

Pringle: The Aesthetics of Empire

Nick Meihuizen

With *Don Quixote*, according to Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, 'writing has ceased to be the prose of the world' (Foucault 1974:47) as it was in the Renaissance, when there is an unchallenged continuity between signs and things, or words and world.

Flocks, serving girls, and inns become once more the language of books to the imperceptible degree to which they resemble castles, ladies, and armies ... (Foucault 1974:47).

This type of resemblance, so clearly undermined by the deluded hero, tells of distinction, not connection. This distinction prompts the observation that language 'now possesses new powers, and powers peculiar to it alone' (Foucault 1974:47). In the second part of the novel, Don Quixote is clearly recognisable to certain people who have read the first part, as he himself becomes his own text:

Don Quixote's truth is not in the relation of the words to the world but in that slender and constant relation woven between themselves by verbal signs. The hollow fiction of epic exploits has become the representative power of language (Foucault 1974:47).

As we will see in more detail in this essay, words in Pringle cannot be trusted in relation to the lived-world of his readers; end-notes are needed to secure them in the understanding, they are not necessarily continuous with the world.

Thus, as Foucault points out, cognitive emphasis shifts from the value of resemblance to that of difference. On the basis of this emphasis on difference, on distinctness, and the 'rationalism' it entails, a new conceptual configuration or *episteme* comes into being. The modifications involved that effect knowledge include an emphasis on analysis rather than analogy; a displacement of resemblance by comparison (which implies an analysis of aspects of things) and representation (as in the case of *Don Quixote*, where romances are clearly seen to be so many words, as are, by extension, the exploits of the knight himself). A final epistemological modification is the displacement of the infinite play of similitudes by the possibility, at least, of 'a com-

plete enumeration' in the form of a table (such as the tables of genera and species developed by the natural historians).

It is too simplistic to maintain that Classical rationalism made nature more mechanical and calculable. There was a mechanism that offered, for a relatively short period (the last half of the seventeenth century), 'a theoretical model to certain fields of knowledge such as medicine or physiology' (Foucault 1974:56). There was also a mathematicising tendency, 'constant and continuous in the case of astronomy and part of physics', but only sporadic in other areas. But, according to Foucault, these tendencies should not be confused with the relation Classical knowledge bears to the *mathesis*, or the 'universal science of measurement and order' (Foucault 1974:47), which implies qualitative ordering as opposed to the merely quantitative ordering of mathematics. The ordering of elements in a system depends upon an analysis of that system, and qualitative analysis uses a system of signs, not algebra, as an instrument.

If signs are now freed from the world, similitude, although generally ousted, still plays its part, as no relation of order between two elements can be accomplished unless some degree of resemblance occasions their comparison (Foucault 1974:67). Resemblance and sign now respond to one another in a new way. Once the purveyor of precise marks, similitude is 'now the undifferentiated, shifting, unstable base upon which knowledge can establish its relations, its measurements, and its identities' (Foucault 1974:68). From this base, comparisons can be drawn through a process of analysis, which culminates in an ordered table of elements.

The goal of Classical knowledge is to achieve the *mathesis* in its wide sense as a general science of order, through the table. The table is

a simultaneous system according to which the representations express their proximity and their distance, their adjacency and their separateness—and therefore the network, which, outside chronology, makes patent their kinship and reinstates their relations of order within a permanent area. In this manner the table of identities and differences may be drawn up (Foucault 1974:72f).

As Mary Louise Pratt points out, in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, the prime exemplar of such totalising classificatory systems was Carl Linné, more commonly known as Linnaeus. His *Systema Naturae* comprised,

a descriptive system designed to classify all the plants on the earth, known and unknown, according to the characteristics of their reproductive parts. Twenty-four (and later twenty-six) basic configurations of stamens, pistils, and so forth were identified and laid out according to the letters of the alphabet. Four added visual parameters completed the taxonomy: number, form, position, and relative size (Pratt 1992:24f).

The two poles of the general *mathesis* are *taxonomia*, the qualitative ordering of complex natures, such as in the work of Linnaeus, and its quantitative counterpart, *mathesis*, in its narrower sense as the ordering of simple natures, which are subject to an algebraic method of analysis. Genetic analysis, or, simply, genesis, is at the basis of both the above.

Both human nature and nature are involved in the notion of genesis. They guarantee 'the reciprocal bond' between imagination (a property of human nature) and resemblance (an effect of nature). Human nature mobilises the imagination, which, if the source of disorder and vague resemblance, restores order by duplicating representation, reminds us of the present significance of the same representations experienced in the past. Nature mobilises 'shifting resemblances and the vague murmur of similitudes', thereby, prior to any order, resembling itself (Foucault 1974:70). On this basis analysis follows two directions. On the one hand, we find an analysis that forms

a non-actual but simultaneous table of comparisons: the analysis of impressions, of reminiscence, of imagination, of memory, of all that involuntary background which is, as it were, the mechanics of the image in time.

This corresponds to an extent with the analytic of imagination, where the linear time inherent in representation is transformed into a 'simultaneous space'. On the other hand, we find the analysis that tells of the resemblance between things prior to 'the tabular redistribution of their unordered similitudes'. This corresponds roughly with the analysis of nature,

including the *lacunae*, the disorders that confuse the tabulation of beings and scatter it into a series of representations that vaguely, and from a distance, resemble one another (Foucault 1974:69f).

In short,

[n]ature and human nature, within the general configuration of the *episteme*, permit the reconciliation of resemblance and imagination that provides a foundation for, and makes possible, all the empirical sciences of order (Foucault 1974:71).

The remainder of this essay will attempt to cast light on Pringle's attitude to empire, by indicating his relationship with the Classical *episteme*. If he is morally involved in his subject, South Africa, he tempers this involvement with a type of *taxonomia*. Foucault's analysis points to the compatibility of such a *taxonomia* with the imaginative sensibility, or with that access to simultaneous and informing perceptions peculiar to artistic creation.

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If we consider the title pages of Pringle's *Poems Illustrative of South Africa* (1989), we get a clear impression of the tabulatory nature of his project, as hinted in his title. Exotic people, strange experiences, animals and places are offered, as in a catalogue:

Song of the Wild Bushman
The Coranna
The Kosa
Evening Rambles
The Lion Hunt
The Lion and Giraffe
The Hottentot
The Caffer
The Bushman
Slavery
Franschehoek
Genadendal (Pringle 1989:vii-viii).

Reading the poems we find details drawn from life, 'illustrative' of the life around Pringle, and widely inclusive, considering the flora and fauna recounted in his poems. Thus, in place of a mediating mythology with figures such as Adamastor, which would stress a continuum of resemblance between Europe and Africa, Africa is, to the best of the poet's abilities, presented in terms of its own distinctness, as this is expressed in the differences of its parts. Africa is not anything like Scotland, the locals are nothing like British shepherds. A sense of analytic discriminative exactitude is evidenced too in Pringle's notes to his poems, which suggests that he takes this tabulating seriously. Even from the table of contents, then, we obtain a distinct impression of what Pratt (1992:9) calls 'the emergence of natural history as a structure of knowledge, and the momentum toward interior, as opposed to maritime, exploration', characteristic of the new *episteme*, or unconsciously assumed epistemological frame for ordering the world. Pratt sees these changes as inaugurating a totalising Europeanisation of the world, and as thus being indicative of perhaps the most ambitious phase of imperialism. Even to be antagonistic to imperialism, as Pringle is, is not to escape the gaze of one's own 'imperial eyes', which 'look out and possess', if only by means of an innocent-seeming process of tabulation (Pratt 1992:7).

The poems comprise the first part of his *African Sketches*, published in 1834. The second part is titled *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*. Pringle in his notes sometimes refers the reader to this *Narrative*, which then supplements the other notes, and like them, sets up a dialogue with the poetry, creating a circle of representation, where signs refer primarily to other signs. Anything unusual, and because of his desire

to record so much (there are many instances of suchlike), finds definition in his notes and the *Narrative*. Also, and it is this which helps inform his strongly moral relation to an ever expanding empire¹, Pringle still has recourse to infinity; he believes that Christianity is the basis of eternal perfectibility. Hence we find a concern with the religious dimension of empire, albeit qualified by an awareness of hypocrisy and abuse not at all evident, for example, in Camoens' consideration of Christianity. By Roy Campbell's time this religious dimension has been dissipated by the analytic of finitude, or materialism taken to its logical (and discomfiting) extreme. Where Campbell must strive to re-establish a sacral relationship with infinity, Pringle must strive against the contamination of infinity by the baser aspects of empire.

The Pringle family arrived in South Africa in 1820, as part of Britain's move to secure the Cape (which she had taken over from the Dutch in 1806) from marauding blacks. The role of the unsuspecting settlers was conceived in classic imperial terms by the Governor of the Cape, Lord Somerset:

The officials, and notably Lord Somerset, the Governor, steeped in the classics, the only training in sociology then available, thought in terms of the Roman Wall, the legions being in fact half agriculturalists, half regimental warriors (Lewis 1971:101).

But this colonial attitude was perhaps something of a conceptual fossil. Robinson, Gallagher and Denny, in *Africa and the Victorians* (1981), note that colonial expansion 'was not essentially a matter of empire but of private commerce and influence'. They continue:

Exertions of power and colonial rule might be needed in some places to provide opportunity and to protect. But empire tended to be thought of as an auxiliary, in much the same way as the liberal state at Home. The main engine of expansion was enterprise. Its momentum was attributed to the free energies and aspirations of myriads of individual Britons in search of maximum opportunity (Robinson, Gallagher & Denny 1981:3).

If this is so, particularly from mid-Victorian times on, the idea of empire still formed a backdrop to individual enterprise, with this difference from preceding eras: the emphasis, in shifting from state to individual, heightens the sense of constitutive finitude that begins to dominate awareness from the early nineteenth century. As committed as Pringle is to 'Home', his reformist tendencies, for example, go against the grain of

¹ Paul Kennedy, in 'Continuity and Discontinuity in British Imperialism 1815-1914', notes: '... during the half-century after 1815 the empire expanded by an average of about 100,000 square miles per annum' (Eldridge 1984:29).

local authority, representative of the state. Thus, the freedom of the press, which Pringle advocated, might contribute to a lowering of public morale. And so Pringle finds himself standing for individual rights, which are not necessarily commensurate with the good of the state.

Ernest Pereira and Michael Chapman, in their introduction to *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, indicate Pringle's divided sensibility in a way that gives emphasis to the thrust of the present essay:

Inheriting the reason of the Enlightenment while catching the spirit of religious revivalism and romantic idealism, Pringle was ... to be attacked by the Tory Governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset, not only for his 'whiggish' propensities, but for his revolutionary (Jacobin) sympathies (Pringle 1989:xv).

The 'reason of the Enlightenment' implies the Classical *episteme*. I will argue that this *episteme* is never far from Pringle's perception; indeed, perhaps his African experience contributes to the sense of distinctiveness attached to it. Like Camoens's stay, Pringle's stay in Africa is of limited duration, some six years; he also brings to Africa a very different frame of reference, but departs having embodied something more of Africa than Camoens was able to do. Does this frame make him more susceptible to the world around him than does that of the earlier poet? Is the Classical *episteme* better suited to a more reflexive consideration of empire than the Renaissance *episteme*? One suspects that its atomising tendency leads to a greater regard for specifics and peculiarities, which might have escaped attention when similitude held sway². Thus the 'spirit of religious revivalism and romantic idealism' perhaps goes hand in hand with the 'reason of the Enlightenment' in Pringle's case.

Pringle's *Poems Illustrative of Southern Africa* has as one of its epigraphs lines from a dedicatory sonnet by Spenser (1970:412), which, however appropriate, tell of the continuing (if unconscious) sway of a linguistic imperium, a sway at odds with Pringle's political sentiments. It is unlikely that Pringle even considered the political implications involved³; as late as 1928, with the publication of Pauline Henley's *Spenser*

² Pratt (1992:44-52), distinguishing between the approaches of Kolb and naturalists Sparrman and Paterson, notes an increasing emphasis on the difference between Khoikhoi culture and the European paradigm in the latter two writers; for Kolb, Khoikhoi culture seemed almost continuous with European culture.

³ As George Nadel and Perry Curtis (1964:9), in the introduction to *Imperialism and Colonialism* (1964), point out: 'Because of the existence of Ireland ... the English were not entirely innocent of the colonizing process. Men like Raleigh and his half-brother Sir Humphrey Gilbert had gained valuable experience in the technique of planting colonies on hostile soil through attempts to pacify the Irish'.

in Ireland, and, in fact, for many years after, Spenser's 'creative and polemical writings' were 'treated as discrete entities' (Canny in Coughlan 1989:9):

Rude Rymes, the which a rustic Muse did weave
In savage soyl, far from Parnasso Mount,
And roughly wrought in an unlearned loome (Pringle 1989:1).

That the other epigraph (in Latin), from Lucretius, refers to the Pierian realm of the Muses (Lucretius 1951:54), also tells of the continuing sway of a linguistic imperium and its trappings, which Pringle clearly considers to be benign, as did the Romantics, whose politics were similar to Pringle's. Peacock, Shelley, Keats, Thomas Taylor and Blake all invested much in classical culture, but would never have abided the imperial expansionism with which it is invariably linked in Camoens. But that Pringle travels to the outposts of the empire '*loca nullius ante/Trita solo*' ('where no foot has ever trod before', Lucretius 1951:54) without any initial misgivings regarding the rights of the settler to do so, suggests that he yet participates in the mind-set of the imperialist. Of course, he is soon to qualify his participation in aspects of this mind-set, much to the annoyance of a local representative of empire such as Lord Somerset, who, apparently, did all he could to prevent Pringle from succeeding in the colony (Pringle 1989:xix).

Virtually all of Pringle's poems exhibit aspects of a tabulating tendency. Typically in his tabulations he evokes *taxonomia* (the logically structured ordering of complex natures, such as in the work of Linnaeus); and he evokes genesis (or ordering based on a simultaneity linked to resemblances perceptible in nature and the mind through agencies other than logic, such as superficial similarity, and memory). Although one cannot really isolate *taxonomia* and genesis, it is convenient to group poems according to which type of analytical perspective, in my view, predominates. Thus, of the first type we might include his most famous poem, 'Afar in the Desert', very popular in the nineteenth-century, when it was, of course, extravagantly praised by no less a figure than Coleridge, who declared it 'among the two or three most perfect lyric Poems in our Language' (in Pringle 1989:80). We might also include 'Song of the Wild Bushman', 'The Coranna', and 'The Kosa'. Of the second type, we find 'Evening Rambles', 'An Emigrant's Song', and 'A Noon-day Dream'. Space dictates that I deal only with a representative poem of the first type, 'Afar in the Desert'.

'Afar in the Desert' builds upon discrimination and combination, but is not without recourse to the play of memory. Thus, in the first stanza the distinctiveness of the experience is offset by traces of 'the Past', which lead to a comparison between past and present, but also, by the end of stanza two, an eventual distinct solitariness, suitable for recounting the uniqueness of the experience:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
When the sorrows of life the soul o'ercast,
And, sick of the Present, I cling to the Past;
When the eye is suffused with regretful tears,
From the fond recollections of former years (ll. 1-6).

He refers specifically to Scotland, his principal key of comparison:

And my Native Land—whose magical name
Thrills to the heart like electric flame;
The home of my childhood; the haunts of my prime;
All the passions and scenes of that rapturous time
When the feelings were young and the world was new,
Like the fresh bowers of Eden unfolding to view (ll. 13-15).

And yet, apart from the vivid 'electric flame', Scotland is conditioned by vague generality and cliché. Pereira and Chapman observe that Pringle was inclined to be journalistic in his attitudes towards writing (Pringle 1989:xxi), often never moving beyond a surface facility. However, he is provoked at times by his African experience to set aside cliché, and turn to new signs, beyond the reassuring murmuring of repetition and convention which often plague his verse⁴. Thus the third stanza of 'Afar in the Desert' takes on a uniqueness of its own, where linguistic resemblance (in words from the old country, such as 'haunt' and 'glen') vies with the distinctiveness of the fauna, arranged in a sequence that does little more than enumerate. But his table suggests the simultaneity of experience in the African veld, which is not constrained by personal history or the larger 'historical' sequence of epic narrative, say; if it verges on science (Pringle is philologically scrupulous in his use of diacritical marks, for example), the table yet conveys immediate perception:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
Away—away from the dwellings of men,
By the wild deer's haunt, by the buffalo's glen;
By valleys remote where the oribi plays,
Where the gnu, the gazelle, and the hartèbeest graze,
And the kùdù and eland unhunted recline
By the skirts of grey forests o'erhung with wild-vine;

⁴ Let it be granted, however, that Pringle deliberately cultivated a 'very simple style' (Pringle 1989:77).

Where the elephant browses at peace in his wood,
And the river-horse gambols unscared in the flood,
And the mighty rhinoceros wallows at will
In the fen where the wild-ass is drinking his fill (ll. 41-52).

It is in conjunction with this stanza that we might first consider Pringle's notes. Again, a discriminative exactitude is apparent:

The *Oribi* is termed by Lichtenstein the *Antilope Pigmea*; but it is not the same as the *Blauwbok* of the Colonists, or the *Iputi* of the Caffers, an animal from nine to twelve inches in height, which is, I believe, the true *Antilope Pigmaea*. *Oribi* is the Hottentot name of an antelope somewhat resembling the Steenbok (*A. Rupestris*), but rather larger, and of a darker brown colour (Pringle 1989:83).

The note has no bearing on the impression conveyed by the poem. It is concerned with classification, and seeks to place its subject in the proper niche in the conceptual grid. In a sense, the *Oribi* in the poem becomes displaced by this grid, or table, which takes on a greater significance than the living creature, emphasising the present centrality of representation. Similar notes are found dealing with the Gnu, Gazelle, Hartbeest, Kudu, and Eland. The name of this last beast draws from Pringle a disparaging observation regarding inexactitude in the application of a conceptual grid; he in fact criticises a type of complacent reliance on resemblance:

The name of *Eland*, i.e. *Elk*, has been applied to this animal by the Colonists, from some fancied resemblance to the elk of Europe, in the same mode as many other names of animals have been misapplied by them (Pringle 1989:84).

The following stanzas convey a similar impression of simultaneity; there is nothing much else remarkable in them, although perhaps, stanza four is more successful at imparting the distinctiveness of the animals:

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
O'er the brown Karroo, where the bleating cry
Of the springbok's fawn sounds plaintively;
And the timorous quagga's shrill whistling neigh
Is heard by the fountain at twilight grey;
Where the zebra wantonly tosses his mane,
With wild hoof scouring the desolate plain;
And the fleet-footed ostrich over the waste
Speeds like a horseman who travels in haste,

Hying away to the home of her rest,
Where she and her mate have scooped their nest,
Far hid from the pitiless plunderer's view
In the pathless depths of the parched Karroo (ll. 53-66).

Pringle's note regarding the quagga tells of his search for a natural sign⁵, which he establishes through a combination of words, if not all natural in origin (and 'neigh' surely is), then certainly having onomatopoeic value:

The cry of the *Quagga* (pronounced *quagha*, or *quacha*) is very different from that of either the horse or ass; and I have endeavoured to express its peculiar character in the above line (Pringle 1989:84).

While he assumes the ability of language to relate to the world, he must yet offer guidelines as to the pronunciation of his subject's name.

The concluding stanza suggests a temporal relation to infinity to be derived from the solitariness and barrenness of the desert; this is the point to which the simultaneity of the table has been leading us, and it is something of a climax, reinforcing simultaneity by evoking the infinite dimension of the divine, while at the same time implying a Genesis and teleology:

And here, while the night-winds round me sigh,
And the stars burn bright in the midnight sky,
As I sit apart by the desert stone,
Like Elijah at Horeb's cave alone,
'A still small voice' comes through the wild
(Like a Father consoling his fretful Child),
Which banishes bitterness, wrath, and fear,—
Saying—MAN IS DISTANT, BUT GOD IS NEAR!

⁵ His interest in natural language is also evidenced in a poem for 'Juvenile Readers', where the cry of the honey-bird is rendered as, '*Cherr-cherr, cherri-a-cherr, cherr-a-cu-coo-la!*'; the noise of the bees as, '*Boom-a-boo, foom-a-boo, boom-bom-a-boo-la!*' This originary language is equated with indigenous tongues in one of the conclusions of the poem (two exist):

Now think, little dear, as you sit at your tea,
'*Sugar-a-sweet-a-lip! sugar-a-boota!*
If thou art a Honey-Bird, who is the Bee?—
Alas! the poor Negro—who suffers for thee
In the slave-cultured Islands far over the sea,
Crying, *Charaib uloolula! Afric uloola!*' (Pringle 1989:88f).

The Missionary simplicity of the final line belies an expression of the *mathesis*, or the 'universal science of measurement and order' (Foucault 1974:56), where we find, so to speak, the terms of a qualitative equation: physical absence is countered by spiritual presence. The formulaic neatness of the statement reflects scientific exactitude, but the sentiment expressed is one of being alienated from human existence, and by implication, the rationalising centre of the *mathesis*. The imaginative move here is characteristic. Pringle, the tabulator of empire, must also tabulate a religious dimension counter to the imperial urge, while at the same time, as the formula tells, so clearly a part of it.

Department of English
University of Zululand (Durban - Umlazi Campus)

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