Representations of the 'Self' and the 'Other' in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature

An Essay by
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Travel Writing was one of the most popular literary genres in the eighteenth century. Arguably, this period was a time of increased scientific and economic exploration, and numerous scientific expeditions were motivated by the ambition to 'boldly go where no man has gone before'. At the same time, travel in the form of tourism became more widespread, especially for the middle classes. In *The Idler No. 97*, Samuel Johnson himself diagnoses a natural curiosity "to learn the sentiments, manners, and condition of the rest [of mankind]"[1] in his age. Travel narratives, like a package of photographs today, brought back and made aivailable the experiences of the traveller, be it scientist or tourist. As Blanton notes, their "main purpose is to introduce us to the other," and to "dramatize an engagement between the self and the world."[2] This engagement, however, can never be unproblematic. The other threatens the self in its identity, its self-consciousness to be 'on the right track'. It questions the self in its way of being and its values in profound ways.

The self must react to this threat in one way or another. Several possibilities can be imagined: Firstly, the self is overwhelmed by the other and transformed utterly in its identity. Secondly, the self confirms its identity in opposition to the other. Thirdly, and probably ideally, the self is neither in opposition to the other, nor swallowed by it, and hence a less threatening interchange can take place. Unfortunately, the latter possibility is rarely realized. Instead, it is far more widespread to create a protecting superiority of the self over the other. One way to achieve the confirmation of the self is the setting up an opposition between the self as the one who knows and can understand and the other who does not know and does not understand. It is this method of 'solving' the conflict created by traveling and encountering the other that is the subject of my investigation. I find this pattern in my reading of the two following travel accounts, namely Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands*,[3] and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*.[4]

[1]Samuel Johnson, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Frank Brady and W.K. Wimstatt, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1977), p. 270.

[2]Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*, (Twayne Publishers: New York and London, 1997), p. xi.

[3]Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, edited by Peter Levi, (Penguin Press: London, 1984), in the following text the book is quoted as JWI with pagenumbers in paranthesis.

[4]Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, edited by Richard Holmes, (Penguin Press: London, 1987), in the following text the book is quoted as Letters with pagenumbers in paranthesis.

Of course, I am aware that the above mentioned method is by no means the only one used in the eighteenh century, but its strategies are worth investigating in order to gain some understanding of the representation of self and the other in this age.

In 1773, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell undertook their long planned journey to Scotland and the Hebrides. Their interest was to "contemplate a system of life almost totally different from what we had been accustomed to see; and, to find simplicity and wildness."[5] Twentytwo years later, Mary Wollstonecraft traveled to Scandinavia "a largely unknown region ... beyond the pale of Western culture, which was generally regarded as a primitive world."[6] The alledged motive for the journey was the recovery of large sums of money Wollstonecraft's partner Gilbert Imlay had lost when a ship illegally packed with french goods had been stolen by its Norwegian captain. Wollstonecraft took this opportunity to give "a just view" (Letters, Advertisment) and "a general idea" (Letters, 85) of the countries she was passing through.

Is is important to note at this point that debates about the nature of such concepts as civilization, the primitive, the savage, and the babarian were very common in this time, and formed the intellectual background for Johnson's and Wollstonecraft's texts. The discussion centered around three main topics: Society was perceived as evolving from primitive stages towards civilized ones with a parallel development of property and economy. John Millar formulated this in terms of the four stages theory of society, namely the hunting and gathering period, the pastoral stage, the agricultural era, and commercial society.[7] At the same time, models were proposed to understand differences between human cultures. Two theories were discussed, one argued that external forces such as geography and climate act on the body, thereby influencing the behaviour, the other regarded the mental or moral life of non-Europeans as internally different from that of Europeans.[8] According to Wheeler, the external theory dominated in the eighteenth century. Finally, the principal value of civilization – whether it improves or degenerates man – was questioned in connection with Cook's travels to the South Sea and encounters with the Tahitian population.[9] Johnson's and Wollstonecraft's travles are fundamentally connected to all these issues. In fact, Rogers argues that "Johnson's transit of the Caledonian hemisphere turns out to

[5]James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, edited by Peter Levi, (Penguin Press: London, 1984), p. 161.

[6]Richard Holmes, 'Introduction' to Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, edited by Richard Holmes, (Penguin Press: London, 1987), p. 17-18.

[7]Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1995), p. 12.

[8]Roxann Wheeler, 'Limited Vision of Africa: Geographies of Savagery and Civility in Early Eighteenth-Cenury Narratives', in: *Writes of Passge*, edited by James Duncan and Derek Gregory, (Routledge: London and New York, 1999, pp. 14-48), p. 20.

[9]Pat Rogers, *Johnson and Boswell: The Transit of Caledonia*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1995), Chapter 4.

be similar to a South Sea voyage, in its anthropological, scientific, and cultural framework."[10] In Rogers opinion, Johnson sets out to test many of the ideas proposed by Enlightenment authors in real life.[11] Similarly, Wollstonecraft's text is full of comments on the stage of the improvement of mankind in the countries she is passing through, thereby also responding to the above sketched current philosophical debate.

In performing their quest to test ideas on civilization and primitivism, Wollstonecraft and Johnson claim to be open minded or, as Johnson puts it, that these

> ideas are always incomplete, and that at least, till we have compared them with realities, we do not know them to be just. As we see more, we become possessed of more certainties, and consequently gain more principles of reasoning, and found a wider base of analogy. (JWI, 60)

Equally, Wollstonecraft states that it is her "principal object ... to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man." (Letters, 172) She wants to "promote inquiery and discussion, instead of making ... dogmatical assertions," thereby contributing to "a great accumulation of knowledge". (Letters, 93)

The gained knowledge is based on observation and the already mentioned intellectual framework. It involves, in the case of Johnson, careful observations of the architecture, including the taking of scientifically precise measurements, the stature and the manners of the inhabitants, as well as a study of landscape and climate. Understanding is also furnished with the help of certain theories such as the explanation of the sociological structure of people living in mountainous regions. Actually, Johnson does expect to find the Highlanders to be savage, wild, and primitive, because they live in the mountains which "commonly contain the original, at least the oldest race of inhabitants". (JWI, 62-63) He reasons that a mountainous terrain is difficult to cross, hindering conquering as well as civilizing of the inhabitants. Civilization is, according to Johnson, brought forward by social "intercourse mutually profitable" (JWI, 63) and by commercial trade, but mountaineers are instead split into numerous feuds, they "form distinct races, and are careful to preserve their genealogies." (JWI, 66) Hence they remain warlike, thievish and continue in primitive manners "where the primitive language is spoken". (JWI, 63) Indeed, Johnson's expectations are met, and he concludes that "such are the effects of habitation among mounains, and such were the qualities of the highlanders, while their rocks secluded them from the rest of mankind, and kept them an unaltered and discriminated race." (JWI, 66)

During his stay on the island of Sky, Johnson undertakes to study the manners of the islanders. (JWI, 92-119) Again, he contrasts generally hold opinions with

[10] Pat Rogers, 1995, p. 87.
[11] Pat Rogers, 1995, p. 4.

his observations, for example on the longevity, which seems to be commonly attributed to lack of luxury, but which he does not find particulalry often in this poor countryside. He hence concludes that "very different modes of life in very different climates" (JWI, 93) render such reasoning invalid. Part of his study is conducted in commercial and economical terms, providing him with – at least for himself – a satisfactory understanding of his observations, be it of habitual idleness or of emmigration and decreasing population, connecting them with the pastoral stage of wide parts of the country. The highlander, he argues, "has no strong adherence to his native soil; for of animal enjoyments, or of physical good, he leaves nothing that he may not find again", (JWI, 105) in contrast to someone imbedded in a commercial society. Another point of view is education, and he writes on the state of schools and the pervailance of superstition. Johnson is particularly interested in the second sight, but cannot resolve the question of its existence because the information he can aquire is insufficient. This brings him to stress the problem of reliabale testimony and of the preservation of memory in an illiterate society and finally to an account of the Earse language. Although he does not undersand Earse, he draws some conclusions from the concept that it is a solely spoken language, in particular on the bards and the relation of the highlanders to literature.

Similar points are of interest to Mary Wollstonecraft concerning Scandinavia. Like Johnson she comments on the number of the population, their means of subsistence, their food, their clothing, their education, treatment of servants, government and economical system, laws, the geography and the climate. Wollstonecraft also understands everything she looks at, and if she is not able to collect even more knowledge, it is not her fault, but the fault of the native population who make it difficult for her "to obtain from them any information respecting their own country." (Letters, 114) Like Johnson, Wollstonecraft draws conclusions by generalization and according to philosophical theories of her time. The account of a single life "gave her an idea of the manners of the people". (Letters, 67) Culture is connected to geography when she notes that "seaports are not favourable to improvement". (Letters, 103) Likewise, character traits are influenced by political and economical systems, by profession, and climate. Despotism destroys industry, while capitalism encourages it. (Letters, 63) On the other hand, trading destroys feelings of honesty, (Letters, 131) lawyers are vicious, (Letters, 123) and customs officers are unfriendly. (Letters, 70) "The long Swedish winter" she remarks "renders people sluggish". (Letters, 82) Not only does she make generalizations about the inhabitants of Scandinavia, she even incorporates her observations there into her picture of the development of the population of the whole earth, claiming that "primitive inhabitants of the world" have their origin not in the south but in the north. (Letters, 89-90) By putting observed facts into the framework provided by her culture, Wollstonecraft achieves a comprehensive sense of understanding.

These preconceptions the author brings with him or her are employed to understand the other when it is encountered, and hence are justified a posteriori

by the successful gain of knowledge. The capacity to understand the unknown other is an integral part of the conception of self for Johnson and Wollstonecraft, and that is why it is so imporant for them that their methods of understanding do not fail them. Moreover, the belief in the capacity to understand was part of the a philosophical debate which argued that all humans are in principal similar and hence comprehensible, even when differentiated due to external circumstances.[12]

A good example of the problems inherent in the process of interpreting observation according to predetermined frameworks is Wollstonecraft's first encounter with the coast of Norway. Looking for a pilot who could bring her to her actual destination, she sees a hut in the landscape, and does not observe anybody coming out of it. This empirical fact is transformed into surprise about the lack of curiosity which prevents the presumed inhabitants from looking out of the windows or coming outside. This interpretation leads to the judgement that Wollstonecraft is dealing with "men ... near the brute creation" which in turn is extended into a general reflection on the traits of such primitive men, namely that they "have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind" because they only "exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life". (Letters, 65) Similarly, after Wollstonecraft's announcement "to return to the straigth road of observation" she notes that "the sensuality so prevalent [among the people in Copenhagen] appears to me to arise rather from indolence of mind, and dull senses, than from an exuberance of life". (Letters, 171) Johnson must have had in mind 'observations' like this when he wrote that many travellers report "knowledge which, without some power of intuition unknown to other mortals, he never could attain." (Idler No. 97)[13]

Compared to Wollstonecraft, Johnson is much closer to the spirit of strict empirism, but even he draws some wild conclusions from his observation of the absence of trees in the Scottish landscape. He supposes that "Scotland had once undoubtedly an equal portion of woods with other countries", (JWI, 39) combines this with some general wisdom of his time on the influence of cultivation and human settlements on forests and arrives at the statement of a centuries long negligent waste "without the least thought of future supply." (JWI, 39) The point is that Johnson has to fit his empirist observations, incomplete as they sometimes are, into general concepts in order to achive a sense of understanding. But the induction from the particular to the general is inherently problematic, because facts are mixed with speculation or theories. Johnson is aware of this problem and he refrains, for example, from describing Fort George because "I cannote delineate it scientifically" (JWI, 50) since his general knowledge on garrisons is founded on only one further example, thereby expressing that his observations are insufficient for a proper account.

It is interesting to note that another strategy to identify herself as the know-

[12]Attilio Brilli, *Als Reisen ein Kunst war: Vom Beginn des modernen Tourismus*, (Verlag Klaus Wagenbach: Berlin, 1997), p. 32.

[13]Samuel Johnson, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, 1977, p. 271.

ing and understanding subject is Wollstonecraft's effort to cast herself as a male person. This starts right at the beginning, when she creates an opposition between herself and her French servant Marguerite. While the latter is timid, easily frightened, and has a woman's imagination, the former "does not apprehend danger easily", (Letters, 70) again and again stressing her fearlessness, her lack of foolish female vanity and her intellectual capacity. Wollstonecraft is proud to report that one of her hosts calls her "a woman of observation, for I asked him *men's questions*." (Letters, 68) This male persona becomes particularly apparent in the company of women. Wollstonecraft invites a pretty girl to accompany her "because I like to see a beautiful face", (Letters, 91) and always comments on the beauty of women when she finds herself surrounded by them. The scene when Norwegian women "gathered around me – sung to me – and one of the prettiest to whom I gave my hand, with some degree of cordiality, to meet the glance of her eyes, kissed me very affectionately" (Letters, 113) has all the over- and undertones of a man flirting with native women and like a male traveller, she is satisfied with a "conversation of gestures" with them, because "their minds were totally uncultivated [so that] I did not lose much, perhaps gained, by not being able to understand them" and feels flattered "when I was told, the next day, that they said it was a pleasure to look at me". (Letters, 114)

The identity of the self as knowing is opposed to the identity of the other as ignorant. Johnson finds a plenitude of proofs for ignorance in the native population. He stresses that they only "learned from Cromwell's soldiers to make shoes and to plant kail," but that shoes "are not yet considered as necessary for life," (JWI, 51) observing many who still go barefoot. He often comments on ignorance and negligence in agricultural matters and clothing, and notes details as the use of knives with cutlery: "They are indeed instruments of which the highlanders have not been long acquainted with the general use," (JWI, 73) and the use Johnson can observe shows every sign of lacking knowledge, the knives being neither bright, nor sharp, nor laid out properly. Another important issue is ignorance with respect to ones own history. As Rogers points out, absence of records and its implied lack of certainty shows, in Johnsons eyes, the "limitations of a basically illiterate culture."[14] Johnson states a general neglect of ancient architecture, and that the ruins still to be found leave much to the imagination, signs for him of a missing historical consciousness. Some caves, which alledgedly were shelter for the first rude inhabitants appear to him not as "the work of an age much ruder than the present," (JWI,84) and he finds no ruins of more ancient magnificence worth mentioning than some remains of druidical circles. (JWI, 47) He also diagnoses the sad state of churches, "we neither saw nor heard of any house of prayer ... that was not in ruins", (JWI, 79) which, however, is clearly related to the destructions during the Calvinistic reformation.

On the other hand, historical accounts exist only in oral tradition. Listening to the melody of a bagpipe player he is informed by an elderly gentleman

[14]Pat Rogers, 1995, p. 54.

about a story related to the melody, on which he comments that "narrations like this, however uncertain, ... are the only records of a nation that has no historians, and afford the most genuine representation of the life and character of the ancient highlanders." (JWI, 68) After further inquiries which ended in similar uncertainty, because "the accounts of different men are contradictory", he finds that "the traditions of an ignorant and savage people have been for ages negligently heard, and unskillfully related." (JWI, 69) Johnson himself seems to be unable to hear and record them because of the limitations he perceives in the process of tradition among these people. Later, Johnson is faced with the same ignorance again, when he looks for the bards, which were universally supposed in his time to have preserved the local history. According to hearsay, every "great familiy had a bard and a *senachi*, who were the poet and historian of the house", (JWI, 113) but this custom obviously ceased a long time ago, and with the authors perished the works. The ignorance of a nation relying on *senachies* to relate their history shows itself not only in the fact that there is no real distinction between historian and story-teller, but also in the habit that the office of such a 'man of talk' was hereditary, as Johnson suspects, wondering "what genius could be expected in a poet by inheritance?" (JWI, 114) Moreover, if the whole nation is illiterate, there is no way to detect ignorance of the bards or *senachies*: "they were believed by those whose vanity they flattered." (JWI, 114) Thus Johnson realises that the recital of genealogies of the highland chiefs is unreliable except the fact that the principal house of a clan must be very ancient. This ignorance is cemented by the Earse language which was never a written language. Johnson argues that the bards could not read, and hence could not acquire any knowledge to overcome ignorance. Therefore, "the bard was a barbarian among barbarians, who, knowing nothing himself, lived with others that knew no more." (JWI, 117)

Similar comments on the ignorance of the native population of Scandinavia are made by Wollstonecraft. Evaluating the people on the basis of their material expressions (compared to her taste and experience) she concludes from unfamiliar ways of clothing that they have "a false notion of beauty" (Letters, 186) and no taste (Letters, 83) They also dress their children in the wrong way (Letters, 82) are often found to be deficient in cleanliness (Letters, 83) and treat their servants in "barbarian" ways (Letters, 76). In Christiana it is the architecture which displays "barbarism" and a "poverty of conception" (Letters, 147). In general, Wollstonecraft describes the Scandinavians as a "sensible, shrewd people with little scientific knowledge and still less taste for literature" (Letters, 103). Their "want of knowledge renders the silver mines unproductive" (Letters, 106) and the arrangement of "specimens of natural history and curiosities of art" in a museum in Copenhagen is likeswise unsatisfying because everything is "huddled together, without that scientific order which alone renders them useful", although Wollstonecraft concedes that this may be the result of a recent fire in the building. (Letters, 176) Much of Scandinavia reminds the traveller of "the first attempts at culture" (Letters, 138), still reminscient of the Laplanders whom Wollstonecraft calls "that first species of ingenuity which is rather proof of patient preserverance,

than comprehension of mind." (Letters, 176) Often the population is not only described as "scarcely human in appearance" (Letters, 64) but also as "near brute creation" in behaviour (Letters, 65) and the reason for this is their lack of civilisation, refinement, improvement, knowledge.

Although Wollstonecraft shows some fascination for the "simplicity of the golden age" (Letters, 66) and at one point expresses her wish to travel further north to encounter a people supposedly still living in that state, she does not seem to imagine it as a "state of nature" but as "independence and virtue; affluence without vice; *cultivation of mind*, without depravity of heart;" (Letters, 149, emphasis mine) For her Rousseau's state of nature is the "golden age of stupidity" (Letters, 122) and this only provokes her disgust. Repeatedly, she expresses her strong dislike of ignorance, assuring the reader for example that she "shuddered at the thought of ... remaining here, in solitude of ignorance" (Letters 131) and expressing her conviction that "vices ... are the concomitants of ignorance." (Letters, 172)

I HOPE THAT I have succeeded in demonstrating some of the strategies of the travelling self to represents itself as knowing and understanding while depicting the native population as ignorant and not equipped to accumulate "real" knowledge. This finding is in accordance with patterns of behaviour pointed out by Pratt who describes especially the Linnean system of classifying nature as one attempt of comprehensive understanding on a planetary scale. Natural history in general and the Linnean classification in particular emerged in the eighteenth century as an all pervading structure of knowledge which made it possible "to categorize all plant forms on the planet, known or unknown to Europeans."[15] For the first time it was possible to incorporate all plants on earth into a single system and with it the "construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatus of natural history"[16] was enabled. By the use of this apparatus travellers were given the universal capacity of understanding no matter how strange and foreign the objects were they encountered. As Linneaus[17] himself had emphasized, his system of classification made order out of chaos.[18] It also involved a disregard for any preexisting knowledge of the local population. This came to be considered as inferior because it was not relevant for the European system of thinking. Instead, specimens were extracted from the local symbolic system[19] and named and arranged in the supposedly only possible way. It is important to note that natural history understood itself as "the exact description of everything."[20] This

[15]Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1992), p. 16.

[16]Mary Louise Pratt, 1992, p. 16.

[17]By irony of fate, at least for Mary Wollstonecraft, Linneaus happens to be of Swedish nationality.

[18]Mary Louise Pratt, 1992, p. 25.

[19]Mary Louise Pratt, 1992, p. 31.

[20]Mary Louise Pratt, 1992, p. 34.

implies that it is the only correct way of knowledge and turns other possibilities into ignorance.

The Linnean system of classification was of course meant to give man the capacity to understand and know about nature. In *Orientalism*[21] Said argues for a similar of pattern of behaviour with regard to the understanding of foreign cultures. Europeans as foreigners in a culture they have probably never encountered, or have encountered only through books, or for comparatively short periods of time feel authorized to "divide, deploy, schematize, tabulate, index and record everything in sight ... [They] make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type"[22] This attitude also includes the conviction that the native population is not able to understand itself – or anything else – in an equally profound way which is a convenient strategy to solve the problem of clashes of interpretation. The traveller carries with him the assuring conviction that the "the foreignness [of the other culture] can be translated, its meaning decoded, its hostility tamed."[23] His interpretative powers and his authority are limitless.[24] This asserts his identy which is further strengthened by being not "them", who are turned into the opposite of the self, the ignorant.

By the same manoeuvre the traveling self justifies and legitimizes its way of being in the face of the possibility of the 'other'. Rogers for example suggests that "some of his [Johnson's] most profound enquiries were concerned with the nature of a preliterate civilization" because "he needed space to reconsider the meaning of that [literate and text-based] civilization which had shaped his mind and pervaded his life."[25] When he returns home he is more than ever convinced of the value of literature and texts. Similarly, Wollstonecraft experiences numerous situations "where observation confirms her opinion" (Letters, 193), most of all her conviction that " I formed a very just opinion of the character of the Norwegians" (Letters, 113). Johnson and Wollstonecraft both can feel reassured that they live in the right culture, which is the culture that knows and understands.

[21]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (Penguin Press: London, 1978, reprinted with a new Afterword 1995).

[22]Edward W. Said, 1995, p. 86.

[23]Edward W. Said, 1995, p. 103.

[24]Mary Louise Pratt, 1992, p. 217.

[25]Pat Rogers, 1995, p. 26.

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