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Eurocentrism

The principal focus of "Science, planetary consciousness, interiors" is the development of a particular mind-frame which Pratt refers to as Eurocentrism. Two precursory events are cited as evidence of this new and evolving mental relationship with the rest of the world: the instigation of "Europe's first major international scientific expedition"(15) and the publication of *Systema Naturae*. The movement suggested by these two occurrences is "planetary consciousness," which, Pratt suggests, is "a basic element constructing [*sic*] Eurocentrism." (15)

That "first" international scientific expedition set out, in 1735, to resolve the Cartesian Newtonian dispute over the exact shape of the earth. Two separate groups headed one to Lapland, the other to South America. Pratt pays almost exclusive attention to the latter expedition:

In the case of the La Condomine expedition, the Spanish crown set aside its legendary protectionism. Eager to build its prestige and live down the "black legend" of Spanish cruelty, Philip V seized the opportunity to act as an enlightened continental monarch.

The point Pratt seeks to make is that though science was the motivating force, such moral high ground occupied by science was under constant attack from political considerations. Not only

was the question of the earth's shape divided along nationalistic and so political lines: French Cartesian versus English Newtonian theory; but also the politics of Spanish sovereignty, which had for two centuries effectively excluded foreigners from the region, and shrouded the land's riches in a mystery that could barely be penetrated by even the most fantastic speculation, was partially abjured by a King who, Pratt insinuates, merely sought to *act* as an enlightened ruler. Certainly, the problems the expedition encountered suggest that belief in scientific enquiry was often overshadowed by political distrust.

The relevance of this expedition is, according to Pratt, most properly its arrowhead position targeting the country's interior as the new realm of exploration as well as the international nature of its organisation. The age of maritime exploration had reached its natural limit. Connected with this, and of particular importance to Pratt's thesis, is the varied body of texts which resulted: texts which spanned the gamut of genres: from scientific to sociological, epistolary, adventure, survival literature. Romance and espionage were neither excluded. These texts bore witness to what Pratt suggests was:

. . . an early, and notoriously unsuccessful, instance of what was shortly to become one of Europe's proudest and most conspicuous instruments of expansion, the international scientific expedition.(23)

Pratt suggests that the strained international alliances and

scientific focus manifest in this exploration served as a foretaste of what was to become a general trend, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the resultant travel writing satisfied a keen public hunger in that regard. These texts became:

. . . a source of some of the most powerful ideational and ideological apparatus through which European citizenries [sic] related themselves to other parts of the world. (23)

System Naturae by Swedish naturalist Carl Linné was a "descriptive system" that sought to classify the earth's plant life according to the physical aspect of reproductive parts. The importance of this, according to Pratt, was manifold. It created order from chaos: formally disparate species now could be collected in a single all inclusive catalogue; and also the field of natural history itself was made more structured and sensible. Pratt ties in this new system with the La Condamine expedition by offering both as examples of "the continental, transnational aspirations of European science." (25) But the consequence, Pratt insists, of this system was much more than the conceptual order it imposed, for it set in motion a number of botanical studies in all corners of the earth; established a European non-exploitive relationship with nature; fostered public interest in botany and botanical gardens; stimulated small industry in the production of technical apparatus; aided artistic development in scientific illustration and writing;

inaugurated amateur as well as professional societies. It was an example of social motion caused by the quest for knowledge. Travel texts and journalism then, both influenced by and containing natural history, simplified the strictly scientific produce and made it suitable fare for the general public. Not only this, they also served, she suggests, as "central agents in legitimating scientific authority,"(29) as well as changing the way European's knew the world. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Pratt also suggests that this new system of natural history served not only as an exercise in "correlation but also in reduction."

Maritime exploration had initially given Europeans a global sense which was initially manifest in map making and sea voyage accounts. The relationship it offered between Europeans and the rest of the world, Pratt's submits, is founded in vicarious living and expressed from the "European, male, secular and lettered"(30) point of view. This relationship was further refined by interior exploration occasioned by the study of natural history, the resultant texts being of more interest to the general public and so according a more profound effect on the general European view of the outside world. Pratt suggests, further, that the systematic surface mapping incited by natural history can be seen directly connected with the "expanding search for commercially exploitable resources."(30)

It was Linné's attempt to classify man according to geographical delimitation that demonstrated the inherent dangers of extending the descriptivity of the system beyond purely

physical characteristics. Accordingly, native American's are deemed not only "copper coloured" with "dark hair"(32) etc., but also as being "obstinate, content, free,"(32) and "regulated by custom."(32) Asiatics are "sooty, melancholy . . . Governed by opinions";(32) Africans: "Black, phlegmatic . . . crafty, indolent, negligent . . . Governed by caprice."(32) Alternately:

European. Fair, sanguine, brawny; hair yellow,
brown, flowing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive.

Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws.(32)

Natural history, then, speaking with the authority of science, not only naturalises European superiority, but legitimises it also.

The nomenclature of science, Pratt believes, served as a transformational *operandi*. Just as maritime exploration baptised newly discovered regions and thus brought them, in a sense, within the sovereignty of Christian Europeans, natural history's transformational effect was even more profound, extracting all things from their chaotic environment, robbing them of their local significance, their socio-cultural context, and placing them as new possessions in the domain of scientific knowledge--a land whose borders were open solely to the educated European.

As well as this perhaps theoretical conquest, natural history expeditions often concealed in their baggage commercial and political consideration. Pratt offers Cook's voyages to the South Seas in the 1760s and 70s as an example of this, for it went "under secret orders to look out for commercial opportunities and threats."(34) Here then the imperialistic role

of natural history expeditions is much more concrete.

The systemisation of nature affected the discourse of travel writing firstly because it actually encouraged interior exploration but more importantly because it was not only an indicator of a new ideological construct but, Pratt seems to suggest, an actual instigator; thus it creates a world from a European perspective in which the slave trade and the plantation system, for example, can be seen as "experiments in social engineering and discipline, serial production, the systemisation of human life, the standardisation of persons." (36) In effect, interior exploration combined with scientific categorisation produced a particular discourse in resultant travel texts that explain the psychological effects of both expansionistic imperialism and the industrial revolution which fuelled it.

Analysis¹

It is difficult to read "Science, planetary consciousness, interiors" without the sense that thesis takes precedence to fact, and that we actually witness not so much a revealing of socio-historic dynamism as a false collage produced more by exclusion than inclusion.

Pratt's choice of the La Condamine expedition and Carl Linné's system of categorisation seem particularly problematic, and

¹Since I was unsure of the appropriateness of critical analysis in a paper such as this, I have kept it entirely separate from the main summery. Please feel free to consider the paper concluded at this point if the remainder is superfluous.

since they are the foundation of the thesis, the soundness of her words seems equally questionable.

Firstly, the La Condamine expedition was divided on nationalistic lines and was wrought with political and scientific jealousies, bringing into serious question "the continental, transnational aspirations of European science" Even Pratt admits that the co-operative and altruistic aspect of the expedition was a complete failure. Not only did nationalism play a controlling role, but personal rivalry too. We are also left to wonder how much new ground the expedition actually uncovered in terms of interior exploration since it traversed land that was *already* settled by Europeans.

By focusing upon the La Condamine side of the expedition, Pratt reveals her basic problem: she must represent the unifying force of science upon the European nations and yet avoid portraying imperialists as excessively altruistic. The solution is an international expedition that fails.

As far as the international scientific expedition becoming "Europe's proudest and most conspicuous instruments of expansion,"(23) we must wonder what necessitated this "instrument," for the religious aspect, the moral and spiritual superiority of Christians, had always provided reason and device enough to encourage all forms of expansionism or conquest. Indeed, Pratt's focus on what she for some reason feels is the "new" field of scientific categorisation--to which Aristotle must certainly raise a bemused eyebrow--leads to a narrow focus which entirely excludes religion from the picture. It certainly

seems incredulous to use Daniel DeFoe as an example of the new "secular" outlook. The only secularity of DeFoe seems to be Pratt's squint eyed reading of him. The very first page of *A Journal of the Plague Year* presents us with the most obvious and often repeated characteristic of the narrator: his partiality for the list. Some of the topics expressed in this form:

(1) The bills of death.

(2) The numeration of the various trades with a note of their individual privations.

(3) The locations and histories of burial sites.

(4) The superstitious prescriptions (with a derisory introduction) employed by the masses to ward off the disease, ranging from incantations to potions.

The symbolic value of these lists is the narrator's inclinations towards that growing philosophy which has scientific enquiry as a ruling principle, and belief in its potential as a ruling virtue. There can be no doubt though that the visitation of the plague was seen by the narrator as not only an indication of heavenly displeasure, but more specifically as the direct work of God. Indeed, his relationship with God, during the early days, is perceived as being so close that he takes a number of innocuous incidents as being signs commanding him personally to remain in London, and to place his safety in heavenly providence. The narrators systematic, observational, numerative and experimental bent is brought in conjunction with piety, and it is this combination that demonstrates a desire not so much to impose order on chaos, but

more to *secure order from* chaos. The apparent chaos—in reality the work of God—is indeed only apparent: if man cannot see the order, God certainly can. The *Journal of the Plague Years*, which could, according to numerous criteria, be considered even a primary travel text, not only shows DeFoe entirely opposed to Pratt's "pious" reading, but also, when we bring together the religious with the scientific, even against the idea of imposing order upon chaos.

As for the suggestion that Linné "deliberately revived Latin for his nomenclature precisely because it was nobody's national language,"(25) it seems clear that this is another example of narrow focus and inept interpretation designed not to reveal truth but to support her a limping weak limbed thesis. The fact is that Latin had long since established itself as the language of learning. Not only this, but knowledge had also been long the cell mate of religion. Pratt, by again focusing upon science and excluding religion reveals an entirely modern attitude in which science is an *alternative* to religion. This was not the case in the eighteenth century.

The categorising process of Carl Linné's system should not be seen as something new, something European, nor something particularly scientific--all of which they must be for Pratt's purposes. The Elizabethan world picture, for example, used religion in a similar manner, fixing all things in a fixed order with fixed relationships. The Hindu caste system is an example of non European social ordering which incorporated reductionism and effected its own type of "othering." The mapping of the

heavens was a science practised by "unscientific" societies which also attempted to find order in apparent chaos, and of which the cause and effect link is much less tenuous than those made by Pratt, the settlement of isolated Polynesian island being a perfect example.

The transformational and ownership aspect of the categorising process of natural history seems tenuous at best. Even Pratt admits:

From another perspective, however, natural history is not transformative in the least. That is . . . it undertakes to do virtually nothing in or to the world.(33)

When a change of perspective presents diametrically opposite interpretations, we might perhaps wonder if we are actually attempting to read reality or support a theory by selecting only those words that seem appropriate. Certainly there is a sense that Pratt's thesis is built upon the narrowest of views which attempts to compartmentalise eighteenth and nineteenth century European history, robbing it of its religious, psychological global and temporal context. Even as Pratt attempts to deconstruct the Eurocentric superiority myth, by presenting Europeans as originators of particular scientific techniques, as particular expansionistic explorers, with particular attitudes to foreign parts and peoples, she sets them outside the global human continuum as entirely separates and largely black beasts and so in effects reinforces that myth.

Finally, numerous works from antiquity show La Condamine

expedition and Linné's system not as ground breaking events suggesting new ways of thinking and perceiving the world, but as events on a temporal continuum which were neither new nor special. The earliest pre-Socratic philosopher, Miletus, for example, used his *international* knowledge (of Egypt) to measure the heights of pyramids from their shadows. A contemporary, Anaximander, displayed keen interest in the evolution of human beings, which he sought to reconstruct by personal observation. Herodotus' *Journey Around the World*, from some time around 450, showed him a pioneer geographer long before the maritime explorations cited by Pratt.

As a foot note, we might wonder why Pratt uses the peculiar "citizenries" rather than the conventional *citizenry*, since the former seems to underline a plurality antithetical to the desired meaning.

Works Cited

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