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GEORG FORSTER AND THERESE HUBER’S ADVENTURE TO NEW HOLLAND

Abstract: There has been relatively little work done on Therese Huber (1764-1829) in comparison to her famous first husband, Georg Forster (1754-1794). Early attention to Huber typically focused on her failings: her betrayal of Forster, both as a wife and as a keeper of his letters, her inadequacy as an accurate reporter of the early history of Britain’s new colony at Botany Bay, and her limitations as a writer of any note. Although recent readings have been more generous, identifying her efforts as apiece with the strategies employed by many female authors during a period of women’s political and social repression, there are in fact only a handful of them. In this short contribution I highlight the manner in which Huber’s first novella, *An Adventure to New Holland* (1793), positions its female protagonist as a person forced to navigate male power while maintaining a spirit of defiant resistance reminiscent of Forster’s description of the French Revolutionary Charlotte Corday. Huber’s brief Coda to her novella, *The Lonely Deathbed* (1810), imagines a happy ending for Forster, but serves at the same time as a reminder of the centrality of India to the geopolitics of the time. Stephen Gaukroger’s attention to this aspect of the discussion provides the backdrop for my analysis of Forster and Huber.

Keywords: Georg Forster, Therese Huber, Stephen Gaukroger, German Orientalism

In January 1794 Georg Forster, the famous *Weltumsegler* who had accompanied James Cook on his second voyage to the South Pacific between 1772 and 1775, felt almost entirely alone in the world. Disillusioned, embittered, and ill, the failed Mainz Jacobin had been cut off from family and friends as a traitor, even as he was viewed with increasing suspicion by the same men who had bade him to translate a new constitution passed by the Montagnard faction in June 1793 (Goldstein 2019). Forster’s English and German translations were hastily completed in the midst of political turmoil and uncertainty. In fact, the entire year had been an exhausting series of one spectacle after another. Only five days after Forster’s translation was complete did news spread of a new catastrophe: the Girondin Charlotte Corday had murdered Jean-Paul Marat, stabbing him repeatedly as he sat in a medicinal bath. Forster went with his fellow Mainz Jacobin, Adam Lux, to see Corday hanged four days later (Bode 2019). Forster described the scene in a letter to his wife Therese, explaining that in his view,

The fanatical conviction of Marat's murderess is irrelevant here, whether it is based on error or truth; what matters is the purity of her soul, which was so completely devoted to her purpose and accepted all the consequences of the act with such beautiful heroic strength. She was in full bloom of health, enchantingly beautiful, most of all through the charm of her innocence, which surrounded her. Her short-cropped dark-brown hair gave her the appearance of an antique head on the most beautiful bust. Her cheerfulness remained until the very last moment on the scaffold, where I saw her executed. Her death was a relief for me on her behalf. “You have already suffered enough,” I thought. Did she want a priest? No! She despised them (Forster 1989, p. 395).

Adam Lux must have felt roughly the same about Marat’s politics, becoming afterwards passionate in his support of Corday’s objectives, publishing incendiary pamphlets, and eventually climbing the gallows himself. As the year wore on Forster made one last trip to

meet with his children and Therese (who was accompanied by Ludwig Ferdinand Huber, their friend (and her lover)) at the French-Swiss border to sign divorce papers. At the meeting Therese read the first half of her first novella out loud to Forster: an adventure story collecting together bits of the pair’s autobiography and focussed on a trip to the South Pacific.

Now before we get any further into this interesting little story, I should explain that the reason I know anything about it is in large part thanks to the great good fortune I had in being friends with Stephen Gaukroger. Stephen’s intellectual generosity was widely known among his friends for he was always full of ideas, references, and books to recommend; he was always ready to open doors for others even when he might not have been interested in going through any of them himself. Like many of us, Stephen supported me over the years as I began one project or another, and when I decided to begin research on the 18th-c German philosophical reception history of the Pacific, he was immediately enthusiastic and full of good suggestions, in fact he opened the door to the large body of scholarly work, starting with Bernard Smith, on the representations—of the flora, fauna, and peoples of the Pacific—that were produced as their own kind of important scientific reporting during the voyages undertaken by Cook and others in the last decades of the 18th century.

This kind of generosity, an impulse to share what one loves best and finds most fascinating was in my view a defining feature of Stephen Gaukroger. The last talk I heard him give was a discussion of German Orientalism from a manuscript he was working on in 2021 called “Ancestors and Aliens: Classical Antiquity, the Orient, and the Construction of a European Cultural Identity, 1500-1914,” and since it has unfortunately remained unpublished, I would like to say something about it here. The focus of the work is the idea of Europe itself, and in particular Europe’s effort to “distinguish itself from the rest of the world by identifying aliens,” on the one hand, and to identifying ancestors, on the other hand, in order to establish a unique lineage that would validate its claims to religious and cultural superiority (Gaukroger 2021, p. 10). As Gaukroger develops this over the course of the manuscript he manages to balance this big history story with careful attention to the kind of challenges that historical events of one kind or another would place before any effort to carve out a uniquely European identity. There were linguistic, religious, geographic problems to consider. What were the borders of Europe? Was it defined by Christianity? Expanding upon just one of the problems, Gaukroger points out that by the twelfth century, Christendom was contracting in the face of an expanding Caliphate, one with its own form of Mosaic monotheism. North Africa, as he puts it, “which had been the stronghold of Latin Christianity, the home of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, was subjected to a forced conversion of Christians and Jews by the Almohad caliphate ... [and] Trebizond, the last remaining territory under Christian control in Asia Minor, fell to the Ottomans in 1461” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 9). In this rehearsal, Europe, despite its coming difficulties to face via the Reformation, is defined by its being the last “bastion of Christianity outside the Eastern Orthodox churches” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 9). And this was so, as Gaukroger reminds his readers, even as what we would today identify as the “European” landmass comprised some 500 more or less independent entities—with 350 distinguishable states still on hand as late at 1650.

Now who were the aliens and who were the ancestors in this schema? Gaukroger outlines four contrasting categories for locating the idea of Europe: the Orient, classical Greco-Roman antiquity, the category of the ‘primitive,’ and Christianity. The Orient “is wholly contrastive,” he writes, “encompassing all non-Christian advanced cultures, predominantly in the East, most notably the remote territories of China, Siam, and Japan, the Safavid and Mughal empires, and the Ottoman empire” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 10)—a broad sweep of lands and cultures, whose breadth from such a distance was not only inherently

homogenising, but by no means understood, let alone embraced, by any actual member of this so-called entity. As Gaukroger traces this, the parameters of what would count as membership in an alien Orient proves to be both unstable and elastic, as will be the identification of Europe’s own ancestry viz., for example, Christianity’s point of origin in Judaism as opposed to the Greeks, or Europe’s origin in the Greeks as opposed to Christianity. By the 19th century, as he reads it, “there emerged attempts to Aryanize Christianity and at the same time to Semiticize Islam, rendering the latter wholly alien” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 12). Here Gaukroger is careful to note the currents of racialized thinking, citing Masuzawa’s comment that “to the modern European eye, the religion of Mohammed was to be rigidly stereotyped as the religion of the Arabs, as an intolerant religion determined and constrained by the Arabs’ national, ethnic, and racial particularities. This semitisation of Islam came about in spite of a fact well known to Europeans, namely, that the vast majority of Muslims, then as now, were not Arabs” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 12).

Tracking the shifting ensemble of ancestors and aliens in this manner gives Gaukroger time to consider the attention paid by Montesquieu to Persia, and Voltaire to China, with each positioning the alien cultures as opportunities to view Europe itself from a distance, to identify its own parochialisms, and to thereby displace its easy confidence and presumed seat at the centre of a decidedly Eurocentric universalism. With this entrée to a somewhat more empathetic engagement with Europe’s ‘other,’ Gaukroger is ready to take up a complicated set of discussions regarding the relationship between pagan myths and Christian parables, the question of the origin of language and the placement of Hebrew as the oldest one, and the deep difficulties wrought throughout these considerations by the supposed virtues or vices assigned to the category of ‘the primitive’; a category which in Gaukroger’s recounting appears much like a floating signifier, as useful for stadial historians as it would be for the possibility of Europe’s moral renewal in the hands of Rousseau, Herder, and Schlegel. “Christianity was what had traditionally marked out the West from the Orient,” he explains, “but its origins lay in the ‘Middle East’ and exploration of these origins required significant familiarity with the language and culture of the Middle East. After all, Hebrew was considered not just the oldest language but the successor of the antediluvian speech by which God had called the world into being. ... And when a serious interest in India developed in the late eighteenth century, its relevance [too] lay in the light it threw on Biblical and classical antiquity” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 13).

The turn to India required scholars to ‘assimilate a synchronic to a diachronic understanding.’ What does this mean? Gaukroger is interested here in looking at the way in which thinkers forged links to the alien, to the Orient, even as it meant shifting temporal boundaries, reimagining genealogies, and indeed redrawing mental geographies between self and other. This allowed ‘the primitive’ to function as both a snapshot of Europe’s childhood—conveniently portrayed in ‘real time’ by the Amerindians and South Sea Islanders of traveller reports—and its moral core. Positioning the primitive in this manner underscored the truth of universal progressive history even as the discovery of ‘actual primitives’ seemed to obviate any further need for such history at all. Of greater significance for late 18th-century reflections, it meant that the linguistic world of Sanskrit could be positioned as both alien *and* ancestor in the works of Schlegel and von Humboldt.

This is a big story to tell and as always, the devil is in the details. The parts of the manuscript that I am most interested in concentrate on the German Enlightenment figures at work during the last quarter of the 18th century. There is a truism in natural history to the effect that from a distance nature has categories, move closer however, and its individuals all the way down. In this vein it seems worthwhile to pause and unpick a few of these strands being woven into the fabric of Gaukroger’s account, not indeed to unravel it, but to perhaps add some texture. Its well-known that both Kant and Hegel would prove to be dismissive of

efforts to locate the origin of either philosophy or Christianity anywhere other than the Greeks (Park, 2013), but we can embroider the narrative a bit more here too by considering the important role played by the ‘other Greeks,’ by Homer and Sophocles, by the mythology and art of Arcadia for a host of figures from Goethe to Hölderlin in the 1790s. How did the turn to India take place amidst this ‘tyranny of Greece over Germany’ as Butler memorably put it?

Gaukroger tracks distinctions between British, French, and German engagement but there are of course crossovers everywhere. The British were deeply involved in India at this point via the East India Co., reports of whose mismanagement of affairs leading to a succession of devastating famines in the 1770s, had been translated into German by 1780. As Gaukroger reminds us, the British were well aware of the need for administrators with knowledge of non-European languages. Urged forcefully by Warren Hastings, British Governor of Bengal, efforts were made to establish a university chair at Oxford in Persian, the language of diplomacy. When this proved unsuccessful, Hastings recruited a number of his top aides around him to be trained in Persian and Hindustani. It is at this point in the story we meet William Jones, a senior colonial judge and administrator working under Hastings whose eventual impatience with the slow process of translating legal documents into Persian led him to hire a Sanskrit scholar to teach him the language. This led Jones eventually away from legal documents to a broad appreciation of Sanskrit as not just the means for discovering “the antiquities, arts, sciences, and literature of Asia” (Gaukroger 2021, p. 193) but the roots of European languages and thus of its culture and history. Indeed, insofar as language was proposed as the best medium by which we might know the mind, Sanskrit, for Jones, provided a lens through which we might view the mental and moral development of Europe. In this fashion India, for Jones and Friedrich Schlegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt after him, represented a genuine ancestor and one older even than the Greeks (Mensch 2018).

How did the enthusiasms of a British colonial administrator get to Germany? Why did Schlegel—whose 1794 work on Greek poetry placed him firmly in the centre of German Romantic fascination with the Greeks—decide to learn Sanskrit? And not just learn it, but to follow Jones in Schlegel’s own enthusiastic appraisal of the beauties of the language and the window it opened to the myths, literature, art, and religion of the land and its people; retrieval of an ancestral line that would inaugurate a second Renaissance in Europe, as he put it in 1808 (Mensch 2019)?

The surprising answer in part is found by way of Georg Forster, the naturalist who along with his father had done more than anyone else to transmit information from Britain’s far-flung colonial exploits to German-reading audiences (Mensch 2024). While this part of Forster’s biography is perhaps as well-known as is his unhappy ending in Paris at the age of 39, Forster had been long interested in India, and had in fact written review essays on more pieces devoted to India than to the South Seas (here it bears remembering perhaps that a number of James Cook’s crew, including William Hodges, chief illustrator on the second voyage to the South Seas with Forster, moved on to documenting Indian expeditions once the major Pacific voyages were completed in 1780). In 1790 Forster and Alexander von Humboldt had been together in London during the impeachment hearings of Warren Hastings, with news of Britain’s colonial administration in Bengal dominating newspaper coverage. It is no surprise then to see Forster’s decision to publish reviews of Edmund Burke’s political analysis of the Hastings affair in the following year (Kontler 2013). In 1791 Forster also published a review of William Robertson’s timely commentary, the *Historical Disquisition* on India, which included an account of current commercial activities. As was his custom, Forster continued to reflect on matters in consultation with his father-in-law, C.G. Heyne (Professor of Classics at Göttingen University and editor of the *Göttingen Anzeigen*, which published the bulk of Forster’s reviews), and his own father, J.R. Forster, who had had

a series of letter exchanges with Robertson after the appearance of his volumes on America in the late 1770s (Kontler 2014, p. 146) before deciding ultimately to begin work on a translation of Robertson’s commentary, which appeared in 1792. All this activity aside, Forster’s most important translation to appear in 1791 in relation to India was a German edition of William Jones’s English translation of Kalidasa’s ancient Indian drama *Sakuntala* from Sanskrit (1785); a text that would deeply influence the German Romantic image of India and the *Morgenländer* more generally (Germana 2009), and only add momentum to Kant and Hegel’s forceful rejection of Indian letters in favour of a Greek origin of philosophy (Park 2013).

While this exegetical and translation work was being done by Forster—now working in Mainz at the University library—forces were crossing over from France and would soon take over the area, transforming it into a French republic. Forster and Huber were already sympathetic to the Jacobin cause, and Forster quickly became involved in the so-called Mainz Rebellion, heading to Paris as an emerging leader of the new Mainz Republic. In a quick turn of events, however, Prussian forces retook the area in 1793, leaving Forster an exile and declared traitor in Paris. Huber and their two children fled with her lover to Strasbourg and then Neuchâtel. In Wilson’s words, “She too was now an outcast, vilified by Forster’s friends as the destroyer of his personal happiness, vilified by his foes as the wife and collaborator of a traitor, rejected by family and friends, and an object of public outrage and derision” (Wilson 2009a, p. 225). Throughout the tumultuous events of 1793 Forster wrote regular, oftentimes daily, letters to Huber, chronicling the changing politics, his meetings with the various expats arriving from across Europe to report on events—“met with Miß Wolstonkraft,” 13 April, 1793—and increasingly, his anxiety at the violence that seemed to be spinning out of control as factions fought for power (Forster 1989, p. 346). It was these letters, and Huber’s personal and political circumstances in particular, that would be pulled together by her as she developed ideas for her first piece of major writing, *An Adventure to New Holland*, published in serialised form in a journal for “female readers” between 1793 and 1794.

Forster died in January of 1794, after which Therese married her lover, the Saxon diplomat Ludwig Ferdinand Huber. After his death in 1804, Therese Huber’s writing became the main economic lifeline for her and her four surviving children. In the following years Huber published dozens of short stories and several longer novels in addition to taking over the editorship (1816-1823) of a widely read German newspaper, the *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* in Stuttgart (Richards 2004, p. 417). It was only in 1810 that she returned to the plotline of the *Adventure*, in a short Coda she called “The Lonely Deathbed.” In the Forward to the piece Huber explained that the earlier story had been centred on the events surrounding her and Forster’s life and had been drawn additionally from the letters sent during his exile. Now, however, she wanted to imagine what had happened since we had last met with the main protagonists: Rudolf (Forster) and Francis (Therese). That story had ended with Rudolf leaving New Holland for China on the way to India.

Now as we just saw, Forster had in fact been busy working on the translation of Robertson’s *Disquisition* in 1792 when Mainz was invaded, and when he left for Paris he took work with him, including grammar books in line with his aim to continue working on his own mastery of the languages he would need if his eventual goal to travel India himself were to come to fruition. As Huber recalls it in her Foreword to *The Lonely Deathbed*,

The idea of the *Journey to New Holland* first came about through Forster’s intention to go by this route to Asia. His plan was comprehensive and he would have made any sacrifice to gain acceptance as a citizen of the East. He made preparations for this by studying Arabic and Persian. These studies

formed the subject matter of the last books he read. The books that lay beside him on his deathbed were Oriental grammars (Huber 1966, p. 107).

Huber's initial *Journey* has had an interesting reception history, variously decried for its inaccurate summarisation of the location so clearly borrowed by Huber from Forster's reviews of the new colony or dismissed for its weak writing and overtly sentimental reliance on the family as a vehicle for moral reintegration into society (Wilson 2009b, Gokale 1996). While recent feminist work has been done to retrieve Huber's work (and person) from such censure (Gokale 1996, Richards 2004), only a few pieces in this vein have been devoted to an analysis of the *Adventure* (Wilson 2009a, 2009b, O'Connell 2020). Wilson's work has focused attention to the thread of guilt running through the work, a theme captured well in the Coda, as Rudolph's decision to leave Reinette (now a stand in for Therese) for New Holland on his way to the East is explained by the narrator thus:

Exhausted by his illusions, Rudolph saw the ideals that had ennobled his error, fade away. He had lost his friend, his wife and country and he stood alone amid the ruins of a blood-stained world. ... In a letter he entrusted his wife and his only child to Berthold [i.e., L.F. Huber] and hurried overseas to the Ganges and the land that had once been the cradle of mankind, there to seek peace—or the grave (Huber 1966, p. 114).

But if this all makes sense from Forster's biography, what about Therese's doppelgänger Francis? It is an interesting question and one that Wilson considers in part (2009a). Without the space here to develop anything substantive I will just close with a suggestion for further enquiry. In the *Journey* the French Revolution appears like a contagion, infecting people from all over to rebel in the face of oppression. Like any sickness, the accompanying fever can lead to delirium, one that causes Rudolph to be slow to recognise the terror for what it is. The character arc taken by Francis—whose appearance bears a striking resemblance to Forster's description of Charlotte Corday—is too complicated to be quickly summarised but suffice to say that she remains uniquely untarnished by her revolutionary ideals. As in so many stories in the genre, her plotline begins with a sexual assault, but rather than succumbing to the unwanted attention, Francis picks up a knife and plunges it into her assailant (Huber 1966, p. 75). What is more, she fiercely resists any suggestion that she is wrong to have fought against oppression, and indeed Huber gives Rudolf a chance to voice a full-throated defence of the rights of citizens to revolt against tyranny (Huber 1966, pp. 62-64). At the end of the *Journey*, Rudolph is heading off to the Orient, in the Coda, he has returned, for "Wearied by knowledge and experience he longed to have cares and duties once again. Memory's sting had finally grown blunt. In the waves of the Ganges, on the peaks of the age-old mountains of India his soul had at last found peace" (Huber 1966, p. 122). The Orient, as Forster and Huber seem to have understood it at least, was both ancestor and alien to Europe, with Huber's book thus serving as a fitting case study for proving Stephen Gaukroger's own thesis on the instability of the concept, and the need therefore to resort to a diachronic analysis of it for understanding its appeal to thinkers and writers at the time.

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