereas the sixteenth century saw stone or wood as being “polite” because buffed, the eighteenth-century saw no problem in describing a people, a nation, or a society as polite, as it did buildings, arts, or conversations. For like a piece of wood, which had to please on sight and to the touch, so did the Englishman have to please in his daily intercourse, to be sociable, so to manage his words and actions as to facilitate smoothly his dealings with others. Paul Langford speaks of the sense, forming among the newly emerging political class in England after 1688, of “having to conform to a narrower definition of defensible behaviour.” He speaks of “the growing coolness, reserve and circumspection” of English politicians, of their growing “unobtrusiveness” and “unpretentiousness,” of “a trend towards uniformity” in their dress. If Elizabeth delighted in shows and pageants full of pagan joy and drama, which filled popular imagination and endowed her rule with pomp,<sup>637</sup> there was now in England a trend towards the “understatement of power,” towards making power, like its wielders, almost inconspicuous. One need only think of the residence of the Prime Minister at Downing Street, unimposing as it is to the point of affectation, to realize the change. “Symbols of authority once considered unexceptionable, such as wands, sticks, maces, batons, bags, and purses of office, disappeared from view in political portraiture.” The ministers of England, according to an Italian visitor, were “not distinguishable from the other members of parliament, either by their seats, their dress, or their manners.” In fact, not only did ministers increasingly become indistinguishable from backbenchers in the course of the eighteenth century, but, as Langford notes, politicians in general “became indistinguishable from any ordinary gentleman.”<sup>638</sup> So did the clerics. “The fox-hunting, brandy-swigging ‘squarson,’” we are told, “indistinguishable in dress and manners from other gentleman farmers, was a familiar figure in the provinces.” When in London, he was “just as eager to partake in the new cult of the polite, with its values of sociability, benevolence and good conversation, and just as suspicious of anything that smacked of ‘enthusiasm.’”<sup>639</sup> So strong was this pressure to “polished” conformity, that even Jesus Christ did not escape it. “He was a person,” the English were now told, “of the greatest freedom, affability, and courtesy, there was nothing in his conversation that was at all austere, crabbed or unpleasant. Though he was always serious, yet was he never sour, sullenly grave, morose or cynical, but of a marvelously conversable, sociable and benign temper.”<sup>640</sup> Like Christ, the parson, and the politician, all of whom conformed in their manners and demeanor to the model of an English gentleman, so did those on the margins of the society—peasants, laborers, and the urban poor—, in order to gain access to “society,” to be accepted and accorded any regard. This was especially true for domestic servants. Consequently, the burgeoning literature of civility “was explicitly directed at guiding social dealings with superiors, equals, and inferiors,” while “instruction in the rules of polite behaviour was purveyed to non-gente audiences in a range of print media, inculcating a kind of commercial affability to smooth transactions.” Everyone was now to be pleasant, to anticipate and satisfy the expectations of others, and to be as unmemorable and bland as everyone else. Any “excesses of sentiment, insight, or expression,” be they romantic,

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<sup>637</sup> See, e.g., de Sola Pinto, *The English Renaissance*, p. 35.

<sup>638</sup> “Politics and Manners from Sir Robert Walpole to Sir Robert Peel,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 94, 1997, pp. 103-125.

<sup>639</sup> John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1991, p. 384.

<sup>640</sup> Quoted in Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, vol. 1, p. 83.

metaphysical, baroque, or transcendental, were now going to be replaced by the overriding concern for decorum and social comity.<sup>641</sup> The poor were going to be poor in a socially acceptable way, just as would the rich and the powerful; there was going to be no friction. This, in brief, was an age of order.

#### XIV

“Nothing surely is more strongly imprinted on our minds, or more closely interwoven with our souls,” said Shaftesbury at the beginning of the century, “than the idea or sense of order and proportion.” “If everything which exists,” he said in another place, “be according to a good order, and for the best, then of necessity there is no such thing as real ill in the universe, nothing ill with respect to the whole.”<sup>642</sup> These words and, most of all, the attitude behind them would be echoed throughout the century. It was an age driven by an obsessive need for consensus, to be achieved one way or another, and at any cost. Burke, writing some decades later, but with the eyes still fixed on the “universe,” described this order as “a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection... between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” The driving force, in turn, was always the same: the dread of “an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles.”<sup>643</sup> If one were to read these words from a purely sociological or political standpoint, one would fail to realize fully their significance. For if they bring to mind the frightening image of whirling cosmic dust, prior to any form and harmony, then this is not because Burke was being pathetic, but because the Englishmen of the eighteenth century experienced the threat to their society and their polity in universal, nearly metaphysical terms. After the Civil War and the subsequent fears of various plots, those coming from Rome or from France; after Hobbes’s “discovery” that man is by nature wicked and anti-social, driven by passion and self-interest; and with the rapid development of commerce, which seemed to make society ever more complex and to pull men away from civic virtues, the English became preoccupied with the question of social unity. We could see this already in *The History of the Royal Society*. Sprat, we should recall, argued that “eloquence ought to be banished out of all civil societies, as a thing fatal to peace and good manners,” and that “the most effectual remedy” against “civil differences and religious distractions” was for Englishmen “to assemble about some calm and indifferent things” in which “can be no cause of mutual exasperation.” Sprat concluded the book by presenting the Royal Society and, by extension, science itself as an example of a polite and disinterested engagement: “For there we behold,” he said, “an unusual sight to the English nation, that men of disagreeing parties and ways of life have forgotten to hate, and have met in the unanimous advancement of the same works. There the soldier, the tradesman, the merchant, the scholar, the gentleman, the courtier, and divine, the Presbyterian, the Papist, the Independent, and those of Orthodox judgment, have laid aside their names of distinction, and calmly conspired in a mutual agreement of labors and desires.”<sup>644</sup> The same retreat from contentious political and religious issues into things “calm and

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<sup>641</sup> Lawrence Klein, “Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 45, 2002, #4, pp. 880, 898.

<sup>642</sup> *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 2, pp. 160, 5.

<sup>643</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1999, pp. 96-97.

<sup>644</sup> Pp. 111, 426-427.

indifferent” is evident in the journal *Spectator*, run by Addison and Steele. A major determinant of tastes and manners in the eighteenth century, the *Spectator* openly promoted a culture of gentlemanly self-restraint and disinterested observation (hence the “spectator”), replacing engagement in public affairs with the focus on self-improvement and the practice of polite conversation and sociability. “[M]y paper,” says Addison, “has not in it a single word of news, a reflection in politics, nor a stroke of party.” “I never espoused any party with violence, and am resolved to observe an exact neutrality between the Whigs and Tories,” he reassures his readers.<sup>645</sup> This attitude of the *Spectator* was something that even Samuel Johnson found necessary to remark upon. “It has been suggested,” he wrote in his *Lives of the Poets*, “that the Royal Society was instituted soon after the Restoration to divert the attention of the people from public discontent. The *Tatler* and *Spectator* had the same tendency:...to minds heated with political contest, they supplied cooler and more inoffensive reflections.”<sup>646</sup> Finally, the centrality of the concepts of “sociableness,” natural affection, compassion, or sympathy, for an entire line of Scottish thinkers—from Shaftesbury, to Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith—should be seen within the same “existential” framework that guided Sprat and Addison and Steele. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, Smith developed a theory of moral conduct based on the ability of the individual to place himself in the situation of someone else. According to Smith, because we desire sympathy from others, we learn to adjust our actions in order to create “harmony and concord” with their emotions. We learn, in other words, “to accommodate and assimilate, as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings” to those who observe us. A moral person, according to Smith, is the one who fully internalizes the gaze of others—of what Smith calls “the impartial spectator,” the “great inmate,” or “the demigod within the breast,” namely society at large—and so becomes a permanent spectator to oneself, a subject whose conformity with the society is self-regulated.<sup>647</sup> Though Smith’s theory is ostensibly a descriptive rather than a normative theory of the origin of morals, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Smith, as fearful of discord as Sprat and Addison, is eager to distance the moral man from an active public life, and to associate him instead with a stoic self-restraint. Smith’s moral man, like the polite reader of the *Spectator*, is a passive observer anxious to be accepted, tinkering with his manners and speech so as to gain most sympathy, rather than an agent determined to do the right thing—even if it means being alone and going against the prevailing norms. He is more concerned with how he comes across to others, than how others come across to him.

That this period, which put such a stress on the values of order, should witness the flourishing of nationalism in the British Isles is therefore not a surprise. Milton already speaks of England as a nation “of a quick, ingenious, and piercing spirit... not beneath the reach of any point that the highest human capacity can soar to.”<sup>648</sup> Sprat’s *History* is replete with suggestions of a mystical unity of the nation, of its unique predispositions and world-historical tasks; page after page we are reminded of “the present prevailing genius of the English nation,” of the “the genius of the nation itself [that] irresistibly

<sup>645</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, 5 vols., vol. 2, no. 262, vol. 1, no. 1.

<sup>646</sup> Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006, vol. 3, p. 8.

<sup>647</sup> Ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 22, 224, 146-147, also p. 38.

<sup>648</sup> *Areopagitica*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1961, p. 44.

conspires,” of its “unaffected sincerity” and “sound simplicity,” “of the prerogatives of England, whereby it may justly lay claim to be the head of a Philosophical league, above all other countries,” etc., etc. “[E]ven the position of our climate,” says Sprat, “the air, the influence of the heaven, the composition of the English blood, as well as the embraces of the ocean, seem to join with the labours of the Royal Society to render our country a land of experimental knowledge. And it is a good sign that nature will reveal more of its secret to the English than to others, because it has already furnished them with a genius so well proportioned for the receiving and retaining its mysteries.”<sup>649</sup> In a treatise written in 1674, Nathaniel Fairfax displays, we are told, “a violent antipathy to all imported words in the English language,” and tries “as far as possible to substitute English coinages for words of foreign origin, with grotesque results in some cases.”<sup>650</sup> Like a poet of the nineteenth-century national reawakening, James Thomson in his “Summer” (1726) swoons at the glories and beauties of England (“like the red rose-bud moist with morning dew”), its liberty and “inspiring vigor,” its soil, climate, cities, and people. “Island of bliss!,” he calls her, “at once the wonder, terror, and delight of distant nations, whose remotest shore can soon be shaken by thy Naval Arm.”<sup>651</sup> Hume speaks of Britain as no less than the “guardian of the general liberties of Europe, and patron of mankind,” as “above any nation at present in the world, or that appears in the records of history.”<sup>652</sup> Samuel Johnson, who is convinced that “the English nation cultivated both their soil and their reason better than any other people,” desires to purge his *Dictionary* of all “Gallick structure and phraseology,” and focuses almost exclusively on English writers for his sources.<sup>653</sup> We begin hearing everywhere about the “genius” of the English language (as opposed to Latin or French), the “genius” of English common law (as opposed to Roman law), the “genius” of English freedom (as opposed to the servility of those living on the continent) and, of course, of the “genius” of the unbridled English mind, such as Shakespeare or Newton. Benign curiosity towards foreigners is replaced by an increasing xenophobia, those on the continent being represented as guileful, cruel, malevolent, effeminate, and inferior, or, as in the case of the French, simply as baboons.<sup>654</sup> “All nations on earth,” said one Scottish resident of London, “are regarded by them with an equal degree of contempt or hatred, which they are not at all solicitous to conceal; and upon the slightest provocation, or even without it, they will express their antipathy in such terms as these, *a chattering French baboon, an Italian ape, a beastly Dutchman, and a German hog.*”<sup>655</sup> (The worst abuse was always reserved for the French. As early as 1666 the London mob demanded, according to a report by the Venetian ambassador, that “all commerce with France should be prohibited, that no one should

<sup>649</sup> See pp. 78, 87-88, 113-115, 150, 372. See also Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 231-238.

<sup>650</sup> See R. F. Jones, *The Seventeenth Century*, pp. 107-108, note 54.

<sup>651</sup> *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, pp. 125-132 (ll. 1438-1605ff). See also Bonamy Dobrée, “The Theme of Patriotism in the Poetry of the Early Eighteenth Century,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 35, 1949, pp. 49-65, and Dustin Griffin, *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2002.

<sup>652</sup> “Of the Balance of Power,” *Political Essays*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994.

<sup>653</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. E. W. Chapman, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998, p. 442; *Johnson on the English Language*, p. 95.

<sup>654</sup> See Kathleen Wilson, “The Good, the Bad, and the Impotent: Imperialism and the Politics of Identity in Georgian England,” in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800*, New York, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>655</sup> *A Letter from a Member of Parliament in London to his Friend in Edinburgh*, London, J. Hinxman, 1763, p. 12.

dress after the fashion of this nation, but that parliament should select some to devise a new form of clothes which should be peculiar to that country.”<sup>656</sup> The architect Isaac Ware called upon his compatriots to “rouse in every sense the national spirit against them [the French], and no more permit them to deprave our taste in this noble science [of architecture] than to introduce among us the miseries of their government, or fooleries of their religion.”<sup>657</sup> On his trip to England, the Frenchman J. P. Grosley said to have suffered “at the corner of every street a volley of abusive litanies, in the midst of which I slipped on, returning thanks to God that I did not understand English. The constant burden of these litanies was *French dog, French b—*; to make any answer to them was accepting a challenge to fight, and my curiosity did not carry me that far.”<sup>658</sup> This sentiment towards the French was harbored even by the well-educated. “Never did the masculine spirit of England display itself with more energy,” said Edmund Burke in 1796, “nor ever did its genius soar with a prouder pre-eminence over France, than at the time when frivolity and effeminacy had been at least tacitly acknowledged as their national character.”<sup>659</sup> Artistic influences coming from abroad are increasingly rejected in the name of the “national style” (“These Corneillean rules,” wrote one critic, “are as dissonant to the English constitution of the stage, as the French slavery to our English liberty”<sup>660</sup>), and genealogies are constructed such that foreign influence is historically minimized (Palladianism, for example, thus becomes detached from the Italian Andrea Palladio, and attached to early seventeenth-century Englishman Inigo Jones<sup>661</sup>). The English are said to be innately upright and brave, straightforward and honest, thoroughbred and virile, and their task is to be on guard and defend these qualities at every front—and to “rule the waves.” “Our language,” wrote Addison (who is said to have nurtured a “silly hatred of the French”<sup>662</sup>), “shows the genius and natural temper of the English, which is modest, thoughtful and sincere.”<sup>663</sup> Particularly “plainness”—the plain common sense, and even bluntness, that supposedly characterized the English—is treated as a distinction of superiority over other cultures. By the 1780s, we are told, “even an English beggar, at the sight of a well-dressed Frenchman or any other stranger, still thinks himself superior, and says within himself, I am glad I am not a foreigner.”<sup>664</sup> Whether, and to what extent, this sentiment figured in the creation of an economic form of nationalism under the guise of free market is an open question. It is a fact, though, that the age of Adam Smith witnessed strenuous efforts on the part of the government in

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<sup>656</sup> *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs*, ed. Allen B. Hinds, London, HMSO, 1935, p. 101.

<sup>657</sup> *A Complete Body of Architecture*, Farnborough, England, Gregg Intl. Publishers, 1971 [1768], p. 448.

<sup>658</sup> *A Tour to London*, tr. T. Nugent, London, Lockyer Davis, 1772, vol. 1, pp. 84-86. See also C. de Saussure, *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I and George II*, tr. Madame van Muyden, London, J. Murray, 1902, pp. 112-13.

<sup>659</sup> *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, London, F. & C. Rivington, 1801, vol. 8, p. 12. See also Gerald Newman, “Anti-French Propaganda and British Liberal Nationalism in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 18, 1975, #4, pp. 385-418.

<sup>660</sup> Edward Filmer, *A Farther Defense of Dramatic Poetry*, London, Eliz. Whitlock, 1698, p. 28.

<sup>661</sup> See Steven Parissien, *Palladian Style*, London, Phaidon Press, 1994, pp. 14-17, 78-82, 86, 127. On the use of history for the purpose of distinguishing the English from foreigners, see Jeremy Black, “Ideology, History, Xenophobia and the World of Print in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *idem* and Jeremy Gregory, eds., *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain, 1660-1800*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 1991, pp. 184-216.

<sup>662</sup> Dobrée, Bonamy, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 106.

<sup>663</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, 5 vols., vol. 2, no. 135.

<sup>664</sup> F. A. Wendeborn, *A View of England towards the close of the Eighteenth Century*, London, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1791, p. 375.



London to restrict as much as possible the flow of foreign goods—even of those coming from the American colonies, or via the East India Company—to the benefit of English manufacturers.<sup>665</sup> The economist Thomas Mortimer went a step further and declared that “the consumers of French manufactures in Great Britain should be considered as petty traitors, and punished severely.”<sup>666</sup> And William Hogarth, as if guided by similar laws, rallied English artists to revolt against foreign competition and claim England, or at least its richest patrons, for themselves alone.<sup>667</sup> In brief, there is an almost juvenile zeal at this time for the glories of the nation and of the national character, and this, according to Herbert Atherton, is “one of the most striking developments in the mood and thought of the Georgian era.” A “new militancy,” “commercial and maritime aggressiveness,” “a disdain for and inveterate hatred of Britain’s ancient enemies,” they all served well to compensate for the varied anxieties experienced by the contemporaries.<sup>668</sup> Between the perception of society as never sufficiently individuated, and that of the individual as never sufficiently ordered, the nation was a convenient path of achieving both, for it allowed individuals to identify with supposedly timeless and superior attributes of their race.

That language played a crucial role in this reinforcement of order after the Restoration there can be no doubt. As we have seen, there was already in the middle of the seventeenth century a widespread confidence, even among men holding diametrically opposed views, that religious and moral disputes could be resolved if only language were employed in the right way.<sup>669</sup> This confidence in the socially unifying character of language continued into the eighteenth century with an ever greater force. Swift, Johnson, James Ingram, and Thomas De Quincey, all attempted to bring into close connection the destiny of the language with that of the nation.<sup>670</sup> Thomas Sheridan held that nothing could contribute to the union of England with Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, more effectually “than the universality of one common language,” and that the regulation of English was therefore “of more absolute necessity to us, than to any other nation.” He also hoped that his work on the art of speaking would cure the nation of “the evils of immorality, ignorance and false taste.”<sup>671</sup> Henry Home (Lord Kames) declared, in the preface to his three-volume *Elements of Criticism*, that “by uniting different ranks” of men “in the same elegant pleasures,” the fine arts such as literature “promote benevolence” and “enforce submission to government.”<sup>672</sup> In his definitions of the words

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<sup>665</sup> See, e.g., Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 68, and F. J. Fisher, “The Economic Background of Eighteenth-Century Literature,” in *The Augustan Age*, ed. Ian Watt, Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, 1968, p. 39. Also E. F. Hecksher, *Mercantilism*, tr. M. Shapiro, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1935, vol. 1, pp. 265-6, 297-301.

<sup>666</sup> *The Elements of Commerce, Politics and Finances*, London, R. Baldwin, 1774, p. 124.

<sup>667</sup> See William Gaunt, *The World of William Hogarth*, 1978, p. 18, and V. De S. Pinto, “William Hogarth,” in Boris Ford, ed., *From Dryden to Johnson*, 1969, p. 279.

<sup>668</sup> *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 84. See also Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830*, New York, St Martin’s Press, 1987; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1992; Michael Duffy, *The Englishman and the Foreigner*, Cambridge, Chadwyck-Healey, 1986; and David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2000.

<sup>669</sup> See also Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, vol. 1, pp. 5-6.

<sup>670</sup> See Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*, Macmillan, 1989, p. 79.

<sup>671</sup> *British Education [1756]*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1970, pp. 160, title page.

<sup>672</sup> Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2005.

such as “equal,” “liberty,” or “rights,” Samuel Johnson was either completely apolitical and abstract, or hierarchical and paternalistic, always careful to avoid any potentially subversive connotations. As an example of the proper use of the word “right,” Johnson gave the following: “persons of noble blood are less envied in their rising, for it seemeth but *right* done to their birth.” And for the word “weak”: “To think everything disputable is a proof of a *weak* mind.” Hugh Blair, a star student of Adam Smith’s, and the author of a textbook which went through 130 editions and dominated the study of English until the last three decades of the nineteenth century, deemed the sentiments of anger or indignation—an essential part of political action and discourse—primitive and unworthy of the polite.<sup>673</sup> Attitudes such as these of Home, Johnson, or Blair, often proceeded from an overtly conservative frame of mind. In the sermons of Blair, who was also a preacher, “it is sometimes difficult to distinguish,” it has been said, “between submission to Providence and submission to the existing system of social ‘ranks’ and orders.”<sup>674</sup> Johnson declared himself on more than one occasion in favor of subordination and strict hierarchy. “Subordination tends greatly to human happiness,” he was known to say; “I am a friend to subordination.” “Were we all upon an equality, we should have no other enjoyment than mere animal pleasure.”<sup>675</sup> There were, according to Johnson, “fixed, invariable, external rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, as they are allowed to be accidental.”<sup>676</sup> “The first duty therefore of a governor,” he wrote in one place, “is to diffuse through the community a spirit of religion, to endeavour that a sense of the divine authority should prevail in all orders of men,” to incite in everyone “that obedience to the laws, and that respect to the chief magistrate, which may secure and promote concord and quiet.”<sup>677</sup> “Submission” alone, he wrote elsewhere, is “the duty of the ignorant... they have no skill in the art of government, nor any interest in the dissensions of the great.”<sup>678</sup> The views of Henry Home were even more drastic. In his *Sketches of the History of Man*, we read how “Nature has fitted a small proportion for being leaders and a great proportion for being led,” how a white and a black man are “species” as different as a mastiff and a spaniel, and how “the man, as a protector, is directed by nature to govern: the woman, conscious of inferiority, is disposed to obey.”<sup>679</sup> In his *Historical Law Tracts*, we learn that to “establish the authority of government, and to create awe and submission of the people, the power of making laws is a mere shadow without the power of the sword.”<sup>680</sup> And in his *Elements of Criticism*, we are told how “those who depend for food on bodily labour are totally devoid of taste; of such taste at least as can be of use in the fine arts.”<sup>681</sup> In his legal practice, in turn, Home was so severe that he was widely known as the bloodthirsty “hanging judge,” who even boasted of how many people he sent to death on any given day.<sup>682</sup> (It may be worth noting that it was Home who brought Smith for a professor in Edinburgh, and that Smith held him in

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<sup>673</sup> See Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language*, pp. 14-15, 29. On the impact of Blair, see James Berlin, *Writing Instruction in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Colleges*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP, 1984, pp. 6-34.

<sup>674</sup> R. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, New Jersey, Princeton UP, 1985, p. 185.

<sup>675</sup> Quoted in Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, p. 313.

<sup>676</sup> Quoted in *Boswell’s London Journal, 1762-3*, ed. F. A. Pottle, London, Heinemann, 1950, p. 320.

<sup>677</sup> *Sermons*, ed. Jean Hagstrum, and James Gray, New Haven, Yale UP, 1978, pp. 256, 259.

<sup>678</sup> *Political Writings*, ed. Donald Greene, New Haven, Yale UP, 1977, pp. 338-339.

<sup>679</sup> Edinburgh, 1778, vol. 2, p. 244; vol. 1, p. 20, vol. 2, p. 2.

<sup>680</sup> Edinburgh, 1761, p. 35.

<sup>681</sup> Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2005, p. 726.

<sup>682</sup> See I. S. Ross, *Lord Kames and the Scotland of His Day*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 301-302.

very high regard, saying that “We must every one of us acknowledge Kames for our master.”<sup>683</sup>) However, a deeper connection between language and order—deeper precisely because less abrasive, less overtly conservative and political, less obviously stemming from class hatred—developed in the eighteenth century in the form of a peculiar character analysis. Ever since the Englishman began “discovering” his self, so to speak, since the time he first found it worthwhile to write about his own life, or to paint a picture of his own face, he had been preoccupied, as we have seen, with the question of who the other man “really” is, what he “really” thinks, what he “really” intends, and language came to play a significant role in this regard. Locke provides a good example of this. “[T]o make words serviceable to the end of communication, it is necessary,” he said, “that they excite in the hearer *exactly* the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker.” But what happens when we are dealing with “a very complex idea,” which in such form is “nowhere to be found constantly united in nature?” What happens, Locke wondered, when the idea is “not visible in the action itself?” How will we then know what is “really” in the mind of another man?<sup>684</sup> Questions such as this consumed the English throughout the following century. Nearly a hundred years after the first edition of Locke’s *Essay*, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* still thought it necessary that “a proper person or committee be appointed, to ascertain all such words as are wanting in our language, to convey clearly and precisely such ideas as naturally arise in the mind of every man.”<sup>685</sup> “I was assured by an old person of quality, who knew him well,” said Swift of Lord Falkland, “that when he doubted whether a word were perfectly intelligible or no, he used to consult one of his Lady’s chambermaids (not the waiting-woman, because it was possible she might be conversant in romances), and by her judgment was guided, whether to receive or reject it.”<sup>686</sup> So concerned was the eighteenth-century Englishman that he may not come across as transparent and trustworthy in his social interactions that he even stopped signing his letters with the typical “Your humble servant,” which he now deemed obsequious and therefore potentially duplicitous, and instead began using “Yours sincerely” or “Yours truly.”<sup>687</sup> In short, the belief came into being “that the self and language coexisted in a simple and direct relation,”<sup>688</sup> which made everyone anxious about the way they used language, and particularly sensitive and curious about the way others did. This may have been the origin of modern literary criticism; like most other arts, it must have originated in an obsession. More importantly, though, this was the origin of a particular form of social control, which divided people according to linguistic categories, thus further consolidating the existing forms of economic stratification and political authority.

“Considered as resulting from, and as founded in, the faculties and circumstances of human beings, the principles of grammar form an important, and very curious, part of the

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<sup>683</sup> Quoted in Alexander Fraser Tytler, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Honourable Henry Home of Kames*, Edinburgh, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1814, p. 218.

<sup>684</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. III, ch. ix, §§ 6-7, pp. 477-479, emphasis added.

<sup>685</sup> Vol. 58, 1788, p. 947.

<sup>686</sup> *Irish Tracts and Sermons*, ed. Herbert Davis, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1948, p. 65.

<sup>687</sup> See Keith Thomas, “Yours,” in Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels, eds., *The State of Language*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, pp. 452-453.

<sup>688</sup> Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language*, p. 21. See also Vincent Bevilacqua, “Adam Smith and Some Philosophical Origins of 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Rhetorical Theory,” pp. 559-568.

philosophy of the human mind.”<sup>689</sup> Thus spoke James Beattie, a professor of moral philosophy and logic. “As each man has peculiarities in his way of thinking,” he said in another place, “so has he in his manner of speaking, and consequently in his style. For style may be defined [as] that particular way in which a man chooses, or is accustomed, to express his thoughts by speech or writing.”<sup>690</sup> And, in yet another place, we read the following: “Every serious writer or speaker sustains a certain character... Now by a peculiar kind of sagacity, either instinctive or derived from experience, all people of taste know what thoughts and words and modes of expression are suitable to an author’s character, and what are otherwise.”<sup>691</sup> Similar views were held by Adam Smith. According to him, “the style of an author is generally of the same stamp as their character.” Hence, the most effective style was the one that expressed not only “the thought but also the spirit and mind of the author.” To prove this, Smith offered a lengthy analysis of various characters and styles. “The flowery modesty of Addison,” we learn, just as “the pert and flippant insolence of [William] Warburton, appear evident in their works and point the very character of the man.” We learn that, because Swift had a “plain” character, his style was “plain” too, whereas William Temple’s “simple” style corresponded to his “simple” character. Addison’s “sentences are neither long nor short but of a length suited to the character he has of a modest man, who naturally delivers himself in sentences of a moderate length and with a uniform tone.” Shaftesbury, on the other hand, aimed at the character of “polite dignity,” and so his style was “supported by a grand and pompous diction.” In short, all things being equal, “the character of the author,” said Smith, “must make the style different. One of grave cast of mind will describe an object in a very different way from one of more levity, a plain man will have a style very different from that of a simple.” (This point, it seems, made the greatest impression on those who attended Smith’s lectures. “The best method of explaining and illustrating the various powers of the human mind,” wrote a student in his summary of the entire course, “arises from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech.”<sup>692</sup>) Consequently, “a gay man should not endeavour to be grave nor the grave man to be gay, but each should regulate that character and manner that is natural to him and hinder it from running into that vicious extreme to which is most inclined.” What makes a man agreeable company, and what makes his style agreeable, is that “he never seems to act out of his character but speaks in a manner not only suitable to the subject but to the character he naturally inclines to.” All he needs to do to achieve this effect is to “regulate his natural temper,” and “bring it to that pitch which will be agreeable to those about him.”<sup>693</sup> Here Smith touches upon the subject that is more fully developed in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and that we mentioned above. Since one can never expect another to identify with one’s own emotions completely, Smith said there, one must “flatten” the sharpness of their “natural tone,” lower “his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him.”<sup>694</sup> But Smith is also formulating what seems to have been a general concern of his contemporaries. Whether

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<sup>689</sup> *Dissertations Moral and Critical* [1783], Stuttgart, Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1970, p. 308.

<sup>690</sup> *Elements of Moral Science*, London, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1817, p. 284.

<sup>691</sup> *Essays*, London, E. & C. Dilly, 1776, p. 393.

<sup>692</sup> Quoted in Dugald Stewart, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith,” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p. 274.

<sup>693</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, pp. 19, 25-61.

<sup>694</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

and to what extent one has found the right “pitch” and is therefore being “natural” and “agreeable” and worthy of others’ company and sympathy; whether what one reveals is a character plain or simple, modest or pompous, true or disingenuous—this was all now a matter of serious assessment in the daily lives of the English. Even Shaftesbury, known for his ornate style, claimed that one could recognize an honest man by his plain style of speech.<sup>695</sup> “Style has always some reference to an author’s manner of thinking,” Blair taught his students; “It is a picture of the ideas which rise in his mind, and of the manner in which they rise there.” “[W]ords being the copies of our ideas,” he said, “there must always be a very intimate connection between the manner in which every writer employs words, and his manner of thinking.” From “the peculiarity of thought and expression” which belonged to a man, there was “a certain character imprinted on his style.”<sup>696</sup> None of these or other theorists, however, embodied the preoccupation with character as much as the *Spectator*. It is the *Spectator*, by far the most widely read and influential periodical in eighteenth-century England, that would contribute, more than anything else, to the strict disciplining of the way the English came to present themselves in their daily life. This it would do by paying particular attention to physical appearance.

Though both Hutcheson and Hume had given prominence to the notion of spectatorship in their ethical theories, the editors of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggest that it might have been Addison’s *Spectator* that actually made Smith use the notion in his work.<sup>697</sup> After all, it was Addison who first wrote of “an impartial spectator,” the notion which was to become the very core of Smith’s theory. For Addison, it meant to describe the purpose of his new journal, namely to observe society from a supposedly disinterested standpoint, and to expose, through the most intricate analyses, the true nature of its many characters. “I have acted in all the parts of my life as a looker-on,” he wrote in the first issue of the *Spectator*, “which is the character I intend to preserve in this paper.”<sup>698</sup> He therefore recommended the paper to those who, presumably like he himself, and in keeping with his own ostensibly apolitical standpoint, “live in the world without having anything to do in it, and either by the affluence of their fortunes or laziness of their dispositions, have no other business with the rest of the mankind but to look upon them.” These potentially impartial observers included, according to Addison, “all contemplative tradesmen, titular physicians, fellows of the Royal Society, templars that are not given to be contentious, and statesmen that are out of business; in short everyone that considers the world as a theatre, and desires to form a right judgment of those who are the actors in it” (no. 10). The task that Addison undertook, in turn, was to teach these readers how to observe others closely—the choice of their words, the manner in which they speak, the gestures which they employ, the facial expressions they make—for the purpose of entering into their character, understanding their true nature, and measuring the level of their sincerity. For, according to Addison, “there is a very close correspondence between the outward and the inward man,” and “scarce the least dawning, the least parturiency towards a thought can be stirring in the mind of man, without producing a suitable

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<sup>695</sup> See *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 1, pp. 160, 174.

<sup>696</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Harold Harding, Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 183-184, 368.

<sup>697</sup> “Introduction,” in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 15.

<sup>698</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Bond, no. 1. See also Michael Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance and Form in the Spectator Papers*, Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 1985, pp. 27-81.

revolution in his exteriors” (no. 518). In his effort to reveal men for whom they “really” are, Addison gave particular attention to the language of the body. “We are no sooner presented to anyone we never saw before,” he says in one place, “but we are immediately struck with the idea of a proud, a reserved, an affable, or a good-natured man; and upon our first going into a company of strangers, our benevolence or aversion, awe or contempt, rises naturally towards several particular persons before we have heard them speak a single word, or so much as we know who they are” (no. 86). Indeed, he told his readers, “I am so apt to frame a notion of every man’s humour or circumstances by his looks, that I have sometimes employed myself from Charing Cross to the Royal Exchange in drawing the characters of those who have passed by me” (no. 86). Thus we learn, for example, that merely by judging the way a woman uses her fan Addison could distinguish “the angry flutter, the modest flutter, the timorous flutter, the confused flutter, the merry flutter, and the amorous flutter,” all in belief that “there is scarce any emotion in the mind which does not produce a suitable agitation in the fan... [I]f I only see the fan of a disciplined lady, I know very well whether she laughs, frowns, or blushes” (no. 435). Every passion, we are told, “gives a particular cast to the countenance, and is apt to discover itself in some feature or other” (no. 86); each line of the face, working with all the others to give the face its distinct air, “is generally nothing else but the inward disposition of the mind made visible” (no. 86). Given, therefore, that any man’s gestures “are a kind of comment to what he utters, and enforce everything he says,” proper are only those gestures, according to Addison, that “show the speaker is in earnest, and affected himself with what he...recommends to others” (no. 407).

Richard Steele, Addison’s collaborator in the *Spectator*, is just as preoccupied with observing the outward appearance of others, revealing their true natures and placing them in appropriate categories. It is through gestures, we are told, that Steele can enter into “the inmost thoughts and reflections of all whom I behold,” “without being admitted to their conversation” (no. 4). “The force of the expression,” we read, “lies often more in the look, the tone of voice, or the gesture, than the words themselves” (no. 521). Thus he tells us of a woman who “hangs on her clothes, plays her head, varies her posture, and changes place incessantly” (no. 454). He listens to a shop girl complaining of customers who “loll at the bar staring just in my face, ready to interpret my looks and gestures” (no. 155). “Her air has the beauty of motion,” he says of a woman, “and her look the force of language” (no. 466). “His garb is more loose and negligent,” he says of a womanizer, “his manner more soft and indolent” (no. 156). He sees “a strict affinity,” we are told, “between all things that are truly laudable and beautiful, from the highest sentiment of the soul, to the most indifferent gesture of the body” (no. 466). And just as in the case of Addison, what motivates Steele in this regard is his profound distaste for deceit, and discomfort with anything inarticulate, elusive, illegible, obscure, or ambiguous: “It is certain,” he says, “that if we look all around us and behold the different employments of mankind, you hardly see one who is not, as the player is, in an assumed character. ...Consider all the different pursuits and employments of man, and you will find half their actions tend to nothing else but disguise and imposture; and all that is done which proceeds not from man’s very self is the action of a player. For this reason it is that I make so frequent mention of the stage” (no. 370). For this same reason, we may add, the literature at the time was replete with references to simple, innocent, spontaneous, and

unsuspecting characters. William Davenant's *Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, Dryden's *Indian Emperor* and *Conquest of Granada*, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, Dennis's *Liberty Asserted*, Gay's *Polly*, all opposed native simplicity to affectation, treachery, flattery, dishonesty, fraud, or infidelity.<sup>699</sup> There was now a widespread intolerance for disguise, and an effort, not to say a campaign, to strip everyone and everything of its mask. "In an age of plot and deceit, of contradiction and paradox," said Defoe, "it is very hard under all these masks to see the true countenance of any man."<sup>700</sup> "[B]y that mask of modesty which women wear promiscuously in public, they are all alike," complained William Wycherley, "and you can no more know a kept wench from a woman of honor by her looks than by her dress."<sup>701</sup> Laurence Sterne regretted that "our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapped up here in a dark covering of uncrystallized flesh and blood; so that, if we would come to the specific characters of them, we must go some other way to work." If only a mirror could be set up in the human breast, he said, "nothing more would have been wanting in order to have taken a man's character... and looked in, viewed the soul stark naked, observed all her motions, her machinations, traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth, watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, [and] her capricios."<sup>702</sup> Complaining that the whole world had become "a vast masquerade, where the greatest part appear disguised under false visors and habits," Henry Fielding built all of his works around good-natured naïfs, men of such "open disposition," he said, "which is the surest indication of an honest and upright heart."<sup>703</sup> Between the 1670s and 1740s, the English public seems to have derived particular pleasure from reading brief character portraits, both in verse and in prose, which stressed the predictability and even the logical inevitability of the course of human life, and which questioned, or rather mocked, both the pretense to individual autonomy and the very category of the private.<sup>704</sup> Most famously perhaps, Defoe's *Friday* and Swift's *Houyhnhnms* (who "have no word in their language to express lying or falsehood"<sup>705</sup>), marked the eighteenth-century desire for the transparency of men and the smooth running of social intercourse. This desire was reflected in nearly every sphere of activity, and no aspect of daily life was insignificant enough not to be guided by it. "There is no precision or affection of the mind," noted a popular book of etiquette for ladies, "which may not be expressed by some correspondent motion of the body."<sup>706</sup> "Take care never to seem dark and mysterious," wrote Chesterfield in a letter to his son. Such a demeanor is not only "unamiable," but also "a very suspicious one too; if you seem mysterious to others, they will be really so with you, and you will know nothing." Instead, the father advised, the "height of abilities is to have *volto sciolto* and *pensieri stretti*, that is, a frank, open, and ingenuous exterior, with a prudent and reserved interior; to be upon your own guard and, yet, by a seeming natural openness, to put people off

<sup>699</sup> See H. N. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage*, New York, Columbia UP, 1928, pp. 23-56.

<sup>700</sup> *A Letter to Mr. Bisset*, London, J. Baker, 1709, p. 10.

<sup>701</sup> "Dedication," in *The Plain Dealer*, ed. Leo Hughes, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1967.

<sup>702</sup> *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 96-97.

<sup>703</sup> See his "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," in *Miscellanies by Henry Fielding*, ed. H. K. Miller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 155, 156.

<sup>704</sup> See Sitter, *Arguments of Augustan Wit*, pp. 6-48.

<sup>705</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005, p. 219. See also Donald Siebert, "Masks and Masquerades: the Animus of Swift's Satire," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 74, 1975, pp. 435-445.

<sup>706</sup> Charles Allen, *The Polite Lady*, London, J. Newbery, 1760, p. 215.

theirs.”<sup>707</sup> “Men of quality,” said the poet William Shenstone, apparently with the same concern as Chesterfield, but only in regards to the language of one’s clothes, “never appear more amiable than when their dress is plain,” while according to an etiquette manual (“authorized by the King’s most excellent majesty”), “a young gentleman...could not recommend his understanding to those who are not of his acquaintance more suddenly than by sobriety in his habit, as this is winning at first sight;...his outward garb is but the emblem of his mind; it is genteel, plain, and unaffected.”<sup>708</sup> “Let your costume be as unostentatious as possible,” said another author, “lest people only remark that ‘your dress is as coarse as your mind.’”<sup>709</sup> What this concern with dress had in common with Addison or Steele’s concern with gestures, or with Locke, Smith, Beattie, or Blair’s concern with language, is the pronounced desire for a direct correspondence between the inward and the outward, between the private and the public, between the mind and the heart on the one hand, and society on the other. From the middle of the century, this correspondence was expected even from those whose job had traditionally been to challenge these links. “Shortly after 1750 in England,” we are told, “the curious notion that poetry ought to be written with a personal sincerity began to afflict the common reader, poets, and even critics, on a relatively wide scale.”<sup>710</sup> What the English were trying to find in the theater was, similarly, “a world where you could indeed be absolutely sure that the people you saw were genuine,” and that “the actors really represented what they played,” that “there was no possible deception, no act of deduction which might go wrong.”<sup>711</sup> “I have the same face, the same word and accents, when I speak what I do think, and when I speak what I do not think,” boasted the malevolent character, aptly named Maskwell, in Congreve’s *The Double Dealer*, thereby articulating a supreme source of society’s anxiety.<sup>712</sup>

Whatever else it was, and whichever other purpose it served, this demand for transparency, coming as it did from so many different sides, was born of distrust and of fear, and could result only in the further privileging of order. If anything, it helped produce among the English a particular idea of themselves that served as a strong cohesive factor. According to Lionel Trilling, there was by the nineteenth century a “widespread belief that England produced a moral type which made it unique among nations.” What characterized this type, on which the English came to pride themselves the most, was “their single-minded relation to things, to each other, and to themselves.” This resulted, at least on the account of American visitors at the time, in a peculiar “impermeability of English society, the solidness of the composition, the thick, indubitable *thereness* which enforced upon its members a sort of primary sincerity—the free acknowledgment that in one respect, at least, they were *not* free, that their existences were bound by their society, determined by its peculiarities.” It resulted furthermore in an affirmation, and not in a blurring, of social hierarchy; in a belief, that is, that the

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<sup>707</sup> *Lord Chesterfield’s Letters to his Son*, London, Dent, 1969, p. 77.

<sup>708</sup> *Essays on Men and Manners*, London, J. Parson, 1794 [1765], p. 87; *The Young Gentleman and Lady Instructed*, London, Edward Wickstead, 1747, vol. 2, p. 147.

<sup>709</sup> Charles William Day, *Hints on Etiquette*, London, Longman, 1840, p. 65.

<sup>710</sup> Leon Guilhamet, *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, McGill-Queen’s UP, Montreal, 1974, p. 1.

<sup>711</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man*, New York, Vintage Books, 1978, pp. 174-176.

<sup>712</sup> See also Maximilian E. Novak, ed., *English Literature in the Age of Disguise*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977.



supreme act of one's sincerity is in one's acceptance of one's station in life, and in acting fully in a manner that corresponds to it.<sup>713</sup> Most importantly, however, the fact that anything obscure or idiosyncratic was now seen as a threat, as inimical to a safe and stable society, created an atmosphere in which it became expected of individuals to grant others, and society at large, full access to their private world and innermost thoughts and feelings, or else be treated with suspicion and suffer the consequences. The entire society was now becoming increasingly involved in a peculiar "phrenology" of human life, one which included every aspect of the human body and human activity, with everyone its practitioner and at the same time an object of study. Here we see for the first time the outlines of what would later be called a totalitarian society.

## XV

It may seem strange, even irreverent, to seek the origins of totalitarianism in early-modern England. After all, is England not the birthplace of constitutionalism and limited monarchy, of toleration and of freedom of opinion, speech, and press? Did practically the entire world not come to espouse the principles of parliamentary democracy, which were first fought for and practiced in England? Even E. P. Thompson, never quick to praise the achievements of English government, has acknowledged as much: "Freedom from absolutism (the constitutional monarchy), freedom from arbitrary arrest, trial by jury, equality before the law, the freedom of the home from arbitrary entrance and search, some limited liberty of thought, of speech, and of conscience, the vicarious participation in liberty (or in its semblance) afforded by the right of parliamentary opposition and by elections and election tumults..., as well as freedom to travel, trade, and sell one's own labour," these were all attributes of the English state.<sup>714</sup> One need only turn to the accounts of European visitors to see how different England was already in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, how it signaled for them the birth of a truly new society, a society in which any individual could live a life worthy of a human being. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the French Revolution of 1789, which overthrew absolutism and feudalism in France, and which for the first time declared universal human rights, was to a large extent inspired and made possible by the example of the English. One need only read Voltaire to feel the excitement, indeed the cultural shock, which awaited those who ventured across the Channel. Writing in 1733, after having spent two and a half years in England, Voltaire tells us that "the English nation is the only one on earth that has managed to control the power of kings by resisting them, and which, by successive efforts, has finally established this wise government in which the prince, all-powerful for doing good, is restrained from doing harm; where the lords, who lack insolence and vassals, are yet great; and where the common people share power without disorder."<sup>715</sup> We are told that in England "you do not hear of high, middle, and low justice," and that no man is "exempt from certain taxes; all taxes are regulated by the House of Commons, which, though only the lower house in rank, is held in esteem by the

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<sup>713</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity*, pp. 110-115. See also Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 69-86.

<sup>714</sup> *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, V. Gollancz, 1963, p. 79.

<sup>715</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, ed. John Leigh, tr. Prudence L. Steiner, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2007, p. 23.

upper house.”<sup>716</sup> And as for English respect for commerce, an object of ridicule in Paris (Louis de Boissy’s play *Le François à Londres*, staged during the very time of Voltaire’s stay in England, represented the English merchant in the vulgar character of a Jacques Rosbif), Voltaire says that it “has enriched citizens of England, has contributed to their freedom, and [that] this freedom has in turn stimulated commerce; thus has the greatness of the State been magnified.”<sup>717</sup> He thus praises English nobility for putting its younger sons into trade and, in one of his more memorable passages, not devoid of a touch of irony with respect to religion, but also with respect to human character (as well as betraying some acquaintance with Sprat’s *History*), Voltaire points up the effect of commerce on toleration, cooperation, and respect within a society:

Go into the Royal Exchange in London, a building more respectable than most courts; there you will find deputies from every nation assembled simply to serve mankind. There, the Jew, the Mohammedan, and the Christian negotiate with one another as if they were all of the same religion, and the only heretics are those who declare bankruptcy; there the Presbyterian trusts the Anabaptist, the Anglican accepts the word of the Quaker. Leaving this peaceful and liberal assembly, some go to the synagogue, others go to drink; this one is baptized in a great font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; that one has his son circumcised while some Hebrew words that he does not understand are mumbled over him; still others go to their church with their hats on their heads to await the inspiration of God, and all are content.<sup>718</sup>

In praising English religious tolerance, but also individuality, Voltaire further states: “Were there only one religion in England, despotism would be a threat; were there two, they would be at each other’s throats; but there are thirty, and they live happily and at peace with one another.”<sup>719</sup> Elsewhere, again with irony, he states that “an Englishman, being a free man, goes to heaven by whatever path he chooses.”<sup>720</sup> In a letter he sent to France, Voltaire thus speaks of England as a country “where one obeys to the laws only and to one’s whims.” It is a country where “no manner of living appears strange; we have men who walk six miles a day for their health, feed upon roots, never taste flesh, wear a coat in winter thinner than your ladies do in the hottest days... but [are] taxed with folly by nobody.” It is a country where “reason is free and walks her own way.”<sup>721</sup> In another letter we are told that, “though there are social differences [in England], the only difference between men is based on merit. It is a country where people think freely and nobly, without being held back by any servile fear.”<sup>722</sup> In a word, it is “a nation fond of their liberty.”<sup>723</sup>

Voltaire was by no means the only one on the continent ready to heap such praise upon England. Indeed, as early as 1726, the French journalist, translator, and literary critic Pierre Desfontaines writes that people in England “have no devoirs to the great” but live

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<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>718</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. Cf. *Voltaire’s Notebooks*, ed. Theodore Besterman, Geneva, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1952, p. 31, for a different version of this paragraph.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>721</sup> Cited in Wade, *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>722</sup> Cited in Ian Davidson, *Voltaire: A Life*, London, Profile Books, 2010, p. 60.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

by their own industry, that, unlike other countries, in England there are “no tenures... held by virtue of a feudal right. The vassal in England is discharged of everything, by paying his rent to the lord of the manor; he is obliged to no homage, servitude, or duty.” No man of quality, says Desfontaines, is in England “regarded for his wealth, his birth, or his superiority of genius and knowledge, but only for the reputation he has acquired by his probity,” while trade “does not lessen any man’s gentility.” And, with regard to law, in England “the letter of the law is generally stuck to: so that before a guilty person is punished, his crime must be clearly expressed, and his punishment exactly declared by the law. This rule prevents all arbitrary sentences of judges, and secures the lives of the English.”<sup>724</sup> As a matter of fact, by the time of Desfontaines, there are already several accounts of English society and government circulating among the educated in France, such as Andre Michael Ramsay’s *Essai philosophique sur le gouvernement civil* (1719), Emmanuel de Cize’s *Histoire du Whigisme et du Torisme* (1717), Père d’Orléans’ *Histoire des révolutions d’Angleterre* (1693), Edward Chamberlayne’s two-volume *Etat present de l’Angleterre* (1671), and Samuel Sorbière’s *Voyage en Angleterre* (1664); a translator of More and Hobbes, and an acquaintance of the latter, Sorbière already wrote at length on the origins of the House of Commons.<sup>725</sup> Rapin de Thoyras’s eight-volume *Histoire d’Angleterre* (1724-1727), accompanied by his *Dissertation sur les Whigs et les Torys* (1717), was the first serious account of the history of English institutions, especially of Parliament, in any language, and the boast of one Frenchman how without the French, without Rapin de Thoyras, the English would not yet have a history of their nation,<sup>726</sup> does contain some truth to it. A few years later Bolingbroke’s *Remarques sur l’histoire d’Angleterre* (1730-1731) appeared, which—in spite of its clumsy style—must have spoken directly to the frustrations of many French, given its sharpened, near-Manichaeian, emphasis on the long struggle between national liberty on the one hand, embodied in the mixed constitution and an independent Parliament, and factional interest of evil monarchs and their petty ministers on the other.<sup>727</sup> A common denominator to all these works at the turn of the eighteenth century, at least in the eyes of the French readers, was the discovery of an organization of society in which the average individual assumed an unprecedented significance.

Nevertheless, during the first thirty years of the eighteenth century, at least as far as the French accounts of English institutions are concerned (and these came largely from Huguenot refugees in London), these were of modest quality. It is not unfair to say, together with Joseph Texte, that the authors saw their task mostly in compiling, in the making of extracts, and in polishing the existing material, not in writing analytical or philosophical accounts.<sup>728</sup> An important exception, however, and by far the most influential work at the time, was *Lettres sur les Anglois*, written by Beat Ludwig von Muralt in 1694, and widely circulated in manuscript before its publication in 1725. At a

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<sup>724</sup> Pierre Desfontaines, *Remarks on the Letters Concerning the English and French*, London, Tho. Edlin, 1726, pp. 8-9, 11, 23-24. Translation slightly altered.

<sup>725</sup> Samuel Sorbière, *Relation d’un Voyage en Angleterre*, Saint-Etienne (France), Editions de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 1980, pp. 103-114.

<sup>726</sup> Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, *Letters on the English and French Nations*, London, J. Brindley, 1774, v. 2, p. 209.

<sup>727</sup> Henry St John Bolingbroke, *Historical Writings*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1972.

<sup>728</sup> *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Cosmopolitan Spirit in Literature*, tr. J. W. Matthews, London, Duckworth & Co., 1899, p. 35.

time when England was considered by continental Europeans as practically the very edge of the civilized world, a violent, brutal, and disorderly *terra incognita* (“l’Enfer des Démons et des Parricides,” said one observer in 1654), when English was virtually unknown, and when the two or three existing travel guides were largely superficial (dealing almost exclusively with English topography, climate, women, and sports), this Swiss author produced an account of the English so fresh and incisive that it has since been deemed as marking the beginning of “a new era in the continental interpretation of Great Britain.”<sup>729</sup> What is ironic, in turn, given the immense impact Muralt had on creating a particular form of Anglomania in France, is that his account of the English was set precisely *against* the French, whose pleasure in producing mere effect, in things modish, flashy, and bombastic, or, conversely, charming, refined, polished, even clichéd (especially when it came to their manners and dramatic arts), he found thoroughly unappealing. To the sterile, pedantic and, ultimately, boring French, creatures of form and conformity, Muralt opposed the unruly English, indifferent to appearances, despising servility, lacking prejudice, and jealous of their freedom. Regardless of how contrived this opposition may be, it is without a doubt the most important aspect of Muralt’s work. Herein lies a direct source of Rousseau’s defense of virtue from the social norms that stifle and trivialize it, and of retreat (from such a society) and of introspection as means of strengthening one’s own moral vigor.<sup>730</sup> It is within this general *esprit* of the English that Muralt then situates his more political and mundane observations, especially on the relationship between the individual and authority, whether in the form of government or of custom and prevalent opinion. For example, the common people in England, according to him, are

as little solicitous after the great men as they are after the court; it would seem as if they were neither feared nor admired, as in other countries. On the contrary, one may observe a spirit of liberty which is countenanced by the government: and if all I have heard be true, it is in England that a man is a master of his own, without the oppressions of the great, or ever knowing them, if he thinks fit: they are only considered in proportion to the good they do; if they do much, as it often happens, then they become truly great lords, by their numerous levies, the complaisance and esteem of the people, and are like little kings in their country houses. If they do but little good, they are left to themselves, to enjoy their prerogatives in sadness...<sup>731</sup>

Consequently—and this is an observation that will be repeated by many a subsequent commentator—the English “are not much troubled about the opinions which people may have of them, nor do they take much notice of what others do.” England is “a country of liberty, everyone lives there as he wishes; which, no doubt, is the source of the many extraordinary characters among them... It likewise gives them a freedom of thoughts and sentiments, which does not a little contribute to their good sense, wherein they are

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<sup>729</sup> Charles Gould, “Introduction,” in B. L. Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglois et les François*, Paris, Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, 1933, p. 9.

<sup>730</sup> For a detailed analysis of the reception of Muralt in the eighteenth-century France, see János Riesz, *Beat Ludwig von Muralt’s “Lettres sur les Anglois et les Français et sur les Voyages” und ihre Rezeption*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979, pp. 46-185. For influence on Rousseau in particular, see Arthur Ferrazzini, *Béat de Muralt et Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, La Neuveville (Switzerland), Éditions du Griffon, 1951, esp. pp. 55-76, 110-121, and p. 80ff for an analysis of their shared social critique of theater. For impact on *Nouvelle Héloïse*, see George R. Havens, “The Sources of Rousseau’s Edouard Bomston,” *Modern Philology*, 1919, v. 17, #3, pp. 134-37.

<sup>731</sup> Béat-Louis de Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français*, Lausanne, Bibliothèque romande, 1972, pp. 11-12.

distinguished, generally speaking, from most other nations.”<sup>732</sup> And even when he criticizes the English, and he does it often, Muralt’s observations must have resonated strongly with his readers across the channel. Thus, in his pioneering treatment of the English legal system, Muralt points to the nearly absurd literalness with which the English stick to the letter of the law, and to widespread licentiousness as a consequence of a government dedicated to liberty. Clearly this criticism must have sounded as so much quibbling to the French, for whom the letter of the law was at the time merely an abstract noun. Speaking of torture, Muralt says that it is “looked upon here in horror, and never put in practice even to discover the accomplices in a plot; while other nations [and Muralt here clearly refers to France] that regard the English as savages, and value themselves very much for extraordinary politeness, still retain this barbarous custom, and carry it so far, that the most frightful tortures are in the rank of common formalities in criminal proceedings.”<sup>733</sup>

How could one, in the light of accounts such as these, suggest that the eighteenth century in England was essentially an age of order? And not only of order, but of the sort of order that aspires to become total? Are first-hand testimonies of men such as Sorbière, Muralt, or Voltaire, or Huguenot refugees and many others, not enough to make any such suggestion implausible, even outlandish? One could, of course, point to inaccuracies in these accounts. The claim that Voltaire’s account of England introduced a whole new concept of civilization to France<sup>734</sup> could remain true even if it is shown that this account was not as authentic as its contemporaries believed it to be. Some have politely called it “abstract and general,” others have said it was written “too discursively” and “rapidly,”<sup>735</sup> and some have even questioned its originality.<sup>736</sup> A particular “revolution in outlook” did take place in France in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the period when both Muralt and Voltaire published their works, and the eyes of the French definitely “shifted their gaze from a brilliant court at Versailles to a fogbound island across the seas.”<sup>737</sup> But this does not yet mean that the fog was not too thick. Voltaire is illustrative in this regard. In his *Philosophical Letters*, also known as *Letters concerning the English Nation*, Voltaire went to some length, as we have seen, to show the extent to which the English encouraged individuality. One way in which they did so, according to Voltaire, was by giving artists a privileged place in society. Addison, we are reminded, was at one point the Secretary of State, Matthew Prior was an ambassador, Swift and William Congreve held important public offices, and Alexander Pope was a rich man. “What chiefly encourages the arts in England,” said Voltaire, “is the esteem they receive: the portrait of the Prime Minister hangs over the mantelpiece in his office, but I have seen

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<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 10.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-73.

<sup>734</sup> Ira O. Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 185-186, 223-224.

<sup>735</sup> R. L. Graeme Ritchie, *France: A Companion to French Studies*, London, Methuen, 1951, p. 166; Texte, *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>736</sup> G. Bonno, *La culture et la civilisation britanniques devant l’opinion française*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1948, pp. 165-166. According to Kenneth MacLean, Voltaire was “hardly justified in claiming as full credit as he did for introducing Locke in France.” *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>737</sup> E. Preston Dargan, “The Question of Voltaire’s Primacy in Establishing the English Vogue,” *Mélanges d’histoire littéraire et compare offerts à Fernand Baldensperger*, Paris, Champion, vol. 1, 1930, p. 183-184.

Mr. Pope's portrait in twenty houses."<sup>738</sup> What Voltaire said is correct, these men did fare well. What he did not say, however, is that these men were the great exception. The poet and critic John Dennis, for example, wrote in 1711 how "[Samuel] Butler was starved at the same time that the King had his book in his pocket. Another great wit lay seven years in prison for an inconsiderable debt, and [Thomas] Otway dared not to show his head for fear of the same fate."<sup>739</sup> The poet Richard Savage spent a part of his life, according to Samuel Johnson, "without lodging, and often without meat; nor had he any other conveniences for study than the fields or the street allowed him; there he used to walk and form his speeches, and afterwards step into a shop, beg for a few moments the use of pen and ink, and write down what he had composed, upon paper which he had picked up by accident."<sup>740</sup> The same fate befell most other poets as well. At the time of Voltaire's visit, not only were English poets not held in high esteem, on the contrary, "for perhaps the first time in England, the most talented writers of a generation," we are told, "faced a government which made no bones about its hostility to men of letters and its contempt for their role in society."<sup>741</sup> Richard Savage, Samuel Boyse, John Dennis, Butler and Otway in their old age, even James Thomson, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson at some points in their lives, all lived in abject poverty; Simon Ockley completed his *History of the Saracens* in a debtors' prison. "I am every moment threatened to be turned out here," wrote Boyse to his publisher from a sponging house, "because I have no money to pay for my bed two nights past, which is usually paid beforehand... I hope therefore you will have the humanity to send me half a guinea for support, till I finish your papers in my hands... I humbly entreat your answer, having not tasted anything since Tuesday evening I came here, and my coat will be taken off my back for the charge of the bed, so that I must go into prison naked, which is too shocking for me to think of."<sup>742</sup> Boyse was indeed so poor that he was often forced to stay in bed for days at the time because his clothes were pawned at a broker's shop, and he was left naked. According to Beljame, he "used to wrap himself in his blanket, in which he made a hole so that he could put his arm out to write on his knee." Like Boyse, Richard Savage "lived from hand to mouth, eating when his friends invited him to share a meal, sleeping where he could, in a basement lodging, in a noisome cellar, amongst the dregs of the population." At the time of Voltaire's visit, we are told, "most writers were reduced to living in misery from day to day, in everlasting anxiety about the morrow, at the mercy of moneylenders to whom they had to pledge their wages, in perpetual dread of the bailiff and the gaol." To be a writer in England meant being "a wretched outcast, tattered, dirty and starving, living how and where no one knew. There was practically no distinction between author and beggar." The literary profession "offered nothing but a dreary prospect of struggle, privation and disappointed hope," "a collection of strange adventures which far exceed anything to be found in what the French call Bohemia." In brief, to be a writer in England at this time, says Beljame, was to commit oneself to "a compendium of human misery, one of the most cheerless careers on which a man could

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<sup>738</sup> *Philosophical Letters*, p. 93.

<sup>739</sup> "Essays upon Criticism," in W. H. Durham, ed., *Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1725*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1961, p. 242.

<sup>740</sup> *The Lives of the Poets*, vol. 3, p. 130.

<sup>741</sup> Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722-1742*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 1976, p. 6.

<sup>742</sup> Quoted in Beljame, *Men of Letters and the English Public*, p. 348.

embark.”<sup>743</sup> The few poets who did avoid this fate were almost all of them, as it turns out, men who were eager to ingratiate themselves with those in power, and superbly capable of doing so. “Addison and Steele, Pope and Swift, Prior and Gay, were not only the entertainers of the ruling aristocracy,” we are told, “but were admitted to their intimacy.” Their social status derived not so much from their poetry, but from “the identity of outlook and interests” they shared with the governing class.<sup>744</sup>

Most other aspects of Voltaire’s account could be called into question as well. One example is his praise of the freedom of the press and opinion. Even though government censorship officially ceased to exist in 1695, after Parliament allowed the Licensing Act to lapse, the press in the eighteenth century England remained far from free. If writers were now free to publish without prior approval of the government, they were not immune from being charged for slander, obscenity, blasphemy, or sedition, each of which was defined in the broadest possible terms.<sup>745</sup> “Only a few years before Voltaire’s visit,” writes Peter Gay, “Steele had been expelled from the House of Commons for some Whig essays; Defoe had been pilloried for a sarcastic pamphlet; and in 1721, the House of Commons had imprisoned a printer for publishing a Jacobite broadside.”<sup>746</sup> We could add Swift, who was forced to spend nearly ten years—between 1714 and 1723—in a form of exile in Ireland.<sup>747</sup> Indeed, Voltaire himself scribbled in his notebook how William Shippen, a member of Parliament, was sent to the Tower merely “for having said that the King’s speech was calculated for the meridian of Germany, rather than that of London.”<sup>748</sup> This fact, however, he chose not to mention in his *Letters*. Another example is Voltaire’s claim how merchants in England were held in high regard. There is no doubt that, by the time of Voltaire’s visit, the English middle class, no matter how inchoate and insecure, had already become a formidable power in the country. Already by the end of the sixteenth century an entire literary genre came into its own which praised merchants, craftsmen, clothiers, tradesfolk, and apprentices for being useful to the commonwealth, for their courage, their patriotism, their generosity, for their sense of charity and justice. At the time, this seems to have been aimed merely at challenging the entrenched view of them as cheap, greedy, and usurious, and to show instead that they could uphold the values of the elite.<sup>749</sup> Nevertheless, what is significant about this literature is not only that it had readers to whom it appealed, but that it operated on the understanding of a social group—its composition, its reputation—that was already expected to be familiar to the reader. Sixteenth century abounds, in fact, in storybooks, pamphlets, treatises, and manuals that already espoused values such as thrift, diligence,

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<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 341-354. See also Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life, 1660-1730*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 74-75.

<sup>744</sup> H. V. D. Dyson, *Augustans and Romantics, 1689-1830*, London, The Cresset Press, 1961, p. 3. See also J. A. Downie, “Walpole, ‘the Poet’s Foe,’” in Jeremy Black, ed., *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, London, Macmillan, 1984, pp. 171-188.

<sup>745</sup> See Donald Thomas, “Press Prosecutions of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The Evidence of King’s Bench Indictments,” *The Library*, 5<sup>th</sup> ser., vol. 32, 1977, pp. 315-332.

<sup>746</sup> *Voltaire’s Politics*, 1959, pp. 43-44.

<sup>747</sup> John Murry, *Jonathan Swift*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955, pp. 312-328.

<sup>748</sup> *Voltaire’s Notebooks*, ed. Theodore Besterman, Geneva, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1952, p. 45.

<sup>749</sup> See Laura O’Connell, “The Elizabethan Bourgeois Hero-Tale,” in Barbara Malament, ed., *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J. H. Hexter*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, pp. 267-290. See also Laura Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984, and Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973.

and self-improvement, and that revealed a set of concerns and social ideals, a particular temper, a code of ethics, and ultimately an entire way of life that was distinct both from the gentry and the mass of the poor.<sup>750</sup> By the end of the following century, when the number of people *not* employed primarily in agriculture exceeded sixty percent,<sup>751</sup> and when the middle class is said to have composed already little over fifty percent of the population,<sup>752</sup> the power of the merchant was such that it was already seen by some as undermining the entire social structure. Though “the wealth and spending power of England remained... principally in the hands of those who owned and worked the land,” says an economic historian, “it was the merchant, the dealers and the middlemen who alone could inject liquid money into the economy and maintain a high level of employment. It was merchant capital,” we are told, “which created markets, financed manufactures, floated the American colonial economics and launched banking and insurance.” It was merchant capital which “made possible the survival of landowners who were in debt after the Civil War,” which “enabled the gentry to preserve and consolidate their estates and invest in privateering and industrial and colonial schemes,” and which ultimately “gave the businessman an influence out of all proportion to his resources.”<sup>753</sup> It is not surprising therefore that, already by the 1670s, Samuel Butler draws a clear distinction between three basic classes of English society, and speaks of his resolve “to have nothing to do with men that are very rich or poor,” but only with “those that are between,” for they “are commonly the most agreeable.”<sup>754</sup> This and other evidence makes it very likely that during the time he spent in England, between 1726 and 1729, Voltaire indeed had occasion to witness a vibrant and growing middle class, indeed a society which accepted and operated within “the priorities of a broadly bourgeois society.”<sup>755</sup> “The Whig grandees,” says Hobsbawm, “knew quite well that the power of the country, and their own, rested on a readiness to make money militantly and commercially.”<sup>756</sup> According to Nicholas Rogers, “in the last analysis, money, whether derived from rentals, marriage, merchanting or stocks and shares, counted [by the mid-eighteenth century] for more than ancient lineage”—so much that, to influential merchant families in London, “the total withdrawal from business [to purchase a country seat and enter landed society] might well have entailed a loss of political leverage and social influence.”<sup>757</sup> Defoe is only the most outspoken voice of this class, stating unequivocally in 1710 how “the wealth of the nation, that used to be reckoned by the value of land, is now computed by the rise and fall of stocks.”<sup>758</sup> The members of the middle class, he

<sup>750</sup> See Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1935.

<sup>751</sup> P. Lindert, “English Occupations, 1670-1811,” *JEH*, XLV, 1980, pp. 685-712. See also G. Clarke, “Labour Productivity in English Agriculture, 1380-1800,” in B. Campbell and M. Overton, eds., *Land, Labour and Livestock*, Manchester, 1991, pp. 211-235.

<sup>752</sup> Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 14, 167-169, 235 n. 8.

<sup>753</sup> Richard Grassby, “English Merchant Capitalism in the Late Seventeenth Century,” *Past and Present*, #46, pp. 105-107. See also *idem*, *The Business Community of Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995.

<sup>754</sup> *Prose Observations*, ed. H. de Quehen, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 14. The use of the word “class” in this case is not anachronistic. Referring to socio-economic groups, it comes into usage in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and is commonplace by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup>. See Penelope Corfield, “Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *ead.*, *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991, pp. 101-130.

<sup>755</sup> Paul Langford, *Public Life and Propertied Englishmen, 1689-1798*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1991, p. vii.

<sup>756</sup> *Industry and Empire*, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 32.

<sup>757</sup> “Money, Land and Lineage: the Big Bourgeoisie of Hanoverian London,” *Social History*, vol. 4, #3, pp. 446, 451.

<sup>758</sup> *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Temple Scott, London, George Bell & Sons, 1902, vol. 9, p. 76.



wrote a decade later, were “not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labour and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind, and not embarrassed with the pride, luxury, ambition, and envy of the upper part of mankind.”<sup>759</sup> And some years later, at the very time of Voltaire’s visit, Defoe would say how “there is not a nation in the known world, but have tasted the benefit and owe their prosperity to the useful improvements of commerce,” how “it may be truly said of trade that it makes princes powerful [and] nations valiant.”<sup>760</sup> In 1733, one author went so far as to say how the “trading part of Great Britain is not only a very large and opulent, but likewise the most valuable part of it. To their labour and industry it is owing that this nation is raised from a wild, uncultivated desert to its present height of riches, grandeur and strength.” Merchants, he went on to say, “are the heart-blood of the body politic, which circulates through every part of it,” and so “the fate of the whole Kingdom depends, in a great measure, on the welfare of the British merchants.”<sup>761</sup> Clearly this is something that Voltaire could never have heard in France, or anywhere else on the continent, with the possible exception of the Netherlands. And, clearly, some of this praise of the middle class must have had a basis in English society at the time.<sup>762</sup> But, still, does this mean, as Voltaire would have it, that in England the merchant was held in high esteem? This, it seems, is far from obvious. According to the findings of H. J. Habbakuk, and contrary to what Voltaire claimed, “it was in fact extremely rare for a younger son of a peer to go into trade.”<sup>763</sup> Peter Gay, too, finds this claim to be “rather exaggerated: younger sons of peers usually went into the army, the church, or the diplomatic service, and Voltaire’s examples are by no means representative.”<sup>764</sup> Indeed, Norma Perry has argued that eighteenth-century English society was in general still quite intolerant to the merchant class. A closer look at the works of Richard Steele, Daniel Defoe, John Gay, and Samuel Richardson, all of which introduce esteemed and honorable merchant characters (“We merchants are a species of gentry, that have grown into the world in this last century,” says Mr. Sealand in *The Conscious Lovers*, “and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed folks, that have always thought yourself so much above us”), reveals a truth quite different than the one put forward by Voltaire. Namely, “the eulogy of the merchant in these works,” says Perry, “does indeed show the upward thrust of the merchant class in the second and third decades of the eighteenth century.” What it also shows, however, is

<sup>759</sup> *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>760</sup> “A Plan of the English Commerce,” in John McCulloch, ed., *A Select Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts on Commerce*, New York, Augustus Kelley, 1966. On Defoe’s “anxious perception of shifting socio-historical forces,” see John Richetti, “Class Struggle without Class: Novelists and Magistrates, *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 32, #3, 1991, pp. 203-218.

<sup>761</sup> Caleb D’Anvers, *An Argument against Excises*, London, H. Haines, 1733, pp. 12, 20.

<sup>762</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup>-century English middle class, see Earle (note 744 above); Langford (notes 666 and 755 above); Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, eds., *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1994; Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family, 1680-1780*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996; Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995; Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, c. 1660-1760*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1989; Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680-1730*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1982; J. G. Rule, *Albion’s People: English Society, 1714-1815*, London, Longman, 1992; Walter Minchinton, “The Merchants in England in the Eighteenth Century,” in H. G. J. Aitken, ed., *Explorations in Enterprise*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1965.

<sup>763</sup> “England,” in A. Goodwin, ed., *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1953, p. 19.

<sup>764</sup> *Voltaire’s Politics*, p. 44.

that there is a vast discrepancy “between what the merchant thinks of himself and what he knows others think of him.” The reason why Defoe was never accepted into high society, for example, was not because of his supposed paranoid tendencies, but, according to Dobrée, because “he had misjudged the level to which his trading class had risen.” It is therefore not surprising that Perry characterizes Defoe’s tone of writing as “defensive and over-indignant, obviously aimed at an audience which will take much convincing.” This hostility, according to Perry, remains a constant throughout the century, and can be detected even at the turn of the following one, in the works of Jane Austen for example.<sup>765</sup> If not completely incorrect, therefore, the picture that Voltaire gave of the English middle class was at least greatly exaggerated. “Voltaire was not an objective observer,” says Gay, “and his account of English society is too uncritical to be wholly accurate.” He “deliberately foreshortens, omits, overemphasizes,” his observations “are too episodic, too rhetorical, too one-sided,” and he “ruthlessly excises or revises inconvenient facts that contradict” his thesis. “His observations do not deserve,” therefore, “to be called objective analysis.”<sup>766</sup> Other scholars agree with this assessment. According to Joseph Texte, Voltaire was “badly informed, or knowingly inexact.” Voltaire knows, says Texte, “that he is making a panegyric in place of a portrait. Like Tacitus had his Germany, he has his England, too beautiful to be true.”<sup>767</sup> In the opinion of Dennis Fletcher, “Voltaire’s presentation of the government and society of Hanoverian England must appear painfully lacking in depth to the enquiring student of social history.”<sup>768</sup> Lytton Strachey is even more to the point: *Lettres philosophiques* are not a record of facts, he says, “but a work of propaganda and a declaration of faith.”<sup>769</sup>

The account of England given by Voltaire is therefore seriously flawed. The same could be said of most other accounts by continental observers, who in one way or another follow Voltaire in their praise of the freedom and respect accorded to the individual in England after the Restoration. This however is, in and of itself, not particularly significant. What, instead, is more significant is the reason for this repeated inaccuracy. Why did foreigners perceive England in this particular way? How do we account for the fact that a large number of observers, most of whom did not know each other, all committed themselves to same or similar inaccuracies in the course of a relatively long period of time? A French observer called the parliament in London “that august assembly of the wisest government that was ever yet known,” and praised its laws for binding the sovereign as much as his subjects.<sup>770</sup> This may or may not have been an accurate description; what needs explaining, however, is the source of this enthusiasm for England that swept through the continent. In the case of Voltaire, there are strong reasons to believe that his skewed perception of English society came from his own limited perspective. An incorrigible snob and social climber, Voltaire spent his entire life trying to ingratiate himself with the rich and the powerful, and it was no different during

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<sup>765</sup> Norma Perry, “French and English Merchants in the Eighteenth Century: Voltaire Revisited,” *Studies in Eighteenth Century French Literature*, Exeter, 1975, pp. 193-213; Dobrée, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century*, p. 36.

<sup>766</sup> *Voltaire’s Politics*, pp. 43-44, 52, 53, 57.

<sup>767</sup> *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire*, 1970 [1895], p. 80.

<sup>768</sup> “Voltaire’s England,” in *Voltaire: Lettres Philosophiques*, London, Grant & Cutler, 1986, p. 29.

<sup>769</sup> *Books and Characters*, 1922, p. 132.

<sup>770</sup> A. de la Mottraye, *Travels through Europe, Asia, and into Part of Africa*, London, 1723, vol. 1, p. 140.

his stay in England. Speaking of “the general tenor of Voltaire’s behaviour during his residence among us,” J. Churton Collins describes the Frenchman as “a parasite and a sycophant.” The compliments found in his correspondence during this period “are so fulsome, his flattery so exaggerated, that they might excusably be mistaken for elaborate irony. He seems to be always on his knees. There was scarcely a distinguished man then living in England who had not been the object of his nauseous homage. He pours it indiscriminately on Pope, Swift, Gay, Clarke, on half the Cabinet and on half the peerage. In a man of this character,” says Churton Collins, “falsehood and hypocrisy are of the very essence of his composition.”<sup>771</sup> If this was indeed true, then one could hardly expect from Voltaire to have written a critical account of what he saw and heard, or to have been at all in a position to see or hear much outside the high society that he pandered to. One may find this description of Voltaire to be somewhat harsh, but it could be further substantiated. In her detailed research of Voltaire’s life in England, for example, Norma Perry concludes that most of Voltaire’s acquaintances in London were introduced to him by his host, one Everard Fawkener, a highly successful merchant. According to Perry, Voltaire’s rosy picture of the English middle class owes to the fact that the visitor took his host and his circle as typical of England, which was far from being the case. For example, Voltaire was highly impressed by the fact that Fawkener was knighted and sent as English ambassador to Turkey. But Fawkener, says Perry, was an anomaly. He was a gentleman by birth, and therefore belonged to the one and only merchant company that consisted by and large of gentlemen. Voltaire, says Perry, “thought Fawkener became ambassador to the Porte because England honoured merchants. But in fact his merchant-status was against him. The real reasons for his being named ambassador seem to have been that he knew all the right people in the government, was a very shrewd and competent man, was a good linguist, knew Turkey well—and, although a merchant, was a gentleman.” As it turns out, despite being a gentleman, Fawkener was later refused the post in Berlin precisely because he also happened to be a merchant.<sup>772</sup>

There is, finally, another possible explanation for the inaccurate accounts of England, one that is more fundamental and that could be more broadly applied to continental commentators at the time. Namely, like Voltaire, these other men, too, were likely to have had a limited exposure to English society, to have mingled mostly with their social equals or superiors, and to have depended on their hosts and their social circles for their judgments on society as a whole. More importantly, like Voltaire, these men arrived in England with their own agendas. “The English of Muralt,” notes Gian Carlo Roscioni rather perceptively, “even if they reflect characters and attitudes of the English of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, are essentially a philosophical construction, a free intuition of the ethical thought of the Bernese patrician.” Even from the political point of view, the English are conceived by Muralt, according to Roscioni, “as the exact negation of the French: they are precisely as the French are not; their government, their aristocracy, their society, are the opposite of the French government, aristocracy, society. It truly seems that Muralt has only described the former in function of the latter.” Muralt’s account of the English is therefore merely “a moment in the polemic against French political civilization.” Indeed, the ultimate goal of his account of England, one could say, was not to give an

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<sup>771</sup> *Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau in England*, London, Eveleigh Nash, 1908, pp. 42-43.

<sup>772</sup> “Voltaire’s View of England,” *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 7 (1977), #26, pp. 90-91.

account of England at all, but “to put Switzerland and Europe on guard against the dangers of French domination and influence.”<sup>773</sup> For continental Europeans, in other words, England served as a largely fanciful depository of the values and institutions opposite of those that prevailed in France. At the time of Louis XIV, when France dominated Europe in practically every single sense, when the Jesuit Dominique Bouhours could boast that *le bel esprit* “is so proper to our nation that it is almost impossible to find it outside of France,” or that “all *l’esprit*, and all the knowledge of the world is now among us,” that “all the other peoples are barbarians in comparison with the French,”<sup>774</sup> at this time the resentment against France in other parts of the continent reached its apogee. Unable to fight France with arms, diminished and frustrated, its neighbors fought it instead by positing ideals which, in their eyes, negated those espoused by the French. Some have even sought the origin of German collective self-consciousness, at least in the realm of culture, in this suppressed antagonism.<sup>775</sup> Even Voltaire had a motive to seek his revenge against France. After all, Voltaire came to England because he was forced to leave his country for publicly insulting a nobleman, and for drawing his sword on him. Uppity, sarcastic, thinking very highly of himself already at a very early age, Voltaire wanted to erase any trace of his humble origins, adding the seigneurial “de” to his (already invented) name, and courting all the right people in Paris, just the way his fellow writers had to do in London. And though he was exceptionally successful in this regard, more successful, one could say, than the Londoners (during his short residence in the Bastille, he was allowed, we are told, “to send—and pay—for books, furniture, linen, a nightcap, and perfume; he often dined with the governor, played billiards and bowling with prisoners and guards; and he wrote *Le Henriade*”<sup>776</sup>), Voltaire nurtured hatred for those who would remind him of his place in society. Voltaire by no means hated hierarchy, he just hated not to be at top of it. Therefore, when he found himself in England, in what was really a publicity stunt rather than an exile, one of his main goals was to teach a lesson to those back home on the way people of his origins, and of his talents, are supposedly treated in this foreign country across the Channel.

This seems, on the whole, to be correct. Foreign visitors to England at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries did misrepresent this country because their interests were narrow, their exposure limited, and their eyes ultimately directed not to England but to their own countries, even to their own careers. England served more as a stand-in rather than a true object of study in its own right. Nevertheless, the main reason for the widespread inaccuracy is likely none of the above, and owes its explanation to a completely different phenomenon.

## XVI

Contrary to most continental accounts of the time, England was not a land of flourishing individuality. It was nothing of the sort. Primarily, and before anything else, England

<sup>773</sup> Beat Ludwig von Muralt *e la ricerca dell’umano*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 1961, pp. 79-82.

<sup>774</sup> *Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène*, ed. Bernard Beugnot and Gilles Declercq Paris, Champion, 2003 [1671], the fourth *entretien*.

<sup>775</sup> See Max von Waldberg, “Eine deutschfranzösische Literaturfehde,” in *Deutschkundliches: Friedrich Panzer zum 60. Geburtstag überreicht von heidelberger Fachgenossen*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1930, esp. p. 116.

<sup>776</sup> Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Voltaire*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1965, p. 36.

was a land dominated by a fear of individuality, and by a desire for order and stability. This is not to say that the period was uneventful. It witnessed, especially during the reign of Queen Anne, the creation of dynamic and increasingly organized forces, Whigs and Tories, whose rivalry pervaded not only the parliament, but also the constituencies, effectively creating “something like a two-party system as well as a two-party legislature.”<sup>777</sup> By most accounts, the two-party system ceased to define English politics after 1714, at least to the extent that it had done so before, and was supplanted by the rivalry between the Court (the government, the administration) and the country (the opposition or the “patriots”) instead.<sup>778</sup> According to other accounts, the two-party system remained in place and continued to evolve throughout the century, until the 1740s,<sup>779</sup> 1750s,<sup>780</sup> 1760s,<sup>781</sup> or indeed into the nineteenth century.<sup>782</sup> Either way, whether between Whigs and Tories, or between the administration and its opposition, rivalry remained vigorous and complex. So complex, indeed, that some have argued that only a meticulous and painstaking study of social and family connections of each individual actor on the political stage at the time, of his multiple and ever-shifting loyalties, and of his personal motives and compulsions, could do justice to it. By this account, the main rivalry was not between the Whigs and the Tories, or between the Court and the country, but between the Whigs in power and the Whigs trying to get into power, between groups of ambitious men and other groups of ambitious men, between those who were in, and those who were out.<sup>783</sup> In the eighteenth century, finally, political strife extended outside the narrow circle of the elite, into the cities and provincial towns, to include large segments of the middle class and even the poor, of those who were enfranchised and of those who were not. When one examines the actual opinion of the inhabitants of London at the time, “in the records of the Common Council, in the utterances of the City members, in pamphlet and press and the comments of contemporaries, it becomes clear,” we are told, “that the City abandoned its anti-ministerialism only on occasions when there was some special explanation of the fact, and that the occasions were comparatively few... For the rest of the time there was

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<sup>777</sup> Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1967, p. 418. See also J. R. Jones, *The First Whigs: The Politics of the Exclusion Crisis 1678-83*, London, Oxford UP, 1961.

<sup>778</sup> Holmes, *British Politics*; J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725*, London, Macmillan, 1967; W. A. Speck, *Tory and Whig: The Struggle in the Constituencies 1701-1715*, London, Macmillan, 1970; H. T. Dickinson, *Walpole and the Whig Supremacy*, London, English UP, 1973; A. S. Foord, *His Majesty’s Opposition, 1714-1830*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964.

<sup>779</sup> Eveline Cruickshanks, *Political Untouchables: The Tories and the ’45*, London, Duckworth, 1979. See also Paul Fritz, *The English Ministers and Jacobitism between the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975; F. J. McLynn, *France and the Jacobite Rising of 1745*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 1981; Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688-1788*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989.

<sup>780</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *The Dynamics of Change: The Crisis of the 1750s and the English Party System*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1982.

<sup>781</sup> Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714-1760*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1982.

<sup>782</sup> B. W. Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties, 1742-1832*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1985; Frank O’Gorman, *The Emergence of the British Two-Party System, 1760-1832*, London, Arnold, 1982.

<sup>783</sup> Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Macmillan, 1957; *idem*, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, London, Macmillan, 1930; Robert Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1956; John Brooke, *The Chatham Administration, 1766-1768*, London, Macmillan, 1956; I. R. Christie, *The End of North’s Ministry, 1780-1782*, London, Macmillan, 1958; J. S. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960; Dorothy Marshall, *Eighteenth-Century England*, London, Longmans, 1962; J. B. Owen, *The Eighteenth Century, 1714-1815*, London, Nelson, 1974; Dennis Rubini, *Court and Country, 1688-1702*, London, Hart-Davis, 1967; W. A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England 1714-1760*, London, Arnold, 1977; I. R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815*, London, Arnold, 1982.

suspicion and antagonism, flaring from time to time, in the excitements of political life, into violent hostility.”<sup>784</sup> Whether in relation to taxation or foreign policy, to food prices or corruption, to Jacobitism or the questions of religion, the wider population made itself heard and occasionally even forced concessions from the elite.<sup>785</sup> “All these bewigged and ermined lawyers, these bishops in lace, these embroidered and gold-bedizened lords, this fine government so cleverly balanced,” said Hippolyte Taine, “was carried on the back of a huge and formidable brute, which as a rule could tramp peacefully though growingly on, but which on a sudden, for a mere whim, could shake and crush it.”<sup>786</sup> In short, throughout most of the eighteenth century, it is safe to say, no other country of Europe had a political culture that was as vibrant, as varied, and as inclusive, as England’s. And, yet, there was hardly a country in Europe in which the tiny elite ruled with as little opposition, and in which passive obedience was as great an attribute of the entire society. This society might indeed have been carried on the back of a populace which, as Taine suggested, could “shake and crush” its ruling structures at a mere whim. The essential point, however, is that it didn’t. It never got even close to it, it hardly even attempted it. To answer how this could have been the case has been the purpose of this study. How could Nietzsche, to the surprise of anyone familiar with medieval and Renaissance England—the England of bloody rebellions, of Shakespeare and Donne, of civil war, of raw, wild, and insubordinate masculinity—come to describe its nineteenth-century inhabitants as mediocre, small-spirited, narrow, arid, and—most importantly—imbued with “profound normality?”

In the course of some thirty years, somewhere between Dryden’s *Albion and Albanus* and Addison’s *Cato*, an entire world, we have said, came to an end and the foundations of a new world were being laid. To think of this change in literary terms, and not in strictly economic or political ones, might seem odd, especially given that the change in question was that of an entire society, of a people. And yet literature was the ground upon which a large battle was being fought between different conceptions of what it meant to be an individual in England in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One form this battle took was between wit and sense, between imagination, fancy, or taste on one hand, and judgment, intellect, or mind on the other. A poet, physician, and a respected member of the London middle class, Richard Blackmore treated wit as a disease, a deviation from normalcy, and one not only confined to poetry, but infecting all aspects of society. If his aim, and of many others like him, was to make the poetry of wit seem like an aberration, and to deal it a death blow by juxtaposing it to a poetry of sense, this was only because larger social issues were at stake. The poetry of wit was seen as subverting language and merely playing with words; it deliberately defied decorum; it

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<sup>784</sup> Lucy Sutherland, “The City of London in Eighteenth-Century Politics,” in R. Pares and A. J. P. Taylor, *Essays presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, London, Macmillan, 1956, pp. 54, 55.

<sup>785</sup> See Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998; *idem*, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989; Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785*, New York, Cambridge UP, 1995; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, London, Merlin Press, 1991; John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870*, London, Longman, 1992; John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1976; W. J. Shelton, *English Hunger and Industrial Disorder*, London, Macmillan, 1973; R. B. Rose, “Eighteenth Century Price Riots and Public Policy in England,” *International Review Of Social History*, vol. 6 (1961), #2, pp. 275-292.

<sup>786</sup> *History of English Literature*, v. 3, pp. 74-75.

encouraged eccentricity, acted as an irritant to the nerves, and refused to accommodate everyman's taste; it insisted on viewing nature in the light of fanciful ideas and refused to view facts as facts. The fault of this poetry, therefore, was not merely that it violated a poetic sensibility of sorts, but that it violated a particular sense of reality and a particular way of life. The subversion of language implied the subversion of truth; the subversion of truth, on the other hand, implied the subversion of the state and of the sovereign, the subversion of authority in general. Donne's main interest lay not in the world in its own right, but in his own experience of that world. But this is precisely what could upset the calm of the placid, ordinary citizen. To please this citizen without violating his sense of reality, poetry had to be written in a language that was restrained, sober, and reasonable, a language that would not surprise, offend, upset, or discomfit, but that would neither overly inspire. Similarly, the new preaching style had to preclude any thought of struggle, and impart instead a sense of calm, temperance, and universal acquiescence. It is for this reason that the language of the age provides us with suitable access to the formation of modern English subjectivity, for it registers and communicates in its pages the changes in one's conception and experience of oneself, so necessary for our understanding of social change, and yet all too elusive for a strictly economic or political analysis to grasp.

It is these changes that may account, more than anything else, for the way in which England was experienced and portrayed by foreign visitors at the time. Changes in language and literature, but also in multiple realms of material and visual culture—from silver and porcelain to furniture and decorative art, from clothing to architecture to urban and landscape design—, and in the very conception of the human mind, were in essence so many different forms which the individual adopted took, or was encouraged to take, or simply found himself taking, in the course of a wholesale change of English society. The impact was striking. What was taking shape at the turn of the eighteenth century was a society of gentlemanly self-restraint, of polite conversation and sociability, a society of neat, polished, and—most importantly—agreeable individuals. Individuals were to be agreeable, to exude simplicity and pleasantness and friendliness, the way buildings and gardens were, or a drawing room, or a salesman, or kitchenware. Anything that might have stood as an obstacle to a direct correspondence between the inward and the outward, between the mind and society, was strongly discouraged and shunned. Like the poetry of this age, the individual, too, was to renounce anything and everything that might have been deemed obscure and idiosyncratic, anything that could be merely suggestive and not fully articulated, anything that could lead thought to a conundrum without a neat solution. “Such an age,” said Harold Laski, “could make but a little pretence to discovery; and, indeed, it is most largely absent from its speculation. In its political ideas this is necessarily and especially the case.”<sup>787</sup> A society that had recently ended a civil war was now becoming a society of supposedly disinterested observation, and anything overly interested, especially in basic matters of social and political organization, was deemed “enthusiastic” and thus inimical to a safe and stable society, not to mention to good manners. What was at work, in other words, was not only an intricate administration of the individual's physical appearance and demeanor, but an administration of his own

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<sup>787</sup> *Political Thought in England*, London, Oxford UP, 1955, p. 17.

conception of himself, of his understanding of the relationship between the private and the public, and of his role and place in society.

If this age in England was itself relatively bland and intellectually flat, especially in the realm of political theory, it nevertheless raises questions of supreme importance *for* political theory. In particular, it raises the question of the nature of the state which, on one hand, is ruled (for all intents and purposes) as basically a private domain and for a private benefit, the way the English state was ruled by select families in the eighteenth century, but which state, on the other hand, coexists with a wider society that due to its high level of conformism, a particular sense of propriety, a particular temperament, and even a peculiar aesthetic sensibility, acquiesces to this rule and even seems willingly to consent to it. Should the members of this sort of society, and the subjects of this sort of state, be considered free or enslaved? This is not a question that refers merely to the conditions obtaining in England at the time. Instead, it is a question relevant to our understanding of political modernity more generally. For what we meet with in the case of eighteenth-century England is arguably the first large and complex society that manages to preserve, and even considerably strengthen, its rigid structures of authority and at the same time rid itself of much of the burden of traditional authoritarian rule. The reason why eighteenth-century continental Europeans saw England as a wholly new civilization, a land of freedom and without coercion, was that they still operated on the model of continental authoritarianism, of largely centralized top-down oppressive regimes, and could not yet see the qualitative difference in the English model which diffused authority more horizontally, but with no less vigor. The eighteenth-century Frenchman still *encountered* state authority, say, when he chanced upon the procession of the king, or when he was affected by the decision of a local magistrate. The eighteenth-century Englishman, on the other hand, was increasingly himself *enacting* the authority of the state in his everyday life. Or, to use our own contemporary expression, the business of ruling England for the benefit of a tiny elite was increasingly being “outsourced” to individual members of society, who now performed their duty as if it were indeed their own business. In short, the tendency of the English model of authority was to encompass the totality of human life, and so it could come across as natural, consensual, and willful, and hence free. This is the political model that would eventually win over in the Western World.

Much remains to be explored that could corroborate this thesis. First of all, it could be shown how highly authoritarian eighteenth-century England remained. Secondly, it could be shown that the English populace, that “huge and formidable brute” that Taine referred to, had plenty of reasons to seek change and rebel. In some respects at least, this “brute” had more reasons to seek the change of the ruling order now, after the Restoration of 1660, the Glorious Revolution of 1689, or the Hanoverian Succession of 1714, than at any other time in collective memory. Finally, what is needed is more evidence of the way English society bred submission and conformism in the course of the eighteenth century. Four areas of everyday life lend themselves particularly well to this sort of research: work, manners, sentiments, and the relationship between the sexes.



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