

## Cicero's ears, or eloquence in the age of politeness: oratory, moderation, and the sublime in Enlightenment Scotland

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Oratory, Moderation, and the Sublime in Enlightenment  
Scotland**

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# CICERO'S EARS, OR ELOQUENCE IN THE AGE OF POLITENESS: ORATORY, MODERATION, AND THE SUBLIME IN ENLIGHTENMENT SCOTLAND

*Catherine Packham*

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About a page into his essay “Of Eloquence,” first published in 1742, David Hume identifies the orator Cicero as “the most eloquent speaker, that had ever appeared in Rome.” Cicero’s pre-eminence, however, brings with it a problem. “Those of fine taste,” Hume tells us, judged that Cicero, together with the Greek orator Demosthenes, “surpassed in eloquence all that had ever appeared, but that they were far from reaching the perfection of their art, which was infinite, and not only exceeded human force to attain, but human imagination to conceive.”<sup>1</sup> Even Cicero himself was dissatisfied with his performances, asserting that his ears were “greedy and insatiate,” and yearned for “something vast and boundless:” a sublime peak of oratorical achievement beyond realisation and even conception, but whose possibility was somehow suggested by the very desires of his own nature.<sup>2</sup>

Cicero’s ears, signs of the undesirable passions of greed and appetite, but also of further, as yet unattained, possibilities of human achievement, mark the central crux of Hume’s essay, as it considers how to transform a human nature whose passions are described as “stubborn and intractable” in the essay’s opening paragraph, into a more moderate, modified form appropriate for the eighteenth century’s polite age. This question—a persistent one in the writings of Hume and his Scottish contemporaries—is approached through the question of eloquence, another recurring preoccupation in post-Union Scotland and beyond, and one for which Cicero and Demosthenes were entirely conventional markers. Ostensibly, Hume’s essay might be read as a call for the reinvigoration of modern oratory, which thus imagines an emulation, but also a moderation, of its ancient practices.

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But Hume's evocation of Cicero as the model orator points in two directions. On the one hand, Cicero's ears recognise the sublime possibilities of oratory which we moderns, Hume goes on to lament, evidently lack. The "single circumstance" of Cicero's dissatisfaction, Hume adds in later editions of the essay, "is sufficient to make us apprehend the wide difference between ancient and modern eloquence, and to let us see how much the latter is inferior to the former" (H 621, note b). But on the other hand, Cicero's ears also mark out the complex moral territory of an elusive sublime which stimulates dangerous and excessive passions in a search which, given the defining evasiveness of its goal, will never come to an end. Given this, how could a responsible essayist exhort his contemporaries to replicate ancient oratory? Should he, by contrast, rather advise them to rest satisfied in the more "mediocre" achievements of modern public speech?

Hume's essay circulates between these two opposed possibilities, appearing at different points to recommend both as solutions to the question of modern eloquence. The essay's thoroughness, contradictions and conscious ironies contribute to the considerable interpretative difficulties which it poses, although recent commentators have tended to see Hume as calling for a modern moderation which abandons the heights of ancient sublimities for a mediocre, but moral, speech. For Adam Potkay, a resolution to the essay's proliferating ironies is eventually reached by Hume's turning, in the essay's final stages, towards an "unruffled acceptance of the deficiencies of British oratory;" for Jerome Christensen, who reads Hume's career as a whole as that of the modern man of letters remediating and succeeding the ancient orator, the essay represents the clearest example of a "strategic moderation" which deliberately severed links with the admirable oratory of the past, to prescribe instead the mundane, writerly virtues of "ordonnance," or order and method.<sup>3</sup> In such readings, the apparent praise which Hume lavishes on the oratory of the ancients operates as cover under which to set out the more modest possibilities at which modern speech might aim, and the at times "monstrous" eloquence of Cicero is implicitly replaced by the easy conversational orderliness of Hume's own style.

Something powerfully present escapes such readings, however, just as it evades capture by Cicero's ears. If Hume's aim is to warn against the dangerous sublime of ancient oratory, it is not clear why he spends so much time in the essay exploring it—or even why he expresses the hope that moderation might fail ("A few successful attempts of this nature might rouse the genius of the nation, excite the emulation of the youth, and accustom our ears to a more sublime and more pathetic elocution, than we have been hitherto entertained with," H 106). Arguably, the residual power and fascination of the sublime itself is what motivates Hume's essay, just as it was a recurring focus of philosophical thought in eighteenth-century Scotland. The argument that sublime eloquence must be sacrificed in a polite age does not do justice to the commitment of Hume and other thinkers to working out the complexity of the problem of accommodating the sublime to modernity, a problem to which, as this paper will argue, the essay is one attempted solution. Hume's interest in oratory can be read—as Potkay does—as political and historical, but it is also philosophical, and manifests Hume's on-going concern, begun in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and continuing into his *Enquiries* and essays, with human nature and affective experience, in life and in art. As an excessive

test-case for the appetites and desires of the subject, the sublime is clearly central to Hume's philosophical investigation of human passions, as well as his essayistic concern to moderate them for a polite age, and his investigation of the presence of the sublime in oratory is thus necessarily connected to his explanations of human morality and social feeling. In this context, it is significant that Hume begins his essay not with eloquence itself, but with precisely the question of human nature, its passions, and its moderation; it is significant too that he ends the essay by looking to taste not only as a moderating mechanism but also as a potentially elevating one.<sup>4</sup> Recommending that modern taste, even informed by a full sense of historical irony, accommodates itself to the safely mediocre, doesn't fully address the human propensity—increasingly and overwhelmingly documented by innumerable taxonomists of sublime cause and effect throughout this period—to be powerfully moved by the sublime and other forms of affective experience.<sup>5</sup> After all, the sublime itself bears witness to the compelling, seemingly transhistorical appeal of infinitude and transcendent limitlessness.

At the same time, Hume's essay also needs to be understood as an attempt to reconcile certain uneasy oppositions within Scottish commercial humanism. It asks not simply whether Ciceronian eloquence can find a place in the age of the coffeehouse, but also how any modification of it would rework liberties traditionally associated with eloquence, whose possibilities in a commercial age needed to be fully understood. The essay's recognition of oratory's harnessing of the passions of speaker and listeners refracts an acute awareness of the centrality of passions to new Scottish Enlightenment understandings of reason and morality (produced in large part by Hume himself); through a consideration of the cultural power of the passions in ancient oratory, it explores, perhaps ambivalently, their centrality in politics and beyond in the current age of sentiment. And finally, given the frequent association between sublime oratory and auspicious historical epochs (in Hume's essay and in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* too), the essay asks how a modern age, if it modifies its public speech, can retain the supreme virtues of the classical past.<sup>6</sup> If modernity modifies the excesses of the past—in its speech, its passions, its sublimities—is it necessarily mediocre? How can a modern, moderate age retain a place for the sublime? Does modern virtue lie merely in adaptability and propriety, or can it ever be sublime?<sup>7</sup>

"Of Eloquence" must be read then as an investigation into the complex problems of commercial modernity, as manifested in sublime style itself. Certainly the essay, with its bathetic conclusion recommending the banalities of proper order and method, stages a confrontation between styles, between mediocrity and transcendent excess. But it also explores through them the historical opposition of the ancients and modernity, and the possibility of charting a progress from the one to the other—a progress which risks running aground on the persistence of human nature, and indeed the sublime itself. The very difference of the moderns from the ancients, which the essay exhorts and upholds, depends on the possibility of moderating human nature, a possibility at odds with the transhistorical power of the sublime to which our ears, as well as Cicero's, attest. Human nature, not the sublime, is ultimately what Hume's essay seeks to tame and control; put differently, human nature itself becomes the elusive sublime object which the essay confronts and debates. Hume's task in this essay, on which the possibility of escaping the past,

and the circular logic of the essay itself depends, is the formulation of a means of regulating the very passions in which human nature consists. In this way, Hume's essay inherits the sublime of ancient oratory not as a narrowly stylistic concern – though style is a means by which it might be addressed – but as a moral problem at the heart of modern subjectivity.

### SCOTTISH CICERONIANISM

In foregrounding the figure of Cicero in its consideration of classical eloquence, Hume's essay is entirely conventional, but it is equally provocative in allowing such questions and ambivalences as have already been outlined to revolve around him. Cicero was a central and iconic figure in eighteenth-century Scotland, whose importance was recognised on many fronts. Most obviously, Cicero was a foundational authority in the moral teaching of Scottish universities, listed, for instance, alongside Marcus Antonius, Pufendorf, and Bacon as the chief authors discussed in the practical ethics lectures of Sir John Pringle, Edinburgh Professor of Moral Philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Cicero's emphasis on practical morality was especially palatable to post-Union universities who, fresh from the bruising experience of the 1690s Visitation—an attempt to limit university teaching to Calvinist orthodoxies—were keen to find ways for broader social engagement.<sup>9</sup> As Peter Jones has demonstrated, Scottish universities presented their newly formed liberal arts teachings as a “vital forming-process for the character of citizens in a modern Scottish *res publica*,” and Cicero, as a figure who, in *de Oratore*, had found a way to rescue ancient learning (“*sapientia*”) from increasingly recondite specialisms to the practical centres of civic life, was thus a compelling model.<sup>10</sup> That it was through eloquence that this practical engagement was achieved only heightened Cicero's attractions for a Scottish context where, since at least the Reformation, the cultural power of oratory, and what David Allan has described as its “moralistic and exhortatory purposes,” were long recognised.<sup>11</sup> For George Campbell, author of the *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), oratory inspired men in their public duty; in the newly formulated “moral culture” of eighteenth-century Scotland, it was a prominent expression of the wisdom of the civilised and virtuous man.<sup>12</sup> That this conception dovetailed with the role of universities in preparing young men for careers as church ministers, lawyers, or other roles where public speech was important only underlined the significance of oratory for them; it is not for nothing that important accounts of language use, rhetoric and speech in the Scottish Enlightenment, including those of Adam Smith and Hugh Blair, are strongly associated with such a pedagogical context.<sup>13</sup>

Scottish concern with eloquence thus opens out into larger cultural and political domains, and Cicero figures too in such larger contexts: he is a crucial and recurring figure in the attempts of post-Union Scotland to steer its way towards a theorization of commercial modernity. Renaissance humanists had drawn on Ciceronianism to manage or mediate the potential conflict between virtue and commerce, a project which, as Pocock has described, was revisited by early eighteenth-century Whig philosophers looking for an alternative to the classical ideal “of the citizen as armed proprietor.”<sup>14</sup> For Pocock, the vindication of this “regime” of commercial modernity “entailed an opposition between ancient and modern,” but one of the most influential proponents of a polite Whig ideology, Joseph Addison, draws at points quite explicitly on a Ciceronian heritage to articulate the new polite amal-

gamation of social, cultural, and commercial values.<sup>15</sup> Whilst Pocock locates the origins of politeness in the Restoration's countering of the "prophetic religiosity" of the mid-seventeenth century, one of Addison's most famous ambitions, to bring "Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries . . . to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses," repeats Cicero's own account of Socrates's conversational philosophy which called "philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men . . . and also into their homes."<sup>16</sup> That Hume himself in "Of Essay-Writing" repeats a version of such a claim ("I cannot but consider myself as a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation") shows not only the persistence of Ciceronianism in eighteenth-century Scottish thought, but also that Hume himself—in this regard at least—happily took up the mantle of Addison's "intellectual ancestor."<sup>17</sup>

Hume's pose here—as essayist, conversationalist, and inheritor of Addison's Ciceronianism—places him in an intellectual genealogy traceable back to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Shaftesbury drew on Cicero's blend of eloquence and philosophy as a means to describe the cultivation of virtue, in a philosophical project closely related to Addisonian politeness, and he claimed Cicero as a predecessor in the genre of essay writing. For Shaftesbury, the essay combined philosophy and rhetoric, offering the means by which both might be deployed "with the greatest Force."<sup>18</sup> For Hutcheson meanwhile, Cicero with Shaftesbury and Locke informed the development of an empirical moral philosophy which Nicholas Phillipson has described as "a neo-Ciceronian science of morals."<sup>19</sup> Whilst the Addisonian nature of politeness in post-Union Scotland has been widely recognized—in the sociable forms of the essay, the conversation, and the club—the sustaining Ciceronianism of these cultural formations has been less remarked.<sup>20</sup>

Politeness of course was not just a cultural style or form, although, as Pocock says, the "advancement of a polite style" was Addison's "supreme achievement."<sup>21</sup> Rather, in its manifestation in post-Union Scotland, it represented part of a fully developed theorization of commercial modernity, society, and politics adequate to the needs of a nation bereft (since the loss of the Edinburgh parliament) of local political representation.<sup>22</sup> Here, central questions concerned the need to understand how virtue might be possible in a commercial society, given the association between the passions and consumption; understanding virtue as acquired in ways other than participation in political life (given the loss of the parliament); and understanding how liberty might be safeguarded in commercial society. The assumption that the state of eloquence reflected a nation's larger political and moral health (an ancient tenet transmitted to modernity via Shaftesbury) was entirely axiomatic in eighteenth-century Scotland—repeatedly stressed, for instance, in student essays written for John Stevenson, Professor of Logic and Rhetoric in Edinburgh from 1730.<sup>23</sup> Scottish preoccupation with the eloquence necessary for self-advancement in a polite age was thus not merely about proper form, but was underpinned by deeper political, philosophical, and cultural questions crucial to its historical moment.

The conjunction of Ciceronian eloquence and Addisonian politeness in post-Union Scotland was an uneasy, double-edged one, however, and marks some complexly interconnected issues on which Hume's essay is poised, which it investigates, and which it to some extent reproduces. On the one hand, the easy eloquence

of the coffeehouse or essay connotes polite sociability, virtuousness, moderation, and liberty—an attractive discursive mode for an age keen to counter the suspicion that its more representative form of speech was what Adam Smith described as the divisive and self-interested “higgling and bargaining” of commercial society.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, eloquence brought rather darker baggage: potential associations with authoritarianism, passivity, tyranny, passions, and excess.<sup>25</sup> The historical concatenation of eloquence and liberty meant that such political and social questions could be expressed, as in “Of Eloquence,” as an aesthetic one—about the possibility of a modern sublime. Hume’s engagement with eloquence is more than an intervention in modern politics: it is a deeply committed consideration of subjectivity and virtue in commercial society. In setting the auspicious but “greedy” speech of the past against the moderate virtues of the present, it articulates an uneasy problem of historical identity, which can be resolved only by modern resignation to virtuous mediocrity—a resignation which still leaves space for a nostalgic fantasy of the sublime return of the past.<sup>26</sup> In this context, it seems entirely significant that the account of taste which Hume offers in the concluding section of the essay operates largely as a mechanism for social accommodation to mediocrity, whilst nevertheless remaining open to the possibility of virtuous inflation—in stark contrast to the more optimistic account of taste outlined in “Of the Standard of Taste.” But where Hume more or less excludes the sublime from the regulatory mechanism of polite taste, Adam Smith offers a triumphant account of modern morality which escapes the past by relocating the sublime as the incentivising pinnacle of virtuous possibilities.

### THE PROBLEM OF ELOQUENCE

Given these larger concerns, it is significant that Hume opens his essay with human history and human passions, rather than with eloquence. His first sentence offers us the object of human history, presented not abstractly but kept personable, by being framed in aesthetic terms as spectacle or entertainment: “[t]hose, who consider the periods and revolutions of human kind, as represented in history, are entertained with a spectacle full of pleasure and variety” (H 97). Keeping the question of oratory itself politely at bay, Hume amuses his readers with history’s pageant, and the historicity or otherwise of human nature itself. Such an opening foregrounds the historical nature of the essay’s project, which explores historical differences but also shows how human nature, whilst at one level constant across time, is also, crucially, capable of historical modulation. That we are moved—moderately—by history announces the essay’s concern with investigating and moderating the powers of affect and, as we will see, Hume looks to taste—a historically moderated means of experiencing aesthetic pleasure—to achieve the moderation of his age. This concern with taste is already anticipated in Hume’s construction of his audience, which, both as essay readers and as historical onlookers, is characterised by something between moderated interest and amused detachment. Pleasure in both the spectacle of history, and in essay reading itself, is the very model of moderation. Proportionate and reasonable, rather than excessive and overwhelming, our ears, or our eyes, do not like Cicero’s yearn for the vast and boundless, but rather are more simply and modestly “entertained” and “surprized” with “pleasure and variety” (H 97). The moderation of human



nature and its capacity for pleasure, which is at the heart of Hume's essay, is thus cemented in its own style.

If moderation for Hume is a historical problem, his essay—in its turn to taste, and in its own stylistic moderation—suggests there is an aesthetic solution. Hume's friend Adam Smith also understood the passions of human nature historically, but rather differently from Hume: for Smith, a “humane and polished people,” because more willing to “enter into” each other's feelings, more readily pardon what is excessive in them (*TMS* 207). Where Hume looks to modern taste to moderate passions, Smith finds in modernity a potentiality for excess. Fear of passionate excess—and perhaps a longing for it—haunts Hume's essay as something to be brought under control, but Smith makes such “entering into,” or sympathising with, the feelings of others central to the moderating impulses of his own moral philosophy. As we will see, he does so by harnessing the power of what Cicero calls the yearning for the “vast and boundless.” As Peter de Bolla has commented, Smith insists on the “ethical sustainability of sublime affect,” despite the “extremes of self-interest” which it represents.<sup>27</sup> His moral theory cleverly transforms the yearning in human nature for the excessive and infinite into something which raises our sense of moral possibility and our standards of virtue, recouping what Hume fears are dangerous infinitudes of sublime excess for their ethically inflationary effects. In this way, a clear route for the progress of human nature is mapped out which might free it from the recurring cycles of history and of taste, which Hume ironically views, and in which the present never fully frees itself either from the shadow cast by the sublime achievements of the past, or from the desire to attempt to repeat them.

For both Hume and Smith, the sublime represents a test case and a problem for the Scottish Enlightenment project of moderation. How can the human propensity to be moved be balanced with the need to regulate its powerful potential for excess? “Of Eloquence” approaches human affect via one of its causes, oratory, whilst Smith's moral theory places that power to be moved at its very heart. The sublime, of course, is that which goes beyond the limits assigned to it, and Cicero's ears show how this “going beyond” is at once both morally problematic and (even more problematically) desirable. Further, the transgressive excess which the sublime enjoins is never recouped, because what it points towards can never be arrived at: Cicero never hears what his ears yearn for. Smith, the philosopher of a political economy which can too often be understood as the theorization of the economic means by which, through exchange of goods, services, labour, value, and so on, people arrive at what they want, was preoccupied in his ethical thought with the productive possibilities of *not* arriving at what is desired: with the desirability, morally speaking, of insatiability, and its ethical (as well as economic) leverage. But where Smith approaches excessive affect as a moral problem and recoups its inflationary possibilities, Hume approaches it as something which might be akin to a problem in art and offers a regulatory mechanism which threatens merely to repeat a circularity of desire and regulation in an uneasy, repetitive cycle.

In an essay which manifests numerous and changeable attitudes to eloquence, Hume is at his most vehement, even disgusted, when he characterises it as a “monstrous,” even ridiculous art form. “What noble art and sublime talents are requisite to arrive, by just degrees, at a sentiment so bold and excessive,” he

comments, “to inflame the audience, so as to make them accompany the speaker in such violent passions, and such elevated conceptions: And to conceal, under a torrent of eloquence, the artifice, by which all this is effectuated!” (H 101). Hume’s horror at the concealed artifice is itself artfully insinuated in 1768 into an essay which had already been published in at least ten editions over the previous twenty years: an exclamation over the immorality and irresponsibility of the orator’s artificial manufacture of passion condemns a rhetorical artfulness in which it itself participates. But the larger problem here is that, although Hume calls it an “art” and tries to write it off in this instance at least as bad art, sublime oratory cannot quite be shunted off into a separate realm of aesthetic performance, not least because of its strong political associations, its role in public life, the law courts, parliament, and so on. The problem of excessive passions, of being moved beyond established bounds or limits, whilst pertaining to art, is not limited to it.

Nevertheless Hume looks to the regulatory mechanism of taste to control such excesses, both explicitly in the final stages of his essay, and implicitly through the “tasteful” and polite manner of his own writing and its constructed reader. But Hume’s taste is radically ambivalent: whilst he seeks to establish a popular taste for modest and polite oratory, he also, nostalgically, leaves open the possibility of a resurgence of the sublime past. At the end of his essay, Hume looks to the community of popular taste to close down and regulate the powerful forces of human affect which the essay has investigated (as well as exploited and been moved by in its turn). But the inability of the “taste community” to solve the problem which Hume investigates has already been established in the essay’s first paragraphs, where it is not only Cicero, but “[t]hose of fine taste” who recognised that even the greatest speakers of their age “were far from reaching the perfection of their art” (H 98).<sup>28</sup> The power of taste as a potential force of moderation is diminished by its very cultivation of the propensity to be moved for which the sublime represents the logical endpoint.

The problem of the sublime thus exceeds the taste by which Hume attempts to regulate it—a fact perhaps recognised by Hume’s ongoing revisions to the essay through to the 1760s, which Adam Potkay reads as evidence of a hardening opposition to a figurative language which is deemed to be at odds with the polite age.<sup>29</sup> For Potkay, Hume’s ambivalence towards oratory becomes oppositional in the 1760s, under the pressure of what for Potkay is at that point the newly felt power of polite ideology. But such a reading assumes that figurative language is itself the object of regulation in Hume’s essay, rather than a sign or symptom of sublime excesses to which human nature is constantly drawn, and which itself demands explanation. Potkay quotes Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (“The behaviour which is reckoned polite in England is a calm, composed, unpassionate serenity noways ruffled by passion”) as evidence of a turn against figurative language, but this does not explain why Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759, and again in revised editions through to 1790, looks for a return of ancient oratory in contemporary Britain.<sup>30</sup> Smith, in fact, suggests the picture in relation to figurative language is rather more complex than Potkay implies, because although the *Lectures* downplay the traditional importance of figurative language in public speaking, Smith nevertheless spends some time analyzing the use of figures by Addison, who for Smith exemplifies polite style.<sup>31</sup> The overriding

concern in Smith's discussion of language use, however, is that it should be appropriate to context—hence perhaps his ability to welcome revived eloquence in a parliamentary context—but this emphasis on context is in turn due to Smith's insistence on the role of sympathy in communication. Language use should be appropriate to the character, aims, and situation of the speaker in order to achieve the easiest possible communication via the sympathies of the listener. For Smith, questions about figurative language arise within a larger description of forms of conduct appropriate to contemporary civil society: this is what enables Smith to welcome sublime language where appropriate, and even to use it himself at times, not least in describing the operation of a regulatory mechanism for excessive affect which will itself be seen as sublime.

Smith's prescriptions on language use (and thus style) are fundamentally concerned with securing social cohesion via collective, communal feeling founded on the operation of sympathy. This turn from eloquence to sympathy had in fact already been anticipated in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, where the power of eloquence ("Nothing is more capable of infusing any passion into the mind, than eloquence . . . We may of ourselves acknowledge, that such an object is valuable, and another odious; but 'till an orator excites the imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections," H 426–27) is succeeded by sympathy ("eloquence is not always necessary. The bare opinion of another, especially when inforc'd with passion, will cause an idea of good or evil to have an influence upon us . . . This proceeds from the principle of sympathy," H 427). For Smith, sympathy is a moral principle, and thus the apparent stylistic opposition between politeness and the sublime can be subsumed into a larger account of the ethics of sympathy on which civil society is founded. Moreover, far from being at odds with it, the sublime can be harnessed to further the aims of polite society.

At one level, Smith's attitude to the sublime is revisionist. Smith's assertion, in the *Lectures on Rhetoric*, that "all that is noble and grand and sublime" in language lies not in figures of speech but in "the sentiment of the speaker" being "expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner" (TMS 25) already modifies sublime oratory in the direction of the beautiful, and this reassessment of aesthetic-moral values recurs in the sixth edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where sublime oratory is attacked not on stylistic grounds but because of its politically dangerous application.<sup>32</sup> In a passage written in 1789 for the last edition of the work published before his death, conventionally read as a response to the French Revolution, Smith warns of the politician whose "spirit of system" and sublime rhetoric transforms a "gentle public spirit" into the "madness of fanaticism" (TMS 232). Against the "splendid" and "dazzling" actions of the "hero, statesman or legislator" (TMS 242) he offers the modest virtues of the prudent man, the value of whose steady, dependable, moderate qualities are thereby thrown into relief. Smith's desire in 1789 to counter what he increasingly perceives as a worrying tendency to admire the rich and the great even leads him into direct opposition at times with Cicero and indeed Addison.<sup>33</sup> Recounting Caesar's acknowledgement, in the face of conspiracies against him, that he was ready to die, Cicero comments in exhortative vein that Caesar had not lived long enough for the good of Rome, but Smith's response is very different. "[T]he man who felt himself the object of

such deadly resentment, from those whose favour he wished to gain, and whom he still wished to consider his friends, had certainly lived too long for real glory; or for all the happiness which he could ever hope to enjoy in the love and esteem of his equals” (*TMS* 66). Smith’s harsh, even abrasive, moral exegesis runs directly counter to Cicero’s uncritical elevation of Caesar and Rome, and is supported by emphasising how Caesar had exceeded any possible sympathies from his friends and equals. Sympathetic judgement provides the moral grounding point which eludes sublime oratory.<sup>34</sup>

In this instance, judgements founded on sympathy (or its limits) figure as an alternative to the ethical failures of the sublime. But Smith is equally ready, in the fullest expression of his revisionism, to relocate the sublime precisely in the sympathetic judgements of moral spectators—or in the possibility of their enactment. This determination to find a moral potentiality in affect—in our being moved by others, in our ability to enter into the feelings of others—means that his attitude to Cicero (despite the difference over Caesar) differs starkly from Hume’s. For Smith, Cicero’s ability to enter into the feelings of others is a sign of the readiness, in polite and civilised nations, to “enter into an animated and passionate behaviour” (*TMS* 207–28), in contrast to the self-command enjoined in more “barbarous” ones. That Cicero could “without degrading himself, weep with all the bitterness of sorrow in the sight of the whole senate and the whole people” is a sign of politeness, rather than excess, and it is this possibility which Smith elevates to the status of the sublime.

Smith’s moral theory is founded on the acts of sympathy, and the implicit judgements contained therein, which operate between participants in polite society. But the myriad different forms of sympathetic judgement which might conceivably take place between social participants in complex modern society are regulated at a higher level by a further concept, of the impartial spectator, an at least partially theoretical, but nevertheless operative, configuration who provides the ultimate foundation for moral judgements on ourselves and on others. The impartial spectator, or the man within the breast, as Smith also terms him, is the centrepiece of Smith’s complex machinery of moral moderation, providing the means by which our own inevitably partial and prejudiced judgments, which tend to indulge our behaviour and be critical of others, are regulated and corrected. But, with attractive concision, as well as regulating, the impartial spectator also provides the means by which greater, even sublime, virtues can be envisaged and enacted: that which moderates and regulates also points the way to elevation and moral greatness. It is only fitting, then, that it is for this moderating as well as exhorting overseer that Smith reserves a language of the sublime. “There exists in the mind of every man,” Smith tells us, an idea of [exact propriety and perfection], gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct” (*TMS* 247). This idea is an “archetype of perfection,” a work of “exquisite and divine beauty,” and the sublime pinnacle of Smith’s moral thinking.

Like Hume’s taste, Smith’s impartial spectator is at one level a regulatory mechanism to control the potential excesses of passion to which his own historical sociology, as well as his economic theory, tells him the modern age is vulnerable: it seeks to secure social cohesion in a polite and commercial age. Unlike Hume’s

taste, which in relation to oratory is, he tells us, particularly skewed towards popular forms of judgment, Smith's impartial spectator works not to favor the moderate and the mediocre, but to signal the possibility of moral greatness. In the context of a modern commercial society which feared that, as Phillipson describes, pursuit of economic benefits entailed the possibility of no "higher virtue than mere adaptability," the impartial spectator points to the possibility of sublime virtues, acts, and speech receiving wide approval. A more compelling ethical model than the modest, moderate, prudent man, Smith shows that virtue, even in the polite age, could be more than mere propriety—but he does so without undermining the basis for a foundational propriety which sympathetic judgements also approve.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most supreme virtue for Smith's impartial spectator is self-command, the quality increasingly stressed in the final edition of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to appear in Smith's lifetime. As Luigi Turco has commented, this is a "distant relation of the Stoic's apathy," and thus Cicero, one of the three main authors from whom the strong Stoic tendencies in Smith are derived, makes a kind of return.<sup>36</sup> In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume characterises Stoicism as at once "specious and sublime," and as a "refined system of selfishness."<sup>37</sup> Temperamentally and philosophically drawn to the skeptics, Hume cannot share in the possibility of moral elevation which Smith finds in their Stoic opponents. But the sublime possibility of self-command approved by the impartial spectator, which *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* holds out as its ultimate virtue, is very different from the sublime for which Cicero's ears yearned. Unlike Cicero's, Smith's sublime is palpable, present, accessible, and elevating, and it is at least partially achievable. Unlike Cicero's, it is, or could be, actual not imaginary, and whilst the sublime for which Cicero yearns speaks to the insatiable, uncontrollable appetites of human nature, Smith's moral sublime offers a means of transforming those same yearning tendencies to the moral good.

The sublime sought by Cicero's oratory was momentary, even tyrannical in its absorption of speaker and listener into an overwhelming experience of passionate expression; as Jerome Christensen has described, its very sublimity, abstract and disengaged, entailed "the dissolution of all object relations."<sup>38</sup> In an early methodological essay, Smith offers a version of a "philosophical" sublime in describing the wonder and pleasure experienced by the philosopher in forging explanatory connections between cause and effect to make a philosophical system.<sup>39</sup> In the terms of his later *Wealth of Nation's* account of the division of labour, this runs the risk of securing for the philosopher an intellectually and aesthetically pleasurable form of work whilst others suffer the mental alienation of arduous, repetitive wage-labour. Against this, the mechanism of the impartial spectator outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* makes a moral sublime available to all social participants. Far from having no relation to orator or audience, the ethical sublime expresses, consolidates and furthers social relations: not as the dissolution of object relations, but as their apotheosis. Recouping excess as an ethical possibility, and establishing the sublime as a modern, moral principle, Smith ensured that the human capacity for affect which his age shared with the ancients became a matter not merely of entertainment or art or even public speech, but of virtuous social relations capable of exceeding the merely proper forms of a polite age.

## NOTES

An early version of this paper was given at the ESRC-funded 'Rhetorics of Moderation' conference at the University of Edinburgh, in March 2011. I am grateful to the late Professor Susan Manning for the invitation to speak, and wish to commemorate Susan's huge contribution to Scottish Enlightenment studies, to which I, amongst many, am greatly indebted.

1. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 98. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as H.

2. Cicero, *Orator* 29.104: '*Ita sunt avidæ et capaces meæ aures, et semper aliquid immensum, infinitumque desiderant*'. The translation quoted is from H. M. Hubbell's Loeb edition, as given in Miller.

3. Adam Potkay, 'Classical Eloquence and Polite Style in the Age of Hume', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (1991): 31–56, quote on 42; Jerome Christensen, *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 102. See also W.S. Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), and Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994).

4. Potkay makes no reference to Hume's important treatment of taste in this essay.

5. For a survey of eighteenth-century writing on the sublime which suggests something of its extent and variety, see *The Sublime: a Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). This essay seeks to understand 'Of Eloquence' as one of the 'technologies of explanation and understanding' which, as Ashfield and de Bolla assert, the age developed 'in the face of the sublime' (6).

6. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. MacFie (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 207–208. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as TMS.

7. Hume's philosophical and historical concern with moderation is worth comparing to that of the 'moderate literati' of Edinburgh, an academic and ecclesiastical elite including Hugh Blair, William Robertson, and Adam Ferguson, who from mid-century propagated moderation as a distinct ideology. Neither Hume nor Smith were members of this immediate group, although like them they were members of the Select Society and part of a broader circle supportive of polite manners, moderate religion, public virtue, and private ethics. See Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1985), especially 15–18 and 325–27.

8. See Charles Stewart-Robertson, 'The Pneumatics and Georgics of the Scottish Mind,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1987): 296–312. For evidence of Scottish moral philosophy prelectors drawing substantially on Cicero, see Stewart-Robertson, 'Cicero Among the Shadows: Scottish Prelections of Virtue and Duty,' *Rivista Critica di Storia Della Filosofia* 1 (1983): 25–49. For conflicting attitudes to Cicero in eighteenth-century politics beyond Scotland, see Reed Browning, *Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Court Whigs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), especially 217–28, and Howard Weinbrot, *Augustan Caesar in 'Augustan' England: the Decline of a Classical Norm* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 15–17.

9. See Peter Jones, 'The Scottish professoriate and the polite academy, 1720–46,' in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 89–117.

10. *Ibid.*, 90; Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 44–45.

11. David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1993), 186 and especially chapter 4.

12. For Campbell, see Allan, *Virtue, Learning*, 188; for 'moral culture', see Stewart-Robertson, 'Pneumatics'.

13. The record we have of Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* stems from his teaching at Glasgow University; these likely originated in public lectures given in Edinburgh prior to his Glasgow appointment.

14. J. G. A. Pocock, 'Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: a study of the relations between the civic humanist and the civil jurisprudential interpretation of eighteenth-century social thought,' in *Wealth and Virtue*, 235–52, quote on 251, and Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 235.

15. For Addison's Ciceronianism, see John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourses: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987), 47.

16. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce*, 236; [Joseph Addison], *The Spectator*, 10 (12 Mar 1711); Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 42.

17. Hume, *Essays*, 535; Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment,' *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 19–40, quote from 29.

18. Shaftesbury, 'Miscellaneous Reflections on the Preceding Treatises', I, iii, III, quoted in Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 115.

19. Phillipson, 'Scottish Enlightenment', 29.

20. For the influence of Addison in post-Union Scotland, see Phillipson, 'Scottish Enlightenment', 26. For Scottish clubs from 1720s, see Peter Jones, 'Scottish professoriate'.

21. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce*, 236.

22. For a detailed account of discussions of social and political participation in post-Union Scotland, see Phillipson, 'Scottish Enlightenment'.

23. On Shaftesbury and eloquence, see Klein, and Allan, 'Virtue, Learning', 219. For Stevenson's essays, see Peter Jones, Scottish professoriate, 100.

24. Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 1:49.

25. For Shaftesbury's similar concerns, see Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 99.

26. Phillipson suggests that Scottish enthusiasm for Ossian, and Adam Ferguson's attraction to the muscular virtue of the classical age, represents a similarly nostalgic search for more resonant and heroic forms of virtue than the modern commercial age appeared to offer. See Phillipson, 'Scottish Enlightenment', 34–37.

27. De Bolla, *The Sublime*, 4–5.

28. 'Those of fine taste' in 'Of Eloquence' might be compared to the 'men of delicate taste' in Hume's longer investigation of taste, 'Of the Standard of Taste'.

29. Hume's revisions to 'Of Eloquence' in the 1760s are in fact relatively minor, and one at least (quoted above, 2) remarks on the inferiority of modern to ancient eloquence. Potkay's desire to read these revisions in the context of what he sees as a renewed concern with politeness in this decade ignores the presence of politeness as a widespread ideology and cultural practice much earlier in Enlightenment Scotland. His decision to evoke Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric* as evidence to support his argument for a new politeness in the 1760s is also perplexing given that, although the record we have of these dates from 1762–63, the *Lectures* had been given in what was likely to be similar form for the previous fifteen years. See Potkay, 'A Reply to Mark Box', in *Hume Studies* 22 (1995): 340–43, quote on 341.

30. Potkay, 'Classical Eloquence', 33; Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 198–99; Smith, *TMS*, 208. For more evidence of Smith's admiration of the 'splendid and admired' oratory of Cicero, see *TMS*, 240. Smith and other Scottish rhetoricians, including Blair, George Campbell, and Robert Watson all wanted to mediate Ciceronian oratory into a pragmatic, virtuous but still persuasive form of eloquence.

31. Contrast Potkay's claim that 'figures were deemed irrelevant to the polite or enlightened mind', 'Classical Eloquence', 47.

32. Smith is also alert to the pernicious consequences of Cicero's oratory in stamping 'a character of splendour' on suicide: see *TMS*, 286.

33. Dwyer argues that Smith's revisions in the 1790 edition of *TMS* participate in widespread doubts in late eighteenth-century Edinburgh, and its periodical press, about the moral corruption of ambitious middling classes by the passions unleashed in commercial society. See Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourses*, 168–85.

34. Addison uncritically references this episode in *The Spectator*, no. 256 (December 1711). For another instance of Smith's criticism of Cicero's moral judgement, see *TMS*, 241.

35. Phillipson argues that Smith shows, 'in the most disconcerting way, that in the last resort virtue was only a form of propriety, moulded subtly and insensibly by social experience' ('Scottish Enlightenment', 36). The 1790 edition of *TMS* addresses this problem by providing an additional section, Part VI Of the Character of Virtue, to supplement the earlier Part I, Of the Propriety of Action.

36. See Luigi Turco, 'Moral sense and the foundations of morals,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 136–56, quote on 149. For the sources of Smith's Stoicism, see D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie's introduction to *TMS*, 5. Self-command is a topic of *Spectator* 256, one place where Addison's Ciceronianism manifests itself.

37. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 101, 40. On Hume's opposition to Stoicism, see M. A. Stewart, 'The Stoic legacy in the early Scottish Enlightenment', in *Atoms, Pneuma and Tranquillity: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought*, ed. Margaret J. Osler, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 273–96.

38. Christensen, *Practicing Enlightenment*, 126.

39. See 'The Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy', in Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).