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978-0-521-11410-3 - Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Joel Myerson

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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Nature

[Orestes A. Brownson],
Review of Nature,
Boston Reformer,
 10 September 1836, p. 2

This is a singular book. It is the creation of a mind that lives and moves in the Beautiful, and has the power of assimilating to itself whatever it sees, hears or touches. We cannot analyze it; whoever would form an idea of it must read it.

We welcome it however as an index to the spirit which is silently at work among us, as a proof that mind is about to receive a new and a more glorious manifestation; that higher problems and holier speculations than those which have hitherto engrossed us, are to engage our attention; and that the inquiries, what is perfect in Art, and what is true in Philosophy, are to surpass in interest those which concern the best place to locate a city, construct a railroad, or become suddenly rich. We prophesy that it is the forerunner of a new class of books, the harbinger of a new Literature as much superior to whatever has been, as our political institutions are superior to those of the Old World.

This book is aesthetical rather than philosophical. It inquires what is the Beautiful rather than what is the True. Yet it touches some of the gravest problems in

metaphysical science, and may perhaps be called philosophy in its poetical aspect. It uniformly subordinates nature to spirit, the understanding to the reason, and mere hand-actions to ideas, and believes that ideas are one day to disenthral the world from the dominion of semi-shadows, and make it the abode of peace and love, a meet Temple in which to enshrine the Spirit of universal and everlasting Beauty.

The author is a genuine lover of nature, and in a few instances he carries his regard for woods and fields so far as to be in danger of forgetting his socialities, and that all nature combined is infinitely inferior to the mind that contemplates it, and invests it with all its charms. And what seems singular to us is, that with all this love for nature, with this passion for solitary woods and varied landscapes, he seems seriously to doubt the existence of the external world except as a picture which God stamps on the mind. He all but worships what his senses seem to present him, and yet is not certain that all that which his senses place out of him, is not after all the mere subjective laws of his own being, existing only to the eye, not of a necessary, but of an irresistible Faith.

Some great minds have, we know had this doubt. This was the case with the acute and amiable Bishop Berkeley, the audacious Fichte and several others we could mention. Taking their stand-point in the creative power of the human soul, and observing the landscape to change in

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its coloring as the hues of their own souls change, they have thought the landscape was nothing but themselves projected, and made an object of contemplation. The notion is easily accounted for, but we confess that we should think so acute a philosopher as our author would easily discover its fallacy.

The Reason is undoubtedly our only light, our only criterion of certainty; but we think the Reason vouches for the truth of the senses as decidedly and as immediately as it does for its own conceptions. He who denies the testimony of his senses, seems to us to have no ground for believing the apperceptions of consciousness; and to deny those is to set oneself afloat upon the ocean of universal scepticism. The whole difficulty seems to us to be in not duly understanding the report of the senses. The senses are the windows of the soul through which it looks out upon a world existing as really and as substantially as itself; but what the external world is, or what it is the senses report it to be, we do not at first understand. The result of all culture, we think will not be as our author thinks, to lead to Idealism, but to make us understand what it is we say, when we say, there is an external world.

The author calls the external world phenomenal, that is, an Appearance; but he needs not to be told that the appearance really exists, though it exists as an

appearance, as that which appears, as the Absolute. Man is phenomenal in the same sense as is the universe, but man exists. The author calls him "the apparition of God." The apparition exists as certainly as God exists, though it exists as an apparition, not as absolute being. God is absolute being.—Whatever is absolute is God; but God is not the universe, God is not man; man and the universe exist as manifestations of God. His existence is absolute, theirs is relative, but real.

But we are plunging too deeply into metaphysics for our readers and perhaps for ourselves.—In conclusion, we are happy to say that however the author may deviate from what we call sound philosophy, on his road, he always comes to the truth at last. In this little book he has done an important service to his fellow men.—He has clothed nature with a poetic garb, and interpenetrated her with the living spirit of Beauty and Goodness, showed us how we ought to look upon the world round and about us, set us an example of a calm, morally independent, and devout spirit discoursing on the highest and holiest topics which can occupy the human soul, and produced a book which must ever be admired as a perfect specimen of Art. We thank him for what he has done and commend his book—his poem we might say—to every lover of the True, the Beautiful and the Good.

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F[ran]cis. B[owen].,
 “Transcendentalism,”
Christian Examiner,
 21 (January 1837),
 371–85

We find beautiful writing and sound philosophy in this little work; but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer’s whole course of thought. The highest praise that can be accorded to it, is, that it is a *suggestive* book, for no one can read it without tasking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into fits of severe meditation. But the effort of perusal is often painful, the thoughts excited are frequently bewildering, and the results to which they lead us, uncertain and obscure. The reader feels as in a disturbed dream, in which shows of surpassing beauty are around him, and he is conversant with disembodied spirits, yet all the time he is harassed by an uneasy sort of consciousness, that the whole combination of phenomena is fantastic and unreal.

In point of taste in composition, some defects proceed from over anxiety to avoid common errors. The writer aims at simplicity and directness, as the ancient philosopher aimed at humility, and showed his pride through the tatters of his cloak. He is in love with the Old Saxon idiom, yet there is a spice of affectation in his mode of using it. He is sometimes coarse and blunt, that he may avoid the imputation of sickly refinement, and writes bathos with malice prepense, because he abhors forced dignity and unnatural elevation.

These are grave charges, but we make them advisedly, for the author knows better than to offend so openly against good

taste, and, in many passages of great force and beauty of expression, has shown that he can do better. The following sentences, taken almost at random, will show the nature of the defects alluded to.

“Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable, as language, sleep, dreams, beasts, sex.”—p. 7.

“Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air,—and uplifted into infinite space,—all egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball.”—p. 13.

“Whilst we use this grand cipher to expedite the affairs of our pot and kettle, we feel that we have not put it to its use, neither are able.”

“Therefore is Space, and therefore Time, that men may know that things are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual.”—p. 48.

“I expand and live in the warm day, like corn and melons.”—p. 73.

The purpose of the book, so far as it may be said to have a purpose, is, to invite us to the observation of nature, and to point out manifestations of spirit in material existences and external events. The uses to which the outward world is subservient are divided into four classes,—Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline. These ends the writer considers as the final cause of everything that exists, except the soul. To the consideration of each he allots a chapter, and displays, often with eloquence and a copious fund of illustration, the importance of the end, and the aptitude of the means provided for its attainment. In the latter part of the work, he seems disposed to neutralize the effect of the former, by adopting the Berkeleyan system, and denying the outward and real existence of that Nature, which he had just declared to be so subservient to man’s spiritual wants. Of the chapters on “Spirit” and “Prospects,” with which the work concludes, we prefer not to attempt giving an account, until we can understand their meaning.

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From this sketch of the author's plan, it would seem, that he had hardly aimed at originality. What novelty there is in the work, arises not from the choice or distribution of the subject, but from the manner of treatment. The author is not satisfied with that cautious philosophy which traces the indirect influences of outward phenomena and physical laws on the individual mind, and contemplates the benevolence of the Deity in particular instances of the adaptation and subserviency of matter to spirit. He contemplates the Universe from a higher point of view. Where others see only an analogy, he discerns a final cause. The fall of waters, the germination of seeds, the alternate growth and decay of organized forms, were not originally designed to answer the wants of our physical constitution, but to acquaint us with the laws of mind, and to serve our intellectual and moral advancement. The powers of Nature have been forced into the service of man. The pressure of the atmosphere, the expansive force of steam, the gravity of falling bodies, are our ministers, and do our bidding in levelling the earth, in changing a wilderness into a habitable city, and in fashioning raw materials into products available for the gratification of sense and the protection of body. Yet these ends are only of secondary importance to the great purpose for which these forces were created and made subject to human power. Spiritual laws are typified in these natural facts, and are made evident in the whole material constitution of things. Man must study matter, that he may become acquainted with his own soul.

["Language," 19.11–30]

Thus far, whatever we may think of the truth and soberness of the writer's views, he is at least intelligible. But his imagination now takes a higher flight, and the bewildered reader strives in vain through the cloud-capt phraseology to catch a

glimpse of more awful truths. Who will be the *Œdipus* to solve the following enigmas?

["Language," 22.15–23.4]

In the chapter on "Discipline," the lessons of Nature are enforced with great energy and directness. Man is not so constitutionally active, but that he must receive repeated monitions to labor, or the powers of body and mind will rust and decay. Wants and cravings are imposed upon him, some of which his very physical constitution imperatively requires to be satisfied, and immediate stinging pain is the punishment of neglect. Once gratified, they recur, and provision must again be made. To the knowledge of higher wants he arrives by more extended observation and by every advance in knowledge. Thus, the thirst for truth is insatiable, and increases from gratification. Nature entices us to toil, by offering to gratify the lust for power, and subjecting herself to our dominion. She assumes the harness, and allows us to guide the reins, that she may carry us onward. An exact correspondence exists between the constitution of the soul and of the universe. The love of beauty, of dominion, of comfort, find their appropriate food in the various relations of things, that first called these passions into being, or at least first made us conscious of their existence. Variegated colors, brilliant appearances, curious forms, call us away from the chamber and the couch, that we may walk abroad and admire. The desire of fame and the social instinct are adapted to each other. Either principle alone would be inefficient and useless. United, they are continually pressing us to action. Industry is the great lesson of life, and the universe is the teacher.

But man is not only an active, but a moral being. The constitution of society, the relations which connect him with his fellows, are his instructors in virtue. A hermitage is no school of morals, and were man a hermit from his birth, the terms *right*

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and *wrong* with him would have but an imperfect and narrow application. The moral teachings of *nature*, understanding by the term all that is distinct from spirit, are auxiliary, but insufficient. Mind must act upon mind. Man must stand in need of his fellow, before he can learn to love him. The mother, indeed, may love her child, before the infant is able to pay the first instalment of its debt to her, “*risu cognoscere matrem.*” But the feeling is instinctive, and as such, is not a subject of moral approbation, any more than when it exists in the brute. With this limitation, we accept the following remarks from the book before us.

[“Discipline,” 26.22–27.7]

Having thus considered the uses of the material world, its adaptation to man’s physical wants, to his love of beauty, and his moral sense, the author turns and aims a back blow at the universe, which he has been leading us to admire and love. The heavens are rolled together like a scroll, the solid earth cracks beneath our feet,

“Wide wilderness and mountain, rock and sea,
Peopled with busy transitory groups,”

are shadows, and exist only in mind. Matter is nothing, spirit is all. Man is alone in the vast inane with his God.

We have no quarrel with Idealism. Philosophers may form what dreams they choose, provided their speculations affect favorably their own faith and practice, and can never, from their very nature, command the belief, or bewilder the understanding of the mass of mankind. But we do protest against the implied assertion of the idealist, that the vulgar entertain opinions less philosophically just than his own. In the pride of opinion, he has overrated his own success, which at the utmost amounts

only to this, that he has shown the inconclusiveness of the arguments commonly adduced to prove the outward and independent existence of matter. But he has brought no positive arguments to disprove the existence of any thing exterior to mind. He has not shown, that the common opinion involves any repugnancy or inconsistency in itself. The bridge on which we relied for support may be broken down, but we are not whelmed in the waters beneath. The belief still exists, and its universality is a fact for which the idealist cannot account. This fact puts the burden of proof upon him, and it is a load which he cannot support. The infant forms this belief before it quits its mother’s arms. It has existed in every age, as a postulate for the exercise of many affections and emotions, that form a part of the primitive constitution of mind. Nay, the philosopher himself, “when he mingles with the crowd, must be content to comply with common opinions, to speak as custom dictates, and to forget, as well as he can, the doubts and the doctrines which reason perhaps permits, which speculation loves, and which solitude encourages.”

On reviewing what we have already said of this singular work, the criticism appears to be couched in contradictory terms; we can only allege in excuse the fact, that the book is a contradiction in itself. A fair notice of it would be in the vein of honest Touchstone’s commentary on a shepherd’s life. “Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd’s life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humor well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?”

But enough of the work itself; it belongs to a class, and may be considered as the latest representative of that class.

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Within a short period, a new school of philosophy has appeared, the adherents of which have dignified it with the title of Transcendentalism. In its essential features, it is a revival of the Old Platonic school. It rejects the aid of observation, and will not trust to experiment. The Baconian mode of discovery is regarded as obsolete; induction is a slow and tedious process, and the results are uncertain and imperfect. General truths are to be attained without the previous examination of particulars, and by the aid of a higher power than the understanding. "The hand-lamp of logic" is to be broken, for the truths which are *felt* are more satisfactory and certain than those which are *proved*. The sphere of intuition is enlarged, and made to comprehend not only mathematical axioms, but the most abstruse and elevated propositions respecting the being and destiny of man. Pure intelligence usurps the place of humble research. Hidden meanings, glimpses of spiritual and everlasting truth are found, where former observers sought only for natural facts. The observation of sensible phenomena can lead only to the discovery of insulated, partial, and relative laws; but the consideration of the same phenomena, in a typical point of view, may lead us to infinite and absolute truth,—to a knowledge of the reality of things.

As the object and method of philosophizing are thus altered, it is obvious that language also must be modified, and made to subserve other purposes than those for which it was originally designed. Transcendental philosophy took its rise in Germany, and the language of that country, from the unbounded power which it affords of composition and derivation from native roots, is well adapted to express results that are at once novel and vague. Hence the mysticism and over refinement, which characterize the German school of philosophy, art, and criticism. Our own tongue is more limited and inflexible. It must be

enriched by copious importations from the German and Greek, before it can answer the ends of the modern school. And this has been done to such an extent, that could one of the worthies of old English literature rise from his grave, he would hardly be able to recognise his native tongue.

Among other innovations in speech made by writers of the Transcendental school, we may instance the formation of a large class of abstract nouns from adjectives,—a peculiarity as consonant with the genius of the German language, as it is foreign to the nature of our own. Thus we now speak of the *Infinite*, the *Beautiful*, the *Unconscious*, the *Just*, and the *True*. A new class of verbs also has been formed from the same or similar roots, such as *individualize*, *materialize*, *externize*, &c. For instances of new and awkward compounds, take the following; *instreaming*, *adolescent*, *symbolism*, *unconditioned*, *theosophists*, *internecive*.

We deprecate the introduction of a new class of philosophical terms, as it encourages tyros to prate foolishly and flippantly about matters, which they can neither master nor comprehend. Once let a peculiar diction gain footing in philosophy, as it has already done in poetry, and we shall have as great a cloud of pretenders and sciolists in the former, as already exercise our patience in the latter. Nonsense cannot be concealed in plain and sober prose. It stands conspicuous in its jejuneness and sterility. But by ringing the changes on the poetical vocabulary, a *mirage* of meaning is produced, and the mass of readers are cheated into the belief that the author says something. So is there reason to fear that a great portion of modern metaphysics and what is termed *æsthetic* criticism, is made up of "words, words," and very awkward and affected words too. Translate a passage of such writing into English, and it will be found to transcend both reason and common sense.

We speak generally. To many writers of

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the New School we confess our obligation for new and valuable hints, expressed in energetic though affected language. But their influence is most pernicious. Writers, who cannot fathom their depth of thought, will imitate their darkness of language; and instead of comparing truths and testing propositions, readers must busy themselves in hunting after meaning, and investigating the significancy of terms.

It would avail but little, perhaps, with some Transcendentalists to assert, that the deepest minds have ever been the clearest, and to quote the example of Locke and Bacon, as of men who could treat the most abstruse subjects in the most familiar and intelligible terms. If in their modesty they did not rank themselves above such names as these, they would probably allege the different nature of their tasks, and attribute the difficulty of communication to daring originality in the choice of ends and means. But it is evident that novelty both of plan and execution, though it may retard progress, ought not to vitiate results. We do not complain of the New School for doing little, but for doing nothing in a satisfactory manner; for boasting of progress, when they cannot show clear evidence of having advanced a step. We cannot believe, that there is a large class of truths, which in their very nature are incomprehensible to the greater part of mankind. Of course, we speak not of the multitude, whose incapacity results from ignorance and the want of experience in thinking. But the Transcendentalists more than insinuate, that the majority of educated and reflecting men are possessed of minds so unlike their own, that they doubt their power of constructing a bridge which may serve for the transmission of ideas to persons so little fitted to receive them. What a frivolous excuse for being unintelligible is this! There is an essential unity in Truth, in the means of research, and in the vehicle of communication. There is but one philosophy, though

there are many theories; and but one mode of expressing thought, (namely, by symbols,) though there are many languages. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things and their relations. To perceive them at all is to perceive them clearly, and the perception cannot fail of being conveyed to others, except through a very school-boy's ignorance of the force of terms.

The alleged analogy between the new philosophy and the higher branches of mathematics, as respects the preparatory labor required for the study of either, rests upon forgetfulness of the essential difference between moral and demonstrative reasoning. One cannot read the "Mecanique Celeste" without a knowledge of geometry and the calculus. But the difficulty relates to the mode of proof, and results from the technical nature of the reasoning process. The several propositions, which are proved by La Place, admit of being enunciated in terms intelligible to the lowest capacity. A child may understand them, though he knows nothing of the means by which they have been attained and shown to be true. But in moral reasoning, where there are few technicalities, and the conclusion is but a step from the premises, the obstructions to our progress arise from the mutability and ambiguity of terms. Obscurity of language is not a defect merely in the mode of communication, but betrays a want of the power of reasoning. Words are not only the exponents, they are the substratum and essence of abstract thought. Mathematical propositions are like the rounds of a ladder placed against the side of a building; we must pass over each in succession, before attaining the summit. But in treating of moral subjects, the several steps are like the rounds of the same ladder placed flat upon the earth; we can tread on any one, provided the foothold be sure, without touching the others.

We are ashamed to labor this point. The analogy alluded to is so forced, that it can

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have deceived no one. If the partisans of the New School still insist upon it, let them manufacture a treatise on the rudiments of Transcendentalism, that tyros may begin with the alphabet of the science, and toil slowly but surely up its cloud-capt heights. In this connexion a few homely remarks from the writings of a philosopher, who enjoyed some repute in his day, may not appear inappropriate. "Nevertheless, this artificial ignorance and learned gibberish prevailed mightily in these last ages, by the interest and artifice of those who found no easier way to that pitch of authority and dominion they have attained, than by amusing the men of business and ignorant with hard words, or employing the ingenious in intricate disputes about unintelligible terms, and holding them perpetually entangled in that endless labyrinth. Besides, there is no such way to gain admittance, or give defence to strange and absurd doctrines, as to guard them round about with legions of obscure and undefined words; which make these retreats more like the dens of robbers, or the holes of foxes, than the fortresses of fair warriors; which if it be hard to get them out of, it is not for the strength that is in them, but the briers and thorns, and the obscurity of the thickets they are beset with. For untruth being unacceptable to the mind of man, there is no other defence left for absurdity but obscurity."¹

But we are not left to infer vagueness and incompleteness of thought from obscurity of language. The writers of whom we speak, openly avow their preference of such indistinct modes of reflection, and justify loose and rambling speculations, mystical forms of expression, and the utterance of truths that are but half perceived, on the same principle, it would seem, that influences the gambler, who expects by a number of random casts to obtain at last the desired combination. In this respect, the philosophy of the New School is well summed up

by the writer before us in the following assertions; "that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments." "Poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history." Why not follow the principle of the gambler entirely, by shaking a number of words in a hat, and then throwing them upon a table, in the hope that, after a number of trials, they may so arrange themselves as to express some novel and important truth?

"Insanam vatem adspicies, quæ, rupe sub
imâ,
Fata canit, foliisque notas et nomina man-
dat."

If it be urged, that vagueness is not inconsistent with reality and truth, we reply, that this assertion does not meet the point, nor resolve the difficulty. In the imperfect conceptions of man, mystery may envelope truth, but it does not constitute that truth, any more than the veil of the temple is in itself the "Holy of Holies." Still less is there any *necessary* connexion between dimness and reality; for truth, considered as the object of Divine contemplation, is light itself, and glimpses of the spiritual world are blinding to man, only because they dazzle with excessive brightness. We live in the twilight of knowledge, and though ignorant of the points of the compass, it argues nothing but blind perverseness, to turn to the darkest part of the horizon for the expected rising of the sun.

We have a graver complaint to make of the spirit in which the disciples of the modern school have conducted their inquiries and answered their opponents. "It might seem incredible," says Mackintosh, "if it were not established by the experience of all ages, that those who differ most from the opinions of their fellow men, are most confident of the truth of their own." Dog-

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matism and the spirit of innovation go hand in hand. And the reason is obvious, for there is no common ground on which the opponents can stand, and cultivate mutual good will in the partial unity of their interests and pursuits. Both the means and the ends, which other philosophers have proposed to themselves, are rejected by the new sect of hierophants. They are among men, but not of men. From the heights of mystical speculation, they look down with a ludicrous self-complacency and pity on the mass of mankind, on the ignorant and the educated, the learners and the teachers, and should any question the grounds on which such feelings rest, they are forthwith branded with the most opprobrious epithets, which the English or the Transcendental language can supply. It is not going too far to say, that to the bitterness and scorn, with which Coleridge and some of his English adherents have replied to modest doubts and fair arguments, no parallel can be found, save in the scholastic controversies of the Middle Ages.

But the world has grown too old and too proud to be sent to school again by any sect. It boasts of having accomplished something by the labor of ages, of having settled some principles and ascertained some facts; and though it will thankfully accept any addition to its treasury, it will not regard as useless all its former stores, and begin the career of discovery anew. The Transcendentalists have been unwise, therefore, in adopting an offensive tone in the outset, and promulgating new views of things in an overbearing and dictatorial manner. Dogmatists may be sincere, but they are not often successful. Their manner creates a disgust, which no acknowledged ardor in the pursuit of truth, no disinterestedness of purpose, no acuteness of inquiry can ever remove. A sneer is unanswerable, but it is no argument, and repels rather than persuades the modest inquirer. To cavil at the understandings of those who complain of

obscurity, is a poor mode of rebutting the charge, since the ignorant, the foolish, and the vain may on every occasion use the same plea with equal effect. The weapon is too common, and has been too much abused, to be any longer effective. The affectation of distinguishing between *esoteric* and *exoteric* doctrines became obsolete centuries ago, and it is preposterous to attempt to revive it at the present day.

We cannot better illustrate our meaning, than by quoting a passage written in a spirit directly opposite to that alluded to. It is taken from the writings of a man, whose name will never cease to be respected, till the maxim shall come to be generally received, that strong common sense is incompatible with philosophical genius. "To Mr. Coleridge, who doubts his own power of building a bridge by which his ideas may pass into a mind so differently trained as mine, I venture to suggest, with that sense of his genius which no circumstance has hindered me from seizing every fit occasion to manifest, that more of my early years were employed in contemplations of an abstract nature, than those of a majority of his readers; that there are not, even now, many of them less likely to be repelled from doctrines by singularity or uncouthness; more willing to allow that every system had caught an advantageous glimpse of some side or corner of the truth; more desirous of exhibiting this dispersion of the fragments of wisdom by attempts to translate the doctrines of one school into the language of another; who, when he cannot discover a reason for an opinion, considers it as important to discover the causes of its adoption by the philosopher; believing, in the most unfavorable cases, that one of the most arduous and useful researches of mental philosophy is to explore the subtle illusions, which enable great minds to satisfy themselves by mere words, before they deceive others by payment in the same counterfeit coin. These habits, together with