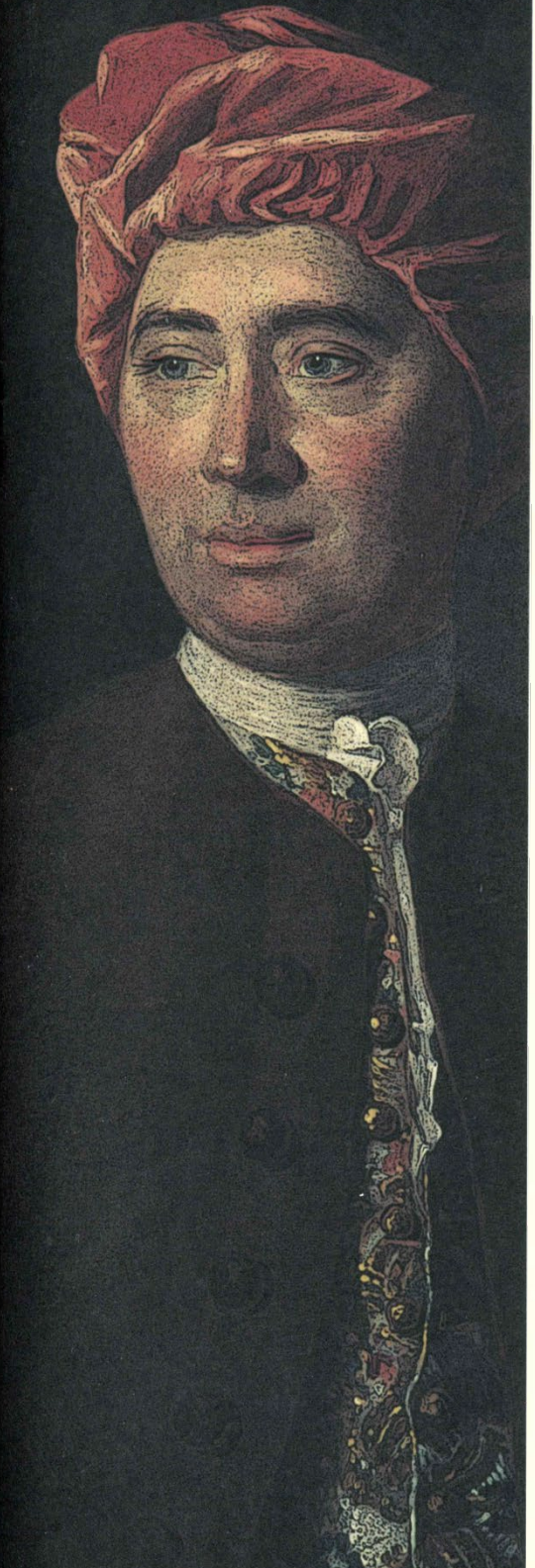

Dialogues with Hume

presented by

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities

Gathering Uncertainties

a conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Susan Manning

Celebrating Hume's Tercentenary

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711, attended the University of Edinburgh from 1723, and died in Edinburgh in 1776, having meanwhile achieved worldwide fame as an historian and philosopher. He and his associates were at the heart of the intellectual, literary and cultural events that are now known as the Scottish Enlightenment and he is generally recognised as the greatest philosopher ever to write in English. Today his work is studied by scholars from all over the world. Although Hume wrote in the 18th century, his works continue to be influential across many fields of scholarship and remain uncommonly relevant to the philosophical disputes of the 21st century and a wide range of current public concerns. It is fitting, therefore, that the 300th anniversary of his birth should be celebrated in Edinburgh in 2011 and the University of Edinburgh is hosting a programme of events throughout the year. As part of this, IASH has organised a series of seminars entitled Dialogues with Hume as follows:

Emeritus Professor Peter Jones (University of Edinburgh):
Conversation: And the Reception of David Hume

Gathering Uncertainties: A conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Professor Susan Manning.

Professor Daniel Schulthess (University of Neuchâtel):
Hume and Searle – the 'is/ought' gap us. speech act theory

Dr. James Harris (University of St. Andrews):
Hume's intellectual development – an overview

A dialogue between Professor Don Garrett (New York University and Carnegie Centenary Professor, IASH) and Dr. Peter Millican (Hertford College, Oxford and Illumni Hume Fellow, IASH) on:
Reason, Induction, and Causation in Hume's Philosophy.

Gathering Uncertainties: a conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Susan Manning

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities
The University of Edinburgh
2011

Gathering Uncertainties: a conversation between playwright Linda McLean and Susan Manning

This series of occasional papers is published by

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities
The University of Edinburgh
2 Hope Park Square
Edinburgh EH8 9NW

Published July 2011

ISSN 2041-8817 (Print)
ISSN 2634-7342 (Online)
ISBN 978-0-9568610-0-9
Institute Occasional Papers, 16

Linda McLean was born in Glasgow and, after graduating as a teacher, travelled in Europe, America, Africa and Scandinavia before she wrote plays. She is Chairwoman of the Playwrights' Studio Scotland and has worked for the British Council in Mexico City, Teluca and Bogota, encouraging new writers to find their own voices. In 2009 she delivered the keynote speech to the Playwrights' Guild of Canada. She is currently under commission to the National Theatre of Scotland, Magnetic North, and the Traverse Theatre. Linda is a creative fellow at IASH.

Susan Manning is Grierson Professor of English Literature at The University of Edinburgh and Director of The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. She works on the Scottish Enlightenment, and on transatlantic literary studies.

Susan Manning: Welcome to the second in our series of Dialogues with Hume which is part of the University's and IASH's celebrations of the Hume tercentenary year. And you will immediately gather from the format that this is intended to be a very different kind of session. It's an outcome of our attempt to think – well over a year ago now – about what forms we should give to a series of celebrations that were partly designed to indicate the continuing interest of Hume and Hume's writings for people in 2011 and to transform this anniversary year from a purely historical celebration, to something that people could – without themselves being philosophers or historians – engage with today.

For some years now the Institute has played host to a playwright, or in one case, a musician, to engage in some form of creative composition – usually to a commission, but not always – and to take part in the Fellowship and add a new ingredient to our mix. And it's a delight to see at least two of our previous Creative Fellows back with us today. I can say, I think, that it has been uniformly successful in the sense that all Fellows at IASH have benefitted hugely and enjoyed enormously the presence of our Creative Fellows, in addition to the value of the new works that the Fellows have produced during their time here.

So one of the things that I thought of as part of the celebrations was the possibility that we might actually link our Creative Fellowships with the Hume tercentenary year, and I had a conversation with the Artistic Director of the Traverse about the possibility of a partnership in which we would host and they would commission playwrights to write something on any aspect of the life, work and legacy of David Hume. We both immediately came to the conclusion that this would not work if people took it up as a sort of 'biopic' story of David Hume's life, and that it would have to be a much more creative, more oblique, engagement to generate interesting or challenging theatre.

Linda McLean: ... which, if you remember, was lucky for me because

the first thing I said when I came into your office was ‘I can’t do a Hume biopic.’

SM: So she got the job . . .[laughter] . . . the shortest interview I’ve ever done. And we ended up with two very different Creative Fellows – Jo Clifford, who came first, and Linda McLean who I’m delighted to have in conversation with me today. And essentially, we’re going just to open up, we hope, a very different kind of dialogue: about the relationship between a philosophical idea and a dramatic idea. This thought comes, for me (as someone who works in literature), out of Lionel Trilling’s essay, written many years ago, called ‘The Meaning of a Literary Idea’ which tries to talk about the way in which a literary idea might take a different form – might be a different sort of beast – from a political idea or a philosophical idea. So I want to know about the meaning of a dramatic idea in relation to Hume, and I should say that when Linda came in with her opening line and said she wasn’t going to write one of those plays, we said ‘OK, well what’s it going to be, then?’ And this was new, for you; this proposal, which was also a provocation, came out, and you thought ‘Can I engage with that?’ Had you read any Hume before? Had you ever thought about Hume before?

LM: Not until I thought about the possibility of coming here. I was hugely ignorant of Hume, I’m afraid, and all of the Hume scholars in the room will discover that I'm only just a fraction less ignorant about Hume now. But the little bit that I did read – and certainly in our conversations – I found that something about what he was doing chimed with me. I don’t know if you’ll remember those earlier conversations, but we talked about the theory of causation. In layman’s terms and how I understood it at the time: we get into the habit of thinking that cause and effect are intrinsically, inherently linked. And the idea that suggested itself to me was. . . well, what if they’re not?

What if there actually is a gap between cause and effect? But of course it would always strike me in a dramatic sense. I had just not long before written a play called *Strangers, Babies,* which was actually a series of five short complete plays. And just so that we get this the right way round, I rarely start with form in my head. I always waken up about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, or in some subliminal half-dreaming state and dialogue floats up. Usually somewhere in that dark space that I try not to be aware of, things are formulating, but I don't start writing until I've got dialogue. So I woke up this particular morning with the dialogue that is actually the opening lines of *Strangers, Babies* which is a young woman looking from a balcony and saying 'Is it dead?' And someone saying to her, 'Is what dead? – 'The bird . . . is it a bird? Is it dead?' And I follow that through and in the space of about two days I have a complete short play. But it felt quite complete. However, very quickly afterwards, the same experience repeated until I realised I had five discrete plays. The thing that was interesting for me – and I'm going to come back to Hume here – is that I couldn't tell what the connections were between the plays. Each play had the one main character – a woman – and she was in them all. But she was with a different male character in each of them and there was no link – there was no explanation about how long it was between one play and the next one; or what the relationship was between her and any of the other characters, or indeed between the other characters themselves.

Just a general note on how I find reading Hume is that I think he builds an amazing model of human understanding, human thinking, and he teases apart that bundle that we are as much as he can into discrete units of how we form our understanding, and that's something that I've increasingly been doing in my work with language, cause and effect, causation, as an explanation of narrative. How big can that gap be, and people still make an overarching sense of it? What I didn't know then that I think I know now is that what we do as human beings is that we fill the gaps with narrative. We almost have no choice but to

do that. If I present you with a short play, and then present you with another one after it, you will make a link. And I'm not sure how big a gap I can play with.

SM: But the way you're describing it is as the space between narratives that are 'there,' already in place, and that you're actually interested in teasing out the relations between these elements to see how big the space can be, and someone still be able to leap over it in imagination.

LM: Yes.

SM: One of the things you said at a very early point when we started having conversations about Hume was that you weren't actually thinking about the play or the plays you were going to write as a result of reading Hume, – you were suddenly thinking about the plays you had written as in fact doing something different from perhaps what you thought they had been doing. Can you say a bit more about that experience?

LM: Well, it's funny the way that's changed actually, because when I met you I hadn't written *The Uncertainty Files.* That backward glance at *Strangers, Babies* was me realising that I needed to have some kind of emotional or theatrical starting point with Hume and I thought I could find it there. We also talked briefly about uncertainty. If for a moment we think that the future may not resemble the past, then at what point do we become afraid to put one foot in front of the other? I was about to go to America to be involved in a project called 'The Orchard Project' and I had to go with an idea. What I had was an idea for a 'two-hander' which would deal with two people who had very different kinds of uncertainties. And I had the voice of one of the characters quite clearly. I thought: I'm almost ready to go there. I didn't know whether these characters were going to be separated,

whether they would be in the same place at the same time, or what the form was going to be. I went over to America to explore that, and actually the journey of going there was one of the most uncertain journeys I've ever taken. It was very long, it was very tiring and I got lost. I ended up being picked up by a man . . . [laughter] . . . who was crazy. It was a three-hour journey and I was terrified out of my wits by the time I got there. When I arrived, it was night, and I was met by this bunch of wonderful theatre-makers who greeted me at half-past-nine at night with: "Oh, you're just in time! We're just about to do a showing!" I actually went to see that showing and the quality of the people I was working with there was so high that I actually just sat there and thought: This is the best possible thing that I could have done, after that long drive and that feeling of uncertainty. But having confronted such a sense of fear associated with uncertainty, I decided to explore uncertainty in the voice and character more. So I spent the rest of the week taping people on the subject of uncertainty. And when it came to transcribing those recordings, it was mesmerising – what the voice does when it's uncertain, how it affects the breathing. – – I think you saw *The Uncertainty Files* – – One of the most difficult things to achieve in a written form was: every intake of breath, or every 'er' or 'ehm'. There was one young woman who I interviewed who said 'like' so many times that the semantics of what she was trying to say almost became lost.

SM: Yes, I remember that one.

LM: Yes, so dealing with language in that way and the transcribing of the smallest part was ... I found another moment in Hume which for me chimed with that, which was 'On Space and Time' – I know some people have difficulty with (Hume on) space and time in the *Treatise,* but personally I still find that really inspiring. It's when he talks about the infinite divisibility of space and time. He talks about instead of

trying to reduce things to the smallest part; perhaps . . . I'll read it:

> This however is certain, that we can form ideas, which shall be no greater than the smallest atom of the animal spirits of an insect a thousand times less than a mite: And we ought rather to conclude, that the difficulty lies in enlarging our conceptions so much as to form a just notion of a mite, or even of an insect a thousand times less than a mite. For in order to form a just notion of these animals, we must have a distinct idea representing every part of them; which, according to the system of infinite divisibility, is utterly impossible, and according to that of indivisible parts or atoms, is extremely difficult, by reason of the vast number and multiplicity of these parts.

I wanted to look at it at its minutest, but the only way I could do that was by including everything that took place in a speech. And so that came about, I think, as a direct result of the conversation that we had then, and the ideas I explored when I went away.

SM: That's fascinating, because there are several things that struck me about *The Uncertainty Files.* There are four characters lined up behind a very anonymous-looking series of desks on the stage. And each of them speaks in turn, and then they take different turns and their genders change, as they speak a small account of uncertainty. One of the immediately visually striking things about it was that it was an entirely static set-up, but charged with the most extraordinary sort of uncertainty in the dynamics. So that as you were watching it, you didn't know which of the four silent waiting figures the next speaker was going to be, whether that person's narrative had any relation to the previous one. You were trying – and perhaps this goes back to what you were saying about how big the gaps are that you can make and still create a narrative – trying to think, well, is there something going on

here about the uncertainties of youth, the uncertainties of age? What's happening? Do these characters each know, when they speak, that the other characters are there? It wasn't at all obvious whether there was any interaction going on between them; or whether they were simply – as far as they were concerned – in a room, in a monologue in front of a microphone.

LM: But the thing about that, the thing that a number of people said to me about the play was that because everything had been included – all of the nervous ties, and thoughts and all of that – because it had been included, people actually started to think that what they were seeing was the truth, in a way that was different from how I might otherwise structure a play where I might not be trying to create something realistic but rather, something with emotional truth. Whereas in this case, people thought they were being confronted by the truth.

SM: Well, I had that thought, in the form: was this simply a speaking of one of your transcriptions? So the girl who said 'like' all the time – was that just the transcription?

LM: Yes.

SM: So it was a choice of actual realities that you were offered?

LM: Yes. Because if I had filtered out all of those things, all you would have been left with – and this was a real difficulty for the actors learning the script for *The Uncertainty Files* – because they used all of their usual techniques for learning their lines, but the next day all they could remember was the sense. They couldn't remember where the 'likes' and the 'ahs' and the 'ehms' came.

SM: So they had filtered those out.

LM: Yes. So they had to employ 'Derren Brown' learning techniques, with colour coding and suchlike. And one of the cast was only able to remember by turning their lines into song, with actions.

SM: One of the effects of all of those interjections and hesitations was to slow down the narrative into a series of discrete statements. So the hesitations, or the verbal ties, the 'likes', and so on, became in themselves a kind of punctuation, but a punctuation that actually separated the elements of the semantic sense into individual words. That's something that relates to that atomisation you were talking about with the indivisibility of space and time.

LM: Yes. Transcribing the work was hundreds of hours, and lots of RSI. Someone did suggest to me that I should perhaps get someone to do the work for me. But I don't think they could have, because the thing they would have missed was that I could still hear, I could still visualise the speaker – how they were in the room, when we were having the conversations, and could see or at least infer certain things about the conversation. I could tell when someone was choosing away from saying something, or would go part way to saying something. Someone who had not been there would have struggled to understand that just from listening to the transcription.

SM: Do you think you would have seen the dramatic potential in that if you hadn't been thinking about this chopping up of narrative? You started by saying that you heard dialogue and that dialogue is very often the dialogue of parts speaking . . .

LM: It's always speech; it's never prose.

SM: But to what extent do you think that thinking about Hume and Hume's articulation of this contiguity issue really helped you see the

dramatic potential of that sequence of transcribed hesitations?

LM: I think I was following an instinct, myself, but that I found myself fortuitously linked with that and wasn't afraid that that was not an exploration of one or the other. I think that possibly since coming here the play that I've just finished now has been far more influenced, even though I've tried very hard not to think about what play I'm going to write. It's a prerequisite for me that I write 'blind' – that I don't know, I don't plan what the story is. This is probably why I didn't want to write a biography of Hume – I know how it ends!

SM: Yes, we know what the plot is. – [laughter] –

SM: Can you tell us about the new play or are you sworn to secrecy on that?

LM: No. Not at all. In fact the final draft is due out on Friday, so all things might change.

SM: Right. OK.

LM: Hume has something very interesting to say about power – power in relationships among people. I think it's in 'Cause and Effect' . . . I'll read it because it's a wonderful description of power:

> When a person is possess'd of any power, there is no more required to convert it into action, but the exertion of the will; and that in every case is consider'd as possible, and in many as probable; especially in the case of authority, where the obedience of the subject is a pleasure and advantage to the superior.

That, to me, is just the perfect summation of a three-hander status

power play. And it's very difficult for me to say that's what led me to write this, but the fact that I've been engaging with this text – I'm prepared to hazard a guess that it's influencing my thinking in ways that I don't want to examine.

SM: Can you say a bit more about why that's an image of a three-hander power play?

LM: Did I not say that?

SM: No.

LM: Is it clear to you Rona? (Rona Munro, playwright) – [laughter] –

SM: OK, All dramatists can leave the room, and the rest of us can be enlightened.

LM: I think it's one of the things I love about the *Treatise.* I spent the first six or eight weeks here mostly reading books that were trying to tell me how to read Hume. And that was absolutely necessary because when I first looked at this I found it very difficult. And it's only in the past few weeks that I've decided that it is actually the *Treatise* and particularly 'Of Understanding' in the *Treatise* which feels like my natural home, in terms of inspiration. And I think this for a number of reasons: the language is abstract often, but it requires that you put such a lot of yourself into it; I've realised in conversation with Humeans – with Hume scholars or with people who know Hume much better than I do – that I read one thing on the page and it means something very particular to me in a dramatic sense, that it quite possibly doesn't mean to any of you scholars. And so I think this might be an example, because that so readily converted itself to me into – it could be in a two-hander, possibly – I'm not saying it had to be a three-hander. I saw a

three-hander because in my experience as a dramatist, a three-hander allows even more changes of status within it, with more tension and repercussion. It's this: that 'there is no more required to convert it into action, but the exertion of the will; and that in every case is consider'd as possible, and in many as probable'. In a status-shifting three-hander that's what you're dealing with, with every interaction.

SM: So is it the inevitability of that? That is: put three people in a room or on a stage, and the dynamics of the power relations between them will emerge, or start a conversation and the response will elicit something by way of a power dynamic?

LM: That's an interesting question. I just leapt straight there.

SM: Well, slower people are taking a while to . . . [laughter] ...

LM: Sorry, I think it's that ... I suppose there's an essence of drama that's always going to have to deal with conflict or resolution. As soon as you put a person on a stage, the audience will infer things about them. As soon as you put two people on the stage, the audience will infer a relationship. And when you put three, they'll infer a different kind of relationship. I find the relationship between three an interesting one when what we're talking about is power. Is that anything more than a restatement of what I said before?

SM: Well, it's a helpful restatement. One of the things, though – going back to *The Uncertainty Files* – is that the *The Uncertainty Files* refuses that temptation, in that those narratives stay monologic. Whatever power relations might be between them – and certainly as a member of the audience I couldn't help trying to construct one –

LM: Of course!

SM: – remains undeveloped, or even possibly refused, by the next narrative that seems to just come out of somewhere different.

LM: It was a rejection of a story narrative. There are a number of dynamics that you deal with when you construct a piece for theatre, and so that means that there are a number of dynamics that you can play with – make stronger or weaker. In that one, the narrative was not the driving force of the play.

SM: Is that in some way analogous to the way you're reading Hume's sense of causation, about contiguity and succession, rather than causal connection? I'm wondering if you find, or found, an analogy between what we were saying about causation and succession, and relationships, when the gap is not filled by a causal sense of one character's effect on another.

LM: Yes, and I think that's a huge stretch of that gap, and I know for some people it was too big a stretch.

SM: So do you think that's the limit case for you of the gap you can leave between the narratives and hope that an audience will still follow you?

LM: Only if I want to keep attracting audiences . . . [laughter] ...

SM: That's who you're doing it for, though . . .

LM: . . . well, not necessarily, because I never have an audience in mind when I start to write a play. But that's not to say that I don't believe that there might be something universal in a piece of work that will echo, that people might be interested by. The ideas of contiguity and succession, in terms of time, were much more of a dramatic

moment for me. I had a play that I have been thinking about for a long time, which is basically a history; exploring – the time of the play was a hundred years, from 1900 to 2000, and it was a succession of four women throughout that period. It was chronological, but the research – the story of it was chronological – but I wasn't able to write that story any more than I would have been able to write a Hume biopic. And I did have that 'lightning-bolt moment' when I read this:

> 'Tis a property inseparable from time, and which in a manner constitutes its essence, that each of its parts succeeds another, and that none of them, however contiguous, can ever be co-existent. For the same reason, that the year 1737 cannot concur with the present year 1738, every moment must be distinct from, and posterior or antecedent to another. 'Tis certain then, that time, as it exists, must be composed of indivisible moments. For if in time we could never arrive at an end of division, and if each moment, as it succeeds another, were not perfectly single and indivisible, there would be an infinite number of co-existent moments, or parts of time; which I believe will be allowed to be an arrant contradiction.

The key thing for me is that this freed the dialogue. I suddenly saw that this was not a chronological play. This was a play that was taking place all at once. A play where the 1920s appeared in the same space, with a different person, as the 1950s and the 1970s – that they were all there present at the same time. And the thing that was wonderful and really liberating about that was that if you take out the chronology, what are you left with? What are you left with?

SM: What *are* you left with?

LM: Well, you're not left with the succession of events. You're left

with what else might link these women together. If you take out the chronology, and don't tell it in that way, then you allow people to jump at what those links are. 'Why am I seeing these women, who are clearly four women from different times, speaking at once?' I don't have to have characters explain, because it is theatre. And so it became really clear to me. And the characters were able to talk in moments of synchronicity, which I'd been playing with in other ways, but not in that particular way.

SM: Where Hume would say what links those is – or, rather, the two things that allow us to connect them – are our memory and imagination. These can create a narrative for us, a narrative of selfhood, or a narrative of succession, that leads to an impression that things more than just tumble one after another, after another, and so on. Those two qualities are presumably what you are asking from your audience – the exertion of memory and imagination, as a response to having certain kinds of links taken away from them – the nice, neat chronological links where the explanatory often happens.

LM: Yes, although I'm hoping there will be a clue in the title, which is *Sex and God.* – [laughter] –

SM: Does that limit it? – [laughter] –

LM: No, absolutely not. Those were the strongest, most synchronous links that those characters were able to reveal, in terms of their personal, emotional histories through that time.

SM: So, you were offering a certain kind of clue to a different form of connectedness.

LM: Yes.

SM: Do you think they need that? LM: In the title?

SM: Yes.

LM: Maybe not. It may turn out that it's not, that it appears to be sex and God, but that it actually isn't.

SM: So for other people it might be something different, is what I'm getting at – it wouldn't be a problem for the play if somebody said, well, actually it's children, or the home, or something like that.

LM: No.

SM: Tell us about 'Water' – that was the other one you mentioned . . .

LM: *This is Water?*

SM: Yes.

LM: *This is Water* came out of the same set of interviews as *The Uncertainty Files.* I had less time to do it because I had only got back, and it was in the form of a reading, so *The Uncertainty Files* was an expansion.

SM: Did you get different responses to the different forms in which those came out?

LM: They both came out in pretty much the same form apart from the fact that *This is Water* was a script in a performance – a reading of the script.

Traverse Literary Manager: It was part of a project we did at the Traverse during the Festival. We had commissioned five plays from five different writers and we asked each writer to play with the fact that you can do anything in theatre. On screen you have demands of veracity, and if you have a scene with fifty thousand soldiers, then on screen they might be CGI, or a lot of extras. But in the theatre, Linda can say in the stage direction 'Fifty-thousand soldiers march across the stage'. And so we were intentionally allowing the audience to hear the format, so the audience could hear the stage directions.

SM: Hearing the stage directions .... Linda, in your reading of the *Treatise,* you'll have come across that image where he says the mind is a kind of theatre ...

LM: Yes.

SM: . . . where successive impressions pass and re-pass across the stage. Does that do anything for you as a dramatist?

LM: Well, it only confirms my growing belief that actually one of the things that I love about reading this is that I see Hume as someone who is building a model for us and presenting that model to us in a way that we can understand, and separating it down into its smallest parts – right down to impressions and ideas. And I think that what anyone does who writes for the theatre is build a model of the world and present it. I'm not saying that the two things are equal, but that it's an easy engagement for me – not easy to read – but what he's doing is showing his process, and in talking like this about my work I think you can see that there's – if not a similar process – a process of modeling. And so I wasn't particularly inspired by what he said about theatre, much more inspired by . . . there are certain moments when I've actually jumped out of my skin, on reading him, and still make the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

SM: Give us another of them.

LM: This is an occasion when I read something and it became something else in my head. This is so rich for me that I know that part of me secreted it off back there: ok, go work on that.

> Those mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear'd to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them. This is the case with all the impressions, whose objects are suppos'd to have an external existence; and is the case with no other impressions, whether gentle or violent, voluntary or involuntary.

The effect that had on me when I read it was this: I was sitting in the chair in the office upstairs, and actually had such a strong vision of myself get up and leave the room and be aware that the room was still there. Now I don't know if that makes the hair stand up on anybody else's neck . . . what makes you think the room's going to be there when you come back? I just think that's amazing. It's such a mental flip to take that on. I'm still not done with that.

SM: But you've already started on it, haven't you. We talked about the man who's losing his memory.

LM: I think that's a bigger exploration. The man who's losing his memory is in the play where there are three people involved in a subtle power relationship. One of the things that I became aware of as I was writing the male character was that he'd lost his sense of succession of

events, one event naturally following another, or that one event may have caused another. And so therefore when he closed his eyes and opened them again, the room hadn't changed, but he didn't recognise the room, and he didn't remember what the previous event had been. And it's about the effect that has on his power and predictability. I don't have a quotation for this, but I think that Hume at one point is very clear that in anticipating the future, it's something of a comfort to us. Does that sound familiar to you?

Q: It's a comfort to anticipate the future? There are a number of passages I think that could . . .

LM: Excellent. And then I realised that when I stepped back from just the writing of the dialogue of the man and the way the other two characters interact with him, that he looked to all intents and purposes, like someone with Alzheimer's.

SM: But that wouldn't cover the case, as it were.

LM: I didn't set out to write a man with Alzheimer's. I set out to write a man who had no memory, when he closed his eyes, of what had happened just directly beforehand, in an unpredictable way.

SM: But obviously there is a link in the syndrome and we know that people with certain kinds of brain damage experience every instant anew, as though the world gets made freshly every time someone comes into the room. And you were experiencing something of that, what it would be to feel like that, when you were reading that passage.

LM: No, not that particular passage. No, I think more when I read about contiguity and succession, and 'constant conjunction'.

SM: And ‘constant conjunction’ is predicting that the future will be like the past without knowing. And there is the uncertainty again . . . There was something when you were describing this wonderful, dramatic in itself, account of your transatlantic crossing and your hair-raising drive and your disorientation – where on earth had you ended up in the middle of the night as far as you were concerned, but these people were just setting up – and the last thing you need is anything other than bed at that point. But, then you get engaged in that thing that you love doing more than anything else, and the time falls away and the disorientation falls away. What came to mind as you said that, of course, is that turn at the end of Book One of the *Treatise* – in a leaky weather-beaten vessel, and being surrounded by hostile glances, hostile seas – who am I, who are these beings that surround me, what am I doing here – and that wonderful dramatic turn in the rhetoric where most fortunately it happens – that moment of reengagement with nature and life, but also that subsequent moment when, having had his indolence and his relaxation of mind, he is drawn back to the thing that’s of greatest pleasure to him. That’s a terrific narrative sequence, in itself, isn’t it; and that question of why it is that we keep doing this difficult thing that we keep doing. It’s one of the best descriptions of that that I know.

LM: Yes. And I do think that if I was to draw another link between the model making that we both do – and I think that all of the other writers in the room here would say that what we do is: construct models of human understanding. That’s what we’re involved in. And it is a huge privilege, but a real hurdle.

SM: But common life is the common denominator, isn’t it?

LM: Yes.

Q: I'm intrigued about the title of the other potential play, 'Sex and God' – do you get any inspiration on the sex-side from Hume? Sorry, that sounds wrong! – [Laughter] – Book One of the *Treatise* says very little about God, less about sex and here you are, finding inspiration for something.

LM: It was the form. The thing that inspired me most was the form. The form became immediately clear when I read that. If time has collapsed, then you're showing something else, you're showing something that's not 'this is what happened at this time and this is what happened at this time'. What you're showing is, in these ways, all of these people could be at any time.

Q: So, in fact, the kind of inspiration that you're getting there could be very versatile. It could apply to just about any subject matter, any interaction? Is that right? You bring the perspective of space and time to whatever ideas you might have forming about other things – and suddenly there's a new way of seeing it.

LM: I think the way it's happened to me so far with the *Treatise* is that each inspiring moment is attached to a particular play. I'm right in the middle of causation now and it's very rich territory. And I do love that notion – and I think it's not just theatrical but personally enlightening – that the future may not resemble the past. Whoa! That means so many more things are possible. And what does that look like in a play form? If the future doesn't resemble the past then that's a whole other tool for creating a piece of work.

I have brought something with me, which, at first glance, you're going to think is entirely ludicrous. But I think you'll come to see it in a different light by the end of this. Anyone who knows me or who's been into my office at IASH will know that I spend a lot of time crocheting. And it's

partly because when you read those moments and when you're battling, struggling to understand the profundity of some of the work here... For me, I just have to sit with it and let the idea sink down. And quite often what I do when I'm doing that is some crochet because I have a need to make things. And I'm going to show you this because I think it is analogous to how I work. It probably sounds to you as though I start from form and then impose some characters and ideas – and that's the opposite of how I work. I was in Ikea and bought some string from the bargain bucket, just some Christmas wrapping string. I took one look at it and it was, for me, the equivalent of hearing a first line of dialogue. I looked at it and thought that's begging to be made into something! So I brought it in and as I was thinking or, rather, trying not to think – that sedimentary process of new thought – I tried it out with different kinds of hook sizes and different kinds of stitches. Finally I came up with this very large hook size. And I had a growing feeling for it as I made things and ripped them out.

I started to get a real feeling for the texture of the material. So this kind of misshapen thing started to emerge. I had such a strong sense that it could communicate something soft. It further illustrates for me the idea that if I hold back from deciding what I'm going to do with a thing, where a thing is going to go, it might reveal itself differently to me. So I had this huge thing which I kind of liked the colour of (it does wonderful things in the light) and I thought, well, look all these odd bits and ties – I should just turn it inside out. So I started to turn it inside out and then this structure began to emerge, which was not at all... I couldn't have predicted it. I couldn't write a pattern for it. I might not even be able to do it again as I can't remember how it was achieved in detail. What actually happens is that this thing starts to form itself and, as Hume would be first to say, beauty is not a quality of the circle, but I took one look at that and it was some other form and it was beautiful to me. And I couldn't have anticipated that that's what it would be. And that demonstrates

the inside-out way that I work. I don't know that that play is going to be that shape or that length until I actually get my hands dirty with the dialogue and the characters.

SM: One of the things you said is that you never start with form, you start with dialogue. And Hume gives you form in some sense. There's something about reading that for you is equivalent to form or which gives form for things that are going on.

LM: Absolutely true – and I'm going to revise that statement to 'I never knowingly start with form'. But I do know that as I trawl around the world for inspiration, thieving, I do make very small mental notes to myself about the things that catch my eye, including forms, that I want my brain to log without telling me. And then after a certain amount of time that will emerge with a story and some characters.

Q: Obviously, you've greatly enjoyed meeting Hume and what you've read has inspired your ideas. I had three thoughts and I wondered if you had had these thoughts as well. There were quite a lot of people of Hume's day who were thinking about either escaping from chronology, as you've described it, or at least not thinking in terms of events as small term items of experience – and the classic case is geology. Have you looked at James Hutton, Hume's doctor's closest friend and the founder of geology? He writes at enormous length on space and time – and it's not about instants...

LM: I know James Hutton – and this work would be of real interest, thank you for the reference.

Q: ...The second example is from the medical sciences, which were tremendously successful in Edinburgh because most of the early doctors, including Hutton and Pringle, had studied medicine in Leiden. One of

the things Boerhaave was immensely interested in when it came to organic matter – human beings ultimately – was that, in his view and the view of all the doctors who studied with him, merely identifying constituents of a given problem did not reveal all the factors that it was necessary to understand if you were going to try to predict the future. You needed the relations and you needed some ability to guess or conjecture what happened when these two particles or constituent parts interacted. And their view was you couldn't predict it. That's the second field that you might want to think about. And the third example isn't from that period at all. I just wondered how do you react to Philip's great monologue about uncertainty in Verdi's *Don Carlos* – there's a great deal of rhetorical comment in the orchestration, it's one of the greatest moments in classical opera.

LM: And one that I'm not familiar with unfortunately!

Q: Can I ask quite a personal question? I wondered why you wanted to apply for the job in the first place. Why did you think that somebody as famously abstract and as famously difficult as Hume would be somebody you wanted to engage with?

LM: Well, I didn't – I wasn't sure at all in the first place. I looked at the possibility of it because, on a very pragmatic level, everyone that I know who had been at IASH raved about it, about what an inspiring place it was. And so I was predisposed to want to come here anyway. Plus it came as a commission from the Traverse and full-length commissions these days are becoming fewer and further between. And probably why I burst into the room straight off saying I can't do a biopic is because I knew I couldn't come here and fake an engagement with Hume. So when I first came it was to explore is there an engagement?

Q: What you're getting from Hume is a set of stimuli which have to

do with forms and shapes and whether things fit together etc. There's another thing I get from Hume which is a voice talking or more than one voice talking. A voice that you conjecturally attribute to a person, Hume, but whether it was a real person or not isn't really the point because Hume now is just a lot of words for us. And these words create this sort of echoing voice. Does that matter or is it something that you set on one side?

LM: I do very strongly get the feeling that there is this man who is guiding me through this topic. And sometimes his tone changes. There are times when he is really quite chatty, as it were, when he's trying to explain memory to people in a room when one has a memory and the other one doesn't. It's almost like a script – it just needs the dialogue! But I suspect, and I know there are some problems with the bundle theory of identity, that we've all collected our own bundle of Hume and it's not the same for any of us. I do have my own bundle of Hume – it changes!

Q: I wanted to ask you to go back to something you said earlier that was interesting to me and make sure that I got you right, and if I've got it wrong, please correct me. It's about Hume and your own writing. In relation to Hume on causation... the kernel of that as I see it – and of course this is controversial among Hume scholars – is the idea of causal connection, the connection between cause and effect: that's not something in the world. The world is just one damn thing after another. That's something that we read into, we provide. That seems to me to be parallel to storytelling and the narratives we make. Is one of the things you're trying to do almost in that sense not tell a story? Precisely, just to present the world in words.

LM: I'm not providing the narrative links, so that you can provide the narrative links. In that particular case – *Strangers, Babies* – that came out truly by me getting up one day and getting up the next day and writing the next one and me not knowing what the narrative links were.

I didn't know what the narrative links between the five plays were until I got to the fourth one. And then I was completely shocked by what the links were. And then it turned out that it wasn't actually a play about a discovery of what the links were because there was a fifth play and the fifth play was the one in which all of the tension and judgement took place. It actually became a play that wasn't about narrative, but about judgement and redemption. So yes, I think I have to do that generally. I have to experience a thing; I have to form a thing myself before I can conjure any idea of what it was I was actually involved in, and not start the other way around.

Q: I would like to thank you for your talk and to underline how original your approach to this subject is in the first place. It's a matter of great surprise that the material you work on is the most abstract material in the *Treatise:* infinite divisibility, cause and effect and the idea of necessity-things that are somehow not very appealing in principle for anyone other than those working in theoretical philosophy. At first blush, it's completely impossible to hear anything about them from the perspective that is yours. With experiments of the 'Aha!' kind, such as yours. I very much admire this way of addressing the material, which is very difficult. This brings me to my question: do you think that the kinds of experiments you are suggesting are there in what Hume is out to do or do you think that you impose these kinds of experiments to his material in a way that wasn't there?

LM: I think that it is partly the abstract nature of how he writes that demands a level of creativity for me to understand. That means that... I think that it actually is a kind of conversation, a kind of dialogue. But it is taken way out of the time when he originally wrote it, so I can't imagine that I will have precisely the understanding of the words as he intends them. I can only say: 'this is how this struck me now'. Does that address what you mean?

Q: Yes, it does. To me it's an open question, how much these kinds of experiments can be implied by what Hume wrote. Part of the question has been captured by a very famous Edinburgh scholar called George Davie, in a paper on Hume and Husserl. He addresses the question of what is it all about? Is it addressed to questions in ways of reasoning or is it also addressed to ways of seeing and finding access to a kind of experience of things and maybe... If there was a phenomenological reading as Davie at the time suggested, maybe there is some real serious work to be done in the area you are thinking of.

LM: Well, I'm not giving up for a while yet.

Recent publications in the IASH Occasional Papers series include:

11. *Darwin in Scotland.*
David Fergusson. 2009. ISBN 978-0-9532713-5-1

12. *Charles Darwin: Some Scottish Connections.*
Walter M. Stephen. 2009. ISBN 978-0-9532713-6-8

13. *Edinburgh, Enlightenment and Darwin's Expression of the Emotions.*
Gregory Radick. 2009. ISBN 978-0-9532713-7-5

14. *Evolving Creation.*
John Polkinghorne. 2009. ISBN 978-0-9532713-8-2

15. *Conversation: and the Reception of David Hume.*
Peter Jones. 2011. ISBN 978-0-9532713-9-9

To order, please contact: The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities,
The University of Edinburgh, Hope Park Square, Edinburgh EHS 9NW, Scotland.
Email: iash@ed.ac.uk Web: www.iash.ed.ac.uk

THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

ISSN 2041-8817 (Print)
ISSN 2634-7342 (Online)
ISBN 978-0-9568610-0-9

If you require this document in an alternative format, such as large print or a coloured background, please contact Ben Fletcher-Watson at iash@ed.ac.uk or +44 (0) 131 650 4671.