European Scepticism: Johnson’s *Rasselas*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Lichtenberg’s *Aphorisms*

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"Scepticism," Oscar Wilde once proclaimed "is the start of a new belief." In a strange way, sceptics all seem to know each other. Their approach to the essential questions of life is widely identical, and it seems to be of no major concern in what period they live. Johnson and Voltaire knew each other not only in a figurative sense; they paid each other a kind of reluctant respect, Lichtenberg the alert and witty German scientist, who was not personally known to either Johnson or Voltaire, usually brightened up his dark days in provincial Göttingen with extensive reading of both the Englishman and the French. It is true, the three authors would make strange bedfellows in other respects, but as far as their scepticism is concerned they all imbibe their philosophic ideas from the same European tradition that harks back to Pyrrho, enjoys considerable reception through the Middle Ages and gains new momentum with Erasmus, Montaigne, Bacon, Mandeville, Hobbes and, of course, Locke. I want to show that Johnson, Voltaire, and Lichtenberg represent three modes of European scepticism, firstly the sceptic as essayist and humanist, secondly the sceptic as satirist, and thirdly the sceptic as critical rationalist.

1 Critics and readers alike appreciate Johnson as a stout believer in the validity of eternal norms and as an inveterate hater of any sort of infidels. The portrait—in my view unjustly—drawn of "Johnson the Rambler" conveys the idea that Johnson held firmly conservative views about life, religion, and morality. But every conscientious approach to his works confirms the suspicion that Johnson's nature contains contradictory seeds. Even in his moral weeklies Johnson employs his filtering syntax to disentangle philosophical truths from fictions.

2 Johnson begins the story of the Prince of Abyssinia by concocting a paradoxical situation. His story starts where others end. Rasselas is the unhappy inhabitant of the happy valley. Evoking reminiscences of the Garden of Eden, paradise in Johnson's Rasselas is not looked
upon as a goal but as a vantage point. The idea Johnson wants to convey is that any form of exclusively materialistic satisfaction has to be regarded sceptically. In my view, his main criticism concerns the conditions of existence in the happy valley. Life there seems to be planned according to a mechanical scheme that does not allow any form of individuality. What Johnson describes in his happy valley is an eighteenth-century version of Huxley’s *Brave New World* with propagandistic songs used as a sort of somnia:

"To heighten their opinion of their own felicity, they were daily entertained with songs, the subject of which was the happy valley." 8 Initially, Johnson sympathises with his protagonist Rasselas when he shows him in his quest for individuality symbolised by Rasselas’ "solitary walks," "silent meditation" and "singularity of humour." 9 But soon the omniscient narrator, justly praised for his majestic calmness, exhibits his scepticism. Instead of encouraging him to identify with the prince, Johnson seeks to bewilder his reader by first showing Rasselas "burthened with himself'in a melancholy meditation about the deplorable state of human beings, only to add a revealing sentence: "With observations like these the prince amused himself as he returned, uttering them with a plaintive voice, yet with a look that discovered him to feel some complacence in his own perspicacity, and to receive some solace of the miseries of life, from consciousness of the delicacy with which he felt, and the eloquence with which be bewailed them." 10 Johnson the sceptic is eager to disillusion his reader. Preventing him from identifying himself with the protagonist is one means, destroying any expectation evoked by the genre "oriental tale" is another. 11 Instead of depicting a colourful exotic world of foreign countries, instead of telling fascinating stories of adventure, eroticism or romance, Johnson merely describes a *vita contemplativa*, moreover one awkwardly presented in the shape of a deficient plot. But critics have so far erred when they blame the unsensational nature of the story on its author’s incapability to create suspense. 12 Renouncing the tension of a thrilling plot must be regarded as an authorial programme, another blow aimed by Johnson against the false notions aroused by generic convention. 13 Sceptics don’t like stories that turn their public into literary opium eaters. They want to make them alert, not send them to sleep. Johnson the sceptic needs alert readers; he wants them to join him in an experiment in which human happiness and the immortality of the soul are at stake.

The beginning of *Rasselas* already demonstrates that the author will not suffer us to read his tale merely for pleasure. Some critics argued that *Rasselas* was not an oriental tale but an apologue trying to justify basic doctrines of Christian philosophy. 14 In my view, *Rasselas* might just as well be regarded as an essay in the Latin and French sense of the word. 15 Derived from the Latin *exagium*, that means an attempt, an essay or a sample, the essay is the most appropriate literary genre in which the dynamics of scepticism can be properly expressed. 16

In *Rasselas* Johnson needs essayistic liberty. Imlac, Rasselas’ sister Nekayah and her maid Pekuah set out to seek happiness beyond the happy valley. The protagonists must be seen as experimenters, as essayists, they are old and young, male and female, master and servant, that is they serve as emblems for average human beings. *Rasselas* should be interpreted as a *tour de force* through the realms of philosophy. To put it succinctly, the story functions as a philosophical crash test. Just as in "The Vanity of Human Wishes," 17 Johnson describes and then demolishes clichés of happiness. One by one he puts the various formulae of happiness to the test: epicurism, stoicism, prosperity, life according to natural laws, public and private life, greatness, the life of scholars and poets, the life of
learning, the idylls of pastoral life, hermitage, marriage. Each test follows the same rules. It is usually Rasselas, a literary mixture of simpleton and ingénue, who is quite innocently confronted with concepts such as epicurism or stoicism. Rasselas is deeply impressed by what he sees. His naïveté makes him the most appropriate victim for any kind of illusionists who offer their ideas as panaceas for an ailing world. But—and here Johnson's craftsmanship of shaping apt protagonists becomes clear—Rasselas is not merely the innocent believer of false notions. Even in the happy valley he evinced a certain extent of scepticism, I need only mention his conversation with the mechanical artist and constructor of a flying machine.18 Rasselas cherishes illusions, but he only does so for a short time. Then he applies the art of doubting to every scheme offered: like an essayist he examines the various aspects of such doctrines as epicurism, he becomes suspicious of hollow maxims, he sees behind the curtains of false stoic performances.19 He anticipates Kant's formula sapere aude, in this way functioning as a typical embodiment of Enlightenment values. "Dubito, ergo sum," might be considered the hallmark of his philosophy. And as any alert sceptic should do, he enhances his awareness of contradictions and paradoxes. Unlike sceptics, optimistic teachers of either religion, morality or science depend on the consistency of their doctrines. Thus the hedonist should always be happy and not suffer from fits of melancholy, and the stoic should prove his ataraxia not only in the pleasant surrounding of polite conversation but under the harsh conditions of a grim fate. After subjecting hedonism to the exagium of his scepticism, Rasselas bids it farewell: "Their mirth was without images, their laughter without motive; their pleasures were gross and sensual, in which the mind had no part; their conduct was at once wild and mean...."20 Experience functions as the touchstone of the justification of this maxim, and Rasselas learns a bit later that the stoic after the sudden death of his own daughter is completely overcome by despair. Stoicism has utterly failed; according to Rasselas it is nothing but "emptiness of rhetorical sound" and "inefficiency of polished periods and studied sentences."21

The bipartite structure of illusion and disillusion permeates the whole book. Marriage is contrasted with celibacy, not to the advantage of either of these formulae: "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures."22 The concept of natural life loses any sense in its enigmatic and equally preposterous description; Johnson lambs the clichés of a happy life in a hermitage when he describes the unbearable monotony and boredom it brings along, he devalues the pleasures of pastoral country life when he emphasizes the gloom and grossness of this kind of existence. And the astronomer is not only an emblem for pride, as some critics rightly contended,23 but he also embodies the disillusioning prophecy of what will happen to a mind permanently occupied with the enigmas of nature: its probable fate is madness, a distortion of the rational faculties by the Baconian forces of fancy and imagination. Finally, the old man makes his appearance on Johnson's stage in order to prove the fallacy of the idea that old age promises happiness.

To a reader of Johnson's Rambler and Idler essays most of these ideas are well familiar. But Rasselas adds an even darker note to the gloomy Johnsonian symphony. Johnson does not restrict himself to describing the world according to the ethics of the Book of Ecclesiastes;24 and he does not only try to demolish positive formulae such as stoicism, epicurism or hermitage. Johnson's scepticism goes further. He not only questions the results of choice but choice itself.25 Rasselas and his friends encounter versions of Browne's vulgar errors and Bacon's idols on their quest for happiness. The eudemonistic formulae turn out to be nothing but "cobwebs of the mind,"26 psychological idols, distortions and products of the

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imagination. The eudemonistic formulae are wrong precisely because they are formulae. Johnson's whole philosophy is based on the principles of dynamic essayism; his essay-writing shows a mind continuously in motion, examining various aspects of diverse problems, his essays are bristling with images that express the idea of fluctuation, movement, vicissitude, change; the places where he employs the imagery of "water," "sea," "ocean," and "river" or "torrent" are legion.27 It is a conscious adaptation of Heraclitus' *panta rhei* that induces Johnson to refute any concepts that are prone to ossification, to "fixed opinions" or "established habits."28 This philosophy is convincingly expressed in Imlac's words in *Rasselas*: "Our minds like our bodies, are in continuai flux; something is hourly lost and something acquired.... Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: Commit yourself again to the current of the world...."29

This is precisely what sceptics are after; stagnation is mental death; life demands a vital brain, ever alert to solve the problems on its way. The stream of consciousness, too, is prone to become muddy; scepticism prevents it from being crystallised into Bacon's idols. Scepticism, moreover, is a kind of intellectual prime mover, a constant reminder of the necessity to keep in motion, not to settle. Sceptics and essayists alike live like nomads in a world of constant change. They do not believe in the existence of a *harmonie préétablie* à la Leibniz. Johnson, too, totally objects to any belief in predestination in general and in simplistic explanations of theodicy in particular.30 Essayism and scepticism thus work hand in hand in their fight against scholasticism. Intellectual flexibility is their common goal, the procedure of sampling and essaying takes priority over any fixed doctrine or rule of behaviour.

But this plead for flexibility, which might be considered untypical of Johnson on first sight, has its price. Any form of sceptic argumentation displays a trait of selfrefutation. Sceptics often end in silence, because they have recognized not only the fallibility of so called dogmas but the incertitude of any kind of statement. This is the deeper reason for Johnson's alleged resignation in the end of *Rasselas*. The book does not seek to formulate a definite moral or religious message, but rather to induce the reader to think for himself. The conclusion of *Rasselas*, in which nothing is concluded, has an awe-inspiring effect. Johnson has shown that no sublunary recipes for happiness are to be found. And even scepticism as the best of all possible attitudes to the world is not capable of providing the solace a human being usually needs. But the demolition of all worldly concepts blazes a trail for a new metaphysical knowledge. Johnson employs—and this is quite new—scepticism in order to emphasize the importance of an awareness of metaphysics. Thus *Rasselas* should be read and interpreted as a long essay that does not prove anything, not even the usefulness of its own method. But just as Bacon's philosophy set out to purge the world from those idols that had prevented the advancement of learning,31 Johnson is eager to cleanse philosophy of those false notions that hinder men from seeing the only chance of becoming happy, that is belief in concepts of immortality and concentration on a life beyond the grave.32 Johnson the master of disillusion disappoints his reader on all levels of his story, but the concept of immortality is exempted from his criticism.33 Using scepticism as a tool to destroy the idea that human desire might be satisfied in the sublunary world, he develops his strong "argument from desire"34 Johnson's scepticism is motivated by deep and inimitable humanism, to put it more succinctly, by Christian humanism. He criticises "for the benefit of mankind." With Johnson there remains no residual of the intellectual superiority that is so typical of sceptics of a more worldly kind: his scepticism ends in honest humility. In the end we read: "Imlac and the astronomer
were contented to be driven along the stream of life without directing their course to any particular port." It is precisely the incertitude of his own beliefs and a strong component of Christian humanism that prevented Johnson from becoming a sardonic satirist. With Johnson, European scepticism is transformed into essayism and humanism.

II

This last statement can hardly be applied to Voltaire. Comparing *Rasselas* with *Candide*, Boswell, who had met both Rousseau and Voltaire in person, stated: "Voltaire, I am afraid, meant only by wanton profaneness to obtain a sportive victory over religion, and to discredit the belief of a superintending Providence...." It is true there are striking parallels between the Englishman and the Frenchman: the structure of the plot, the onus that falls on the philosophical themes, the characterisation of the chief protagonists, the ambiguous conclusions, all these are quite similar in Johnson and Voltaire. The two even share a belief in an unattainable ideal of human satisfaction when they describe the happy valley, respectively Eldorado, or delineate the State of prosperity as psychic deficiency symbolized for example by the Bassa in *Rasselas* or by the unforgettable Pococuranté in *Candide*, a prosperous man who suffers from an abundance of beautiful women, valuable works of art, music, and the writings of Homer, Vergil, Horace, Cicero and Milton. Candide innocently describes him "Oh! quel homme supérieur! disait encore Candide entre ses dents, quel grand génie que ce Pococuranté! rien ne peut lui plaire."

Moreover, Johnson and Voltaire share their attack on the false notions of predestination and human happiness, but with Voltaire scepticism does not aim to demolish worldly concepts in order to clear the way to heaven. His scepticism is completely devoid of self-refutation and with the exception of the enigmatic end of *Candide*, Voltaire's art of doubting rather attacks clearly identifiable targets. Flaubert compared Voltaire's intellect with a war machine, and indeed in Voltaire's work the tradition of European scepticism becomes a dangerous satirical weapon. Johnson and Voltaire start from the same vantage point: both use the expectations evoked by the chosen genre in order to disappoint their readers. The improbable amount of coincidences, that in Fielding's *Tom Jones* was turned into an "argument from design" in order to prove divine theodicy, assumes an ironical note in Voltaire. The coincidences of sudden reunifications of friends and lovers are too strange to be taken literally. Even in the arrangement of his plot, Voltaire ridicules the device of poetic justice widely favoured by innocent readers of romances. Voltaire's scepticism turns into vitriolic satire when he focuses on his chief butt, Leibniz's theories of *harmonie préétablie*, the concept of "sufficient cause" and of the world as "the best of all possible worlds." Leibniz and his votary Christian Wolff incur Voltaire's ire because they lead innocent spirits like Candide astray. Voltaire's protagonist, an *ingénu* like Rasselas, and his patron Pangloss embody the doctrine of unmitigated optimism. They thus ignore both reality and experience. In the beginning it seems as if Candide—just as Rasselas—adopted the pose of an essayist in order to put reality to the test; but a meticulous examination of Voltaire's *Candide* shows that his book is essayistic only in the emphasis it gives to the role of experience. *Candide*, however, completely lacks that—as I should like to call it—"essayistic licence" that indelibly marks Johnson's *Rasselas*. While Bacon's philosophy influences both tales, it is rather Montaigne whom Johnson sides with, whereas Voltaire reminds the reader much more of the caustic attacks levied by Swift. No firm ground was ever reached in *Rasselas*. In *Candide*, scepticism casts all in doubt except itself. It is true that both Johnson and Voltaire refer to the importance of experience. But whereas *Rasselas* exudes the charm of genuine experience mirrored in a symbolic but
probable world, Candide presents a cynical model microcosm constructed along the lines of brilliant but inhuman logic. It is as if a French version of the Swiftian animal rationis capax had employed its faculties in order to invent the "worst of all possible worlds". Even to a German reader the world of Westfalen, described in Candide, seems more unfamiliar than Johnson’s Abyssinia. Dogmatic as the language Johnson used may appear, readers will look in vain for a positive norm in Rasselas. Voltaire, on the other hand, adheres to positive norms, although Eldorado must not be counted among them. His scepticism is clearly satirical. Any derivation from the positive norm firmly grounded on a sound basis of logic and reason is severely lashed in Candide. The Christian mood of deep understanding for men’s flaws is completely absent from Voltaire’s tale. His scepticism, however, is not self-refutative, because it does not renounce those yardsticks against which Voltaire can measure the degree of misbehaviour and crime in his satanic world. At least three figures in Candide embody satirical norms, the anabaptist who cures both Candide and Pangloss, the old woman who helps Candide to meet Cunégonde, and Cacambo who despite Martin’s dark prophecy returns to Candide. The most effective norm, however, is the omnipresent logic, which reveals itself indirectly in both the plot and the narrative stratagems of the tale. Voltaire establishes a sharp contrast between theory and reality in Candide. Any interpretation of the world that is in tune with the theories of Leibniz and Wolff is undermined by what is going on in Candide’s world. Scepticism scoffs at holistic formulae and employs irony to disclose the fissures between idea and reality. Here is Voltaire’s version of harmonie préétablie as taught by Doctor Pangloss:

Il est démontré, disait-il, que les choses ne peuvent être autrement: car tout étant fait pour une fin, tout est nécessairement pour la meilleure fin. Remarquez bien que les nez ont été faits pour porter des lunettes; aussi avons-nous des lunettes. Les jambes sont visiblement instituées pour être chaussées, et nous avons des chausses.... Par conséquent, ceux qui ont avancé que tout est bien ont dit une sottise: il fallait dire que tout est au mieux.

Pangloss’s doctrine parodies a scope of beliefs inherent in Leibniz’s System. Since his own optimistic belief in divine goodness was deeply shaken by the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, Voltaire sets out to deride the idea of a great chain of being, objects to Rousseau’s apologue of predestination, denies that individual evil might ever become the universal good of Pope and Mandeville, criticises the belief in the concatenation of cause and effect, and refuses to admit theodicy, harmony, symmetry and proportion. To put it succinctly, by parodying and ironically undermining Doctor Pangloss’s System Voltaire’s scepticism carries out a universal attack against any form of holism.

In Candide figures emulate each other in an attempt to prove that their life is the most unfortunate. The biographies of Candide, Pangloss, Cunégonde, Martin, the old woman, or Paquette, to name but a few, all read as catalogues of severe human affliction. The book is teeming with descriptions of war, earthquakes, or shipwreck; and various disasters are treated as if they were nothing special. Voltaire’s use of understatement combined with the hyperbolic depiction of daily catastrophes guarantees a satire of the most scabrous kind. European scepticism here shows its sardonic and derisive face. The idol of harmonie préétablie is demolished by chaos. Just as harmony is sceptically contrasted with chaos, holism as a principle is demolished by denigrating its incarnations, mainly the innocent Candide, the beautiful Cunégonde and the optimistic philosopher Pangloss. Voltaire’s title Candide, or l’optimisme has to be taken ironically; a more appropriate title would have been "Candide, ou l’anatomie de l’optimisme," because that is precisely what
Voltaire is aiming at here. Whereas in Rasselas nobody is ever hurt, not even the abducted Pekuah, protagonists in Candide tend to lose one limb or another. The incarnations of optimism are virtually taken to pieces, anatomized, vivisected. The optimists lose their eyes, arms, hands, their beauty like Cunégonde, their teeth like Pangloss and even a buttock like the old woman. It is Swift's sardonic humour of "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" with its description of the most heinous striptease which does not end when the clothes have all been taken off, which permeates Candide. And just as in Swift's A Modest Proposal, Voltaire does not shrink away from the taboo of introducing cannibalism into his tale. Scepticism denies the idea of man as the "glory, jest and riddle of the world," as Pope puts it in his Essay on Man. Man in Candide is denuded of its dignity, humiliated, tormented, tortured, torn to pieces. Voltaire substitutes Shaftesbury's optimistic definition of man by Martin's invective against mankind: "Croyez-vous, dit Candide, que les hommes se soient toujours mutuellement massacrés comme il font aujourd'hui? qu'ils aient toujours été menteurs, fourbes, perfides, ingrats, brigands, faibles, volages, lâches, envieux, gourmands, ivrognes, avaris, ambitieux, sanguinaires, calomniateurs, débauchés, fanatiques, hypocrites et sots?—Croyezvouz, dit Martin, que les éperviers aient toujours mangé des pigeons quand ils en ont trouvé?—"51 It does not take too much intelligence to anticipate the pessimistic answer.

But—and this incurs Voltaire's hatred more than anything else—to the end Doctor Pangloss—having lost much of his body but nothing of his faith—still adheres to the false logic and erroneous notions of a holistic world view. Candide takes quite a long time before he turns sceptic, and it is only Martin, a pessimist and manichean who thinks that God abandoned "this globule to some mischievous power"52 whom nothing can astound any longer, who serves as Voltaire's mouthpiece in Candide. European scepticism even turns against Europeans when Candide and Cacambo meet a mutilated negro and hear his words: "Quand nous travaillons aux sucreries, et que la meule nous attrape le doigt, on nous coupe la main; quand nous voulons nous enfuir, on nous coupe la jambe: je me suis trouvé dans les deux cas. C'est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe"53 This quotation that reminds Johnsonians of the Cham's toast to the negroes of the West Indies, proves that towards the end of the eighteenth century European scepticism discovered its moral responsibility for life in the colonies. Voltaire is sceptic as far as Europeans are concerned, and I do not want to examine in detail what he says of the French in general and of the Parisians in particular.54 This place here is a dangerous place to do so. But I want to show that Voltaire, like Johnson, leaves no doubt that he regards coherent Systems of the interpretation of the world, and in particular the super-idol optimism, as madness. "Qu'est-ce qu'optimisme? disait Cacambo.—Hélas! dit Candide, c'est la rage de soutenir que tout est bien quand on est mal."55

Voltaire's scepticism appears as the purest form of European scepticism because like Pyrrho, Descartes, Montaigne, La Mettrie, Boyle and a host of other philosophers, Voltaire attacks metaphysical doctrines.56 In my view his scepticism is transformed into pessimism anticipating the gloomy doctrines of both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.57 With the exception of the famous conclusion "Il faut cultiver notre jardin,"58 it conveys the impression of unmitigated scepticism and that means that the sceptic is bound to work as a satirist.59 Only after having lavished abuse on his enemies might he return to the principles of humanism since humanism that—according to Voltaire—is based on metaphysical beliefs is perverted into brutal inhumanity, as is shown in the cynical justifications of autodafés in Candide. Both Johnson and Voltaire sceptically present life as
a labyrinth and a concoction of lies and illusion. But the therapies that they recommend after this diagnosis are hardly comparable.

III

Both Johnson’s and Voltaire’s scepticism is deeply rooted in scientific experience. Johnson’s predilection for highly dangerous scientific experiences is copiously documented by his biographers, and Voltaire eagerly read everything about new advances in science, and even saw to it that Newton’s ideas were introduced into France. Both followed Bacon in using doubt as a critical tool. Although Lichtenberg, who knew well both the works of Johnson and Voltaire, discovered Bacon’s ideas only late in his life, his writings evince a surprising degree of congeniality with the English scholar. With Lichtenberg European scepticism grew into critical rationalism. It is no exaggeration to describe Lichtenberg’s existence as a whole life spent in doubt. Moreover, Lichtenberg was not an occasional amateur of dilettantish experiments but a highly esteemed scientist who towards the end of his life was elected a member of almost any distinguished scientific society one can name. To his contemporaries, Lichtenberg was known first and foremost as a highly gifted professor of mathematics and physics. With Voltaire, Lichtenberg shared a deep admiration for English life, society and learning, and his two journeys to England marked him positively for life. Owing to his distorted figure and an ailing body, comparable to that of Pope, Lichtenberg’s scepticism is without doubt the most essential compound in his nature and he applied his critical attitude to a wide scope of objects ranging from the astute evaluation of scientific beliefs, through questioning theological doctrines, to a sustained effort not to take even the most trivial elements of everyday life at face value. Lichtenberg virtually embodied that maxim which Johnson recommended in Rasselas, “never to suffer life to grow stagnate.” Lichtenberg’s diaries, his letters, and especially his famous notebooks show a mind constantly in motion, ever spinning out theories or inventing ideas. Lichtenberg’s wit and his imagination are exceptional; moreover he might be considered to be one of the most humorous European sceptics that ever lived. Nowhere did Lichtenberg express his universal scepticism more consistently than in his famous waste-books or Sudelbücher, anthologies bristling with serio-comic observations ranging from the most trivial pun to serious philosophical meditations upon literature, life or religion. In his waste-books Lichtenberg takes nothing for granted, no idea passes his mind without being questioned, examined, and occasionally turned upside down. The derisive remark with which he scoffed at those pedants who copied from one book into another, leaving the head quite out of the game, could never be turned against him. Although Lichtenberg for a fairly long period of his life, quite unlike Voltaire, appreciated Leibniz and his doctrines, he cannot be said to be a devoted follower of the famous polymath. Without doing so consciously, Lichtenberg heeded a vital maxim that Bacon had formulated when he diverged from the tradition of the scholastic predilection for Systems. In Bacon’s view "cobwebs of learning" spun round worn out philosophical Systems ever prone to paralysis. Instead of perfecting Systems and thus handing down their numerous idols and errors, Bacon recommended splitting them up, in order to prevent the fallacies of logic and syllogism. A useful alternative to the worn-out philosophical System is the aphorism. As a highly condensed and concentrated genre, it allows its author to distil philosophical Systems into sharp and witty expressions, often provocative, seldom unequivocal and never boring. Instead of Systems the aphorist presents fragments of scientific knowledge, splinters of thoughts, and small particles of learning. Aphorists induce their readers to think for themselves. No
cliché, stereotype or commonplace observation will survive the aphorist’s intelligent, sophisticated and witty test.\textsuperscript{71}

Differing from the examples of both Johnson and Voltaire, Lichtenberg even discusses scepticism in his aphorisms.\textsuperscript{72} As a genuine representative of the ethics of the Enlightenment he aims at teaching readers the techniques rather than the results of learning. Finding out truth for oneself is the most important of Lichtenberg’s didactic goals. In English education he sees this ideal realised. One important stage on the way to learn how to learn is to doubt:\textsuperscript{73} “Doubt everything, even the formula that 2 and 2 make four.”\textsuperscript{74} Lichtenberg establishes doubt as a kind of mental filter through which new and old ideas alike have to pass. Get used to doubting, Lichtenberg recommends, and he frequently hints at the function of doubt as a hodogetic instrument: “To doubt things that are now believed without any examination—this is the main thing everywhere.”\textsuperscript{75} Like an essayist Lichtenberg then examines the fruitfulness of doubting and hints at its dangers: “Doubt should not be more than alertness, otherwise it gets dangerous.”\textsuperscript{76} Again and again he gives free rein to his passion to doubt: “Why do I believe this? Is it really proved?”\textsuperscript{77} or: “One of the chief questions especially concerning the most familiar things is: this really true; could we not attempt to distinguish and try to make clear that it could not always be like this. It is a pity that one does not ask when it would be most necessary.”\textsuperscript{78} Anticipating the achievements of Popper’s critical theory,\textsuperscript{79} Lichtenberg applies the method of a critical rationalist to each and everything.\textsuperscript{80} He even doubts the nature of reasoning, when he compares his thinking with lightning or hints at the paradox of a mind meditating upon itself.\textsuperscript{81} Scepticism towards his own scepticism leads Lichtenberg to accept those doctrines which he set out to fight; after his stay in England, the philosophy of Hartley and Beatty made him believe in systematic thinking once again.\textsuperscript{82} But this return to positions overcome did not take very long.\textsuperscript{83} Throughout his work European scepticism is the predominant attitude serving the search for truth and questioning the results gained. Lichtenberg is never content with what he has found out, because this might not be true. Under the control of this critical rationalist, European scepticism is developed into a strong epistemological instrument,\textsuperscript{84} and Lichtenberg does not forget to subject language in particular to a stern test. Reminding the critic of Bacon’s philosophy of language, Lichtenberg finds fault with the distortive nature language usually reveals.\textsuperscript{85} He continually wonders about the deficient precision of words and terms, examines the role metaphors play in the finding and testing of hypotheses and cudgels his brain to find an answer to the question as to whether a language could be invented that attained the clarity and distinction of mathematical formulae. Scepticism examines the conditions of its own medium. By subjecting language to a harsh test Lichtenberg tries to develop new perspectives. Dissatisfied with the achievement of linguistic expression he is extremely averse to any sentences coined in the indicative. Gradually his criticism of language changes into an apologue of utopian thinking. Since language is not strictly mimetic, since it distorts reality, it might even be used for the purpose of finding new readings of reality. This thought that justly reminds critics of the aesthetics of postmodernism helps Lichtenberg to keep his mind in motion. As Byron said, “he who doubts all things nothing can deny”\textsuperscript{86} Lichtenberg develops an astounding imagination to find parallels between the most heterogeneous things. And like in Johnson’s famous definition of metaphysical conceit,\textsuperscript{87} he is capable of linking them together in a witty way. The critical rationalist is a thorough utopian thinker, because he is always looking for new perspectives. “New glimpses through the old holes” is one of his
favourite maxims and his life's work proves that he never neglected it. Lichtenberg, the sceptic as critical rationalist and utopian, tries to sail through those pillars of Hercules that Bacon printed on the frontispiece of his *Instauratio Magna* (1620). And in his opinion a new attitude towards language is likely to show the right way. Perhaps the most important feature that Lichtenberg's aphorisms reveal, is an essential by-product of his doubting: the choice of a new mode of speaking. Here again scepticism and essayism join. Lichtenberg writes most of his observations in the subjunctive trying to express the sense of possibility and probability that he wants to instil in his readers.

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In Lichtenberg's aphorisms the use of the subjunctive is the linguistic emblem of sceptic but also of utopian thinking. This leads to an interesting paradox. If the statements of scepticism are formulated in the grammatical mode of the subjunctive they themselves are regarded as hypotheses only. Lichtenberg has obviously recognized this paradox. In an observation that proves both his astute intelligence and his deep insight into the nature of European scepticism he remarks: "At first there is a time in which one believes everything without distinction, then for a short time one believes making distinctions; then one believes nothing; and then one again believes and one tries to adduce reasons for one's belief that one believes everything." In Lichtenberg European scepticism has come full circle. As Oscar Wilde said: "Scepticism is the start of a new belief." And sometimes, Lichtenberg would have added, the new belief is the old one.

NOTES


2. About Voltaire Johnson said, "Vir est acerrimi ingenii et paucarum literarum." See James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. J.D. Fleeman (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1970) 661. See also 997: Johnson thought, that "Candide had more power in it than any thing that Voltaire had written." In Voltaire's opinion, Johnson was both "a superstitious dog" and "an honest fellow" (see 308).


4. The impression of Johnson as a dogmatist is mainly conveyed by Boswell's biography, but one cannot help feeling that some of Johnson's dogmatic verdicts passed on a variety of subjects were only made in order to fan off an overambitious acolyte. It is Boswell who reports that Johnson once displayed his kinship with Hume when he said that "everything which Hume has advanced against Christianity had passed through my mind long before he wrote"; see Boswell, *Life of Johnson* 314. Johnson saw scepticism as an outflow of human pride and vanity. Nevertheless some
of his works are sceptical; three even stand out as examples of unmitigated scepticism: his refutation of Soame Jenkins, his theriophilic Idler 22, and Rasselas.

5. For these ideas see e.g., W. Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York: Oxford UP, 1955) 171-73.


9. Rasselas 42.

10. Johnson here refers to the vicissitude of melancholy; this procedure demonstrates that even suffering is subjected to the principle of vanitas. See also Rasselas 48, when Rasselas "regretted his regret." In Wasserman's opinion Rasselas has to be read as a member of that category of literature that shows features of "autodestruction"; see "Johnson's Rasselas" 2-4.


12. See e.g., Owen Ruffhead's criticism in the Monthly Review (May 1759); "And therefore, we observe, with less regret, of the learned writer of these volumes, that tale-telling evidently is not his talent." Quoted from James T. Boulton, ed., Johnson: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge, 1971) 141.


14. See Kolb, "The Structure of Rasselas" 698-717.


17. For an analysis of the themes of both Johnson's famous poem and his tale, see J.S. Cunningham, Johnson: The Vanity of Human Wishes and Rasselas (London: Arnold, 1982).


20. Rasselas 78.

21. Rasselas 81. See also Imlac's words: "Be not too hasty, said Imlac, to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men" (80).

22. Rasselas 95.


25. Wasserman has brilliantly shown in which way Johnson is indebted to traditional themes, e.g., that of "Cebes," the "choice of Hercules," the "bivium vitae" and the Greek letter "T." He rightly hinted at the congeniality between Rasselas and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and I regard this interpretation as one of the most fruitful in recent years. Both Sterne and Johnson have in common their philosophy of essayism and scepticism. See Wassermann, "Johnson's Rasselas" 7-25.


27. See *Rambler* 29; 102; 127; *Idler* 89; 99; and *Adventurer* 69.


30. In *Rasselas* and even more drastically in his *Review of Soame Jenkyns*, Johnson demonstrates that he had only scorn for the idea that the Gods tormented men for their own pleasure; compare the following parody of Jenkyns's belief in metaphysical interference: *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (London, 1792) 8: 46-47: "As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves now and then with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cock-pit. As we shoot a bird flying, they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apoplexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human philosopher in the effects of the air pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolick beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why".

31. European scepticism has its roots in an antagonism against set doctrines of metaphysics, later with Descartes and Bacon it endeavoured to reanimate those brains paralysed by pedantic Systems and mechanical repetition of stock syllogisms.

32. In this respect *Rasselas* can be fruitfully compared to Johnson's *Rambler* 4; for such an interpretation see Frederick M. Keener, *The Chain of Becoming: The Philosophical Tale, the Novel, and a Neglected Realism of the Enlightenment: Swift, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Johnson and Austen* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 15-31, especially 28-29.


35. *Rasselas* 150.


39. In his chapter "Candide and Rasselas Revisited" of his *Samuel Johnson and Three Infidels: Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot* (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1988) 77-123, Mark J. Temmer presents a diligent comparative study of both texts. See also Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Holt, 1944) 161-84, especially 181: "The one demoralized a continent, and gave birth to lust, and rapine, and bloodshed; the other has blessed many a heart, and gladdened the vale of sorrow, with many a rill of pure and living water."
40. Voltaire, *Candide*, in *Romans et contes*, 6d. René Pomeau (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 246. All quotations are taken from this edition. See also Martin's oxymoron that might be applied to sceptics: "C'est-à-dire, reprit Martin, qu'il y a du plaisir à n'avoir pas de plaisir?"


44. See Herbert Dieckmann, "Religiöse und metaphysische Voraussetzungen in Voltaire's Philosophie und Natuerauffassung," *Voltaire*, ed. Horst Baader (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980) 70-85; Dieckmann regards Voltaire's attitude as a mixture of "deism" and "pragmatism"; cf. 84.

45. Carol Sherman even interprets the contrast in terms of oxymoron; see her *Reading Voltaire's Contes: A Semiotics of Philosophical Narration* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985) 139-62, especially 187.

46. *Candide* 180.


48. This is also an attack against the concept of the Great Chain of Being; see Keener, *The Chain of Becoming* 15-31, and against Rousseau; cf. Temmer, *Samuel Johnson and Three Infidels* 122-23.


51. *Candide* 229.

52. *Candide* 226.

53. *Candide* 222.

54. *Candide* 228-29.

55. *Candide* 222.


57. Cf. the slightly differing interpretation of Wade, *Voltaire and Candide* 319: "Candide is thus in its inner substance not wholly optimistic, or pessimistic, or cynical: it is all of these things at the same time."


59. *Candide* 259.


62. See Mautner, *Lichtenberg: Geschichte seines Geistes* 362-63; although Lichtenberg knew Bacon already in 1773 (117), it is not before 1792 that he intensely read and commented him.

63. Even in his early years Lichtenberg reveals scepticism, relativity and autonomy in his thinking (see Mautner 8).

64. See Friedhelm Zubke, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Der Zweifel als Lebensprinzip* (Köln; Wien: Boehlau, 1990) in particular 77-82.


67. Rasselas 115.


71. In this respect Lichtenberg's view of the world is similar to Johnson's idea of vicissitudes; it is the principle of panta rhei again that in Lichtenberg's eyes justifies scepticism; see Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, ed. Wolfgang Promies, 4 vols; vol. 1: Sudelbücher I (München: Hanser, 1968; 1980) 370, E 139: "Schwatzt doch nicht.... Wenn die Fixsterne nicht einmal fix sind, wie könnt ihr denn sagen, dass alles Wahre wahr ist?" ("Do not tattle.... If not even the fixed stars are fixed, how then can you say that all truth is true?"). All other quotations are taken from Promies's edition.

72. There are numerous analyses of Lichtenberg's aphorisms; instead of enumerating their titles I would rather recommend Rainer Baasner's critical survey in his monograph Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992) 70-129. In my view Baasner's book is an invaluable source of information for anyone interested in Lichtenberg's life and works.

73. Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, vol. 1: Sudelbücher I 434, F 441.


75. Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, vol. 2: Sudelbücher II 233, J 1276: "Dinge zu bezweifeln, die ganz ohne weitere Untersuchung jetzt geglaubt werden, das ist die Hauptsache überall."

76. Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, vol. 1: Sudelbücher I 521, F 447: "Zweifel muβ nichts weiter sein als Wachsamkeit, sonst kann er gefährlich werden."

77. Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, vol. 2: Sudelbücher II 244, J 1326: "Warum glaube ich dieses? Ist es auch wirklich so ausgemacht?"


80. See also Baasner, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg 140-45.

81. See Lichtenberg, Schriften und Briefe, vol. 1: Sudelbücher I 898, L 311: "Ist es nicht eine sonderbare Situation, in der sich die Seele befindet, wenn sie eine Untersuchung über ihr eigenes Selbst liest.... Es hat einige Ähnlichkeit mit dem Hunde, dem man einen Knochen an den Schwanz gebunden hat." ("It is a strange when the soul examines its own self.... This is comparable to a dog to whose tale one has fixed a bone").

82. See Mautner, Lichtenberg: Geschichte seines Geistes 208-14.


84. The following aphorisms, as Mautner has already pointed out, have to do with epistemology: D 174, 181, 188, 221, 224, 229, 236, 248, 249, 257, 261, 265, 281, 297, 443, 444, 445, 455, 460, 465, 470, 502.


90. In a brilliant and consistent analysis Albrecht Schöne, *Aufklärung aus dem Geist der Experimentalphysik: Lichtenbergsche Konjunktive* (München: Beck, 1983), has shown to what degree Lichtenberg’s scepticism relies on the use of the subjunctive, and Schöne even sees a link to Robert Musil’s utopia of essayism.

91. Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 1: *Sudelbücher I* 609, F 1042: "Erst ist eine Zeit, da man alles glaubt ohne Gründe, dann glaubt man eine kurze Zeit mit Unterschied, dann glaubt man gar nichts, und dann glaubt man wieder alles und zwar gibt man Gründe an, warum man alles glaubte...".

92. For the linguistic assistance I received in preparing this paper I would like to thank John Coates, University of Gottingen.

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