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Fascination with the Feral: Lord Monboddo and the Evolution of Peacock's Simian Sir Oran Haut-ton

Andrew Armour

In the final sequence of *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (1974), Werner Herzog's film based on the story of Kaspar Hauser, the town clerk gives his hat to the waiting coachman, saying he will walk home. As he does so, he talks to himself and expresses his profound satisfaction that the mystery of Kaspar has been solved: the autopsy revealed abnormalities of liver and brain. Now that the scrupulous scribe can write up a "precise report" to explain the strange Child of Europe, all is well with the world. Science has triumphed. The year of Kaspar's murder was 1833, and yet the questions raised by him and other feral children still haunt us.¹

Perhaps it is merely coincidence, but the above scene is reminiscent of one in real life, involving the eccentric Scottish jurist James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (1714–99). On emerging from court one day he placed his wig in the waiting sedan chair and decided to walk home, despite the fact that it was raining heavily. It may well have been that he too was lost in thought, looking for answers to those same questions surrounding the human condition.

If Monboddo had been alive in 1828 when Kaspar was discovered on the streets of Nuremberg, he would have surely wanted to interview him. We

1 Kaspar was not, strictly speaking, feral, in that he was not brought up in the wild, but because of his isolated childhood he was seen at the time as a *tabula rasa*.

know that he eagerly sought out meetings with two members of the Linnaean list of *homo feri*: Peter the Wild Boy and Memmie Le Blanc.² Unlike many of his contemporaries, Monboddo's fascination with the feral was based on serious scientific interest. Now widely considered to have been a pioneer in the development of evolutionary thought, he believed that language develops and then evolves to meet the needs of increasingly civilized races. Unfortunate for him, however, was his eccentric nature which harmed his reputation as a scientist. His contemporaries mocked his firm contention that the orang-utan, alone among other primates, is a form of Man, and also his statement, later retracted, that men are naturally born with tails. This would seem to have made him an easy target too for Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866), who satirized all and sundry in his “conversation novels”.

Taciturnity is not an obvious feature of the opinionated philosophers who populate Peacock's fiction, yet in *Melincourt* (1817), we find the silent

2 Dividing primates into “Homo” and “Simia” in his *Systema Naturae* (1735), Linnaeus starts the former category — divided into six species — with Homo Ferens. What is most peculiar is that this subdivision of Man consists of a list of actual individuals, some of whom were added in later editions:

1. A youth found in Lithuania, in 1761, resembling a bear.
2. A youth found in Hesse, in 1544, resembling a wolf.
3. A youth in Ireland resembling a sheep.
4. A youth in Bamberg resembling an ox.
5. A wild youth found, in 1724, in Hanover.
6. Wild boys found, in 1719, in the Pyrenees.
7. A wild girl found, in 1717, in Overyfel.
8. A wild girl found, in 1731, in Champagne.
9. A wild lad found near Leyden.

No.5 in this list is Peter, while No.8 is Memmie; the latter, like Kaspar, was not strictly feral and like him could talk. Taken from Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 38.

and simian Sir Oran Haut-ton, an ape attired as the model of fashion, who appears to lack only the ability to talk — his high “ton” refers to vogue not voice.³ In choosing this primate as a protagonist, was Peacock, as some suggest, merely adding to the taunts suffered by Monboddoo? Or was he, rather than deriding, actually defending Monboddoo and thus adding weight to the evolutionary ideas that were to finally crystallize in Darwin’s *Origin of Species*? A closer examination will reveal that, while he made fun of some of the Scotsman’s ideas, Peacock was almost as serious as Monboddoo in suggesting that the orang-utan⁴ is Man’s closest relative, a relationship that would be clear if only the former had opportunity to speak.⁵

Any discussion of Peacock’s attitude to Monboddoo should rightly encompass not only *Melincourt* but also the earlier *Headlong Hall*, Peacock’s first novel and the one that literally made his name. As Howard Mills points out in his *Peacock: His Circle and His Age*, when discussing *Headlong Hall* (“the rickety prototype” of Peacock’s later novels, published in 1816), Peacock shuffles the ideas and opinions of his contemporaries and himself and “deals them out to two speakers” — Mr Foster (the Perfectibilian) and Mr Escot (the Deteriorationist), alternating all the time between seriousness

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- 3 Sir Oran Haut-ton appears to understand human speech; however, as Sir Telegraph Paxarett shrewdly observes, this may be explained by the gestures that ordinarily accompany speech.
 - 4 *Pongo pygmaeus*, arboreal anthropoid ape native to Borneo and Sumatra, now considered to be superior in intelligence even to the chimpanzee. The Malay name *orang hutan* means “forest person”; various spellings have been used in English, but now “orang-utan” is standard in the UK. The older “oran outang” spelling is retained in the quotations from Monboddoo.
 - 5 While acknowledging that Monboddoo was “the type of controversialist Peacock particularly liked,” Marilyn Butler holds that Peacock remained uncommitted as to the validity of the Scotsman’s scientific theories. *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 75–6.

and playfulness. Naturally, the determination of whether a particular comment or claim mirrors the author's own serious opinion, or whether it should simply be put down to the "intellectual gaiety" or informed ridicule that comes to full fruition in his later *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) is largely up to the reader. This is, after all, one reason for the popularity of his works. Mills, for example, is of the opinion that "Peacock's own serious [deteriorationist] idea, that recurs in his novels and essays" is behind Escot's unfavourable contrast between the modern mathematician and Newton; yet, he goes on to say that in Escot's "'Give me the wild man of the woods'" speech "Peacock is toying with Monboddo".⁶

There is no doubting that Escot is portrayed as a monomaniac *par excellence*. Within the first few pages he claims that modern man "'loses all independence and singleness of character, and degenerates so rapidly from the primitive dignity of his sylvan origin, that ... the whole species must at length be exterminated by its own infinite imbecility and vileness.'" ⁷ The consumption of meat is next to come under fire: "'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.'" The unhappy consequence of combining flesh and fire for culinary purposes, we learn, is a shrinking of the human body "'till the whole race will vanish imperceptibly from the face of the earth.'" ⁸

As pointed out by Hoxie Neale Fairchild, the enormous stature of

6 Howard Mills, *Peacock: His Circle and His Age* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 87.

7 *Headlong Hall*, in *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. with introductions and notes by David Garnett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 12. All quotations from this novel are taken from this edition, which is essentially the definitive 1924–34 Halliford edition with corrections.

8 *Headlong Hall*, p.15.

primitive man was a pet theory of Monboddo's, "and is mentioned several times in *Melincourt*, of which Monboddo is the principal butt."⁹ Fairchild is thus clear about Peacock's purpose in introducing Sir Oran Haut-ton, but Fairchild's own purpose was to contradict Carl van Doren's suggestion that while Foster is modelled on Shelley, "Escot, the pessimist, may very reasonably represent Peacock himself, or, rather, the character he would assume in the presence of such a Shelley as Mr. Foster."¹⁰ In support of van Doren, there is no denying that, in the admittedly underdeveloped debate on industrialism, Escot's horror and amazement at seeing new factories in Snowdonia — "'fungous excrescencies, in the bosom of these wild and desolate scenes'"¹¹ — must reflect some of the author's own feelings about environmental issues. Nevertheless, it is just as true that Escot's extreme claims make it impossible for us to associate him closely with the author. Yet, in carving out a position for Peacock as "the most interesting hostile critic" of the Noble Savage,¹² Fairchild was wrong to link Peacock's ridicule for unadulterated pessimism about the human condition with the "person" of Sir Oran Haut-ton. There is more to this ape than at first meets the eye, and a clue is to be found in Peacock's footnotes.

In his own footnote to the text, David Garnett agrees with van Doren regarding the association of Foster and Shelley, going on to state that

9 Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), pp. 348–62; quoted from an on-line extract at www.thomaslovepeacock.net/essays/fairchild.html.

10 Carl van Doren, *The Life of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Dent, 1911), p. 78 and pp. 89–90; as quoted by Fairchild.

11 *Headlong Hall*, p. 47.

12 It should be noted that Rousseau himself did not in fact use the term "noble savage", realizing that natural man could be fierce and bestial (though perhaps not so dreadful as Swift's Yahoos.)

“Escot’s ideas are derived from Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’inégalité* and *Emile* and from Rousseau’s disciple, Lord Monboddo.”¹³ Peacock himself does not draw the reader’s attention to Monboddo’s writings until Chapter 5, when Escot describes prelapsarian man, who ““had not the faculty of speech,””: thanks to civilization, ““from a free, strong, healthy, peaceful animal, he has become a weak, distempered, cruel, carnivorous slave.”” The footnote simply says “See Lord Monboddo’s *Ancient Metaphysics*” (1779–99) without any amplification.¹⁴ No other explicit references to Monboddo follow.

It is in the following novel, *Melincourt*, that Peacock goes out of his way to quote Monboddo directly and at considerable length.

In the *Edinburgh Review* of 1839, James Spedding, noted editor of Bacon’s works, suggests that *Melincourt* would have been better presented as two tales:¹⁵ one revolving around the election of Sir Oran Haut-ton to parliament (representing the Borough of One-Vote), and the other, more serious in tone, dealing with the romance between Sylvan Forester and the wealthy heiress, Anthelia Melincourt, who is kidnapped by a rejected and aggressive suitor, Lord Anophel Acthar. Spedding’s point is well made.

Nevertheless, Spedding is especially harsh when it comes to Forester’s hirsute protégé, who is first introduced as having a ludicrous physiognomy, an air of high fashion, a pair of enormous whiskers, and a striking politeness, all in the same sentence:¹⁶

13 *Headlong Hall*, p. 12, n. 1.

14 *Headlong Hall*, p. 27, n. 2.

15 James Spedding, *Edinburgh Review*, LXVIII (Jan. 1839), 450–1; as quoted in Mills, p. 99.

16 *Melincourt*, in *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. with introductions and notes by David Garnett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 120. All quotations from Peacock’s novels are taken from this edition.

[I]n what other light can we view the introduction of Forester's friend, the dumb Baronet? His theory concerning the true and original man might have passed for the dreams of an enthusiast. But when coupled with the introduction in person of Sir Oran Haut-Ton, Bart. — that is to say, of a real orang-outang ... wanting nothing of the civilized man except his vices and his powers of speech — what is it but buffoonery?¹⁷

Whilst praising Spedding's analysis of *Melincourt*, Mills accuses him of oversimplification:

With him [Sir Oran Haut-Ton], moreover, Peacock wavers between the serious and the farcical, attempting irreconcilables: to ridicule Monboddo; yet also to entertain the idea of the noble savage so as to criticise modern manners; and to satirise an electoral system that could return an orang-outang to parliament. But Sir Oran ... is a clumsy way of introducing the qualities of the Natural Man.¹⁸

Clumsy indeed, if that were really Peacock's purpose. But what if Peacock was seriously entertaining not the idea of the Noble Savage so much as the human qualities of the orang-utan?

Forester and Fax, a character based on Malthus, debate a variety of questions peripatetically while on their search for the abducted Anthelia.

17 Mills, p. 99. In fact, Sir Oran Haut-Ton does enjoy drinking as much as did Peter the Wild Boy. The latter was often fashionably attired when in the presence of royalty, but his mastery of etiquette (or chivalry) never equaled that of Peacock's protagonist.

18 Mills, p. 99.

One of the topics of conversation is the height of the Patagonians; in relating the tale of a skeleton “between twelve and thirteen feet” high, Peacock provides in a footnote a reference to Monboddo’s *Ancient Metaphysics*, but again he neither quotes nor comments on it.¹⁹ This economy stands in stark contrast to what we find on being enlightened as to the origins of Sir Oran Haut-ton:

MR. FORESTER. Sir Oran Haut-ton was caught very young in the woods of Angola.

SIR TELEGRAPH PAXARETT. Caught!



Sir Oran Haut-ton, illustrated by F. H. Townsend²⁰

¹⁹ *Melincourt*, p. 300.

²⁰ *Melincourt*; or, *Sir Oran Haut-ton*, illustrated by F. H. Townsend; with an introd. by George Saintsbury (1896); detail of a line drawing used as a frontispiece and taken from the scanned work (www.archive.org/details/melincourtorsiro00peacuoft).

MR. FORESTER. Very young. He is a specimen of the natural and original man — the wild man of the woods; called, in the language of the more civilized and sophisticated natives of Angola, *Pongo*, and in that of the Indians of South America, *Oran Outang*.

SIR TELEGRAPH PAXARETT. The devil he is!

MR. FORESTER. Positively. Some presumptuous naturalists have refused his species the honours of humanity; but the most enlightened and illustrious philosophers agree in considering him in his true light as the natural and original man.²¹

It is from this point that Peacock inserts, as footnotes, several lengthy extracts from Monboddó's writings: *Ancient Metaphysics*, and more especially *The Origin and Progress of Man and Language* (1773–92).

What is striking here is not just the recondite subject matter but the prodigious volume of Peacock's notes: in David Garnett's 1948 edition of the novels, nowhere else is there such a heavy concentration of notes than on pages 128 to 135. In the main, these are used as background information for Sir Oran Haut-ton's gentlemanly deportment: that he had a sweet temper and "wept bitterly" when abandoned by his original captor/mentor; that he fell into a deep depression when surrounded by strange faces; and that he learned to play musical instruments. In other words, Sir Oran Haut-ton is a pastiche of several tales collected by Monboddó, and Peacock almost appears to be at pains to prove the possibility of such an unlikely character existing in the real world.

21 *Melincourt*, pp. 127–28.

Of all the footnotes in Peacock, one of the more interesting is when Monboddo expands on the musical accomplishments of a certain ape:

He has the capacity of being a musician, and has actually learned to play upon the pipe and harp.... it shows that the oran outang has a perception of numbers, measure, and melody, which has always been accounted peculiar to our species. But the learning to speak, as well as the learning music, must depend upon particular circumstances; and men, living, as the oran outangs do, upon the natural fruits of the earth, with few or no arts, are not in a situation that is proper for the invention of language. The oran outangs who played upon the pipe had certainly not invented this art in the woods, but they had learned it from the negroes or the Europeans; and that they had not at the same time learned to speak, may be accounted for in one or other of two ways: either the same pains had not been taken to teach them articulation; or, secondly, music is more natural to man, and more easily acquired than speech.

Origin and Progress of Language, book ii. chap. 5.²²

Clearly Monboddo believed that under the right circumstances, orang-utans might gain some form of locutionary ability. In another note, from *Ancient Metaphysics*, he states that “The oran outang, so accurately dissected by Tyson, had exactly the same organs of voice a man has.”²³ In this he was badly misinformed: none of the apes possesses a hyoid bone — also known as the “lingual bone” because of its role in the production of speech.²⁴

22 *Melincourt*, p.130, n. 3.

23 *Melincourt*, p.138, n. 1.

24 It is interesting to note that following a cremation in Japan, the mourners’ attention is traditionally drawn to this bone, which is thought to have special significance.

Neanderthal man did, however, possess a hyoid bone, suggesting that, however primitive, he could speak.

In the longest of the footnotes in this section of *Melincourt*, Peacock quotes Monboddo's claim that there is "no doubt of the humanity of the oran outang," adding "as to the vulgar, I can never expect that they should acknowledge any relation to those inhabitants of the woods of Angola."²⁵

Of course, one possible explanation for this sudden explosion of footnotes²⁶ may be that Monboddo was no longer widely read (as suggested by Fairchild) and Peacock deemed it necessary to introduce his readers to the source. But in that case, we should expect similar notes in *Headlong Hall* and *Melincourt* explaining the supposedly giant stature of primitive man and the Patagonians. Quite clearly, Peacock is much more interested in the primate; otherwise, why would he have opened himself up to the charge of buffoonery? That is, both the appearance and the treatment of Sir Oran Haut-ton — chosen for no less than the subtitle of the novel — suggest that the author was at the very least highly intrigued by Monboddo's writings on orang-utans. This should not be confused with deteriorationism. In fact, Monboddo presented quite the opposite argument. Adding to his remarks about the "vulgar", he writes:

"[T]hey should continue, through a false pride, to think highly derogatory from human nature what the philosopher, on the contrary, will think the greatest praise of man, that from the savage state in which the oran outang is, he should, by his own sagacity and industry, have

25 *Melincourt*, p. 128, n. 1.

26 Butler (pp.75–6) suggests that most of the long footnotes "are surely meant to seem engagingly dotty," but nowhere else does Peacock employ this technique to such ends.

arrived at the state in which we now see him.”²⁷

This is far removed from the pessimism of Escot. Indeed, it echoes the first words of Foster:

“In short,” said he, “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.”²⁸

Monboddo was interested in evolution and progress, not decline and decrepitude, and for him the fundamental “art of life” was language, which both primitive man and orang-utan lacked simply because they had no need for it. After all, if Peter the Wild Boy — the celebrated feral child at the court of King George I — was still incapable of conversing after over half a century in society, it is not surprising that an orang-utan should be similarly handicapped by circumstances.²⁹

27 *Melincourt*, p. 128, n. 1.

28 *Headlong Hall*, p.11.

29 Monboddo saw Peter in June 1782, when the Wild Boy from Hanover was about seventy years old and living in retirement on a farm in Hertfordshire, where he died in 1785. During his six decades in civilization, Peter never learned to speak. For the world around him, he remained a “blank slate” on which nothing could seemingly be written or read. It is worth noting that he was fond of music and spirits; he never laughed and appeared indifferent to the other sex; and he was principally vegetarian by choice.

Swift was one of the several men of letters interested in Peter, about whom Defoe wrote the pamphlet “Mere Nature Delineated: Or, a Body without a Soul” (1726). Monboddo died before 1800, when Victor, the “Wild Boy of Aveyron”, began to enjoy some celebrity in the French newspapers; like Peter, Victor never learned to speak, despite the energetic efforts of Dr. Itard. For details of these and other feral cases, see Newton.

Lord Monboddo, although a serving judge, had interests that ranged from the theatre and literature (Robert Burns was a dining friend), to philosophy and the evolution of language. In this latter field of scholarship, his views were as uncommon as one might expect from his eccentric behaviour on that rainy day. As argued at length in *The Origin and Progress of Man and Language*, his studies led him to the conclusion that languages evolve and that, by the process we know as natural selection, the superior languages are the ones that survive. Monboddo was deeply religious but considered biblical tales of the creation and Eden to be allegorical in nature.

The continuity that Monboddo saw in the seemingly disparate languages of the world — not foisted upon mankind by a deity concerned about the threat posed by the builders of the Tower of Babel, as the Bible presents, but the natural result of languages developing after the dispersion of the species to different parts of the world — was also to be found in biology. He was convinced that the apes are related to Man, the latter being more evolved in the same way that he saw European languages as being more evolved.³⁰ This was heretical stuff, but when he first encountered Monboddo the young Peacock was already acquiring a habit of questioning “accepted wisdom”, particularly as promulgated by ancient bastions of learning:

When Scythrop grew up, he was sent, as usual, to a public school, where a little learning was painfully beaten into him, and from thence to the university, where it was carefully taken out of him; and he was sent home like a well-threshed ear of corn, with nothing in his head.³¹

30 Interestingly, Monboddo shared the early grammarians’ view that Greek was more perfect than a modern language like English.

31 *Nightmare Abbey*, p. 356.

The maverick in Monboddo must have appealed to Peacock. Despite his strong religious feelings, Monboddo was not afraid to pursue his unorthodox ideas, and this intellectual courage, in the face of ridicule from the establishment, must also have won support from Peacock. In *Headlong Hall*'s "controversy concerning animal and vegetable food", the Reverend Doctor Gaster asserts that "'nothing can be more obvious than that all animals were created solely and exclusively for the use of man.'" And when challenged by Escot for proof, he replies "'It requires no proof ... it is a point of doctrine. It is written, therefore it is so.'" ³²

Many years later, when Peacock was 74, he might well have smiled to see something of his Dr. Gaster in Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford. Following the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), T. H. Huxley, a defender of Darwin, became the unwisely chosen target of ridicule in the famous debate with Wilberforce on 30 June 1860:

Then the Bishop rose, and in a light scoffing tone ... assured us there was nothing in the idea of evolution; rock-pigeons were what rock-pigeons had always been. Then, turning to his antagonist with a smiling insolence, he begged to know, was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey? On this Mr Huxley slowly and deliberately arose. A slight tall figure stern and pale, very quiet and very grave, he stood before us, and spoke those tremendous words.... He was not ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor; but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth. No one doubted his meaning and the effect was tremendous. One lady fainted and had to be carried out: I,

32 *Headlong Hall*, pp.15–16.

for one, jumped out of my seat.³³

In this dramatic exchange, complete with fainting extras, one might almost be reading from one of Peacock's own novels.

It is well documented that the debate on evolution (even if that term was not used) predates Charles Darwin's work by many decades. Monboddó influenced Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), grandfather of Charles Darwin, and so must have had at least an indirect effect on the formation of the latter's ideas. It is suspected that Peacock first became acquainted with Monboddó's works around the turn of the century while engaged in his first job, as a clerk.³⁴ It is reported that in 1812, on meeting with Shelley, Peacock provided the aspiring poet, just turned twenty, with a list of recommendations for reading that included Monboddó.³⁵ This should be indication enough that Monboddó was not in fact "a man whom he [Peacock] thought ridiculous," as Fairchild claims.³⁶ While he did poke fun at the shrinking stature hypothesis, Peacock was not so rash as to write off all of Monboddó's ideas merely because he found one or two hard to swallow. It should be remembered that Shelley himself was not immune to Peacock's satire. In addition, Monboddó was from north of the border: often suspected of deriding the Scots, Peacock was most probably displaying "Aristophanic mock-animosity", as suggested by Robert Buchanan.³⁷

33 Isabella Sidgwick, "A Grandmother's Tales", *Macmillan's Magazine*, LXXVIII, no. 468, Oct. 1898; as quoted in J. R. Lucas, "Wilberforce and Huxley: A Legendary Encounter", *The Historical Journal* 22, 2 (1979), 313–30.

34 Mills, p. 13.

35 Mills, p. 21.

36 www.thomaslovepeacock.net/essays/fairchild.html.

37 Felix Felton, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 23–24.

We can very reasonably surmise that Peacock's exposure to this ape debate began more than half a century before the Huxley-Wilberforce confrontation, when he was a boy of fourteen. What probably caused Peacock to become interested in the relationship of the orang-utan to Man, and the question of whether or not the former would ever be able to speak, was an illustration not unlike that executed by F. H. Townsend for *Melincourt*.

The year was 1800, when Peacock first came to the public's notice. A poem he submitted to a contest run by the new *Monthly Preceptor* magazine won him a special prize, on account of his youth.³⁸ The first number of this publication also included a coloured plate of an orang-utan wearing an apron; the accompanying article warned that: "apes must not be regarded as members of the human race. They may have tongues and vocal organs ... but they possess an extra rib to the twelve of man, and — the clincher — they are dumb."³⁹ It was after leaving his job that Peacock began to read widely, and presumably this is when he became more acquainted with the writings of Monboddo that must have inspired the ape-in-apron admonition.

Returning to *Melincourt* and the thick cluster of quotations supporting the theory that the orang-utan would almost be human if it could only talk, it is not hard to see this as Peacock's defiant response to the article in the *Monthly Preceptor*. Far from ridiculing Monboddo, as so frequently claimed by critics, the novelist was giving him the benefit of the doubt, and more. Butler believes that Peacock admired Monboddo as a moralist and social critic rather than a scientist "when he [Monboddo] demands to know whether our definitions of what is human are adequate." In response to the complacency that "rested its claims for man's superiority on the faculty of

38 Felton, pp. 33–34.

39 Felton, p. 34.

speech,” Monboddo declared it to be a “superficial acquired skill.”⁴⁰ These are still the key issues in the minds of all who have a fascination with the feral. Peacock never followed in Monboddo’s footsteps and tried to meet with either Victor or Kaspar, the wild children of his time, but their stories would surely have intrigued a man so full of energetic interest in the human condition.

Monboddo’s crotchets may be comic, but his principal ideas about the evolution of Man and language are common sense today. Peacock would surely have been gratified to see this vindication. Yet despite the considerable scientific progress of the last two centuries, and our much improved understanding of evolution, we are still searching for the answers to those questions about what makes us human and how we acquire language. Will the “precise report” that explains these mysteries ever be written?

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40 Butler, p. 76.

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