Review: *The Atlantic Enlightenment*
edited by Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano

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The Atlantic Enlightenment
Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano (eds.)
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'In the beginning, all the world was America', wrote John Locke, letting his mind range over the 'wild Common of Nature' represented by the continent in the second of his *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690). The power of the transatlantic imagination forms one of the starting points for this collection, which figures the crossing of the Atlantic both in literal terms (the plight of whalers and the disputed rights of sailors, for instance, are tackled in Paul A. Gilje's essay) and as 'a culturally dense symbolic experience in which ideas, beliefs, and consciousness itself were transformed' during the Enlightenment (4). Indeed, this collection argues from the starting point that 'there was no Enlightenment without the Atlantic', and specifically, without transatlantic 'exchanges and circulations - commercial, material, spiritual, intellectual and imaginative' (1).

This double emphasis characterizes the book's theoretical approach, which builds on – and interrogates – two main trends in criticism. The first is in its definition of 'Enlightenment'. What was it? When was it? Where did it happen? These essays show a wisely wary approach to all three questions, but the over-arching principle is that of interest in 'a network of actively contested discourses and experimental possibilities' (3). If the seminal works of the 1950s and 1960s – Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1955) or Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1967-9) – structured understanding of the Enlightenment around key concepts, solidly grounded characteristics of rational empiricism and religious scepticism, then the trend over the last few decades has been interest in the shifts, circulation and transformation of ideas around this period. Similarly, although the collection acknowledges the importance of period-defined criticism from Carl Becker's *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) to Roy Porter's *Enlightenment* (2000), these essays move across period boundaries, repeatedly underlining continuations from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The collection is also, of course, based on challenging national boundaries, and what the editors term 'nation-based analyses': this is, instead, the Enlightenment as 'Atlantic phenomenon'. Atlantic studies form the second of the two critical trends in which the book is interested, a relatively new preoccupation which informs work such as Bernard Bailyn's *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (2006) and, indeed, the symposium which gave rise to this issue of *19*. The book offers an excellent introduction to the growth of interest in Atlantic history and scholarship, and takes this critical idea forward.

We begin with Paul Giles's 'Enlightenment Historiography and Cultural Civil Wars', offering a good, provocative overview of currents in Enlightenment criticism which extends the arguments of the 'Introduction', and recaps his recent publication, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (2006). The 'grand Enlightenment metanarrative' frustrates Giles. Enlightenment fascination with abstraction, he contends, has a tendency to rub off on critics, and he argues, instead, for a more fractured, less programmatic way of reading the Enlightenment, a reading which leaves 'more room for discordances, discontinuities and incoherences' (20). He turns a sceptical eye on our desire to tell stories about the Enlightenment through our own experiences: Gay's desire 'to focus upon the iconoclastic tone of eighteenth-century culture as a kind of extended prelude to the climate of the 1960s, the era of John F. Kennedy, scientific technocracy, enlightened liberalism and sexual freedom [...] effectively appropriating a particular version of Enlightenment thought as a precursor to his own political concerns', or Gillian Brown's attempt, in *The Consent of the Governed* (2001) to establish the foundations of contemporary US multiculturalism in the American Enlightenment. It could be argued that no critical narrative can really hope to escape the grubby lens of present preoccupations, and nor should we want it to. Part of this book's appeal, after all, is a certain self-consciousness about, in the words of its editors, its 'particular bias and unique contribution [...] a *North* Atlantic Enlightenment primarily protestant in denomination, and Anglophone in orientation'. This is both a limiting device in this huge field and, as the editors admit, 'a practical consequence of our particular interests as Americanists living and working in Edinburgh' (9). Is Giles arguing we should erase the traces of these 'particular interests', attempt to redress the 'particular bias' of the individual narrative? Not quite: as his essay goes on to outline, he is really targeting the

'excessively rapid allegorisation of cultural formations and crosscurrents into grand schematic narratives' (24). There's a danger about these kinds of narratives, and what they may be used to justify. In particular, he wants to remind us of the 'conflicted and messy' nature of the American Revolution, to keep emphasising that its outcome 'owed as much to chance as to providence' and therefore to hold open the imaginative possibility of quite a different historical narrative (24). He nicely illustrates his point about contemporary critical historiography with the example of Richard Price, whose writing on the American Revolution he juxtaposes with Roy Porter's reading of the Enlightenment. Whereas Price's Atlantic Enlightenment is a joyful Dissenting vision – linking the American Revolution with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and seeing, for instance, the 'new United States to be an incarnation of what Britain could and should have been if it had followed Locke's principles to their logical conclusion' – Porter's version is essentially secular rather than religious. Both, as Giles makes clear, are performing 'intellectual acts of retrospective appropriation' (33) which, perhaps, do an injustice to the slippery, conflicted nature of the period. The introduction and this first essay thus form a bold and theoretically sophisticated argument for what a concept of 'Atlantic Enlightenment' might do, and make the book's contribution to eighteenth-century scholarship clear.

If Giles focuses on how we might define the Enlightenment, the second essay, by Charles W. J. Withers, focuses on the Atlantic. Expanding on the idea of the Enlightenment as 'something dynamic' (37), Withers takes as his structuring metaphor the dynamic flow of the Atlantic Gulf Stream itself, reflecting the flow of intellectual exchange moving backwards and forwards across it. As a space of exchange, Withers's Atlantic contests the concept of '*the* Enlightenment moving east-west across the Atlantic as a single unproblematic phenomenon' (45), and refigures ideas of core and margin. The piece fits together well with the closing essay by Paul A. Gilje, which also focuses on the Atlantic: this time on the seaman who might traverse it. Gilje gives an illuminating account of the Anglo-American mariner, using writings about sailors such as Thomas Jefferson's pamphlets, and the moving commentaries of seamen themselves, such as Samuel Leech's *A Voice from the Main Deck* (1843) or *An Affecting Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of Thomas Nicholson* (1816). 'A man should be secured the rights of a citizen,' commented Leech, 'as well as on the planks as the soil of his country': Gilje

attempts to outline the rights these citizens of the Atlantic actually had, and uses 'Anglo-American maritime culture' to question concepts of the Enlightenment on dry land.

The essays by Daniel W. Howe and Emma Rothschild use the concept of 'Atlantic Enlightenment' to afford different sorts of biographical insights. Howe discusses John Witherspoon, born in East Lothian, educated at the University of Edinburgh, who became president of the College of New Jersey – later to become Princeton – in 1768. The only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon, with his habitual 'thick Scots accent', was at the heart of American politics and education. Not only did he have a shaping effect on the religious life of the college, mediating between the Old Side and New Side Presbyterians, he also changed the course of its educational development. Howe shows the lasting influence of his teachings on moral philosophy and rhetoric, and of the innovations he imported from his experience of the Scottish university system – lecturing to students, establishing a professorship of mathematics and natural philosophy, acquiring an orrery, fund-raising, and setting the college 'on the road to becoming one of the most influential of American universities' (65). Moreover, Howe demonstrates how, through Witherspoon, an important stream of Scottish common sense philosophy filtered into the outlook of America's constitutional founders, such as James Madison. So why don't we hear more about him? The relative paucity of scholarly work on Witherspoon and his influence, argues Howe, may be, in part, down to the division between British and American historians: his career, political, religious, philosophical, can only really be understood if both its Scottish and American aspects are fully considered. Atlantic scholarship such as this, with its emphasis on the 'dynamic flow' of ideas (in Withers' words) might redress this problem, and Howe makes a strong case for a re-reading of Witherspoon as a 'quintessentially Atlantic figure' (68).

But what of someone who never crossed the Atlantic? What can this type of 'dynamic' scholarship do for someone 'large and plump and indolent', whose pleasures were, self-confessedly, 'reading and sauntering and lownging and dozing, which I call thinking' (81). In contrast to Howe, Emma Rothschild begins her chapter with a 'distinctively unAtlantic figure': David Hume. Yet Rothschild makes a good argument for what an Atlantic reading can bring to light about this well-known figure. She details Hume's own voyages, including an ill-fated attempt to cross the Atlantic in 1746 as secretary to General St. Clair, an expedition which petered out in a confused attack on the

French coast. But Rothschild makes the point that Hume's own experiences of the Atlantic were less important than the 'universe of oceanic connections' which he experienced both during his stays in Paris and London, and back at home in Edinburgh, where he continued to think transatlantically. 'I am an American in my Principles,' he wrote to his friend William Mure in 1775, 'and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper' (86). Hume's life, concludes Rothschild, illustrates 'the ways in which the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century extended far inland, into the interior of the provinces and into the interior of individual existence' (95).

Similarly, Thomas Ahnert's contribution on German responses to the American revolution shows how interest in America might also reach 'far inland' into Europe. Ahnert demonstrates the vigorous debate going on in Germany about the American crisis and its repercussions for trade and politics, and argues that German authors were keenly aware of the wider 'Atlantic context' (99). Peter S. Onuf's essay, 'Adam Smith and the Crisis of the American Union', also traces the ripples of debate about *The Wealth of Nations* which spread out across the Atlantic. His legacy, Onuf suggests, 'could cut in opposite directions' (150) – advocates of both free trade and protective tariffs could invoke Smith equally. Onuf's essay compliments Howe's discussion of Witherspoon: both pieces emphasize the ways in which British ideas might take on new life across the Atlantic, while also suggesting that this is not a purely one-way traffic.

Literary exchange and influence is not always given a full role in Atlantic scholarship, which sometimes tends towards the historical, so it is welcome to see – as well as Paul Giles' contribution – two pieces on the fictions of the Atlantic Enlightenment by Sarah F. Wood and James Chandler. Wood traces different Quixotic incarnations, from early eighteenth century readings of the 'lunatic knight' to a more Romantic 'just and virtuous hero' as the century wore on, and shows how these different interpretations then resurfaced transatlantically, popping up in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801) with its dreamy, deluded heroine Dorcasina (reminiscent of Mary Hays's Emma Courtney) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815). Moreover, discussing these politically inflected Quixotes, Wood shows that it was primarily the 'promiscuously circulated and politically contested Quixote' employed by Revolutionary satirists of all political persuasions in the 1790s who crossed the Atlantic, rather than Cervantes' original. Don Quixote's transatlantic pilgrimages, she argues, give him a new

lease of life, so that he becomes 'an indispensable figure when it comes to critiquing the unrealisable ideals of America's founding fathers' (129). The recovery of neglected early novels is also at the heart of James Chandler's essay, 'Transatlantic Sentiments and the 'First American Novel''. The study of the Romantic novel has undergone a transformation in the last few decades, no less in the US than here: Chandler uses the example of William Hill Brown's recently republished *The Power of Sympathy* to show why and how particular works might be rehabilitated and re-valued. Hill Brown's novel, the first to be published after the ratification of the US constitution, marks one of the earliest published instances of the word 'transatlantic', and Chandler argues that it has a special significance for transatlantic studies. In its echoes and interrogations of Sterne, and its self-conscious reflections on the labile nature of sensibility, the novel not only shows the development of the American novel in relation to its European counterparts: it also looks back to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to form its complex notion of sympathy. 'What and how and why does sympathy's 'power' enable it to 'move'?' asks Chandler, speculating lucidly and intriguingly about the transatlantic trajectory of the sentimental journey.

While on the subject of Atlantic literary criticism, it is rather a shame that the excellent work by Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776–1862* (2000) doesn't have a mention in the bibliography – although an approving quote by him does make an appearance on the back of the book. It's even more of a loss, I think, that Susan Manning – whose subtle works on the 'echoes, continuities, developments of implications' across Scottish and American literature in *The Puritan-provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Fragments of Union* (Palgrave, 2002) are important for our understanding of the Atlantic literary context – doesn't contribute an essay of her own. However, her interest in allusions, connections, shared metaphors and structures of thought and style – the 'grammar of the imagination,' as she puts it in *Fragments of Union* – do obviously have a shaping effect on the whole collection. Overall, the volume is a very timely contribution to a developing field of study. As events such as *The Idea of America* show, the concept of Atlantic scholarship is proving highly useful for scholars across disciplines and periods, and this book outlines a number of different critical approaches which will help to define and complicate both the Atlantic Enlightenment, and the Atlantic nineteenth century.