Book Reviews


The Fullness of Knowing is a scholarly effort to uncover the epistemological riches to be gleaned from re-readings of what Daniel E. Ritchie here terms “pre-Enlightenment” texts, and in doing so to draw important parallels with selected models of postmodern critical theory. This study provides an unusual interrogation of the Enlightenment project—the pursuit of knowledge and truth—which makes quite clear Ritchie’s own project. Ritchie offers, in a wide-ranging discussion of texts from Defoe and Swift to Burke and Cowper, a platform for an equally wide-ranging collection of philosophical, critical, and religious theorists whose ideas he collectively terms “postmodern” scholarship. If the revisionist elements of Ritchie’s readings of Enlightenment thinking are by no means unique, his comparisons of “pre-Enlightenment” literature with this particular range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship probably is, incorporating as it does aspects of seminal thinking from figures such as Gadamer, Derrida, and Lyotard with ideas from considerably lesser-known figures and emerging thinkers, such as Michael Polanyi, Brian McLaren, and Robert Wuthnow.

Ritchie makes apparent, as early as the first page of his Introduction, his intention to offer a revisionist reading of a whole spectrum of what he terms “Enlightenment” or “modern” epistemologies in light of some carefully selected, and even more carefully interpreted, postmodern discussions of cultural theory and philosophy. He does so by “making connections between the questions raised in our postmodern age with those raised by Defoe, Swift, Burke, and others during the Enlightenment” (1). What follows is a series of compelling and substantive essays in which Ritchie considers the critical questions (and solutions, or lack thereof) posited as an epistemological dialogue between texts he selects as representative of opposing sides of what I will describe as an Enlightenment “fulcrum.” In this (largely binary) division, Ritchie posits the “pre-Enlightenment” discourse as, variously, “the knowledge that arose from tradition or unmethodical personal tuition” (3), or that which articulates “the authority of knowledge that came from noncumulative, representational methods of religion, literature and the
This field of epistemological endeavor is placed in opposition to an Enlightenment discourse characterized by “faith in progress” and “constraining knowledge to what could be proven logically, tested scientifically, or verified empirically” (3).

The distinctions Ritchie makes here between “pre-Enlightenment” and “Enlightenment” texts are not merely chronological, though his reading of the epistemological division between, for example, the first volume of Robinson Crusoe (1719) on one side, and the Farther Adventures (1719) and Serious Reflections (1720) on the other, certainly marks a very precise moment in time. Here, Ritchie draws some of his interpretation of this division between Defoe’s Crusoe volumes from a very interesting discussion of Hans Frei’s work on biblical narrative, which argues that Bible-reading prior to the eighteenth century was “at once literal and historical” (Frei 1), a method of interpretation that was undermined by the Enlightenment project to reject the quest for historical veracity in Bible narratives in favor of a “search for a nonhistorical meaning of the scriptural text, separate from its literal meaning” (12). Though Ritchie does acknowledge that all three of Defoe’s volumes reflect both the “unified” pre-Enlightenment interpretative method and the later “Enlightenment split between fiction and fact” (10, 12), his real point is to address the manner in which Defoe, in the latter two volumes, “abstracts the moral truth of Crusoe’s experience from the now disposable fictions he had written.” This point is, in one sense, a reworking of the now-familiar cultural observation that “truth” meant something quite different to people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than it does today, which will hardly come as any surprise to those familiar with the genesis of prose fiction and “the novel” in this period. Ritchie’s arguments add substance and nuance to this wider discussion of genre and Biblical interpretation. Still, his conclusion, which endorses the “renewed claim” of the validity of knowledge disseminated to the reader (and Crusoe) via “representational methods of literature” (35), will hardly come as a surprise to anyone for whom literature serves as a valuable method of understanding the world.

There is also a problematic transitional link between Ritchie’s chapter on Defoe and the early stages of his subsequent one on the hymns of Isaac Watts in his observation that “unlike Defoe, Watts was conscious of the philosophical changes in the air. He knew that the work of John Locke (1632–1704) in particular represented a significant narrowing of the scope of religious knowledge” (37). While most scholars who recognize strongly Lockean components in Defoe’s political discourse openly acknowledge that there are very clear reasons why Defoe is not more explicit in his praise of Locke, it is unlikely that this is because Defoe was unaware that Locke had existed. The Watts chapter goes on to recognize the profound influence of his hymns on a Dissenting community during a period which Watts knew to be “a time of great revival and great controversy among the Dissenters” (39), and it seems clear from the footnotes that Ritchie’s research into the history of Dissent and the evangelical movement in this period is based on highly reputable scholarship (such as that of Donald Davie, Michael Watts, and
D. Bruce Hindmarsh). Given this context, it is difficult to understand why Ritchie does not acknowledge that it is precisely this latter, ongoing climate of controversy amongst Protestants—both within and outside the established Church—that had colored so vividly Locke’s, Defoe’s, and also Watts’s (differing) responses to the relationship between reason and spiritual grace in Christianity over many decades.

In other words, my reservations concerning both the chapters on Watts and Defoe reflect Ritchie’s tendency to limit his comparative analysis to a very narrow reading of the context in which these discourses were first articulated. Moreover, Ritchie’s parallel of the hermeneutic and aesthetic riches to be gleaned from Watts’s hymns with the eclectic and evangelical components of what he terms the “postmodern church” (by which he seems to mean, approximately, the twenty-first-century global Christian faith movement) is ultimately unsatisfactory; his open-ended conclusion that “[p]erhaps [the postmodern church] can remain open to the broad traditions of faith, while remaining rooted in particular communities” (66) gives little real credit to Watts’s legacy, while it implicitly seeks a rather ambitious parallel between the “First Great Awakening in America and the corresponding revivals in Britain” with the future of the “postmodern church” (66).

The shortcomings of Ritchie’s conclusion in this and other chapters, such as his subsequent discussion of Swift’s Royal Society satire in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), result from a repeated discrepancy between what is offered in terms of “postmodern” scholarship in comparison to the complex richness of the “pre-Enlightenment” texts he considers. He acknowledges himself that cybersceptic Wendell Berry is “hardly a postmodern figure” (68), but his extended discussion of Derrida and Lyotard on technology does not really address the questions he raises in this chapter concerning Swift’s own, more complex, response to progress and natural philosophy in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Ritchie’s critical analysis of the Laputa and Lagado chapters partially rehearses well-known arguments concerning Swift’s satire of the Royal Society, but also does them a disservice in that he fails to acknowledge the extent to which Swift shows his unreliable (and, progressively, unhinged) narrator Gulliver endorsing the most hare-brained and violent projects of the Grand Academy (he particularly likes the project to uncover assassination plots through the careful examination of suspects’ faeces), while dismissing the more sensible, albeit idealistic ones (such as those which promote “Wisdom, Capacity and Virtue” in monarchs’ advisors, or which propose to run government by rewarding “Merit, great Abilities and eminent Services” in public life [Swift 175]).

This observation concerning the partiality of this interpretation of *Gulliver’s Travels*’s satire reflects something, broadly, about Ritchie’s work as a whole; the Royal Society project to promote knowledge and truth through empirical investigation, like the wider European Enlightenment that inspired it, was not founded on the premise of rejecting all forms of knowledge attained through aesthetic, artistic, intuitive, or spiritual means. Ritchie may acknowledge this point himself, but his references to a panoply of disparate and sometimes merely reactionary “postmodern” writing undermines what should be his (more objective)
position. Similarly, the French Revolution and its bloody aftermath were not “merely” the collective results of a French rationalist rejection of cultural and religious tradition, as Paine’s (and Wollstonecraft’s, among many others) response to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was quick to point out. Ritchie’s discussion of these works makes this point reasonably enough. However, in considering the broader cultural implications of the post-Revolutionary, “de-Christianized” reinvention of the French national calendar, designed by Gilbert Romme and Philippe Fabre, Ritchie distracts readers from the subject at hand by alluding to a series of recent campaigns across America to liberalize school curricula (to encompass wider social acceptance of homosexuality, for example) or to reject the Christian derivation of nationally-recognized holidays and festivals (in the replacement of St. Valentine’s Day at a series of American campuses with “Vagina Day” or “Penis Day,” for example). Similar “postmodern” discussions might be cited in relation to Ritchie’s chapters on Christopher Smart and William Cowper, and while his own analysis of the primary texts and prevailing debates concerning their epistemological derivation in relation to his “Enlightenment fulcrum” offer some compelling reading, the unassimilated “postmodern” comparative content serves to undermine the work’s strengths as a whole. In his conclusion, Ritchie does offer some caveats concerning the reading of these components of his thesis (in suggesting that some postmodern critiques “continue to endorse the individual’s mastery over language and time that ... blinds them to their own inevitable moral and political shortcomings” [214]). If such critiques do survive what Ritchie describes, here and elsewhere, as “the severe test of time” (50), they may merit further discussion in relation to the eighteenth-century epistemological treasures that he considers here, but it is far too early to know this for certain.

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WORKS CITED
