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The Lure of Sylvan Solitude : Deteriorationism in the Works of Thomas Love Peacock and Kamo no Chômei

Andrew J. L. Armour

For the millenarian doomsayer, disaster looms in every possible field of human activity. And those who lend an ear to such dire prophecies turn to a philosophy of descent, decay, and despair. In many cases, the sincerity of these beliefs may be open to question, but an undeniable benefit of their albeit temporary popularity is that they offer us a glimpse of the medieval mindset, a mental climate in which deterioration is seen as the natural course of life.

One of the more striking symbols of this inevitable deterioration is perhaps the Tower of Babel. Before its construction, there was but one language. But, as a divine punishment for this early experiment in elevated architecture, Man was forced to speak in many tongues, the one no longer able to communicate with his neighbour. And these languages too were condemned to deterioration. For those who saw Hebrew as corrupt—with Greek and Latin having even less to recommend them—English was considered to be in desperate need of corrective measures if it were ever to be saved from perdition.

One eloquent proponent of this “corrupt” language who chose to discuss the question of deterioration, among many others, was the nineteenth-century novelist Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866). Peacock wrote seven novels—two historical works, and five so-called conversation novels.⁽¹⁾ It was the latter—*Headlong Hall* (1816), *Melincourt* (1817), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), *Crotchet Castle* (1831), and

Gryll Grange (1861)—that provided him with a vehicle to explore both sides of virtually every significant debate of his age.

Several characters in the conversation novels of Thomas Love Peacock—most notably Mr Escot in *Headlong Hall*—preach a belief in the inevitable deterioration of mankind and the world in general. Peacock contrasts the supposed benefits of progress with the utopian existence of a noble savage—not unlike the real-life Kaspar Hauser—living a life of speechless solitude, surrounded by nature and untainted by civilization. One man who lived such a life, by choice, was Japan's most famous literary hermit, Kamo no Chōmei. A reading of his *Hōjōki* (An Account of My Hut, 1212) reveals many of the sentiments expressed by Peacock, including a recognition that human dwellings are a prime cause for the misery suffered by Man, who is unable to relinquish this earthly attachment and thus find salvation.

The typical conversation novel is set in a large country house, the owner of which has invited a colourful collection of individuals for the express purpose of conversation. The story, usually one of light adventure and romance decorated with comic interludes, is thus punctuated with discussions of varying intensity, set out in such a way as to resemble the script of a play, complete with stage directions.

The participants are frequently given type-names, as in the case of Mr Eavesdrop, a noted gossip. The significance of some names, however, is sufficiently obscure that Peacock feels obliged to provide the necessary Greek or Latin derivation in a footnote. The readership of the time was, however, expected to identify the contemporary events and personages referred to in the conversations, to the disadvantage of the modern audience. Nevertheless, as Peacock himself says,

[T]he classes of tastes, feelings, and opinions, which were successively brought into play in these little tales, remain

substantially the same. Perfectibilians, deteriorationists, statu-quo-ites, phrenologists, transcendentalists, political economists, theorists in all sciences, projectors in all arts, morbid visionaries, romantic enthusiasts, lovers of music, lovers of the picturesque, and lovers of good dinners, march, and will march for ever, *pari passu* with the march of mechanics, which some facetiously call the march of intellect.⁽²⁾

Writing this two decades after the publication of *Headlong Hall*, Peacock admits that the world has changed, but not human nature. Indeed, the arguments remain substantially the same even now, one hundred and eighty years later.

One of these debates is concerned with the question of whether the world is destined for progress or decay. Among those characters who hold the latter view is Mr Chainmail, the medievalist in *Crotchet Castle* :

He . . . holds that the best state of society was that of the twelfth century, when nothing was going forward but fighting, feasting, and praying, which he says are the three great purposes for which man was made. He laments bitterly over the inventions of gunpowder, steam, and gas, which he says have ruined the world.⁽³⁾

The story comes to a dramatic climax during a Christmas dinner hosted by Mr Chainmail in his “large hall, adorned with rusty pikes, shields, helmets, swords, and tattered banners . . . where he dines with all his household, after the fashion of his favourite age”. In repelling revolutionaries under Captain Swing, he is able to play a more important role than his type-name would suggest, although from his conversation it is abundantly clear that he is an authentic monomaniac:

And as to the people [of the twelfth century], I content myself

with these great points : that every man was armed, every man was a good archer, every man could and would fight effectively with sword or pike, or even with oaken cudgel : no man would live quietly without beef and ale ; if he had them not, he fought till he either got them, or was put out of condition to want them. They were not, and could not be, subjected to that powerful pressure of all the other classes of society, combined by gunpowder, steam, and fiscality, which has brought them to that dismal degradation in which we see them now. (*Crotchet Castle*, p. 203)

He does, however, touch on a more cultural topic when challenged. In response to the remark that “your poetry of the twelfth century . . . is not good for much”,⁽⁴⁾ he launches into a diatribe that is out of character to the extent that one can read it as a statement of Peacock’s own opinions about poetry, a subject close to his heart:

It has, at any rate, what ours wants, truth to nature, and simplicity of diction. The poetry, which was addressed to the people of the dark ages, pleased in proportion to the truth with which it depicted familiar images, and to their natural connection with the time and place to which they were assigned. In the poetry of our enlightened times, the characteristics of all seasons, soils, and climates, may be blended together, with much benefit to the author’s fame as an original genius. (*Crotchet Castle*, p. 206)

This passage echoes the author’s previous attack on the poetry of his age (“the age of brass”) in his essay “The Four Ages of Poetry”⁽⁵⁾, although, as Madden points out, the author had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote of “the degraded state of every species of poetry”⁽⁶⁾.

One finds similar deteriorationist sentiments in *Gryll Grange*, in

which the eponymous Mr Gryll derisively suggests asking “the illustrious of former days” for their opinions on the modern world :

Let us . . . ask them what they think of us and our doings? Of our astounding progress of intellect? Our march of mind? Our higher tone of morality? Our vast diffusion of education? Our art of choosing the most unfit man by competitive examination?⁽⁷⁾

Education—particularly that variety obtained at university, “the house of mental bondage”⁽⁸⁾—is a frequent target of the self-educated Peacock. “Man has fallen, certainly, by the fruit of the tree of knowledge : which shows that human learning is vanity and a great evil,” explains the Reverend Mr Portpipe.⁽⁹⁾

Peacock’s quintessential deteriorationist, however, appears in his first conversation novel, *Headlong Hall*, which immediately introduces the reader to three Jonsonian characters: “Mr. Foster, the perfectibilian;⁽¹⁰⁾ Mr. Escot, the deteriorationist ; Mr. Jenkison, the statu-quo-ite”.⁽¹¹⁾ In spite of Mr Foster’s best efforts to convince him that “every thing we look on attests the progress of mankind in all the arts of life, and demonstrates their gradual advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection”, Escot counterattacks, firm in his belief that everything has “changed very considerably for the worse” (p. 24):

“ [T] hese improvements, as you call them, appear to me only so many links in the great chain of corruption, which will soon fetter the whole human race in irreparable slavery and incurable wretchedness: your improvements proceed in a simple ratio, while the factitious wants and unnatural appetites they engender proceed in a compound one; and thus one generation acquires fifty wants, and fifty means of supplying them are invented, which each in its turn engenders two new ones; so that the next generation has a hundred, the next two hundred, the next four

hundred, till every human being becomes such a helpless compound of perverted inclinations, that he is altogether at the mercy of external circumstances, loses all independence and singleness of character, and degenerates so rapidly from the primitive dignity of his sylvan origin, that it is scarcely possible to indulge in any other expectation, than that the whole species must at length be exterminated by its own infinite imbecility and vileness. (*Headlong Hall*, pp. 11-12)

Perhaps in an attempt to inject a little levity into this Socratic debate, Peacock takes Escot's opinions—not so far removed from his own, one suspects⁽¹²⁾—to extremes, as when discussing the stature of early Man. With support from Monboddó's *Ancient Metaphysics* (1779-99),⁽¹³⁾ the argument is put forward that the noble savage was “not less than ten feet high” (p. 24) before he first applied “fire to culinary purposes, and thereby surrendered his liver to the vulture of disease”:

From that period the stature of mankind has been in a state of gradual diminution, and I have not the least doubt that it will continue to grow *small by degrees, and lamentably less*, till the whole race will vanish imperceptibly from the face of the earth. (*Headlong Hall*, pp. 16-17) [original emphasis]

This concept of a Lilliputian destiny can be read as a metaphor for a general diminution in the quality of both mankind and his life on earth. “Man under the influence of civilization”, explains Forester in *Melincourt*, “has fearfully diminished in size and deteriorated in strength” (p. 184). Later this same character takes “occasion to expatiate very largely on the diminution of the size of mankind”, (p. 207) using quotations from Homer, Herodotus, and other classical authorities regarding the supposed size of heroes.

He asked, if it were possible that men of such a stature as they

have dwindled to in the present age, could have erected that stupendous monument of human strength, Stonehenge? in the vicinity of which, he said, a body had been dug up, measuring fourteen feet ten inches in length. (*Melincourt*, pp. 208-210)

Again in *Headlong Hall*, Escot discovers “a skull of very extraordinary magnitude” among the bones of “the degenerate dwarfs of later generations” in a charnel-house; the unusual size of this skull is apparently sufficient proof of the sexton’s claim that it once belonged to the twelfth-century Welsh prince Cadwaladr (pp. 84-85).

In addition to shrinking stature, Escot’s theory of devolution also involves language, though in a way that perhaps contradicts the tale of the Tower of Babel :

The first inhabitants of the world knew not the use either of wine or animal food; it is, therefore, by no means incredible that they lived to the age of several centuries, free from war, and commerce, and arbitrary government, and every other species of desolating wickedness. But man was then a very different animal to what he now is⁽¹⁴⁾: he had not the faculty of speech; he was not encumbered with clothes; he lived in the open air; his first step out of which, as Hamlet truly observes, is into his grave. (*Headlong Hall*, p. 37)

It is ironic that among the reasons for Man’s fall are the eating of meat, and the drinking of wine, both of which receive much praise from the majority of Peacock’s characters. Yet “the propensity which has led [Man] to building cities has proved the greatest curse of his existence” (*Headlong Hall*, p. 45) :

His first dwellings, of course, were the hollows of trees and rocks. In process of time he began to build: thence grew villages; thence grew cities. Luxury, oppression, poverty, misery, and

disease kept pace with the progress of his pretended improvements, till, from a free, strong, healthy, peaceful animal, he has become a weak, distempered, cruel, carnivorous slave. (*Headlong Hall*, p. 37)

Thus, according to Escot, among the “rewards” for living the simple antediluvian life was great stature and longevity, both of which had to be forfeited on exposure to civilization :

“The natural and original man,” said he, “lived in the woods : the roots and fruits of the earth supplied his simple nutriment: he had few desires, and no diseases. But, when he began to sacrifice victims on the altar of superstition, to pursue the goat and the deer, and, by the pernicious invention of fire, to pervert their flesh into food, luxury, disease, and premature death, were let loose upon the world”. (*Headlong Hall*, p. 16)

The silent, sylvan, vegetarian lifestyle that is put forward in this utopian vision of Man’s ancient past suggests the life of a religious ascetic, familiar in the Orient. In particular, one is reminded of the Japanese hermit-priest Kamo no Chômei, who wrote the *Hōjōki* (1212).

Like Peacock, Kamo no Chômei (1156?-1216) had shown great enthusiasm for poetry in his youth, though he was probably more successful—no fewer than 25 of his poems are found in imperial anthologies. Also, both men wrote treatises on poetry. But Peacock enjoyed a more successful career. Chômei had a position at the palace, and was expecting to become a Shinto priest at the Kamo Shrine, a position traditionally passed down in his family. Unfortunately, he was disappointed in this and was forced to move out of his home and into a cottage at Ōhara, outside the capital.

Having neither position nor a family to support, Chômei took the tonsure at the age of fifty, adopted the Buddhist name Renin, and five

years later left his cottage to live the life of a literary recluse in the mountains of Hino. He built himself a small hut and spent his days reciting poetry, gathering berries, and observing the nature around him. He also wrote, producing such works as the *Mumyôshô* (Anonymous Extracts). But at the age of sixty he left his mark on Japanese literature in the form of a brief sketch of his world entitled *Hôjôki*.

Although the work is traditionally classified as a *zuihitsu*, a miscellany, it is quite different in nature from either the foremost example of the genre, Sei Shônagon's *Makura no Sôshi* (c. 1000), or the later *Tsurezuregusa* (1331) of Yoshida Kenkô. In fact, it has much in common with diary or epistolary literature.

Chômei's work is remembered today for its famous opening passage, likening life to a river :

The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same.
The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming,
are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings.⁽¹⁵⁾

This is, of course, an evocation of the Buddhist aesthetic of *mujôkan*—impermanence, transience. But it also points to a sub-text involving “man and his dwellings”.

Chômei decides to relate all of the disasters that he witnessed before becoming a hermit: the great fire of 1177, the devastating whirlwind of 1180, the famine of 1181~82, and the earthquake of 1185. What clearer signs could there be of impending disaster? It is argued that the early Japanese had no clear eschatological vision before the arrival of Buddhism. The Buddhist concept of *mappô*, or “Latter Days of the Law”, found favour with the Japanese in the Heian period (794-1185), encouraging them to believe that they were living in a degenerate age in which all was *vanitas*.

The second half of the work turns more personal, although it focuses not on the author's past but on his present life as a recluse (*yosutebito*), one who has renounced the world and all earthly attachments in order to seek enlightenment. What impresses the modern reader is his love for nature—suffused with a sense of disillusionment, verging on bitterness at times—but also a peculiar obsession with houses.

Chōmei laments the fact that so much time and money is invested in the building of houses that are doomed to destruction. After briefly turning philosophical, he again returns to houses :

Whence does he come, whence does he go, man that is born and dies? We know not. For whose benefit does he torment himself in building houses that last but a moment, for what reason is his eye delighted by them? This too we do not know. Which will be first to go, the master or his dwelling? One might just as well ask this of the dew on the morning glory. (pp. 197-198)

One almost feels that the sole reason for recounting the disasters is not so much to emphasize the evanescence of life as to give the author an opportunity to describe the construction and destruction of houses.

After the disasters he muses on the afflictions resulting from living in a fixed place—the scorn of a rich neighbour, the threat of fire. Wanting to remain mobile, he apparently built his hut with hinges, so as to be able to fold it up at a moment's notice, although at the age of sixty he appears quite settled in his clearing among the trees.

It is not surprising that the very title of this work is related to buildings: one translation renders it as “The Ten-Foot-Square Hut”, a reference to the cell of the recluse Vimalakīrti.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is also the traditional size of a tea-room, which resembles a form of retreat. According to Chōmei's own account, this hut—which he refers to as

“the cocoon spun by an aged silkworm”—was one-hundredth of the size of the family residence he was forced to abandon. Clearly for him this shrinkage in floor space symbolizes the decline in his fortunes, much as shrinking stature symbolizes the whole race’s decline for Peacock’s characters.

Despite the promising start, it is only towards the end of his account that the author begins to create something of true literary value; needless to say, this occurs when he abandons lamentation for ovation :

My body is like a drifting cloud—I ask for nothing, I want nothing. My greatest joy is a quiet nap ; my only desire for this life is to see the beauties of the seasons. . . . This lonely house is but a tiny hut, but somehow I love it. (p. 211)

He appears to grow self-conscious, aware and perhaps ashamed of his obsession :

The essence of the Buddha’s teaching to man is that we must not have attachment for any object. It is a sin for me now to love my little hut, and my attachment to its solitude may also be a hindrance to salvation. Why should I waste more precious time in relating trifling pleasures? (p. 211)

Perhaps in the end we must forgive the man his weakness. After all, it could be argued that the house motif serves to create coherence in the work, a common thread that is lacking in the other *zuihitsu*. But although in its best moments the *Hōjoki* does have an undeniable charm, reminiscent of the poet Li Po (701-762), the self-pity and resignation evinced by Chōmei are difficult to admire and ultimately prevent the work from attaining true literary enlightenment.

Six centuries after Chōmei wrote his masterpiece, Thomas Love Peacock created the character of Mr Escot. The Japanese hermit and

English deteriorationist have much in common—a preference for nature over civilization, a conviction that, in Escot's words, "luxury, oppression, poverty, misery, and disease [have] kept pace with the progress of [Man's] pretended improvements." The former stresses the bittersweet nature of Man's relationship with his dwelling—an earthly attachment and hindrance to salvation, but something so dear to him that he cannot bring himself to abandon it. The latter sees the building of houses as the prime cause of deterioration.

For Escot, the noble savage was naked, speechless, and lived in "the hollows of trees and rocks"—in other words, lived the life of the genuine hermit, to which Chômei aspired. The inability to communicate with others would seem to guarantee the freedom from earthly attachments emphasized by the Buddhists. Uncorrupted by anything associated with "civilization," he was pure and innocent. Here, Peacock seems to have been anticipating the appearance of just such an individual who was to capture the imagination of Europe: Kaspar Hauser.

Kaspar Hauser's sudden appearance in Nuremberg on 26 May 1828 caused a sensation. Although he was perhaps about sixteen years of age, he seemed unable to say anything intelligible, or even to walk. The mystery of Kaspar's origin has still not been resolved to this day, but it is generally accepted that he had been raised in a dark cellar with virtually no human contact—hence his lack of the faculty of speech. He had lived the life of a hermit without even being aware there was any alternative.

In the following years Kaspar was looked after by a number of benefactors, who no doubt saw in him the *homo ferus* described by Linnaeus. They were true believers in the natural goodness of Man and the social origin of evil, a school of thought exemplified by Rousseau's

Émile. This romantic view of Kaspar may well have been coloured by common motifs taken from literature, such as the *oubliette* theme found in Gothic novels. Models for Kaspar could even be found in fairy tales—the prince brought up as a pauper. Tales of his mysterious powers and hyper-acute senses attracted popular interest, but for the intelligentsia of the time the greatest attraction was that Kaspar was the ultimate *tabula rasa*, unsullied by exposure to centuries of civilization, or even to other living beings (and hence not a true feral child). The world was fascinated by this “Child of Europe,” as he came to be known.

In addition to those who clearly cared for Kaspar’s wellbeing, there were others who took advantage of him, though not always in ways that were obvious. To some intellectuals, Kaspar was seen as a *corpus vile*, of worth only as a means of confirming their own pet theories. He would have been an ideal dinner guest in any of Peacock’s conversation novels. One is reminded of the simian Sir Oran Haut-ton in *Melincourt*, who never utters a word and is described by J. B. Priestley as the most attractive character in the book.⁽¹⁷⁾

Peacock must surely have learned of Kaspar Hauser, though unfortunately he appears not to have made any mention of him in his writings. It is unlikely, however, that he had any acquaintance with Japanese culture. If this English Epicurean had ever learned of Kamo no Chōmei, he would no doubt have recognized a soul mate. In addition to their oft-repeated lamentation regarding the degeneration of Man, they shared an abiding interest in poetry and a love for nature. In a letter to a friend, dated 26 February 1810, Peacock describes the effect that mountain scenery had on him :

I wish I could find language sufficiently powerful to convey to you an idea of the sublime magnificence of the waterfalls in the

forest—when the old overhanging trees are spangled with icicles.

. . . Every season has its charms.⁽¹⁸⁾

But while he may have felt deeply attracted to a life of sylvan solitude, Peacock could never have followed in Chōmei's footsteps and retired to the mountains of his beloved Wales. He was too firmly attached to his family, to his friends, and of course to his own conversations with some of the most prominent intellectual and literary figures of his age. For all its faults, the dining table was for Thomas Love Peacock what Chōmei's mountain hut was for the medieval Japanese hermit, a hindrance to salvation perhaps, but one which provides such comfort that the thought of parting is unbearable.

NOTES

- (1) Whether these can truly be regarded as novels is open to debate. Jonathan Wordsworth points out that "Within their comedy of humours, Peacock's characters have no inner thoughts, do not develop, cannot change their views." Introduction, *Nightmare Abbey* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1992), n. pag.
- (2) From the author's "Preface to 'Headlong Hall' and the three novels published along with it in 1837", dated March 4, 1837. *Headlong Hall and Nightmare Abbey* (London: Dent, 1966), p. 4.
- (3) *Nightmare Abbey / Crotchet Castle* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 163. Further references to both of these works will be made in parentheses.
- (4) *Crotchet Castle*, p. 206. Peacock seldom criticizes medieval life or culture, since it would no longer serve his purpose of drawing attention to the inadequacies of the modern world. However, on this occasion Mr Mac Quedy is allowed to denounce "lazy monks and beggarly friars, who were much more occupied with taking than giving".
- (5) Written for the periodical *Ollier's Literary Miscellany* in 1820.
- (6) Lionel Madden, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Evans Brothers, 1967), pp. 25-26.

- (7) *Gryll Grange* (Gloucester : Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 6.
- (8) *Nightmare Abbey*, p. 55.
- (9) *Melincourt* (New York : AMS, 1967), p. 186.
- (10) As Madden points out, Foster's defence of progress echoes the doctrines of Joseph Priestly and William Godwin, the latter declaring that "Perfectability is one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species." See Madden, p. 76.
- (11) It is tempting to identify these characters with Peacock and his friends, such as Shelley ; however, it is more appropriate, as Marilyn Butler suggests, to see Foster and Escot as "a gallery of eighteenth-century intellectuals", in particular William Godwin and Thomas Malthus. Marilyn Butler, *Peacock Displayed : A Satirist in his Context* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 40-41.
- (12) Marilyn Butler takes the conventional view that Peacock was merely adopting "the traditional satirist's strategy, at least as old as Socrates and Aristophanes, and older than Lucian, of challenging contemporary complacency by enquiring if sophisticated times are really better than primitive times". "*Headlong Hall's* philosophic debates are evidently designed to leave the impression that the deteriorationist is winning the argument. This does not mean that the author himself believes the world to be getting worse." (*Peacock Displayed*, p. 46) Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the obviously sincere comments Peacock makes on, among other signs of deterioration, the "age of brass" in English poetry.
- (13) James Burnett (1714-1799), also known as Lord Monboddo, was an eccentric Scottish jurist and anthropologist said to have anticipated Darwin.
- (14) It may be worth remembering that Charles Darwin was just six years old when Peacock was writing of the "primitive dignity of [Man's] sylvan origin" (*Headlong Hall*, p. 12).
- (15) Translated as "An Account of My Hut" by Donald Keene in his *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (1955 ; Rutland, Vermont : Charles E. Tuttle, 1974), pp. 197-212. All further quotations from this translation will be identified solely by page numbers in parentheses.
- (16) Reputed to have miraculously accommodated the Buddha and 3,500 of his followers.
- (17) See Felix Felton, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London : George Allen &

Unwin, 1973), p. 120.

(18) Quoted in Felix Felton, p. 58.