

FRENCH REPRESENTATIONS OF SYDNEY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE SUBVERSION OF MODERNISM

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Modernism has a long history in Europe, reaching back to the beginnings of the scientific age in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The "Moderns", such as Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, and later the *philosophes* of the French eighteenth century were reacting against the Church-dominated knowledge systems of the past, associated with Aristotle and Scholasticism. The "Modern" scholars, although having differing preoccupations, were united in their belief in the importance of experiential and experimental knowledge, and the use of reasoning and observation to understand the natural world. In the seventeenth century, in his *Discours de la méthode*, Descartes enjoined men to break with the past and to apply the scientific method that he had elaborated, in order to become "masters and possessors of nature", instead of part of it. Timothy Reiss in his book, *The Discourse of Modernism*,¹ speaks of the paradigm shift entailed by this changed relationship between man and nature, and the analytico-referential discourse in which it is enshrined. Emblematic of this change in paradigm are the telescope and voyage of discovery, both new ways of possessing the world.

Over the next two centuries we witness the continuation and development of the modernist tradition and I should like to consider in this article how, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the project of modernism plays a defining role in one of the early French scientific voyages to Australia: the Baudin expedition. I shall focus particularly on the stay of the voyagers in the 12 year-old town of Port Jackson (or Sydney as it was already coming to be known) from April to November 1802. The experiences of the participants, as reflected in their later reporting of the voyage, were shaped by the modernist imperative, both methodologically and ideologically. I shall demonstrate how certain contradictions inherent in the modernist ideology shape the

way in which the town of Sydney and its inhabitants are described, ultimately subverting the modernist scientific project.

In 1802, the penal colony of Sydney was already identifiable as an urban centre, (although not yet of course having the dimensions and structures of a city). The French travellers were fascinated by what they found there, both inside and outside the town. The reports and illustrations generated by their stay highlight the problematic of the "modern" project when transported from a specifically European context to the English colony in the Antipodes. The town became the site for intercultural exchange and for the contemplation of what was called the New World by the old world of Europe, but which also revealed itself as an older, pre-European world of origins and natural man, to be contemplated by the new world of science. The intersections of old and new, the interfaces of colonialism and science, create the kaleidoscope of modernism in the Antipodes.

Nicolas Baudin's expedition, commissioned by Bonaparte, was the third in a series of scientific voyages, following those of Lapérouse and d'Entrecasteaux. His ship's company included 22 scientists who had been given numerous and detailed instructions by the prominent scholars of the period as to the work they should carry out. The expedition was to explore the southern hemisphere, particularly New Holland, both Van Diemen's Land and the South Coast of the mainland, before returning to France. It is noteworthy here that Port Jackson was not mentioned in the instructions as being one of the destinations of the travellers. When the French departed from France they were at war with the English and indeed news that the *Traité d'Amiens*, bringing peace, had been signed on 25 March 1802 arrived in Sydney during the stay of the French.

Apart from mapping of the coast lines, the expeditioners were to collect animal and plant specimens, make various scientific observations, and pay particular attention to the native inhabitants of the countries visited. Instructions, composed by Jean-Marie Degérando of the *Société des Observateurs de l'homme* had been issued in this regard. Imbued with Enlightenment principles, Degérando in his *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages*,² was one of the first to enunciate the principles of anthropological observation and was several decades in advance of the birth of the discipline as such. The document enjoins the "philosophical travellers" to observe every detail of the life of the native peoples encountered and to learn their language. It is impregnated with the evolutionary thinking that was to

be such a barrier to the understanding of difference. François Péron, the young medical student, recruited as a naturalist at the last minute, saw himself as the chief anthropologist. It was he also who would later write the official account of the journey, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes*,³ Captain Baudin having died at the Ile de France (as Mauritius was then known) during the return journey.

Before arriving in Sydney, their voyage had taken the expeditioners from Lorient in Brittany, to the Ile de France, then to the coast of Western Australia, up to Timor, down to Tasmania, going up the west coast of Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land). The voyagers then turned west to explore the south coast of the mainland, and then backtracked to Sydney. The scientists were concentrating on mapping the southern coastline when they met Flinders on 8 April 1802 in Encounter Bay, travelling east. By that time, the journey had taken much longer than originally planned and many of the crew were ill, from scurvy or dysentery. It had not originally been the intention of the expedition to visit the English colony, but the meeting with Flinders confirmed Baudin's plan to head for Port Jackson to renew the expedition's depleted supplies and to obtain the medical attention and rest that their situation required.

The two expedition ships, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*, had previously become separated while in Bass Strait and the first of the ships to arrive in Sydney on 26 April was the *Naturaliste*, captained by Emmanuel Hamelin. Several weeks later, on 20 June, arrived the *Géographe*. Overall, the French perceived Sydney as a haven after their long and gruelling journey through unfamiliar lands and seas, and their problematic encounters with the native inhabitants of New Holland. Their delight was reflected in their first recorded impressions of the town. However, both in the official account, written as we have said by Péron (and completed by Freycinet after his death in 1810),⁴ and in the journals and notes of other members of the expedition, Sydney comes to occupy a place in the journey as a whole which goes far beyond that of a welcome port of call.

Prior to the town of Sydney, the voyagers had visited towns in the Canary Islands, the Ile de France and Coupang in Timor. These towns had excited little comment and certainly no detailed description. Tenerife, Port Louis and Coupang engaged the attention of the expeditioners simply as places to be visited on the way to New Holland, some familiar, some exotic, mere backgrounds to the transaction of the business of the expedition and to meetings with the inhabitants.

The decayed grandeur of the Canary Islands belied its old name as the Happy Isles, the arrival at the Isle de France was a kind of homecoming and Coupang, partially destroyed in the previous year by the English, displayed exotic charms.

Sydney, visited as it were as an afterthought, and by chance, was the object of detailed description and comment. The English colonial town, as well as exciting interest in its own right, became the locus for an interrogation of the whole purpose and nature of the expedition, and was the site of a revaluation of aspects of the scientific enterprise. In terms of its geographical location in relation to the route of the expedition, Sydney was the furthestmost point of the journey and it came to be seen in Péron's account as the *terminus ad quem*, the symbolic summation of the voyagers' quest.

After the stay in Timor and the hardships of the subsequent voyage around the New Holland coast, the town of Sydney made an immediate impact on the travellers upon arrival. It was the appearance and shape of the town that was interesting to the French, the surprise that this miracle of order had been wrought at the other end of the world. Arriving aboard the *Naturaliste* on 26 April 1802, the second-in-command Pierre-Bernard Milius describes his first impressions:

Moving inside the harbour, we were agreeably surprised at the sight of several beautiful country houses and the appearance of the town of Sydney. The streets and houses revealed themselves to our eyes like a game of dominos, placed on a green carpet. What surprised us most was to see several boats being constructed and quite a large number at anchor, near a small river which flows inside the town.⁵

The perceived geometric layout of the town, suggesting the game of dominos, strongly evokes the idea of order and the known. For Milius, it was a guarantee of its civilised nature, imposed on the riotous disorder of wilderness. The English are seen as having appropriated the unknown by the act of creation of their town, have made themselves "masters and possessors of nature", by virtue of the colonial enterprise. The French scientists, imbued with the modernism of their scientific enterprise—the possession of the natural world through ordering, listing and classifying it—were confronted with a different kind of modernism, that of the colonial enterprise, possessing nature in a much more tangible sense than could the grid of scientific observation.

Milius's initial observations were confirmed by his further acquaintance with the town and he gives a more detailed description of it and a snapshot of the activities taking place there.

Its streets are wide and straight. The houses are of average height. They only generally have one storey and are all separate from each other. They are built of wood, except for the house of the governor, several public edifices and a few private houses. They are all surrounded by gardens and are neatly furnished. A non-navigable river divides the town into two parts. Its water is excellent and amply provides for the needs of the inhabitants. We filled our casks there. The river flows into the harbour which is large enough to contain several ships.⁶

Various other members of the expedition echoed Milius's comments, and the French made numerous drawings and maps of Sydney during their 5-6 month stay. Péron, in the official account describes the places visited, and the people he encountered. On arrival, he set about noting systematically numerous aspects of life in Sydney at the time: under the heading of *Tableau général des Colonies Anglaises aux Terres australes*⁷ he compiled statistical lists on the colony, concerning the numbers and composition of the various groups of English inhabitants and a summary of the policies of the penal colony, together with sections on administration, commerce, finance, and tables of the number and variety of livestock and importation of whale oil. All these observations are recorded in the *Voyage de découvertes*, in which is to be found also the table he compiled of the strength of the Aborigines of Port Jackson, measured using a device called the dynamometer invented by Régnier. The naming and listing, integral to the scientific enterprise is a characteristic of the modernist analytico-referential discourse, as Reiss has pointed out, and a kind of possessing.

Sightings and encounters with Aborigines on the West Coast of Australia, and later more prolonged interaction with native tribes in Tasmania progressively caused several of the French to question their initial belief that they would encounter the Noble Savage in the Antipodes. In spite of the avowedly anthropological focus of the expedition, there is surprisingly no real focus on an anthropological study of the native inhabitants inside and outside the town, although the dynamometer measurements, various comments, and drawings by Nicolas-Martin Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, the artists of the expedition, show that there must have been a considerable number of encounters between the French and the Aborigines of Sydney. This is in stark contrast to the interest in the Aborigines manifested previously and the detailed descriptions of those encounters on the West Coast of New Holland and in Van Diemen's Land. That the French scientific expedition should be so fascinated with the town of Sydney and its English inhabitants, at the expense of a more thoroughgoing analysis of the native inhabitants requires explanation.

It is clear from their writings that the fascination for the French must have lain in the fact that although the town was new and strange in some regards, it was more familiar to them than anything they had so far encountered on their journey: here was something that could be understood, to which they could apply the grid of scientific observation. Their scientific project, one of the main objects of which was to study natural man, had revealed itself to be difficult and perilous and in the end frustrating because of the limited time available, the lack of cultural understanding and a common language. In addition, the natives had shown few of the characteristics attributed to the imaginary ideal of the Noble Savage. The dynamometer had revealed that even their physical strength was inferior to that of the Timorese, French and English. To have travelled so far to find, at the end of their forward journey, their familiar other, the English, imposing order on the chaos of the unfamiliar, was more than compensation for this frustration and failure. The discovery of the achievement of the English evoked mixed emotions—both wonderment and admiration, but also something else. It was as if the English now became the object of the French anthropological gaze.

Péron, particularly, while expressing his admiration, also resented and envied with nationalistic fervour the English success. The diligent application of scientific principles to the study of the town by the French, and particularly Péron, was, as we have said, a metaphorical taking possession of it. All towns are political spaces, as Henri Lefèvre has taught us,⁸ and another word for detailed examination of a town belonging to one nation by members of another, is spying. In the politically charged atmosphere pertaining to the relations between French and English, this was certainly perceived to be the case by the English and subsequent events proved them to be right. It is a matter of record that Péron had intimated to various members of the colony that the French would find the colony a desirable conquest. On the departure of the French, this resulted in the English, fearing imminent French claims to land, planting the British flag on King Island and founding the first settlement in Van Diemen's Land in the following year.

Captain Baudin, who enjoyed excellent relations with the Governor of the colony, King, never mentions the possibility that the French had been explicitly sent to spy on the English and there seems to be no evidence for believing that this was the case, apart from the ambitious Péron's statements and reports and it is likely that the idea germinated in Péron's mind only after he arrived in Sydney and then developed into

a full-scale proposal to overthrow the English colony. Subsequently he wrote a report to this effect to DeCaen, Governor of the Ile de France, and maintained that the scientific nature of the French expedition had really only been a cover for the French intentions to spy on the English. Indeed his related *Mémoire sur les établissements anglais à la Nouvelle Hollande, à la Terre de Diémen et dans les archipels du grand océan Pacifique*,⁹ was written to persuade DeCaen and Napoleon of the advantages of invading the colony, outlining a strategy for doing so.

In this article I have hypothesised how Degérando's "philosophical traveller", in the person of Péron, had turned into a spy and sketched the anatomy of this transformation. The close parallels between the Modernist scientific project, founded on the mastery and possession of nature, and colonial project, founded on the possession of lands and those who live in them, have given rise to a kind of contamination of the first by the second, centred on the prize possession of Sydney.

Péron's search for the elusive Noble Savage in New Holland had met with failure. But here, at the other end of the world was a social experiment that could be understood, admired, and envied... The shift in Péron's "anthropological" focus is not great. If we cannot learn from studying natural man, we can study civilised man involved in the truly modern enterprise of subduing untamed nature and those natural men contained in it, as well as rehabilitating the English reprobates transported there. From Péron's "anthropological" point of view, the colonial enterprise revealed itself to be a natural progression from the scientific enterprise, both modern in their focus. From the angle of the readers that we are, Péron's born-again admiration of the English colony parodies the modernist scientific project, and ironically subverts it.

NOTES

- 1 Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982).
- 2 No date or place of publication. Reprinted in Jean Copans and Jean Jamin (eds), *Aux Origines de l'Anthropologie française: Les Mémoires de la Société des Observateurs de l'Homme en l'an VIII* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1978), pp.127-169.
- 3 *Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes, exécuté par ordre de sa majesté l'Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes Le Géographe et Le Naturaliste et la goëlette Le Casuarina pendant les années 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804*, published by Imperial decree under the ministry of M. de Champagny and written up by M. F. Péron, naturalist of the expedition, correspondent of the Institut de France, the Société de l'École de Médecine de Paris, and the philomathic and medical Sociétés of Paris (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1807).
- 4 *Voyage de découvertes*, vol. 2 (Partly written up by the late F. Péron and continued by Louis Freycinet, Capitaine de frégate, Chevalier de Saint-Louis et de la Légion d'honneur, Correspondant de l'Académie royale des sciences de Paris, de la Société des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Rochefort, de la Société philomatique, &c.; Com-

- mandant du Casuarina pendant l'expédition, (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1816), pp. 393-433.
- 5 *Voyage de découvertes*, p. 142, my translation: "En avançant dans l'intérieur du port, nous fûmes très agréablement surpris à la vue de plusieurs belles maisons de campagne et l'aspect qu'offre la ville de Sidney. Les rues et les maisons se montrèrent à nos yeux comme un jeu de Domino placé sur un tapis de verdure. Ce qui nous surprit le plus, ce fut de voir plusieurs bâtiments en construction & un assez grand nombre au mouillage, près d'une petite rivière qui coule au milieu de la ville."
 - 6 *Voyage de découvertes*, p. 44, my translation: "Ses rues sont larges et tirées au cordeau. Les maisons sont médiocrement élevées. Elles n'ont en général qu'un étage et sont toutes séparées les unes des autres. Elles sont bâties en bois, à l'exception de la maison du gouverneur, de plusieurs édifices publics & de quelques maisons de particuliers. Elles sont toutes entourées d'un petit jardin et proprement meublées. Une rivière abondamment divise la ville en deux parties. Son eau est des meilleures et fournit abondamment aux besoins des habitants. C'est la que nous remplîmes nos futailles. Cette rivière se jette dans le port qui est assez vaste pour contenir plusieurs vaisseaux."
 - 7 *Voyage de découvertes*, vol. 2, pp. 393-433.
 - 8 *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1968 and 1972).
 - 9 François Péron, *Mémoire sur les établissements anglais à la Nouvelle Hollande, à la Terre de Diémen et dans les archipels du grand océan Pacifique*, edited by Roger Martin, *Revue de l'Institut Napoléon*, vol. 176, no. 1 (1998), pp. 11-172.