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THE LETTERS IN THE STORY

The long tradition of mixta-genera fiction, particularly favored by women novelists, which combined fully transcribed letters and third-person narrative has been largely overlooked in literary criticism. Working with recognized formal conventions and typical thematic concerns, Eve Tavor Bannet demonstrates how narrative-epistolary novels opposed the real, situated, transactional, and instrumental character of letters, with their multilateral relationships and temporally shifting readings, to merely documentary uses of letters in history and law. Analyzing issues of reading and misreading, knowledge and ignorance, and communication and credulity, this study investigates how novelists adapted familiar romance plots centered on mysteries of identity to test the viability of empiricism's new culture of fact and challenge positivism's later all-pervading regime of truth. Close reading of narrative-epistolary novels by authors ranging from Aphra Behn, Charlotte Lennox and Frances Burney, to Jane Austen, Wilkie Collins and Anthony Trollope tracks transgenerational debates, bringing to light both what Victorians took from their eighteenth-century forbears and what they changed.

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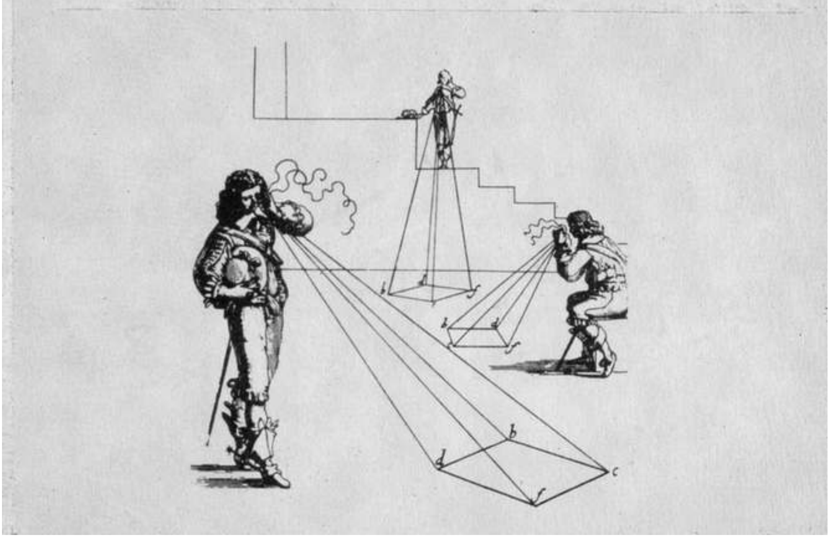

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Narrative-Epistolary Fiction from Aphra Behn to the Victorians

EVE TAVOR BANNET
University of Oklahoma

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Preface: "To the Reader"

In addition to the epistolary novel and the first- or third-person narrative "history," there was from the first a vibrant tradition of narrative-epistolary fiction that mixed the two forms. In embedding multiple letters in her narratives – most obviously in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) – Jane Austen was working in a long-standing, but now apparently forgotten, narrative-epistolary genre, which began to flourish in England in 1685 with Part 2 of Aphra Behn's *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister.* This narrative-epistolary genre was used predominantly by women writers such as Jane Barker, Mary Davys, and Eliza Haywood during the first half of the eighteenth century. It was sufficiently familiar by 1742, for Henry Fielding to be able to mock it quixotically in *Joseph Andrews*. It continued to be used throughout the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic, still predominantly by women – for instance, in Eliza Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1752), Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta* (1758), Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796), Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1782) and *Celestina* (1791), Susannah Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794), Robert Bage's *Hermsprong* (1796), and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801). Adapted during the nineteenth century to new epistemologies and new ideas of the self, it was redeployed by Anne and Charlotte Bronte, Frances Trollope, Wilkie Collins, Thackeray, and Dickens among others, reaching its apotheosis during the 1860s and 1870s in Anthony Trollope's prolix corpus where this study ends. But exemplars are still to be found in twentieth-century British, American, and Anglophone postcolonial fiction where they are often viewed as radically new, postmodern departures from the mainstream realist or modernist novel.[1] Historically, then, narrative-epistolary fictions had a far longer life than the epistolary novel, which was abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century. Narrative-epistolary fiction lived on in part because it proved far more versatile and multifaceted formally, and far more "philosophical" and rewarding intellectually, than the epistolary novel (Samuel

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Richardson notwithstanding), and in part because it enabled writers to combine the familiarity, immediacy, instrumentality, and emotional power of letters with narrative supplementation, narrative pacing, and a narrator's often equivocal guidance on how embedded letters should be understood and used.

From Aphra Behn to the Victorians, narrative-epistolary fiction had its own, recognized, formal conventions for embedding letters in narrative and its own typical thematic concerns. These themes and conventions were put in place in England early on by Aphra Behn, popularized by Eliza Haywood, and subsequently followed, assumed, varied, and adapted by other novelists, including Jane Austen, and those like Charles Brockden Brown in *Wieland* (1798) or George Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), who only included an embedded letter or two. Some novelists worked exclusively in this genre – Mary Davys, Eliza Haywood, and Anthony Trollope among others. Some also tried other formal vehicles: Charlotte Smith also wrote two epistolary novels; Charlotte Lennox, Susannah Rowson, and Anne Bronte also wrote first- or third-person narratives. Some, such as Aphra Behn and Frances Burney, produced prose fictions of each sort. Others, such as Jane Barker, Jane Austen, or Charlotte Bronte, reverted to narrative-epistolary writing for key sections of first- or third-person narratives. As we will see, the virtues of different novel forms were hotly debated, albeit not always in the standard critical outlets.

Questions of form are not empty technical questions as many narratologists would have us believe. Narrative-epistolary conventions and clever variations upon them permitted novelists to explore and debate contemporary epistemological, psychological, and historical questions about our reading and misreading of characters, texts, and events, and thus to make fiction a popularly accessible vehicle for Enlightenment inquiries and concerns. Varying their combinations of narrative and letters enabled eighteenth-century authors to test the viability of empiricism's new "culture of fact" and to explore cognate issues of reading and misreading, perception and misperception, ignorance and knowledge, and credulity and doubt, while demonstrating how such issues arose from people's mental processes, as well as from culturally promoted norms of concealment and from their exploitation by willful deceivers. Nineteenth-century narrative-epistolary authors working with these inherited conventions were more likely to relativize empiricism by reintroducing forms of narrative-epistolary writing, and modes of being and narrating, banished by empiricism's imperious, and now all-pervasive, regime of truth. They were more inclined to show how a determined investigator or curious reader might

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use letters to detect things about people's characters, lives, and conduct that they had taken some pains to conceal, and to treat misread letters psychologically as expressions of characters' involuntary self-deception. But in both periods, narrative-epistolary conventions challenged historians' merely documentary use of letters, by insisting upon what the narratives in supposedly true histories perversely elided about the true historicity of letters: their social and circumstantial embeddedness; their situated meaning(s) and performative function(s); the sliding significances deriving from their multiple temporalities and transactional character; their often unexpected long-term social and historical effects; and failure of some letters, however important in themselves, to have any effect on reality and history at all. In both periods too, narrative-epistolary writers challenged the efforts of scientists and empiricist philosophers to oppose true to fictional narratives, and the sciences of man to other poetical inventions, by insisting on what empiricism's boasted grasp on reality perversely elided: the roles played by preconceptions, spurious conjectures, and imagination in reasoning inductively from experience and in drawing inferences from acts, words, and texts; the mutability of facts; the plausibility of *false* empirical fact-based narratives; the propensity of the invisible, unnoticed, unseen, or unknown to falsify observation-based reasoning, and of contingent particulars to derail supposedly universal truths; the unsoundness of probable links in empiricist "chains" of cause and effect; and the fallacy of expecting that we can judge the future by the past.

Until recently, the multiplication of embedded letters in a story was studied primarily as the stylistic peculiarity of a single novel (Behn's *Love Letters*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*) or of a single novelist (Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope). Unlike embedded narratives whose aporias were extensively theorized by narratologists and exploited by deconstructive critics, embedded letters were otherwise either comprehensively ignored even in analyzing novels studded with them or treated as intrinsic elements of the narrative, which are "both psychologically revealing and also plot furthering."[2] The recent rise of scholarly interest in the letter form has directed interesting new work toward letters as drivers of "postal plots" in nineteenth-century novels.[3] Joined to current concerns with reading and material culture, this has produced some outstanding close readings of epistolary scenes and some important studies of fictional representations of letters as material objects. These include Catherine Golden's study of the role played by the post, and by such epistolary furniture as portable writing desks, in the plots of novels written after the Post Office Reform Act of 1840; William Warner's analysis of Austen's narrative about the Marianne–Willoughby correspondence in *Sense*

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and Sensibility; and Thomas Karshan's "Notes on the Image of the Undelivered Letter," which argues that the undelivered letter is "one of modernism's central images."[4] More traditional sociohistorical approaches have demonstrated the same tendency to subsume embedded letters under narrative. Mistakenly viewing the embedding of letters in narratives as a "generic innovation" of the 1790s, Nicola Watson, for instance, argued in an influential book that this innovation "can be linked directly to changes in political, cultural and ideological structures" in Britain during the backlash to the French Revolution, and that it can be explained as an attempt to "contain" the dangerous freedom of the epistolary novel and to "discipline" unruly and potentially subversive correspondence.[5]

By contrast, scholars wishing to rescue the letters in a story (as well as their subject) from narrative effacement and academic marginalization have equated embedded letters with the letters in epistolary novels. Like Robert Adams Day's *Told in Letters*, which traced "stories in which imaginary letters figure in various quantities" back to late Greek romances, Janet Gurkin Altman's structuralist monograph, *Epistolarity*, tried to "show that, though novels like *Mitsou* and *Herzog* would have to be classified as 'mixed forms' in terms of narrative technique, they arguably are epistolary novels in a more specifically generic sense."[6] Julia Epstein's account of Jane Austen's *Juvenalia* likewise groups Austen's early epistolary novels with those early prose fictions that contain "significant epistolary interpolations, though they are not altogether written in letters," and discusses them in the same terms. Or again: to characterize twentieth-century postcolonial novels in which unseen letters serve as "mirrors" for the protagonist and drivers for the plot, Elizabeth Campbell argues that "novels which are not composed exclusively of letters can be classified as epistolary . . . if the plot is determined, advanced and resolved in letters."[7] One might include among the scholarship that equates embedded letters with the letters in epistolary novels those studies that treat "the letter" in nineteenth-century novels metaphorically without regard to its contents, and those that analyze embedded letters as separate entities with functions that can be listed more or less independently of the narrative.[8]

There is much to be learned from these and other examinations of what catalogers call "letters-in-literature." But they also show why classing narrative-epistolary writing with epistolary novels is as unsatisfactory as tipping embedded letters seamlessly into narrative. Both classifications render invisible the wide variety of conjunctive and disjunctive relations between narrative and embedded letters, together with the many different uses to which these were put. By causing us to overlook narrative-epistolary

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conventions that were used, adapted, and reused by novelist after novelist, they also efface consequential writerly issues and debates, and blind us to how authors writing in, or briefly invoking, the narrative-epistolary tradition expected to be read. Like traditional periodization (Restoration, Eighteenth-Century, Romantic, and Victorian), this "purist" binary taxonomy of narrative *or* epistolary fiction has a limiting effect on our awareness of the practices that shaped literary history. As Franco Moretti has shown, modern critical categories can erase their object by turning self-referentially upon themselves.[9] Setting them aside for a while reveals the links between narrative-epistolary works in successive periods – enabling us to recognize modernism's undelivered letter, for instance, not merely as a figure for the lack of communication in modern life, but also as a comment on nineteenth-century literary realism that cites and creatively recycles a common eighteenth-century narrative-epistolary *topos*.

About this book

This study is neither a comprehensive literary history nor a work of classical narratology. It seeks to make some preliminary inroads into narrative-epistolary fiction by pursuing a few formal and thematic threads within the larger history sketched out more fully in the Introduction. It does so through close reading and in a manner more consonant with an "historical narratology" in which "literary historical research is combined with narratological conceptualization" than with the still primarily fixed, schematic, and universalizing bent of formalist, structuralist, and cognitive narratology.[10] Here, this means recovering historically changing uses and configurations of formal devices considered as "open sets" and looking to literary, historiographical, and philosophical theories that were discussed at the time for explanation and conceptualization.[11] Women writers predominate in the texts selected for close reading both because in this period this was a primarily female novelistic tradition that was first cited or mocked and later appropriated by male authors, and because I agree with Rachel Carnell that "one reason for the continued marginality of . . . women writers in the canon . . . is that their work has been analyzed most frequently in terms of political or cultural history rather than in terms of the development of the novel's formal structure."[12]

A preliminary overview in the Introduction of the principal formal conventions and principal empirical and historical issues to be explored in this study provides the framework for what follows. Each subsequent chapter addresses a formal feature of narrative-epistolary fiction together

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with a topic connected with it through close readings of several dialoguing texts. Texts within each chapter are discussed in chronological order, but new chapters begin with the earliest well-developed version of a formal feature rather than at the point in time where the previous chapter ended. Novels or narrative-epistolary episodes have been selected, which expand, alter, or adapt the same formal device and add in important ways to the substance and representation of the issue in question. Each text is therefore significantly different from the one(s) before. They are linked by repeated reprinting, by later authors' familiarity with them and/or by the practice originating in Quintilian of responding to prior texts by rewriting, altering, and correcting their characters and scenes. That suspends modern categorizations of novels and means that there are large temporal gaps in each chapter; but it makes it possible to view dialoguing texts both as part of a narrative-epistolary tradition that runs through other conventional novel groupings and as preliminary "soundings" of the state of play at different historical moments. Readers wishing to reconstruct a single ongoing literary tradition or to see, for instance, all that Jane Austen gleaned from her narrative-epistolary forbears can do so retrospectively by inserting novels discussed in later chapters into the temporal gaps in earlier ones. The chapters can also be read either singly or in combination.

One might add that moving back and forth across single works in time echoes reading practices supported historically by the widespread use of circulating libraries. The presence and continuing popularity in the circulating libraries of the 1790s and early 1800s of exemplary narrative-epistolary novels by Behn, Haywood, Davys, and Barker from the 1680s, 1710s, and 1720s is a case in point. In turn-of-the nineteenth-century libraries like that in Leadenhall Street and in their alphabetically randomized catalogs, Behn, Barker, or Haywood were as evident and as easy of access as the later fiction of Charlotte Lennox, Frances Burney, Robert Bage, or Elizabeth Meeke to the numerous nineteenth-century authors who report having spent countless unforgotten youthful hours devouring circulating library fiction. Here novels born at different chronological moments enjoyed an interlocking simultaneity and shared currency, which invited readers to peruse them in any order. This belies literary history's conventional linear sequencing of novels by date of first publication, as well as modern period divisions, to remind us that the Ancients and *Don Quixote* were not the only texts that "lived on."[13]

Chapter 1 describes how, in establishing and popularizing narrative-epistolary fiction, Aphra Behn and the Haywood of the 1720s and 1730s used narrative frames describing the writing and reading of fully

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transcribed letters to situate letters in relationships and in the demands of particular occasions. It also shows how this first scaffolding convention enabled them to address contemporary concerns about the irresistible power of rhetoric by demonstrating to the credulous and unlearned that gentlemen's letters were artificial rhetorical constructions, and by showing how and why they were misread. During the 1740s, when Fielding and Richardson appeared on the novel-writing scene, concerns about the power of persuasive language to engender misplaced credulity were being directed to the effects of constant, absorptive novel-reading on manners and morals, particularly those of women.[14] Section 3 (Debating Novel Forms") revives a debate that Haywood, Richardson, and Fielding conducted at mid-century primarily through their fictions, which turned on whether epistolary, narrative, or narrative-epistolary novels were best equipped to interrupt readers' headlong, credulous, desirous, imaginative reading, and make them pause to reason skeptically about the labyrinth of true and false characters, relations, and perspectives constitutive of epistolary commerce and contemporary social life. Writing Haywood back into the now-familiar debate between Richardson and Fielding shows her impact on both men's work, while bringing to light some unique advantages of narrative-epistolary over epistolary fiction and what Fielding perceived as its principal shortcoming. Section 4 ("Letters and Secret Histories") looks forward to *Pride and Prejudice*, the *locus classicus* of narrative-epistolary fiction, to show how Austen addressed this shortcoming while appropriating and adapting her predecessors' narrative-epistolary themes, framing conventions and hermeneutics of suspicion. The chapter concludes by linking the devices discussed here to narrative strategies in the long-standing Aristotelian Romance tradition on which they were all drawing, where plots turn on secrets of identity.

Chapter 2 considers narrative-epistolary novelists' uses of their second scaffolding convention – comparison of letters to narrative realities – to investigate whether empirical methods made it possible to detect a person's true identity; determine the truth about letters and past events; and resolve the difficulties that shifting, empirical, and occasional selves posed for cognition. The focus is on novellae and narrative-epistolary episodes in which protagonists use empirical evidence to try to discover the truth of anonymous letters that make damaging claims about another protagonist's true character and past actions. The fictions examined here expanded the narrative context beyond writing and reading "to the moment" to portray letters' empirical relation to reality as an ongoing dynamic interaction in which letters occasioned by social relations also reshaped them, often

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unexpectedly and sometimes more than once, and in which the truth about letters and about characters' real identities could be discovered empirically – if at all – only over time. But where at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Delarivier Manley and Mary Davys exhibited the utility of empirical tests in detecting the secret of another's identity and past conduct, albeit with certain reservations, Haywood, Smith, and Braddon attacked empiricist pretensions by highlighting flaws in forms of empirical evidence and modes of reasoning that were accepted in history and law, and by demonstrating the dangerous plausibility of the fictional, fact-based narratives that empiricists now presented as truth. This chapter concludes by relating changes in their treatment of empiricism to changes in the laws of evidence.

Chapter 3 addresses uses of this second scaffolding device to address questions of futurity. Like laws in the natural sciences or universal truths about "human nature" in history, expectations in everyday life that were based on cultural archetypes or conduct book rules assumed that the future would probably resemble the past. While demonstrating the primacy of expectations over sense perceptions, and of received ideas over "facts," the novels and narrative-epistolary scenes included here re-examined the claim of men of learning that the predictive, manipulative, and controlling power of scientific knowledge in the natural and human sciences proved its superiority to other forms of knowledge. This chapter introduces what I call encapsulating letters – letters that expand their temporal reach to epitomize a situation grounded in the past, exercise agency in the present, and delineate expectations for the future – as these were deployed from the middle of the eighteenth century at the beginning of a novel or narrative movement. In this position, encapsulating letters were used to provide novel-readers with a concise but elliptical forecast of things to come, and a yardstick for narratives that went on to empirically test the validity of characters' culturally sanctioned expectations of situations and of other characters against the unexpected, surprising, and unforeseen contingencies of ordinary life. Since the shortcomings of expectations of the future could only be identified in retrospect once these had demonstrated themselves empirically, Lennox in *Henrietta* and Burney in *Cecilia* introduced retrospective narratives that corrected or revised past narratives with the wisdom of "hindsight." Subsequent sections describe how Edgeworth, Collins, and Trollope adapted their use of expectations and of encapsulating letters either to reassert the value and dependability of culturally sanctioned expectations or to even more radically destabilize them. This

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chapter concludes by inverting its earlier analyses, to focus on questions of contingency.

Chapter 4 turns back to a long-standing Romance feature. It examines peripatetic or pivotal letters that were used to engender or make conspicuous a sudden *peripeteia* or reversal in the course of events and a surprising *anagnorisis* or discovery associated with it, which retrospectively alters characters' and/or novel-readers' previous understanding of characters and events. We will have encountered in passing in previous chapters' letters in eighteenth-century novels, which also performed this function. This chapter takes a closer look at some of its more innovative forms. Beginning with Jane Barker's brilliant, unexpected epistolary *peripeteia* in *Love Intrigues*, it goes on to consider nineteenth-century exemplars where formal innovations are used to re-examine or discredit sudden *peripeteiae* and surprising *anagnorises* themselves. The thematic focus is on novels addressing a critically neglected issue that I call the "dilatory lover" – the problem presented for women by the beloved man who has shown serious interest but somehow fails to propose, and instead courts and sometimes marries another woman. The concluding section ("Retrospective: On Chimeras in Literary Realism") considers a curious and paradoxical shift from eighteenth-century writers' confidence that distinctions between true and false *anagnorises* could ultimately be made to nineteenth-century narrative-epistolary writers' increasingly insistent efforts to discredit literary realism's naturalization of the idea that a single, all-encompassing, retrospective narrative told from "the vantage point of the end" can reflect reality and truth.

Letter-narratives were already deployed in Charlotte Smith and Jane Austen to explore the distance both of letters and of narratives from the reality inhabited by their character-readers and to juxtapose different realities that provide perspectives on one another. Chapter 5 turns to fictions by Walter Scott and Wilkie Collins, which took the further step of eliminating the omniscient narrator to fragment the narration into a patchwork of letter-narratives and other narrative-epistolary forms authored by character-narrators with different perspectives on events. Superimposing personal and generic perspectives enabled them to present the limitations both of perception and of genre in a manner consistent with contemporary "dioptrics," which described how perspectives are created by refracting objects through different media. The last section ("Retrospective: *Mixta Genera* and the Hermeneutics of Perspective") uses Scott's observation in *Redgauntlet* that narrative-epistolary writers can be compared to "dragoons who were trained to serve either on foot or on horseback as the emergencies of service

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required," to conclude this study by re-envisioning *mixta genera* and the formal narrative-epistolary devices discussed in previous chapters retrospectively in perspectival terms.

The principal goals of this study are to demonstrate that, unexpected as it seems and artificial as such classifications inevitably are, the tradition of narrative-epistolary writing was what my students would call "a thing"; and that writers in this tradition combined narrative and letters in an amazing variety of interesting ways for significant, historically shifting, literary, and cultural purposes. I therefore take my examples from a range of fictions without attempting to fix boundaries for the genre. I say more about this in the Introduction, but hope that others with different goals will be intrigued enough by this mode of writing to consider borderline cases and decide on the utility of sub-genres, as well as to explore combinations and thematic concerns that are missing here. This initial foray into a subject that seems to expand the more one looks is also incomplete in other ways. Its focus is on fiction, on a couple of centuries, and on Britain, but narrative-epistolary writing was confined to none of these. Originating among the Ancients, it reappeared in Shakespeare, in seventeenth-century French and English history-writing, in seventeenth-century French romances, and in early American fictions.[15] And though abandoned by British historians in the course of the eighteenth-century, thanks to the gradual ascendancy of the footnote, it continued to figure in other nonfictional genres –in pamphlets, essays, antiquarian works, reports, stand-alone biographies, and the "Lives" preceding treatises or collections of letters. Like transnational relations among British, French, and North American narrative-epistolary fictions, or their boundaries and/or sub-species, nonfictional uses of narrative-epistolary forms are beyond the scope of this study and invite further work.

The chapters here return in different ways to issues of identity, genre, and reading; to relations between cultural conventions, social archetypes, representations, and empirical facts; and to questions of gender, law, and contingency, as treated by authors skeptical of Enlightenment or Positivist methods of arriving at truth or anxious to defend them. Their issues and positions are sometimes uncannily echoed by postmodern theorists. Whether this means that we have never been modern; that some writers in earlier periods were always already postmodern; that postmodern theorists re-presented "subjugated knowledges" for their own time; or that, like the plural and decentered occasional subject, the same figurations recur in endless iterations, I will not venture to say. But it is important to notice a key difference: the authors whom we are about to meet had not given up

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on reality and truth. After demolishing our pretensions to knowledge of reality in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, and confining us to the prison house of signs and mental representations, even Hume pointed out with a grin that we demonstrate the ludicrousness of his arguments whenever we stand up and walk across a room.

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