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Common Sense, the Common Reader, and Human Nature: David Hume's «kind of Unity»

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Abstract. This article presents a close reading of the three pages of the third section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which were eliminated in the 1777 edition, the first to be published after Hume's death. These pages deserve attention, since their subject is narrative, an art which Hume had not dealt with elsewhere. Here, after having radically rejected the rules of the past, Hume proposes new rules based on his science of human nature, giving them philosophical foundation. He explains what discursive forms enliven the readers' imagination and kindle their passions. In short, he discloses a perspective reader response: not of learned readers though, but of all readers, of the common reader of his time. And that reader had an approach to the practice which was different from before, having internalized silent and individual reading. In eighteenth-century Western Europe, as the article concisely illustrates at the beginning, that practice spread among the majority of the literate population. Such is the reader Hume sets at the centre of his inquiry, one whose approach to the narrative text was direct, and no longer mediated by the voice and the gestures of the person reading aloud. Hume's was the type of reader that contemporary writers of "compositions of genius", to use a Humean expression, were starting to envisage for their narratives and theories.

Keywords: David Hume, the third section of *An enquiry concerning human understanding*, common reader, eighteenth-century reading practices, eighteenth-century narrative theory, silent reading.

In eighteenth-century Britain, common sense and the common reader shared a path that was bound to bear on both politics and literature. Here I would like to highlight aspects of this connection in relation to what we would now call 'narrative theory', focusing on the final three pages of David Hume's third section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. I am convinced that these pages deserve more attention than, to my knowledge, they have received to this day, and they deserve it for two not irrelevant reasons. One is that in them Hume deals with what he calls «compositions of genius», namely, narrative; a subject that had been absent from both the *Treatise* and the *Essays*. The other is that the common reader is here the focus of his enquiry which means 'all readers' and not only a cultural elite. The empirical research concentrates on their response, which is similar in them all, since they all share the same human nature.

COMMON SENSE AND THE COMMON READER

Before getting to this point, however, the eighteenth-century common reader must be defined together with the disciplinary tools which form my line of vision.

The history of reading, knowledge that has emerged in the last four decades from the history of the book, has now amply shown how in eighteenth-century Europe a real explosion of the practice of reading took place in large sectors of the population. In Germany, for example, «Readers of books [...] rise and retire to bed with a book in their hand, sit down at table with one, have one lying close by when working, carry one around with them when walking and [...], once they have begun reading, are unable to stop until they have finished»¹; and so it was in Britain where, what at the beginning of the century was «an unevenly and spottily educated populace» was transformed «into staunch readers, buyers and borrowers, of newspapers, periodicals and books»². Books were mainly novels, with a few towering masterpieces and many unimpressive specimens³. As to newspapers, if in most of the seventeenth century there were only government gazettes and privately paid newsletters called 'corantos', already in the reign of Queen Anne at the beginning of the eighteenth century a real «explosion of political journalism»⁴ took place, employing prominent authors with high salaries.

Very soon the number of newspapers and periodicals multiplied⁵, and some of these bore the expression «common sense» in their titles or subtitles⁶. Although since the beginning an increasing audience kept up with political debates⁷, in the Sixties the buying public

became sufficiently large as to allow the survival of some unsubsidized newspapers, in the hands of professional journalists. Thus, journalism came of age⁸. Politicians certainly did not stop financing it, aware of its power of persuasion among voters⁹, but now the press contributed to the elaboration and national dissemination of a political culture also among those who did not have access to the vote¹⁰, creating a public opinion that debated politics at all levels, even as a form of entertainment¹¹.

This public opinion bore the physiognomy of the common reader, who responded to the idea of common sense, interpreting it, as Sophia Rosenfeld convincingly shows, in a more inclusive way than most of the authors who wrote about it had intended¹². It was an ongoing process, during which those «blanks of society», individuals of the affluent bourgeoisie devoid of opinions, to whom Mr. Spectator had turned to teach common sense and some elements for conversation in the salons¹³, were already less selected than the cultural elite to whom Shaftesbury had spoken.

The conception of an existing faculty of judgment that all men (of course, women were not included) possess simply on the basis of their common human nature and the capacity to experience the external world was progressively interpreted by this expanding readership as their legitimation to express judgments on the governments that administered them. Initially, those who reacted were 'the people', in the sense of 'white property-owning English-speaking men'¹⁴; then the 'middling sort', followed by the 'common people' and the 'ordinary people'; and in the end also the 'working people'. It was at this moment that John Wilkes introduced, albeit unsuccessfully, a bill in the House of Commons for universal male suffrage which was even more advanced than the one that would pass in 1832¹⁵.

The dissemination of the idea of common sense among a common readership inescapably paved the way for a democratic outlook. Even the Scottish philosophers

¹ R. Wittmann, *Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?*, in the still fundamental *A History of Reading in the West*, Engl. transl. by L.G. Cochrane, ed. by G. Cavallo and R. Chartier, Polity Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 284-312: p. 285.

² E. Tavor Bannet, *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading: Print Culture and Popular Instruction in the Anglophone Atlantic World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 1.

³ W.H. McBurney, *A Check List of English Prose Fiction, 1700-1739*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1960; J.C. Beasley, *A Check List of Prose Fiction Published in England, 1740-1749*, The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1972; J. Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland*, Associated University Presses, London 1987; L. Orr, *A Catalogue Check-list of English Prose Fiction, 1750-1800*, The Whitston Publishing Company, Troy (NY) 1979.

⁴ A. Marshall, *Political Journalism in London, 1695-1720: Defoe, Swift, Steele and Their Contemporaries*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2020, p. 1.

⁵ M. Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press*, Associated University Presses, London 1987.

⁶ See the titles listed from page 288 to 293 in Ch. Henke, *Common Sense in Early 18th-Century British Literature and Culture: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics, 1680-1750*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2014.

⁷ Marshall, *Political Journalism*, p. 6.

⁸ R.R. Rea, *The English Press in Politics, 1760-1774*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1963, p. 223.

⁹ J. Black, *The English Press: A History*, Bloomsbury, London 2019, p. 48.

¹⁰ Rea, *The English Press in Politics*, p. 28; J. Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 2.

¹¹ J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, p. 160.

¹² This is one of the leads followed by Sophia Rosenfeld's *Common Sense: A Political History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2011.

¹³ For the aim of the *Spectator* as announced in the periodical, see no. 10. For some quotations on common sense in the periodical, see Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, p. 31.

¹⁴ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, p. 62.

¹⁵ A.H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2006, pp. 348-349.

of the Common-Sense School, though elitist in intent, were faced with the fate of becoming the bearers of ideas that led to political equality and, in the end, to democracy, precisely on the basis of the idea that all men were cognitively equal¹⁶ since human nature was shared by all, regardless of their culture and class.

But there is more. Another crucial dimension united common human nature and an expanding readership.

THE READER AND THE MIND

This was an additional key aspect of the eighteenth-century 'reading revolution', and involved the readers' body-mind with transformations which would last in time. Reading, which in the early eighteenth century still possessed an acoustical dimension, progressively became widely silent and individual. All types of texts were expected to be read «with the eyes only», as the Venetian intellectual Gaspare Gozzi put it, stressing its new physiological trait¹⁷.

If in the early eighteenth century a successful grammar such as Isaac Watts' *The Art of Reading and Writing English* could begin with the question «What is reading?», followed by the answer: «To read is to express written (or printed) Words by their proper Sound»¹⁸; in the closing decades of the century it was taken for granted that reading was a practice to be performed in silence¹⁹. An anonymous farce from about 1789 titled *Half an Hour after Supper*, for example, shows a novel being passed around a gentry household from the floors where the family of the owner resided, up to the apartments of the maids and servants, and then down in the stables, where also the stableboy read it²⁰. Read by each of them separately and in silence, of course.

If part of British social life was undoubtedly still shaped by the practice of reading aloud to a group of friends or relatives, that was a form of sociability²¹ and

no longer – at least in a preponderant sector of the urban population – the only way for some people to become acquainted with the contents of books. In other words, the practice of silent reading was internalized by essentially all literate people and would soon be felt as the natural way of approaching all sorts of printed material.

What happened in the course of that century was that a series of economic, social and cultural elements combined with advances in printing technology that accelerated production and standardized the pages graphically and linguistically making them clearer and more similar to those of today. The act of reading was thus facilitated, and all impediments to a fast and relaxed reading thus disappeared. With their eyes only, and without vocalizing the words, readers now quickly scrolled through periodicals and newspapers in taverns, clubs, or at the breakfast table, as Joseph Addison had successfully hoped for his *Spectator*.

Over the eighteenth century, for an increasing number of people, reading as a quick, immediate activity unaware of the material supports was felt as natural. Words, pages and books were passed through as if transparent, while the reader's mind immediately focused on the contents in a relationship which was physically different from before. If previously meanings and emotions could be conveyed and activated also by the reading voice with its variations of tones and emphases, and by the body of the persons reading aloud, with their postures and gestures, now authors had to rely only on bare words, black signs on a page. They had to translate what previously engaged the whole sensorium into printed discourse to be caught by the eye and quickly decoded by the mind of the individual reader. When this process was accomplished – and this occurred in the eighteenth century – readers felt as if everything took place in the theatre of their minds, to adopt and adapt a capturing image by David Hume²².

The whole process took of course much more time than my words here make to appear. Historically, silent reading had been a slow and far from linear process in the Western world and had developed over the centuries in different ways and at different times for different genres of writings²³. If philosophical writings (in the

¹⁶ Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, ch. 2.

¹⁷ Quoted in L. Braidà, *L'autore assente. L'anonimato nell'editoria italiana del Settecento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2019, p. 8, my translation.

¹⁸ I. Watts, *The Art of Reading and Writing English*, Pr. for J. Clark, E. Matthews and R. Ford, London 1722, p. 1.

¹⁹ See R. Loretelli, *L'invenzione del romanzo. Dall'oralità alla lettura silenziosa*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2010, in particular the section entitled «Fare a meno della voce» (pp. 106-123). As, for the understanding of my argument in the present article, I need to set it against the background of my previous research on the interweaving between book history, the history of reading and literature, in the following pages I shall necessarily refer to my writings more than once.

²⁰ R. Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 25.

²¹ A. Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 2017.

²² T I.4.6.4 («On Personal Identity»). David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. by D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, vol. I, p. 165.

²³ The history of reading was born as a branch of book history and is by now very consistent. It was started by Robert Darnton with his groundbreaking *First Steps toward a History of Reading*, «Australian Journal of French Studies», 23, 1986, pp. 5-30, where he gave some guidelines for research in several possible directions. Since then, all historical periods have been covered, although the eighteenth century is still lingering behind. To the best of my knowledge, the only few exceptions are E.

broad sense) had long been read silently (or, previously, muttered) in restricted cultural circles, this was not the case for narrative, which even those who could read well often liked to listen to, still in the seventeenth century²⁴. But, by the end of the eighteenth century, it was no longer so: the very human nature had changed.

A scene in Wolfgang Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (1809) offers a telling example. Edward, the male protagonist, loved to read to his family and friends gathered in front of him:

A particular trait of his, but one which perhaps he was not alone in, was that he could not bear someone else looking over at a book when he was reading from it. In earlier times, when he read poems, plays and stories, it was the natural consequence of the desire, possessed as much by a reciter as by a poet, an actor or a story-teller, to evoke surprise, to vary the pace to arouse tension²⁵.

Like all those who read aloud to someone else, Edward counted on the possibility of arousing emotions through the expressive qualities of his voice and the control of the pace of the narration in order to trigger surprise and suspense. These effects would be completely spoiled if the listener looked at the book he was reading from. But his two listeners, the female protagonists Charlotte and Ottilie, have so much interiorised silent reading that, as Goethe warns, they have become unable to enjoy a narrative without anchoring the gaze to the printed page.

Something had happened to the very human nature; and I am convinced that it is not incidental that eighteenth-century authors of narrative paid so much attention to their intended reader's cognitive and emotional responses. Although not in the psycho-historical terms in which I have presented the question above, they were

Jajdelska, *Reading and the Birth of the Narrator*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2007, who, after an enquiry into the ways in which reading expanded in eighteenth-century British rural communities, reached the conclusion that a change from vocalized to silent reading took place, and that this had major consequences on the linguistic forms of prose texts; my *L'invenzione del romanzo*, which reached the same conclusions through the interpretation of more or less explicit statements in grammars, periodical essays, prefaces to novels and the very form of novels; Bannet, *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading*, in particular ch. 2, entitled *Arts of Reading* (pp. 92-129). Also, T. Plebani, *La rivoluzione della lettura e la rivoluzione dell'immagine della lettura*, in *Il libro. Editoria e pratiche di lettura nel Settecento*, a cura di L. Braida e S. Tatti, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2006, pp. 3-14, which brings evidence from the visual arts.

²⁴ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* presents many instances of the reading practices of a seventeenth-century book addict, as Pepys was. On the 26th of May 1668, for instance, Pepys convinces a lady he had just met on the stagecoach to read a book of memoirs aloud to him.

²⁵ J.W. von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, Engl. transl. by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1971, p. 49.

aware that they had to find «a new species of writing», as Samuel Richardson put it, in order to captivate their new type of readers. In book reviews, essays in periodicals and prefaces to novels, opinions fluctuated in various directions, having all of them, however, readers as protagonists²⁶. Their targets were not learned readers who knew Latin and the rules prescribed by the Ancients, but all readers, including everyday people who shared the same human nature and the practice of reading silently. Such were the young girls Samuel Richardson consulted in his letters; such was Henry Fielding's «curious» reader in *Tom Jones*, and the «Madam» whose cognitive and emotional capacities Laurence Sterne jokingly alludes to in *Tristram Shandy*.

In modern terms, these are the authors' intended addressees, who respond to what Wolfgang Iser defined the «implied reader», describing it as a «network of response-inviting structures which impel the reader to grasp the text»²⁷. Furthermore, the philosopher specified that this operation was possible because reading is not an act that produces meaning in a totally arbitrary way, but an interaction founded on a universal cognitive and emotional basis. In short, certain textual forms elicit responses which are similar in most readers. It is in this sense that eighteenth-century authors intended their implied readers, focusing attention on human nature and engaging themselves in trying to discover what 'network of structures' could invite cognitive and emotional responses in silent readers.

Against the background delineated above, we shall now observe the passage of the third section of David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* I mentioned at the beginning of the present article. As I said there, I find this passage worthy of attention, since it is wholly dedicated to narrative, one of the arts Hume had not dealt with in his essays.

DAVID HUME'S THIRD SECTION OF THE FIRST ENQUIRY

In the very first section of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume mentions human nature, the common reader (EHU I.1.2) and common sense (EHU I.1.4) almost in one breath. It may appear superfluous to stress this, since these concepts are to be

²⁶ R. Loretelli, *Dell'unità narrativa, ovvero la riflessione settecentesca inglese sul romanzo*, in *La riflessione sul romanzo nell'Europa del Settecento*, a cura di R. Loretelli e U.M. Olivieri, Franco Angeli, Milano 2005, pp. 17-38.

²⁷ W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1978, p. 34.

found everywhere in Hume. However, in the passage we are going to examine, they constitute the backdrop of all Humean considerations.

The third section of the first *Enquiry* consists of only two pages in the 1777 edition, the one which until very recently Hume's editors currently chose to reprint. But in all the editions which Hume saw through the press, from 1748 to 1772, the last before his death, this section was longer. It consisted of about six pages²⁸.

The third section notoriously addresses the ways in which ideas are associated in the mind, namely, through resemblance, contiguity in space and time, and cause and effect. In the 1777 edition, this section includes only the three examples of the portrait, which leads the mind to the original through resemblance; the room, which guides the memory to the other rooms in the house through contiguity; and the wound, which prompts the thought of pain through cause and effect. This is followed by a closing sentence inviting readers to look for other examples and judge by their own experience whether the theory is tenable.

That is how the third section ends in the edition of 1777, but the previous ones contained a few more pages. Precisely these pages will be the object of our consideration here²⁹. They start as follows:

Instead of entering into a detail of this kind namely giving more examples of the three principles in real contexts] [...] we shall consider some of the effects of this connexion

²⁸ See, for instance, Selby-Bigge (David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975³) and also Green and Grose, although in their critical edition (David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. by Th.H. Green and Th.H. Grose, Scientia Verlag Aalen, Darmstadt 1964) they indicate the variants in the notes. In both these editions, the third section consists of only two pages. Differently, T.L. Beauchamp, editor of the edition we are using in this article, opted for the 1772 edition (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, ed. by T.L. Beauchamp, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000), in which the third section consists of approximately six pages, with this passage in square brackets, however (here, it is on pp. 17-23).

²⁹ In *Hume's Literary and Aesthetic Theory*, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Hume*, ed. by D.F. Norton, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 255-280, Peter Jones mentioned this passage in two pages, pointing out the relation there between the literary work and the external world in terms of human agency (pp. 269-270). I discussed the whole passage in *David Hume's Reader-Response Narratology: A New Perspective on the Rise of the Novel*, «1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era», 16, 2009, pp. 44-63. Here I am considering several additional aspects. In *Hume's Imagination* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022, p. 84, n. 29), Tito Magri describes this passage as «a lengthy discussion of the unity of narrative works», commenting that, although being «interesting» in itself, it «risks losing focus of contents and cognition». Further on, Magri mentions this passage again when dealing with the question of representation and absolute ideas in relation to naming (p. 117).

upon the passions and imagination; where we may open a field of speculation more entertaining, and perhaps more instructive than the other.

As man is a reasonable being, and is continually in pursuit of happiness, which he hopes to attain by the gratification of some passion or affection, he seldom acts or speaks or thinks without a purpose and intention. [...] he never loses view of an end [...].

In all compositions of genius, therefore, it is requisite, that the writer have some plan or object; [...] there must appear some aim or intention in the first setting out, if not in the composition of the whole work³⁰.

What I find worthy of notice here is that, in order to probe into the effects of the association of ideas on human emotions, Hume directs his attention to literature. Narrative shall be in fact the focus of the remaining of the section.

The first sentence anticipates the philosophical core of the whole passage, and precisely the effect of the connection of ideas on the passions and the imagination – of a reader, I would add on the basis of what we read in the continuation. The second paragraph refers to a trait of human nature in general, namely the drive that projects the human being toward the future, and is very strong through being rooted in the pursuit of happiness. This drive, suggests Hume, should be exploited by authors of «compositions of genius» in order to give shape to their narrations and induce their readers to continue until the conclusion of the story. To this end, he says, it is necessary that

in narrative compositions, the events or actions, which the writer relates, must be connected together, by some bond or tie: They must be related to each other in the imagination, and form a kind of *Unity*, which may bring them under one plan or view³¹.

«A kind of Unity»: the key locution of this passage has made its appearance in connection with «composition», a word not rare in Hume, either combined with some specifications, or alone where the context makes its meaning clear. Here it is «narrative compositions» and refers to the epic (narration in poetry), history (narration of facts really happened) and biography (narration of an individual life).

What did Hume intend with a «kind of Unity»? Unity was one of the 'rules' which, together with «variety», for at least two centuries had been at the centre of debate

³⁰ EHU I.3.3-4. Interestingly, Amyas Merivale has drawn attention to the last paragraph here above, simply by quoting it in the exergue of his *Hume on Art, Emotion, and Superstition: A Critical Study of the Four Dissertations*, Routledge, New York 2019.

³¹ EHU I.3.6.

in Italian, Spanish and French literary treatises. They were thought to be reciprocally exclusive: more unity in a narrative poem meant less variety, more variety, less unity. Unity and variety were the rules (or were thought to be the rules) Aristotle had established in ancient times³². With 'following the rules', therefore, the Eighteenth century meant following what was thought to be the authority of the Ancients; and it is meaningful that authors who did not fully adhere to tradition used a different terminology. Francis Hutcheson for instance preferred «uniformity»; William Hogarth theorised «variability» as a concept which – as it means variety in time – combines unity and variety together. A cry against the rules will resonate all over from around mid-century, concisely voiced by Laurence Sterne in the words: «*Is a man to follow rules or rules to follow him?*». That is: are authors to follow the rules decreed by authority, or should the rules comply with human nature?

It is therefore more than plausible that by using the expression «kind of Unity», Hume meant to distance himself from the authority of tradition. In fact, here he describes this unity stating that it relates events and actions in the imagination, joining them together «under one plan or view». There follow two quick examples of «narrative compositions» in which connection operates through similarity and contiguity in time and space. Evidently, Hume's concept of textual unity has to do with the association of ideas in the mind. After having quickly done with similarity and contiguity, the philosopher dedicates a whole paragraph to the illustration through literature of the third «principle», that of cause and effect, «the most usual species of connection among different events, which enters into any narrative composition»³³. All types of narrative contain at least some actions connected through cause and effect. In the case of history,

While the historian traces the series of actions according to their natural order, remounts to their secret springs and principles, and delineates the most remote consequences. [...]. Sometimes he supplies by conjecture what is wanting in knowledge: And always, he is sensible, that the more unbroken the chain [of events and actions] is, which he presents to his reader, the more perfect is his production. He sees that the knowledge of causes is not only the most satisfactory; this relation or connection being the strongest of all others; but also the most instructive; since it is by this knowledge alone we are enabled to control events, and govern futurity³⁴.

After this conclusion, which echoes Henry St. John Viscount of Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, Hume continues:

Here therefore, we may attain some notion of that *Unity of Action* about which the critics, after ARISTOTLE, have talked so much: Perhaps, to little purpose while they directed not their taste or sentiment by the accuracy of philosophy. It appears, that, in all productions, as well as in the epic and tragic, there is a certain unity required, and that, on no occasion, can our thoughts be allowed to run at adventures³⁵.

The traditional idea of unity is now overtly and unequivocally rejected. Traditional unity has failed its task – Hume says – and to avoid repeating such an error it is necessary to consult philosophy. And the Humean philosophy advocates a unity based on the mechanisms of the human mind. The function of a unity really operative is to hinder that our thoughts «be allowed to run at adventures». «Our thoughts» in this case means the readers' thoughts.

From this point, Hume explicitly turns his attention uninterruptedly to the reader. The «kind of Unity» he fosters is neither in the narrative nor in the mind; rather, it is produced by the encounter between the two. It is an effect, a response on the part of the reader and exists only as such. In short, it is a *unity perceived in the act of reading*, the result of an experience of reading but – I would like to stress – of reading silently and individually, a practice which was internalised only in the eighteenth century.

To continue with the passage under consideration, Hume now sets himself to specify the traits of human nature and the textual characteristics which combine in perceived unity. With this step, he takes a firm standing on the objective side of his aesthetics. Without excluding a subjective side in the reader's response to "compositions of genius", in the passage Hume undoubtedly reflects on that part of the aesthetic appreciation³⁶ which is common to all human beings, since feelings are similar in them all³⁷.

Every type of narration, Hume insists, must be endowed with unity. Biography, history and the epic

³⁵ EHU I.3.10.

³⁶ For two thought-provoking presentations of the question, see A. Gatti, *Hume's Taste for Standards, Experience and Aesthetic Judgement Reconsidered*, «I castelli di Yale», XI (11), 2019, pp. 131-143; and T.M. Costelloe, *Aesthetics and Morals in the Philosophy of David Hume*, Routledge, New York and London 2007, particularly, chs. 1 and 5. Also, A. Gatti, *Introduction. David Hume's Epistemologies of Aesthetic Experience*; and T.M. Costelloe, *Experience, Epistemology and Taste in Hume's Aesthetics*, in A. Gatti (ed.), *Taste and experience in David Hume's aesthetics*, «Studi di estetica», IV s., LI, 1/2023, pp. 1-4 and 39-58, respectively.

³⁷ T III.3.1.7.

³² Loretelli, *L'invenzione del romanzo*, pp. 110-123.

³³ EHU I.3.9.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

must all make themselves perceived as connected narratives. The difference can only be one of degree:

In epic poetry, the connection among the events is more close and sensible: The narration is not carried on thro' such a length of time and the actors hasten to some remarkable period, which satisfies the curiosity of the reader³⁸.

«Curiosity». The effect of such a unity ensures that readers are driven by their own curiosity and induced to read one fact after the other until the «remarkable period», that is until the climax and denouement, which will satisfy their curiosity.

In the section of the second book of the *Treatise* specifically dedicated to the passion of curiosity, Hume associates it with the love of truth and with utility³⁹. Elsewhere, however, curiosity is considered from the perspective of the causes of violent passions and appears as a secondary passion which mingles with the prevalent one, increasing it⁴⁰. This is a role the philosopher repeatedly assigns to curiosity, as in the passage we are following here, and in the *Treatise*, where he writes:

'Tis a common artifice of politicians, when they wou'd affect any person very much by a matter of fact, of which they intend to inform him, first to excite his curiosity; delay as long as possible the satisfying it; and by that means raise his anxiety and impatience to the utmost, before they give him a full insight into the business. They know that his curiosity will precipitate him into the passion they design to raise⁴¹.

Another example can be found in the essay «Of Tragedy»:

Had you any intention to move a person extremely by the narration of any event, the best method of increasing its effect would be artfully to delay informing him of it, and first to excite his curiosity and impatience before you let him into the secret⁴².

In both the cases above, curiosity increases the predominant passion to the utmost. Now, like all pas-

sions, curiosity needs time to come to life⁴³. But, if in oratory, drama and loud reading to an audience the sources of the utterance are real people, who can vary the pace of discourse or temporarily withdraw information in order to give passions enough time to reach their proper maturity, in the eighteenth century, written narrative could no longer do this. With the practice of individual and silent reading, it could only count on printed words displayed on a page to be quickly scrolled through by the eye. The object of curiosity would be given away much before a passion started to be felt. This is the new problem met by the authors of narrative, and of which Hume seems to be somewhat aware in the three pages of the first *Enquiry* which are the object of our attention here.

THE EFFECT OF HUME'S «KIND OF UNITY» ON THE IMAGINATION AND THE PASSIONS

The task Hume assigns to unity as he intends it seems to me precisely that of solving such a problem. According to him, unity in written narrative is functional to the reader's curiosity, since it contributes to give time to that secondary passion to come to life. Ingrained in curiosity is impatience, which is accompanied by the feeling of 'uneasiness'. A delay in satisfying curiosity, therefore, will heighten impatience and uneasiness.

In this description we easily recognise the feeling of *suspense*. *Suspense*, a word that the eighteenth century inaugurated in literature, while previously it was used – and even rarely – merely in life to signify boredom. 'Dull suspense' was the telling expression, and only slowly over the century the feeling of anxiety was attached to the word. At the same time, over the century the occurrences of the word multiplied, and the first suspenseful narratives appeared⁴⁴.

Let us now go back to the passage of the third section of the first *Enquiry*, which continues:

This conduct of the epic poet depends on that particular situation of the *Imagination* and of the *Passions* [...]. The imagination, both of writer and reader, is more enlivened, and the passions more enflamed than in history, biography, or any species of narration, which confine themselves to strict truth and reality. Let us consider the effect of these two circumstances, an enlivened imagination and enflamed passions. [...] And let us examine the

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ T II.3.10.

⁴⁰ T II.3.4.

⁴¹ T II.3.4. Later reprinted verbatim in *A Dissertation on the Passions* 6.3 (in D. Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions. The Natural History of Religion*, ed. by T.L. Beauchamp, D.F. Norton and M.A. Stewart, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 26).

⁴² *Of Tragedy*, in D. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary: A Critical Edition*, ed. by T.L. Beauchamp and M.A. Box, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, vol. 1, p. 177.

⁴³ T II.3.4.

⁴⁴ Already with full consciousness in Ann Radcliffe, some decades before Edgar Allan Poe. See R. Loretelli, *The Eighteenth-Century Invention of Literary Suspense*, «Textus: English Studies in Italy», 32, 2019, 3, pp. 115-134.

reason, why they require a stricter and closer unity in the fable⁴⁵.

At this point, Hume starts to elucidate on the basis of his philosophy why unity is crucial in narratives to enliven the imagination and enflame the passions. The first reason is that the imagination is stimulated by details:

All poetry [epic poetry], being a species of painting, brings us nearer to the objects that any other species of narration [history and biography] throws a stronger light upon them, and delineates more distinctly those minute circumstances, which [...] serve mightily to enliven the imagery and gratify the fancy. [...] [It is necessary], perhaps, to enter into greater detail than the *Henriade*; where the events are run over with such rapidity, that we scarcely have leisure to become acquainted with the scene of action⁴⁶.

Provided that, as Hume had written in the *Treatise*, «The same good, when near, will cause a violent passion, which, when remote, produces only a calm one»⁴⁷, a narration should present the specific features, details and minutiae of events and characters. While a panorama stretches out before the readers' eyes; while the scene presents itself furnished with precision and a variety of particulars; while, in short, people and contexts are shown in all their details and not as if they were seen from a galloping carriage – to repeat the telling metaphor with which Henry Home, Lord Kames, will also criticize Voltaire's *Henriade*, and for the same reason as Hume⁴⁸ – the reader's imagination is enlivened and his/her emotions gather strength.

The second reason for which unity is required is that

in a just composition, all the affections, excited by the different events, described and represented, add mutual force to each other; and [...] while [...] each action is strongly connected with the whole, the concern is continually awake, and the passions make an easy transition from one to another, The strong connection of the events, as it facilitates the passage from the thought or imagination from one to another, facilitates also the transfusion of the passions and preserves the affections still in the same channel and direction⁴⁹.

Thus, Hume's «kind of Unity», by operating on the readers' minds in giving life and force to their imagina-

tion and passions, is functional to their concern in that text. This is why Hume adds:

But were the poet to make a total digression from his subject, and introduce a new action, nowise connected to the personages, the imagination, feeling a breach in the transition, would enter coldly into the new scene; would kindle by slow degrees; and in returning to the main subject of the poem, would pass, as it were, upon foreign ground, and have its concern to excite anew, in order to take part with the principal actors⁵⁰.

Total digressions should be banned!⁵¹ Hume shares the opinion of all eighteenth-century writers of narrative, who even apologised when they could not avoid introducing them. Not surprisingly, perhaps, as, although long digressions had been the fundamental structural element of the oral epic⁵² and had survived in full swing for many centuries, they started to be felt as interrupting the narrative flow when the practice of individual and silent reading conquered ground⁵³.

As to the relation between the imagination and the passions, Hume had said in the *Treatise*:

It is remarkable, that the imagination and affections have a close union together, and that nothing, which affects the former, can be entirely indifferent to the latter. Wherever our ideas of good or evil acquire a new vivacity, the passions become more violent and keep pace with the imagination in all its variations⁵⁴.

Not only in «common life» – to use Hume's expression – do the imagination and the passions cooperate, but also in «narrative compositions», provided that they are framed in the way Hume has just explained.

However, there is one aspect in which imagination and passions do not seem to proceed in unison. In a passage of the *Treatise* present, verbatim, also in the *Dissertation on the Passions*, Hume writes:

If we consider the human mind, we shall observe, that, with regard to the passions, it is not like a wind instrument of music, which, in running over all the notes, immediately loses the sound when the breath ceases; but rather resembles a string-instrument, where, after each

⁴⁵ EHU I.3.10.

⁴⁶ EHU I.3.11.

⁴⁷ T II.3.4.

⁴⁸ Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, Pr. for A. Millar, and A. Kincaid and J. Bell, London and Edinburgh 1762, vol. III, p. 178.

⁴⁹ EHU I.3.12.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ In what concerns lived life and not discourse, Hume borders this question in T II.3.7 («Of Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time»).

⁵² A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1960.

⁵³ R. Loretelli, *Towards a History of Digression: A Marginal Form at the Centre of the Canon*, in *The Centre and the Margins in Eighteenth-Century British and Italian Cultures*, ed. by F. O'Gorman and L. Guerra, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, pp. 12-24.

⁵⁴ T II.3.6 («Of the Influence of the Imagination on the Passions»).

stroke, the vibrations still retains some sound, which gradually and insensibly decays. The imagination is extremely quick and agile; but the passions, in comparison, are slow and restive: For which reason, when any object is presented, which affords a variety of views to the one and emotions⁵⁵ to the other; though the fancy may change its views with great celerity; each stroke will not produce a clear and distinct note of passion, but the one passion will always be mixed and confounded with the other⁵⁶.

The imagination and the passions do not accord in time; they progress at different paces. Therefore, if a narrative is to arouse the readers' curiosity in order to be read until the very last line, it should meet both needs; it should provide the variety required by the imagination together with the continuity and even slowness needed by the passions. And here again unity comes into play. It allows the rich harvest of the imagination and the several succeeding passions to gather together in the reader's mind⁵⁷.

There is another question which inevitably surfaces in these pages, and it is the question of how the emotions as aroused by people and events in the warm substance of life can be transmitted to readers. How can a reader, who is a human being, get involved in the doings and feelings of literary characters? To this purpose, Hume mentions sympathy, the same immediate and natural response through which, in life, human beings recognize the others as similar to themselves. Sympathy is intimately related to the self⁵⁸, which in its turn is «an original and primary fact in the emotional world of the passions and morality»⁵⁹. The appeal to sympathy in the context of narrative implies that, according to Hume, the readers' selves can enter into a direct contact with the

characters represented, thus feeling them as similar to themselves.

What we can gather from what we read in the passage we have gone through here is that it is not by simply naming the sorrows, pains, or other passions of a character that an author can ensure the activation of the mechanism of sympathy in readers. Much more is needed. The narrative should be framed in such a way as to enliven the readers' imagination and enflame their passions. In short, it should be framed in order to produce Hume's «kind of Unity».

Thus, the narrative form which Hume suggests here and that eighteenth-century writers were making their own performs the twofold function of arousing its readers' emotions and representing a multiple, complex, variable world. How can we fail to recognize the novel in this form? With its capacity to make itself perceived by readers as endowed with a unity that is strong precisely because it is not based on an 'idea' of order and balance but on an 'effect', triggered by textual characteristics.

But if so, it could be asked, why does not Hume mention novels, but only history, biography and, above all, the epic? Is it possible that all the considerations the philosopher unfolds here are based only on the epic, a genre born to be delivered by illiterate 'singers of tales' to an illiterate audience? In light of the advice he gives to authors, this does not sound plausible: the epic is not exactly how he describes it. Why then does he not mention novels?

It seems to me that, besides the fact that, like many intellectuals of his time, probably Hume was not much interested in fictional narratives, there can be two other concurrent reasons. The first, unquestionable, was that before well into the second half of the eighteenth century the term «novel», meaning a long fictional narrative, did not exist⁶⁰. Neither Daniel Defoe, nor Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne or the other eighteenth-century writers whom we now call novelists, had used the term «novel». They called their narratives «love letters», «life and adventures», «the history of...», «memoirs», «progress». And Henry Fielding, who published his *Tom Jones* in 1748 with John Millar, the same year and the same 'publisher' of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in the preface dubbed his book «comic epic poem in prose», continuing to refer to it all along in the text as epic in prose.

The other reason which would explain Hume's not even mentioning by titles the very few narratives which we now call novels and had appeared before 1748 was, in

⁵⁵ Merivale states that most of the time, in Hume, «emotions» and «passions» are stylistic variants (*Hume on Art, Emotion, and Superstition*, p. 177).

⁵⁶ Also T II.3.9, and *A Dissertation on the Passions*, sect. 1 (D. Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion: A Critical Edition*, ed. by T.L. Beauchamp, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 4).

⁵⁷ In the passage, there follow a few examples from ancient and modern epic poems (EHU I.3.13). After this, the editions from 1748 to 1760 continued with a paragraph of considerations on the theatre from the spectator's perspective. In Green and Grose, this paragraph is reported in a note on pp. 22-23; while in Beauchamp's edition, it is in the Editorial Appendix on pp. 236-237.

⁵⁸ T II.1.11.4; T II.2.7.9.

⁵⁹ E. Lecaldano, *The Passions, Character, and the Self in Hume*, «Hume Studies», 28, 2002, 2, pp. 175-193: p. 182. I also found convincing L. Greco, *The Force of Sympathy in the Ethics of David Hume*, in *Hume Readings*, a cura di L. Greco e A. Vaccari, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2012, pp. 193-210. Merivale, *Hume on Art, Emotion, and Superstition*, pp. 55-59, has stressed the strong presence of the mechanism of sympathy in books 2 and 3 of the *Treatise* and how Hume considers it while explaining many phenomena.

⁶⁰ Before the eighteenth century, «novel» as a noun meant a short realistic narrative modelled on the Italian *novelle*, as William Congreve had explained in the preface to his *Incognita* (1691).

my opinion, a cultural reason. Narratives in prose were considered a production of such low moral and intellectual order that it was not convenient for a gentleman to openly admit that he read them, so that what they had eventually gathered from reading romances they attributed to the epic. We can find explicit evidence of such low consideration even in Hume's *Of the Study of History*, an essay he withdrew not without reason in 1768. In that essay, he advises the «fair sex» to read history, and he tells the story of a «young beauty for whom he had some passion» who reproached him for sending her Plutarch's *Lives* instead of «novels and romances» as she had asked. She discovered his deceit when she came across Alexander and Caesar, «whose names she had heard of by accident». The essay continues with some conversational arguments in favour of reading history instead of the tale about Philander. Without mentioning the title, Hume alludes to Aphra Behn's exceptionally successful fiction *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684)⁶¹.

Of course, this is not enough to support the hypothesis that Hume was aware of contemporary narrative. More important to this end is the fact that the new rules he prescribed, so different from those of tradition, show that, like the authors of narrative of his time, as a reader he felt that these rules were not satisfactory. For this reason, it is probably no coincidence that the alternative rules he proposes will reappear, stripped off their philosophical foundations, time and again in periodical essays, prefaces, and in the very narrative practice of the second half of the century. Hume's unity will become the standard requisite of novels, once more making evident that the philosopher was «like a dowsing rod, able to intercept the signals of his time»⁶².

THE CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

The passage we have examined in this article, and which concludes the third section, does not end in a wimp but, to turn upside down the Shakespearean phrase, with a bang, a resonant assertion of its importance. This is how it starts:

These loose hints I have thrown together, in order to excite the curiosity of philosophers, and beget a suspicion

at least, if not a full persuasion, that this subject is very copious, and that many operations of the mind depend on the connexion or association of ideas [...].

And this is how it ends:

The full explanation of this principle and all its consequences would lead us into reasonings too profound and too copious for this inquiry. It is sufficient, at present, to have established this conclusion, that the three connecting principles of all ideas are the relations of *Resemblance*, *Contiguity*, and *Causation*⁶³.

Between the two quotations above, there are a few lines in which Hume recalls the core of the argument he had developed, highlighting the «remarkable» consonance between the imagination and the passions and reaffirming that unity (narrative unity as he intended it, of course) should not be broken, since only through it the communication of emotions can be ensured, interest aroused, and the passions enflamed.

Many operations of the mind depend on the connection of ideas, he restates at the beginning of this closing paragraph in unison with the *Treatise*, several of his essays and the sections following the third one in the *Enquiry*. Yet, he labels what he had written “loose hints thrown together”, as if at random. Besides, in the last sentence but one he stops short his reasoning saying that “the subject is too copious and too profound for the present inquiry”. Why so? Had he not exposed all that was relevant?

It looks as if Hume was revolving some intuition in his mind, concerning narrative and the connecting principles, which had not taken shape yet, but which he felt to be important. I wonder if one could go as far as to hypothesize that Hume might have been asking himself whether there was not more to uncover by observing narration and the connecting principles within the same framework; and whether narration itself might not be an operation of the mind, not only in written narratives to be communicated to a reading public, but the narrations which human beings continuously produce in their minds in order to build their own ideas of how things are.

⁶¹ According to David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton, *The David Hume Library*, pp. 13-64, the precise content of Hume's library is uncertain. Anyhow, the list they give contains Daniel Defoe (entry 515); Samuel Richardson (entry 1044); Henry Fielding (entry 464); Tobias Smollett (entries 1183-84); Laurence Sterne (entry 1216).

⁶² A. Gatti, *Presentazione* in David Hume, *Saggi sul gusto e sulle arti*, a cura di A. Gatti, Mimesis, Milano 2024, p. 47. The translation is mine.

⁶³ EHU I.3.18.