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The Obstacle of the Beach and the Threshold of the Past

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international journal of scottish literature

Issue 9, Autumn/Winter 2013
www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk

Recommended Citation

Jonathan Lamb, 'Dancing and Romancing: The Obstacle of the Beach and the Threshold of the Past', *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 9 (Autumn / Winter 2013), 99-112.

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The Obstacle of the Beach and the Threshold of the Past

Jonathan Lamb

I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done—whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies.

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*¹

I want to say that in history we are entertained by the meanings we put on the past. And Strangers are entertained by Natives.

Greg Denning, *Performances*²

Keith Thomas's latest book, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (2009), ends with a couplet taken from Dryden's Horace: 'Not Heav'n itself upon the past has pow'r; | But what has been, has been, and I have had my hour'.³ In her review of his book Hilary Mantel, twice winner of the Man Booker Prize for splendid historical novels based on the life of Thomas Cromwell, had this to say about his quotation:

As a comment on a career, this is graceful; as comment on the discipline to which Thomas has devoted himself, it is not quite true. Historians can do what heaven cannot: for all practical purposes they can change the past behind them. [...] We understand the past in the light of evidence we select. [...] It is not only the voiceless workers of England who have been subject to what E. P. Thompson famously called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'; it is our ancestors as a class, made fodder for theories.⁴

When someone fresh from making a fiction out of the past comments so equivocally on the plasticity of history, it is worth wondering why. Does Mantel silently admit there was a time before theories when historical evidence was proof against selection and ancestors escaped the condescension of their posterity; an era when history was as self-evident and inevitable as Thomas suggests? Are selections made among the myriad facts now lodged in the archive subterfuges practised by those who wish to flatter the present, or acts of piety enjoined on those who would prefer not to patronise the dead? Or does she mean that the fairest way to alter a past which is going to be altered anyway is not to manipulate the facts but to imagine them? Is fictionalised history better than selected evidence because it is less dishonest; more vivid, shapely and probable, and maybe more true? In her conversation with Henry Tilney about history and historical

novels in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland certainly thought so. And so did Lord Kames, who explained in his *Elements of Criticism* that it was the engagement of the imagination alone which brought history home to the reader's bosom: 'History cannot reach the heart, while we indulge any reflection upon the facts. [...] And if such reflection is laid aside, history stands upon the same footing with fable [...] [and] fable is generally more successful than history'.⁵

I want to test some of these queries and doubts against a period when conjectural history met its first great challenge, and what it hoped would be its vindication, namely the eighteenth-century navigations of the South Seas. And then I mean to bring the discussion home, or almost home, again by examining Samuel Johnson's sole attempt at ethnographical history, his *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*. I want to consider why it is that individual stories about crossing the beach, that permeable boundary identified by Greg Denning not simply as the threshold dividing the Stranger from the Native but also the past from the present, resist a factual narrative. If the beach costs those who traverse it a change or metamorphosis not easily recorded as factual testimony, no less does the past demand, according to Denning, that the historian 'go native' if he or she is to have any chance of representing it.⁶ So we are talking about a double threshold, in space and time.

In the mid-eighteenth century European navigators found islands not known by them to have existed, places where modes of production and reproduction were so novel that even a man as literal-minded as James Cook thought he might have stumbled across the terrestrial paradise. In Tahiti men and women, he observed, went naked without shame, had sex in the open, and found their bread not in the sweat of their brows but in the branches of trees. Bougainville's report of the Paphian utopia Tahiti gave Diderot the idea for one the subtlest Enlightenment speculations on sexuality and its relation to social structures. Setting aside the question of historical veracity, he suggested that the Pacific was an 'ocean of fantasy', a place where all experiences appeared to have been imagined, either because they were so incomparably exotic, out of time and entered like a dream, or because the civilised mind stands in need of alibis for its most daring imaginings. Enthusiasts and sceptics alike compared the reports from the Pacific to the passages of romance. Peter Heylyn had already supposed that *The Faerie Queene* had been situated in the terra incognita, that mysterious cartographical entity one of whose actual fragments, Aotearoa/New Zealand, was later illustrated and explained by Sir George Grey with quotations from Spenser's romance. There were giants too, such as the Patagonians who towered over their European visitors, and cannibals almost everywhere, not to mention naked damsels who made lascivious offers of their bodies to Odyssean seamen. These extravagances earned the genial incredulity of Diderot, Walpole, and Voltaire when they invented their fictions of the strange customs of the Southern Hemisphere.

One of the strangest of these was the anonymous *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman* (1778). The story begins with an actual cannibal event which befell the crew of the *Adventure's* cutter

on Cook's second voyage, when eleven men were killed and partly eaten at Grass Cove, in New Zealand's Queen Charlotte Sound. The fictional twelfth, Bowman, makes his escape and commences a journey through time that corresponds to the aesthetic development of human senses, culminating in the modern age of Luxo-Volupto whose inhabitants experience 'Touch or Feeling in as exquisite a degree as human nature is capable of supporting without turning pleasure into pain'.⁷ *Hildebrand Bowman* is interesting not simply because it emphasises the importance of sensory information in European encounters with strange places and peoples, but more significantly because it unites an idea of history, specifically stadial history, with a narrative of encounters between the hero and societies at different stages of what stadialists would term progress. Yet it is plain the author sees no definite calibration between civility and technology since Luxo Volupto is represented as both sophisticated and corrupt. For him and for others cannibalism is not necessarily a zero degree of savagery, nor were the events at Grass Cove entirely owing to spontaneous Maori aggression. Cook himself refused to punish the perpetrator, a chief called Kahura, because he was not convinced that the blame lay entirely on his side—a decision which led (according to Anne Salmond) to the alienation of Cook from his crew and the bizarre acts that precipitated his death in Hawai'i.⁸

So this blunder on the beach propels two singular narratives: the perpetually imperfect historical account of Cook's death, bringing full circle a tale of fatal violence between Strangers and Natives; and the fictional travels of Bowman, which begin and end with questions of primitivism and taste. That Bowman's fictional history should be framed according to the stages of human progress is intriguing on two counts: first because it is obviously the fictional embroidery of a cannibal feast, something metropolitan audiences found difficult to accept. Second, it offers itself (in spite of its improbability) in proper experimental form as eyewitness testimony. All the equipment of virtual witnessing is wheeled in to emphasise the fantastic basis of a structure of historical conjecture. With regard to stadial historians Mary Poovey has pointed out, 'What they wanted to describe—the origins of modern society, and especially how "rude" societies became "civilised"—had not been recorded by witnesses.' So they had to fill up the empty spaces in the account with abstractions that were treated by them as real entities, but which were in effect no different from fictions.⁹ In order to buttress these abstractions stadialists such as John Millar, as well as sceptical historians such as Adam Ferguson, were raiding the voyage literature of the mid-century for eyewitness evidence of the truth or fiction of conjecture—in Millar's case, facts that would show human society evolving in a predictable four-part sequence. In his *Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771) he had traced social development from hunting and gathering to pastoral nomadism, thence to agriculture and finally to *doux commerce*, ending at exactly the same terminus as Bowman but with a very different inflection. While no single witness had access to the whole process, as Bowman claims, merely to momentary encounters such as that which went so badly wrong at Grass Cove, it was possible now to write a stadial history based on some evidence, not just conjecture. It was also possible to date true heroism from the earliest times and its extinction from the most recent, as Ferguson did. But there was a risk of

course that further empirical knowledge might shatter the symmetry of what had been conceived as a coherent history either of progress or decline, leaving shreds of fiction where a brave hypothesis used to stand.

Stadial history was built on the rivalry between two theories concerning the origins of humans. There were those who believed in polygenesis, namely that inhabitants of different regions were originally quite distinct, growing from a unique stock, and always bearing the same distinguishing features of their race or nation. Thus Lord Kames, a powerful advocate of this position, argued that chance has nothing to do with differences in what he called national character, and that national history was defined by this character, not by the development of techniques of production:

Where the greatest part of a nation is of one character, education and example may extend it over the whole; but the character of that greater part can have no foundation but nature. What resource then have we for explaining the opposite manners of the islanders [of the South Seas], but that they are of different races?¹⁰

The stadial position was founded on monogenesis, where a single human species acquired wide variations as the factors of soil, climate and geology operated on it; but with the advance of time these transformations were compounded by supplemental causes, such as property, gender, mobility and exchange.

One of the most eminent advocates of monogenesis was the cantankerous Johann Reinhold Forster, the official natural historian on Cook's second voyage to the South Seas (1772-5), who used the laboratory of the Pacific to make the first serious attempts at comparative ethnology. Correctly assuming that the Polynesian islands, stretching from Aotearoa/New Zealand in the west to Rapanui (Easter Island) in the east, had been colonised in a general migration eastwards from Malaysia by a people of the same original culture and language, he had on the *Resolution* an unrivalled platform from which to view variations in environment and their correlations in physique, complexion and temperament: 'Nay, they often produce a material difference in the color, habits, and forms of the human species'.¹¹ In the Polynesian diaspora, the inhabitants of the Society Islands (Tahiti and its neighbouring islands) came out on top, in Forster's opinion, with a climate so pleasant, vegetation so lush, and seas so bountiful that there emerged not only a distinctive colouring, muscle tone, and stature, but also an opulent chiefly system of government, together with priestcraft, property, and sea-borne traffic. Near to the bottom came the inhabitants of Dusky Bay, in the south of New Zealand's South Island, who were poor, violent and ill-conditioned; but not so utterly wretched as the non-Polynesians of Tierra del Fuego, a benighted people who stood at the bottom of Forster's scale.

Forster's study of Polynesian cultures was very different from Pierre Lafitau's of the Iroquois or Peter Kolb's of the Hottentots, where the focus on a single national object precluded compar-

ative judgments.¹² When Burke said that navigators such as Cook had unrolled the great map of mankind, he was using a cartographical metaphor to make sense of the kind of anthropological history Forster was writing. Here spread out was a history of human society, from its most primitive beginnings to complex institutions of production, belief and government that had grown up quite detached from European influence. For the first time the early sequences of conjectural history were available for comparative experimental study.¹³ Eras were accessible by ship, and the curious observer could travel back and forth between them, discriminating as minutely as he pleased.

However, it soon became clear to Forster that it was not quite so simple. The map of humanity in the Pacific did not reveal an advancing set of coordinates between lines of latitude and stages of development, which is what he first hypothesised. Clearly some nations had done well, and others poorly; and even within one nation, such as Otaheite, a privileged class (the *arioi*) had thrived while those beneath (whom Forster suspected were the remains of a vanquished population) appeared less wealthy and physically smaller and darker. The regular four-part pattern was contradicted not only by examples of primitivism that were clearly derived, not original, but also by degeneration occurring in places of great natural amenity, often alongside manifest proof of its opposite. What is more, Forster was often indebted to brief meetings amidst inauspicious circumstances, hampered sometimes by his own irascible temper, for observations which he had to generalise if they were to make any sense. For example, his visit to Dusky Bay in New Zealand's South Island was made after a hideously uncomfortable voyage that coloured his view of the four quarrelsome people he met there, one of whom had a large wen on her cheek, surrounded by a landscape he found chaotic.¹⁴ From our point of view it is one of Forster's strengths that whatever was problematic in his witnessing, as Nicholas Thomas has pointed out, 'tended to be paraded rather than disavowed.'¹⁵

This tendency didn't do much for the authentication of stadial history, and kept bringing Forster back to the perplexities of the encounter itself, and the scantiness of what it could be made to yield in terms of worthwhile information. He and his son had approached the land with high expectations. Of Dusky Bay George Forster wrote: 'The view [...] of antediluvian forests which cloathed the rock, and of numerous rills of water, which everywhere rolled down the steep declivity, altogether conspired to complete our joy'.¹⁶ But very soon natural splendour turns into a scientific obstacle, just as the inhabitants have very quickly been transformed from Rousseauvian primitives into squabbling children: 'The fallen putrid Trees, the thick Moss, & the climbing Shrubs contribute to obstruct all passage through the woods [...] it is very disagreeable to penetrate even a little way into these eternal Thickets'.¹⁷ The confusing turn of events in what ought to have been paradise has a curious effect on their language, as if it had grown incapable of affirming anything without implying its contrary. The elder Forster says that one of the Maori women 'looked not disagreeable', and the younger observes, 'Their black eyes [were] [...] not without expression; the whole upper part of their figure was not disproportionate, and their

assemblage of features not absolutely forbidding'.¹⁸ It was a trick of speech not limited to the natural historians. William Wales reported, 'Their features [were] not disagreeable and not in the least masculine; but one of them was rendered barely not frightful by a large Wen which grew on her left Cheek'.¹⁹ The double negative, or litotes, is a symptom of an uneasy relationship to space and time: the harvest of new specimens lies hidden in an impenetrable temperate rainforest; these primitive people are neither noble nor altogether ignoble, stuck in some siding of Whig history.

Many personal histories of the South Seas are indeterminate in the same way, often following the pattern of one of the most successful fictions ever invented: A man is driven ashore under inauspicious circumstances, contrives to preserve a miserable existence, grows happy, witnesses horrid feasts on human flesh, is terrified, forms a close association with a native, and not knowing when he is well off, decides to leave his island and return to Europe. Give or take a few details, this is the story of Herman Melville in the Marquesas, William Mariner and George Vason in Tonga, William Lockerby in Fiji, and John Young in Hawai'i.²⁰ Ian Campbell has identified four broad categories of beach crossing, which may be summarised as the reluctant, the hybrid, the acculturated, and the transculturised.²¹ Horace Holden's life on Tobi Island was pure hell; he was forced to survive on leaves and insects until he was so skeletal his bones broke through his skin. William Pascoe Crook was not quite so miserable on the Marquesas, but he didn't understand or like what was happening to him there, and was extremely keen to get away. On the other hand, Melville's sojourn in the Marquesas was much more pleasant, though seasoned with fear, and for a while he lived like one of the Taipi; but when an opportunity of joining a ship presented itself, he was in no doubt about taking it. This equivocal engagement with native life was perhaps the typical pattern of beach-crossing, where limited but inevitable concessions were made to cultural difference, while basic affiliations remained intact. William Mariner is one of the most interesting examples of this kind of hybridity, a European who was fully adopted by his Tongan tribe but himself not entirely absorbed by their culture. Then there were men such as Edward Robarts in the Marquesas and David Whippy in Fiji who acquired a detailed knowledge of local culture and a perfect command of the language in order to make a living by crossing back and forth over the beach, trading information and goods. As entrepreneurs they facilitated traffic between islanders and visiting ships, sometimes giving crucial aid to missionaries; and in effect they were settlers. One of the best narratives of early New Zealand is written by this kind of acculturated settler, Frederick Maning's *Old New Zealand*.²² But men such as George Vason, Jean Cabri, John Young, and Isaac Davis were transformed by life on the beach's other side, and those who were forced to leave it (Vason and Cabri) mourned what they had lost. The transformation was expressed socially – Vason, Davis and Young became landowners and chiefs, janissaries of the South Seas – and physically: Cabri's body was covered with intricate Marquesan tattoos. One of the best of this kind was John Jackson, 'Cannibal Jack', who concludes his memoir by trying to explain what his purpose was in writing it: 'Well, the answer is, I did not know any more than I do now, excepting perhaps, that I might have been running around the world for sport, or, better still, that I was trying to run away from myself, or chasing shadows. [...] If I enjoyed myself as I

went along, I don't know whose business it is, excepting my own'.²³

The same fantastic incoherence haunts all these tales, either because the transit of the beach is never made and experience remains inchoate, or because the crossing *is* achieved and the result is incommunicable to those who have no inkling of it. Maning's digressions are Shandean extravagances, all made at the expense of historical time and the European reader, and he calls the narrative effect *dancing*:

[B]ut I must confess I don't know any more about the right way to tell a story, than a native minister knows how to 'come' a war dance. I declare the mention of a war dance calls up a host of reminiscences [...] in such a way that no one but a few, a very few, pakeha Maori, can understand. Thunder!—but no; let me get ashore; how can I dance on the water, or before I ever knew how?²⁴

Maning's dancing seems to belong to the first moment of encounter, his first landing in the Hokianga Harbour in the far north of New Zealand. James O'Connell danced for his life after he came ashore on the island of Ponape and faced a terrifying audience of armed men: 'I struck into Garry Owen,' he recalled, 'and figured away in that famous jig to the best of my ability and agility, and my new acquaintance were amazingly delighted thereat'. And when O'Connell got home, he made a living re-performing a once-familiar dance made exotic.²⁵ Trevor Howard, as Captain Bligh in the 1962 Brando version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* dances very uncomfortably to the Tahitians; and in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, her settler hero Thornhill tries to identify himself to his Aboriginal neighbours, who cheerfully echo what he says: 'Yes, he shouted, *only it ain't you, mate, it's me that's Thornhill!* He was almost dancing, poking himself in the chest'.²⁶ There is evidently a difference between petitionary dancing and impatient dancing. Inga Clendinnen makes a case for something in between, a sort of sympathetic dancing, when she tells the story of a British officer, William Bradley, whose men were danced at by Aborigines at Sydney Cove and who, being destitute of other means of communication, danced back at them, with everyone finally mingling in an extempore ball.²⁷ She represents this dancing as a demonstration of speechless goodwill, a provisional state of affairs dominated by hope for the best: not yet an achievement or a fact, more of an expectation. Perhaps the most perfect example of this dancing was organised by Edward Robarts on the beach at Tahauka, where the warriors of two tribes, the Huka and Pepani, were massed for war: 'Our drum beat for a dance. A great chieftain's daughter came down first. [...] I led her to my Party [...] I called on two young men, sons of chieftains, to come down to dance before her. In return, two was sent from her side to dance to our ladies'.²⁸ This sort of dancing fits well into the category of beach exchange Greg Denning calls performance, which he distinguishes as a kind of instant ritual that works because it is suffused with sufficient energy to impart necessity and precision, or what J. L. Austin would call 'happiness' and Marshall Sahlins *mana*, to the spectacle. From the start, performance ruled the beach, whether it was the crude exhibition of power evident in the firing of guns or whether it was the arrival of an *arioi* performing troupe ready to give a pantomime, their drums beating and their flags streaming from

canoes sitting just beyond the surf.²⁹ Anne Salmond has told us that Polynesians were brilliant improvisers, and at a moment's notice could re-enact some notable event, such as the clever theft of British equipment, to huge applause. On Tahiti these displays included mimics of hornpipes and English country dances, danced back as it were to the first dancers of them.³⁰

But how this back and forth of drama and dancing contributed to knowledge, apart from the instinctive knowledge of how to survive in unpredictable circumstances, it is hard to say. Denning finds an analogue for the beach in the no-man's land of the First World War, as described by Edmund Blunden, where he remembers, 'In this vicinity a peculiar difficulty would exist for the artist to select the sight, faces, words, incidents, which characterised the time. The art is rather to collect them, in their original form of incoherence'.³¹ This advice resembles the preface of Herbert Guthrie-Smith's autobiography when, to summarise the history of the changes, both rapid and long-term, which overtook the land on which he was farming sheep in the Hawke's Bay region of New Zealand, he says: 'If the following pages [...] has a value it is because of insistence on the cumulative effect of trivialities. [...] Only to a small number [of observers] opportunity is offered of marking and tracing them; only a trifling minority continue in long enough occupation of any one area, fully to be cognisant of their marshalled immensity.'³² And how does he marshal that immensity? Why, as miracles such as those wrought by the earthquake of 1931 which neatly severed every cigar in a closed box in his study without harming the box or breaking any of the windows in the house, and which then caused the whole chimney stack to fall in a curve off the roof, to come in at the verandah, then out again on to the path, without breaking the roof or the railings. With these momentous enigmas he can fix the attention of his reader and give the immensity of his particulars a chance.³³ They are agreeable to one of the first imagined sightings of things on a beach, facts without a context, so incoherent they might be taken equally for history or fiction: 'three [...] hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows', or the more sinister cargo of fragments carried away from Grass Cove by James Burney, '2 Hands [...] & the head of the Capt^{ns} Servant [...] part of a pair of Trowsers, a Frock & 6 shoes – no 2 of them being fellows –'.³⁴

A fascinating but mordant debate was started in Australia after the publication of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005). In this historical tale of the settlement of the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales, Grenville made no attempt to include the Aboriginal side of the events, other than descriptively. The closest she got to dancing was the scene noted above where Thornhill proclaims his identity to the Aborigines, and hops in exasperation as they fail to comprehend what he is telling them. She confessed, 'I don't pretend to understand or be able to empathise particularly with a tribal Aboriginal person from 200 years ago'.³⁵ But evidently she could manage this feat with a white convict, actually her ancestor, and one to whom she was determined not to condescend. Inga Clendinnen thought the result of this re-enactment was a dubiously partial and 'untutored' empathy with white settlers. To the question Grenville posed herself in writing the story, 'What would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me?', Clendinnen answered shortly, 'Grenville would not have been Grenville in "that situation"'.³⁶

We cannot post ourselves back in time'.³⁶ Two grievous errors are made here by Grenville, Clendinnen persuasively argues. The first is to cheapen the passion that ought to inspire history — the horror, the moral rage, the compassion — in favour of the illusion that we can share the feelings of people in the past who seem to be the same as we are now, Europeans on our side of the beach. The second is to set aside not only the cultural difference of Aborigines but also the difference of history. Two hundred years presents the same obstacle to the historian as tribal culture does to the settler; but both need to be tackled if justice is to be done. The question is, how? By dancing at the threshold? She suggests that dancing of Bradley's kind is a way of marshalling the immensity of what is witnessed but not known, a representation of things in their incoherence: a method of according facts a kind of miraculous singularity without being overwhelmed by them. What one might then go on to ask is whether this has anything in common with history at all, and whether it is not a private romance, an accumulation of accidents arranged in no credible sequence, facts not necessarily connected and therefore not really facts at all—just like Hildebrand Bowman's.

Of the information brought home from the South Seas Samuel Johnson was generally contemptuous. He thought the younger Forster's *Voyage round the World* (1777) was tedious³⁷ and Hawkesworth's redaction of Cook's not much better: 'Hawkesworth can tell only what the voyagers have told him; and they have found very little, only one new animal, I think' (p. 537). That new nations with unique sexual customs had been discovered in places hitherto not known to exist appears to have impressed him not at all. A summary of his views of the anthropological importance of the South Seas is to be found in an exchange with Boswell, who was filled with a romantic desire to live on the beach in Tahiti or New Zealand and subsist in a state of nature. Johnson demanded of him,

What could you learn, Sir? What can savages tell, but what they themselves have seen? Of the past, or the invisible, they can tell nothing. The inhabitants of Otaheite and New-Zealand are not in a state of pure nature; for it is plain they broke off from some other people. Had they grown out of the ground, you might have judged of a state of pure nature. Fanciful people may talk of a mythology being amongst them; but it must be invention. They have once had religion, which has been gradually debased. And what account of their religion can you suppose to be learnt from savages? Only consider, Sir, our own state: our religion is in a book; we have an order of men whose duty it is to teach it [...] yet ask the first ten gross men you meet, and hear what they can tell of their religion. (p. 751)

As well as providing a précis of the non-knowledge to be garnered on this side of the beach, Johnson establishes a perfect equality between the ignorance of the enquirer and that of the native informant. A savage life is only the sum of what can be collected from an imperfect memory; mythology is a fiction either invented by the savages themselves or by those who wish to render them interesting; and whatever the visitor is told it has scant connection with the actual state of

affairs, which is emphatically not a state of nature. There is no truly primitive state of savagery to be observed, and what scoundrels such as Rousseau, or Scottish conjectural historians for that matter, dignify with the name of a state of nature is really always corrupt, for nobody grows out of the ground – and even if they did, their lack of pity, curiosity and letters would mean that what we mistook for innocence would really be imbecility. At the same time Johnson's repudiation of fieldwork reveals a canny but largely submerged estimate of what is at stake in the discussions generated by the elder Forster and Kames. For example, everyone agreed that savagery is always a relative estimate of progress or degeneration; for when Forster discovered what he took to be the degree zero of prehistoric life in the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, he was at length inclined to believe that humans so poor, so dull and so unlovely somehow must have been reduced to this condition. Clearly Johnson had read enough of the voyages to know that no one believed in an autochthonous origin of any Polynesian nation in the South Seas, that these were migratory cultures that had risen or fallen according to the amenity of the landfall or, in the case of the Rapanuians, their alleged profuseness, or for some other reason altogether. What Johnson wishes to impress upon the naïve and ardent Boswell is that the history of that rising and falling is purely conjectural, and that conjecture is worth nothing. Lord Monboddo's conjectures concerning the ape-like origins of humans he found not offensive but stupid: 'What strange narrowness of mind now is that, to think things we have not known, are better than the things which we have known' (p. 460).

Johnson set off with Boswell for the Highlands in 1773, the year Hawkesworth published his *Account of the Voyages* and a year after Cook set sail on his second voyage through the Pacific accompanied by the two Forsters. This was the closest Johnson came to doing fieldwork on his own account, and what he meant to collect was information of facts, things which were known. If he might be said to be testing any kind of theory, it was one that he embodied: his own version of stadial development where civil society reaches its apex in the rich material and intellectual culture of metropolitan London (Bowman's Luxo-Volupto in fact), a triumph of physical and mental exertion that was unequalled in the contemporary world. It caused Johnson great pleasure to catch sight of the silhouettes of Lord Mulgrave and Omai as they stood talking by a window, and to find he was not to be able to tell one from the other.³⁸ In his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) he aimed to measure the distance separating the primitive stage of development of the region (hovering somewhere between pastoralism and subsistence farming) from the standards of politeness that he himself and his companion represented. His alpha and omega are old traditions and antiquated manners on the one side, and a modern, civil nation on the other. Of his host at Anoch he reported that his life was 'merely pastoral', his wealth consisting entirely of 'one hundred sheep, as many goats, twelve milk-cows, and twenty-eight beeves ready for the drover'.³⁹ He explains how such a mountainous fastness defends 'the original, at least the oldest race of inhabitants' (p. 43); and so it is with a sort of comical vainglory he takes his first step towards Loch Ness and across the threshold of history: 'We were now to bid farewell to the luxury of travelling, and to enter a country upon which no wheel has ever rolled' (p. 29). Nevertheless he

detects many signs of progress in the circulation of money and the reach of the law, concluding with apparent approval, 'There was perhaps never any change of national manners so quick, so great, and so general, as that which has operated in the Highlands, by the last conquest, and the subsequent laws' (p. 57). There is only one way for the Highlands to go, and that is rapidly into the present.

Such certainty about the virtue of momentum is undercut however by melancholy reflections: 'We came thither too late to see what we expected, a people of peculiar appearance, and a system of antiquated life' (p. 57). If Forster was troubled by evidence of time going forwards and backwards in the same place, no less is Johnson. When he beholds antiquated manners he is for the most part impatient with them, especially if they require him to go to bed on straw, to travel without wheels, or to listen to a pack of lies from people who will tell the curious traveller anything they think he wants to know. It is then that he catches a strong flavour of clan life and its 'muddy mixture of pride and ignorance' (p. 89). At the same time he reports the general discontent among Highlanders of all classes owing to the rise of rents, the plague of emigration, and the laws against wearing the plaid and the carrying of arms. He recurs to the same theme that Cook was to rehearse when on his return he saw Tahiti blasted by venereal disease, and accurately predicted in the South Seas the same miseries of disease and depopulation for the indigenous people that had been endured for so many centuries in the Americas. In a solemn moment Johnson assesses the damage to what was once a cultural focus with a lot of heat in it: 'The clans retain little now of their original character, their ferocity of temper is softened, their military ardor is extinguished, their dignity of independence is depressed, their contempt of government subdued, and their reverence for their chiefs abated' (p. 57). What is he describing but the degeneration incident to modernisation, the retrogradation of moral virtue that accompanies progress? If he came too late to witness antiquated life, he came also too early to see the progress he wished to welcome. Like Forster he finds himself adrift in an eddy of time.

With regard to landscape of the Highlands Johnson is disquieted equally by the lack of trees and by the sullen power of useless vegetation that remains. The evils of its dereliction keep rushing upon him with sinister energy. He is fenced in by whatever he traverses and whatever he sees. It is Wolmar's boast in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* that the woody theatre of Julie's Elysium garden needs no prospect, and St Preux agrees, having trained his eye on the islands of Juan Fernandez and Tinian when he sailed with Anson.⁴⁰ But Johnson is oppressed by these obstructions; until, that is, he sits down to write his book and comes to terms with them:

I sat down on a bank, such as a writer of romance might have delighted to feign. I had, indeed, no trees to whisper over my head; but a clear rivulet streamed at my feet. The day was calm, the air soft, and all was rudeness, silence, and solitude. Before me, and on either side, were high hills, which, by hindering the eye from ranging, forced the mind to find entertainment for itself. Whether I spent the hour well, I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration. (p. 40)

His pleasure and impatience are alike expressed as litotes, as if (like the Forsters and William Wales) he has trouble positively affirming that things are either pleasant or inconvenient, caught as they are between an equivocal antiquity and an awkward modernity, and between an extensive wilderness and a prospectless coign. A house of entertainment is ‘not ill-stocked with provisions’, a young woman is ‘not inelegant either in mien or dress’, and he consumes barleycakes ‘without unwillingness’ (pp. 33-7). Alternatively, when he is shown a tree of insignificant size, but informed that there is a much larger one a few miles away, he recalls, ‘I was still less delighted to hear that another tree was not to be seen nearer’ (p. 10). What objectively he identifies as the intellectual poverty of a nation that has no historians (p. 50), or the informational vacuity of the Highland traveller who ‘knows less as he hears more’ (p. 51), is finally thoroughly internalised as his own inability to process facts that seem to belong to different eras, confounding his ability to distinguish between true knowledge and fiction. That is why he associates his narrative with romance.

Opulence, for example, is alive and well in the Highlands and all the more surprising for its sudden appearance amidst scenes of natural barrenness. The house of McLeod at Raasay was ‘such a seat of hospitality, amidst the winds and waters, [as filled] the imagination with a delightful contrariety of images [...] without is the rough ocean and the rocky land, the beating billows and the howling storm: within is plenty and elegance, beauty and gaiety, the song and the dance’ (p. 66). A rocky shore that divides a howling storm from a charming dance, it is an interesting pairing. The same coalition of positive and negative impulses that drives Johnson’s prose into litotes here stimulates fantasy of Keatsian extravagance, ‘The same that oft-times hath | Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam | Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn’.⁴¹ This was the minstrelsy to which Johnson was prepared as it were to spread his kirtle. He compared the effect on the mind to the fictions of Gothic romance: ‘Whatever is imaged in the wildest tale, if giants, dragons, and enchantments be expected, would be felt by him, who, wandering in the mountains without a guide, or upon the sea without a pilot, should be carried amidst his terror and uncertainty, to the hospitality and elegance of Raasay or Dunvegan’ (p. 77). Despite his perpetual reminders to the reader of the ignorance of bards and genealogists in the Highlands, it is in these Gothic havens, watching the dancing to the accompaniment of the billows, that Johnson learned the tales of the McLeods and the traditions of the Macleans and had no difficulty in believing them as family history. Although he warns us not to fill the vacuum of information with the pseudo-primitivism of *Ossian*, he spends pages discussing evidence of second sight. Of this faculty, which might have been suspected of being the most romantic of all, and well adapted to the curious collision of the past and the future he was experiencing, Johnson says, ‘The local frequency of a power, which is nowhere totally unknown [...] where we are unable to decide by antecedent reason, we must be content to yield to the force of testimony’ (p. 107). No conjectural historian could be more ready to admit that things we have not known are more interesting than those we have; no ethnographer could more willingly accept the testimony of native informants; no witness could be more partial in admitting evidence whose grounds of authenticity (partly known

almost everywhere) is asserted solely as a denial of its opposite, 'nowhere totally unknown'. Like many another inhabitant of the beach perched on the threshold of what is and what isn't clear to the mind, Johnson has started to dance and romance.⁴²

NOTES

- 1 J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 88.
- 2 Greg Denning, *Performances* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996) p. 47.
- 3 Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 267.
- 4 Hilary Mantel, 'Dreams & Duels of England', *New York Review of Books*, 22 October 2009, pp. 8-12. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/oct/22/dreams-duels-of-england/>> [accessed 1 July 2013].
- 5 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, ed. by Peter Jones, 6th edn, 2 vols (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 2005), I, 71.
- 6 Greg Denning, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), p. 124.
- 7 Anonymous, *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman, Esquire, into Carnovirria, Taupiniera, Olfactaria, and Auditante, in New-Zealand; in the Island of Bonhommica, and in the Powerful Kingdom of Luxo-Volupto, on the Great Southern Continent* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1778), p. 267.
- 8 Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 2-9 and passim.
- 9 Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 215, 228.
- 10 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, 4 vols (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1778), I, 39-40.
- 11 Johann Reinhold Forster, *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, ed. by Nicholas Thomas, Harriet Guest, and Michael Dettelbach (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), p. 152.
- 12 Nicholas Thomas, "'On the Varieties of the Human Species": Forster's Comparative Ethnology', in *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World*, pp. (xxiii-xl) p. xxv.
- 13 Poovey, pp. 215-228.
- 14 George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, ed. by Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), pp. 81, 86.
- 15 Nicholas Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997), p. 80.
- 16 Forster, *Voyage Round the World*, p. 79.
- 17 Johann Reinhold Forster, *The Resolution Journal 1772-75*, ed. by Michael Hoare, 4 vols (London: Hakluyt Society, 1982), II, 278.
- 18 J. R. Forster, *Resolution Journal*, II, 248; G. Forster, *Voyage Round the World*, I, 211.
- 19 William Wales, *Journal of William Wales*, in *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure 1772-75*, ed. by J. C. Beaglehole (London: Hakluyt Society and Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 779-80.
- 20 See H. E. Maude, *Of Islands and Men: Studies in Pacific History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1968),

pp. 170-77.

21 I. C. Campbell, *'Gone Native' in Polynesia: Captivity Narratives and Experiences from the South Pacific* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998).

22 See John Nicholson, *White Chief: The Colourful Life and Times of Judge F. E. Maning of the Hokianga* (Auckland: Penguin, 2006); and F. E. Maning, *Old New Zealand and Other Writings*, ed. by Alex Calder (London: Leicester University Press, 2001).

23 Cited in Campbell, p. 74.

24 Maning, *Old New Zealand*, p. 96.

25 Susanne Williams Milcairns, *Native Strangers: Beachcombers, Renegades and Castaways in the South Seas* (Auckland: Penguin, 2007), p. 121.

26 Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005), p. 213.

27 Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers: Europeans and Australians at First Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 8.

28 Greg Denning, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2004), p. 291.

29 William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches: During a Residence of Nearly Six Years in the South Sea Islands*, 2 vols (London: Fisher and Jackson, 1830), I, 318-19.

30 Anne Salmond, pp. 208-9; Ellis, II, 319.

31 Denning, *Performances*, p. 203.

32 Herbert Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1953), p. 320.

33 Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira*, p. 195.

34 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by John Richetti (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 39; James Cook, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure 1772-1775*, ed. by J. C. Beaglehole (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1969), p. 752.

35 Inga Clendinnen, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?', *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006) 1-68 (p. 19).

36 Clendinnen, p. 20.

37 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. by R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 860. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

38 Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 192-197.

39 Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. by Mary Lascelles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 37. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

40 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 4 vols, *Eloisa: or a Series of Original Letters* (repr. Oxford: Woodstock Press, 1989), II, 153.

41 John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Robert Gittings (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 126.

42 A version of this essay has previously been published in *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, ed. by Subha Mukherji (London: Anthem Press, 2011).