Philosophy and Literature

Michael Randall: Ockham’s “understanding of the universe implies that analogy is impossible ... Ockham, in fact, reduces anything susceptible of being analogical to univocity or equivocation ... There is no ontological participation in conceptual univocity” (45)

“Literary images in the late Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance continued to depend on the analogical relationships of perfect and imperfect, but often these images reflected the troubled nature of the analogical edifice itself” (Building Resemblance, 1996, 46).

But Stephen Penn suggests “the possibility that nominalism, far from rendering analogy and allegory unworkable ... may have contributed positively to its development” (Nominalism and Literary Discourse, ed. Hugo Keiper et al., 1997, 186).

Ullrich Langer: “My contention is that specifically nominalist features of God can be seen in the way certain Renaissance authors construct their fictional worlds, and that these features often point to the most interesting aspects of those fictional worlds: the feeling of contingency, the feeling that things could easily be otherwise, and that they are dependent on an only partially motivated decision of their author” (Divine and Poetic Freedom, 1990, 22).

Edmund Spenser, Mutabilitie Cantos (unfinished, last stanza):

Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,  
Of that same time when no more Change shall be,  
But stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd  
Upon the pillours of Eternity,  
That is contrayr to Mutabilitie:  
For, all that moveth, doth in Change delight:  
But thence-forth all shall rest eternally  
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:  
O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight.

Stanley Cavell:  
“My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’s Meditations is already in full existence in Shakespeare from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes. However strong the presence of Montaigne and Montaigne’s skepticism is in various of Shakespeare’s plays, the skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes’s way of raising the questions of God’s existence and of the immortality of the soul (I assume as, among other things, preparations for, or against, the credibility of the new science of the external world). The issue is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire” (Disowning Knowledge, 3).
“Shakespeare's posing of the skeptical problem of the existence of others takes the form of raising the possibility of praise, of finding an object worthy of praise, and proving oneself capable of it” (*Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 2005, 37) “A passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire” (19).

Skeptical modes as literary inspiration?

John Donne: “And as under water, every thing seems distorted and crooked, to man, so does man himself to God, who sees not his own Image in that man, in that form as he made it” (*Sermons* II.114). Note that here God is the frustrated knower or skeptic and the distorting medium is human sin.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream:*

Hermia: Methinks I see these things with parted eye,  
When everything seems double.” (4.1.186-87)

Theseus: Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends. (5.1.4-6)

Hippolyta: But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images,  
And grows to something of great constancy; (5.1.23-26)

**Philosophy and Politics**

Joan S. Bennet:  
“The case of Jeremy Taylor ... illustrates how a skeptical nominalism made possible a sincere belief in divinely sanctioned political absolutism ... In Milton's Christian humanist view, a nominalistic practical theology such as Taylor's brought about in the individual Christian no spiritually informed morality but only at best an effeminate pietism that left the way open for intolerable political oppression” (*Reviving Liberty*, 1989, 11,13).

But Michael Gillespie argues that “in the political realm” humanists and nominalists “both also sought to develop more republican theories of authority” (*The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 2008, 75).

“Canon lawyers in the third quarter of the thirteenth century adopted the theological distinction of absolute and ordained power, but adapted it ... The form of the distinction was ... two forms of the exercise of power: one the normal or ordinary way in which a sovereign power supported the laws that he or his predecessors had instituted; the other, the ability occasionally to override or make exceptions to those laws—in short, to act absolutely” (William J. Courtney in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse*, 118).