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NORTHRROOM

Agreeable Follies

Mental geography and the polyoptics of place

by Paul Carter

Astronomers use the Greenwich meridian to define standard time. Earthly travellers also calibrate their revolutions of the earth against this line of longitude. From a Chinese point of view chronology is orientalist, implying a growing deviation from the mean as you travel east. For longitudinalists, if such a brethren exists, the join at the back, the International Date Line where the myth of linear time is rectified and brought back into accord with the earth's own turning, is a kind of North Pole, a place where time contracts to a vanishing point. Mundane chronology has its meridian, that is, its high point of reasonableness: the convention of setting our clocks to Greenwich times marks a moment of universal agreement. It could be a triumph of Enlightenment thinking. But I am wondering whether a comparable argument might be mounted around the associations of latitude. Geographically, the meridian 'latitude', as it were, would be the equator. At right angles to the celestial meridian, the equator is not equidistant between day and night, but it is midway between two heavenly hemispheres. Where north and south meet it clearly resolves the Zeno-like paradoxes of digital logic.

However, in common English usage, the latitude of the meridian is set vaguely elsewhere. The meridional is not exactly a place but an idea of the southerly beyond where you are; for northern Europeans it is the Mediterranean and beyond that benign

basin Africa's burning shore. But is so vague a zone reasonable? Isn't that south altogether too fervent? Where, in fact, would a northern European philosopher place the latitude of reason? In what narrow zone does the sun of understanding blaze forth most rationally. David Hume called the "manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason" that beset him "clouds"¹: would he reason better under Naples's serene skies?

Or, "having narrowly escaped shipwreck in passing a small frith"², would the correction of the faculties benefit more from directing his "weather-beaten vessel" to the north, where, by the eerie illumination of the midnight sun, the old day-and-night conundrum of causality is surely resolved? Alternatively, perhaps it was best to stay put: if reasoning was meteorological, then the mixed skies of Edinburgh or Dundee gave a better allegory of the mind's perplexities than either the parching solarities of the south or the fitful auroras of the frozen north.

In fixing the optimal observatory of truth, another "equator" might have to be set—between the geographical equator and the North Pole. Here an environmental corollary of the mind (at least according to Hume) obtains, providing perhaps the natural setting for a sceptical view of human reason's capacity to give an adequate description of the material world.³ Thus the contrast between "the intellectual world" Hume imagined surveying from his lonely tower and his discovery that, "The essence and composition of external bodies are so obscure, that we must necessarily, in our reasonings, or rather conjectures concerning them, involve ourselves in contradictions and absurdities",⁴ suggests the habitual mistiness of the countryside around Ninewells where he lived and worked. The classical latitude of reason might have been set around 40 degrees north, running through Elea, Athens and Ionia, but what had it produced? According to Humphrey Davy only "new clouds of abstracted metaphysics": Plato's theories, in particular, "like brilliant clouds of the evening, may delight and affect the imagination, but they present nothing permanent. They cannot be

touched, they cannot be retained, and they vanish without leaving in the mind any trace of their existence".⁵ Here then was a sound reason for mistrusting the seeming clarities of the south: the midday fairy had run away with their wits.

An empirically-based school of thinking could begin by offering a rational explanation of the clouds, whether aerial or mental—and where better to conduct this enquiry than in a latitude where meteorology and the cloudiness of the mind converge? Such an environment, one may add, is not only climatically chiaroscuro but exhibits a topographical complexity that lends itself to observation. Edinburgh, for example, offered the abyssal geological cross-sections James Hutton needed to read the hieroglyph of nature. It also exhibited the uplift, at once spiritual and physical, of promontories where observatories could be sited and epitaphs carved. In this spirit of intellectual campanilismo Davy ridiculed the imagined mise-en-scene of the 17th Century geo-philosopher Thomas Burnet, whose Antediluvians enjoyed "a flat surface and a uniform sky". The implication was clear: corrugated surfaces and troubled skies better stimulated the advance of knowledge. The fact was that to these northerners the stuff of reason (whether located in the mind or the material world) was obscure, its ground prone to landslide, its sky given to storm. Still, a mass of particularities, however shattered, combined, shattered again and once more fused, better modelled the movement of the mind than any "ideas" about "matter".

If Edinburgh occupied a propitious latitude for the study of "contradictions", this was because it also occupied a social meridian, a midpoint between solitude and the crowd, between the living and the departed. In his Treatise, Hume presents the drama of his intellectual life as a struggle between the rival temptations of "that forlorn solitude in which I am placed in my philosophy" and the crowd to which he would fain run "for shelter and warmth".⁶ He fantasises a society drawn to share in his interests, but, "Everyone keeps at a distance, and dreads that storm which

beats upon me from every side”.⁷ This is a decidedly Romantic self-image. With the advantage of hindsight, it could be the setting of the Hume mausoleum, obscurely remembered in the present installation, standing alone... “on the Brink of the Calton-Hill Rock”, it perfectly exploited the picturesque possibilities of the dramatic location.⁸ In any case, the identification of the vocation of “following truth” with a withdrawal from the “deformity” of society seems a distinctively northern trait.

Even that patient dweller amongst Naples’ motley masses, Giambattista Vico, had his years at Vatolla, but they were an interlude of study. Hume, by contrast, finds his thought already densely peopled with deformities of reason or, as he calls them “chimeras”. And these bodiless voices—in the succeeding age they would have been summoned up by séance—are calling him over. If he turns the barque of his quest towards the north, he is not leaving society behind, but simply substituting one for another. As Peter Davidson succinctly remarks, “Ghosts in Europe are northern”.⁹

Anyone contemplating its imperial town plan, and measuring this against the modest population, must assume that Edinburgh has always been half empty; that from the early 19th century it was largely a design on the imagination, mortgaged to ghosts and only intermittently traversed by the living. Where the homeless gathered they have taken root as graveyards; their unfinished conversations petrified to form inscriptions. In this sense, it is not the press of the crowd that shaped Hume’s work but the lightness of its touch. The panic of encountering others was less than the panic of there being no one at all. Delirium, defined as being out of the furrow, or trackless, was a form of nostalgia for rectitude: if only Cartesian deductionism stood to reason! A decade after Hume’s death nostalgia entered the medical vocabulary as “the pain a sick person finds because he is not in his native land, or fears never to see it again”.¹⁰ Hume was exiled from the true north of reason, but it was only the lightness of his attachment to the meridian of passion

that enabled him to keep to his course. This was clear: landlocked by the senses, the homo clausus must force a chink in the darkness. He remained a monad, locked up in his “system”, at the price of his reason. Even if the ground were soft underfoot, or the waters choppy, he had to scramble out of the mind’s hold: “Blindness is a weapon against time and space; our being is one vast blindness, save only for that little circle which our mean intelligence... can illumine”.¹¹ Thus Canetti, evoking inter alia the Western tradition’s blindness to the reality of the crowd.

Obviously Robert Adam’s mausoleum for David Hume restages this mental drama. It is a squat architectural telescope, using its roofless “little circle” to blind the observer to the smoking chimneys, the haze of bare winter trees, and the ant-like deformity of folk in the streets far below. By this blindness the sky is enlarged; turned approximately into the monocular gaze itself.¹² At the same time, for the living at least, these pleasures of the eye can only be imagined: the exclusive rondure of the heavens is reserved for the philosopher’s ghost. And given the earnestness with which Hume sought a way out of the mind’s self-sameness, reason’s propensity for going round in circles, one wonders whether Adam hadn’t unwittingly created a private purgatory rather than a public monument. In any case the only ocular way out of this blind void would be obscurely, by way of skillfully-placed mirrors perhaps. Alternatively, to gain a better image of the world, the roof should be filled in, plunging the room into darkness. Another aperture would have to be opened in the wall; then, as a camera obscura, the darkened room should function well enough. True, the image would be inverted and partial, but at least it would be a “true picture”, so far as it went. In this case, perhaps I maligned Adam: perhaps his circular open roof was a far subtler allegory of Hume’s philosophical disposition. Given Hume’s scepticism about the evidence of the senses, perhaps the fact that it did not relay a clear image of anything was correct—after all the focus of “those lively images, with which the memory presents us” may make us

imagine they are effects springing from a definite cause, but reason tells us otherwise.¹³

These antinomies—seclusion versus the temptations of “the commerce and society of men”, the lively evidence of the senses versus “the deepest darkness” into which reasoning plunges him—fix the latitude of Hume’s mental geography. It was a constitutionally anxious place because, according to him, however effectively he demolished other systems of thought, his own solutions were riddled with “contradictions”, “absurdities”, “obscurities” and “perplexities”.¹⁴ If you wanted an environmental justification for Hume’s taking every step with hesitation, you would find it in the volcanic history of Calton Hill itself, and more broadly in the general geology of Edinburgh, whose igneous intrusions supplied the faultlines where imagination and inductive logic were fruitfully joined.¹⁵ Much as Hume might rue the fact, this zone had a distinctive psychic topography. It was the realm of fancy. Fancy, in Hume’s psychology, is a subset of the imagination that leads us into “errors, absurdities and obscurities”. But this, Hume argued, was unavoidable. As a mode of understanding, even the broader faculty of the imagination proved on closer examination to possess contradictions that were not methodological but “essential characteristics of the human mind”.¹⁶ What then? In this intolerable situation, where understanding “entirely subverts itself”. “We save ourselves from this total scepticism only by means of that singular and seemingly trivial property of the fancy, by which we enter with difficulty into remote views of things”.¹⁷

Hume refers here to the natural propensity to “reason” associatively. Of course, his whole point is that associative reasoning is no reasoning at all—“Men of bright fancies may ... be compared to those angels, whom the Scripture represents as covering their eyes with their wings”.¹⁸ But exactly here *NORTHROOM* its decisive intervention: what if, its three-dimensional architecture of auditory and visual particulars, suggests, we dispense with the “difficulty” of trying to make

the world cohere. If, instead of trying to loosen the chains of association, we allowed the interplay of different perceptions of place, we could dispense with Hume's linear tyrannies. Instead of trying to paper over the cracks between one impression and the next, instead of trying to train memory to remember in the proper order, we could grant fragmentation, relocation, and even the void between these pedestals of consciousness an ontological value. Half a century after Hume's inhumation, Thomas De Quincey wrote of experiences that connected themselves with his life: "At so many different areas that, upon any chronological principle of position, it would have been difficult to assign them a proper place; backwards or forwards they must have leaped, in whatever place they had been introduced... belonging to every place alike, they would belong, in the proverb, to no place at all; or [reversing the proverb], belonging to no place by preferable right, they would, in fact, belong to every place".¹⁹ Hume's contradiction is De Quincey's structural multiplicity. But the same could be said of *NORTHROOM*'s enigmatic video particulars; they produce a rotational effect, not wholly unlike the new principle of associative thought that De Quincey alluded to in his term "involute".

What's more, including close-up pans of the exterior surfaces of the Adam mausoleum, they turn outside in. As a result, astonishing contradictions come into view; a spider—perhaps it is the rare *Sitticus pubescens*—that has no difficulty in networking between the remotest of things; or a flaking surface that propounds temporal association as a way of being, one state leading to another chemically, without any effort of thought. Through the shattered polyoptic of the installation, things and relations are conserved because the gaps between them are allowed to thrive. In other words a principle of association is put into practice that mediates between the solitary and the crowd, that gives room to the environmental penumbra of thinking which, after all, goes on in many minds simultaneously, whether mistaken or not. When Hume, having "indulged a reverie in [his] chamber, or in a

solitary walk by the riverside", was seized by a desire to communicate with his fellow human beings, he owed something to the environment of thought: its distractions allowed him to concentrate. Now, in *NORTHROOM*, the mental optic is inverted, and the Orphic dismemberment of points of view allows us to think differently and, not least, to see how things as different as a philosopher's mind, a stone, the spirits of the dead and a northern city are associated. Unless the surface were cloudy, it is hard to know how these obscure connections could be discerned.

"If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe anything *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable": thus Hume, his italicized "certainly" tending to erode the foundations of his philosophy, committed as it is to the uncertainty of received wisdom of every kind, including his own. It seems that even the austere Adam was not above this sort of self-reflexive irony. Among the drawings for the mausoleum is one in which the masonry is "represented as if in decay, worn and weathered and with parts of the frieze and cornice missing".²⁰ Architecture, too, could be a serious folly, toying with the monumental rhetoric of immortality. After all, however you looked at it, something always fell between the motive and the act, the shadow of a cloud backflipping over the edge of Calton Hill, say, as fleeting as a man's life, and the seeming solidity of rock. For such ephemeral mysteries as these it is also necessary to make room. Hume requested that his epitaph state only his dates of birth and death. He could not predict if a grateful posterity would fill in the gap with its own memorial. He wanted to indicate that the primary association between life and death, the one that bound every human nature, was also the one that escaped imagination. No single viewpoint existed in whose embalming perspective it could be contracted and calibrated. Life, even one as internally ordered as Hume's was largely blindness. In this doubtful realm it was proper "to be positive and certain in particular points, according to the light in which we survey

them in any particular instant."²¹ In letting us meditate on the mystery of these particularities *NORTHROOM* is a true *humument*.²²

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¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: J.M. Dent, 1934) 2 vols, vol 1, p. 254

²David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 249

³David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Appendix

⁴David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1

⁵Siegfried, R. & R.H. Dott (eds), *Humphry Davy on Geology: The 1805 lectures for the general Audience* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1980) p. 28

⁶David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 249

⁷David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 250

⁸Iain Gordon Brown, *David Hume's Tomb: a Roman mausoleum by Robert Adam*, Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot, 121 (1991) p. 391–422, 413

⁹Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, London (Reaktion Books, 2004) p. 205

¹⁰Hamilton R., *History of a remarkable case of nostalgia affecting a native of Wales and occurring in Britain. Medical Commentaries, for the year 1786* Edinburgh 1787; 1:343–8.

¹¹Elias Canetti, *Auto da Fe*, trans. C.V. Wedgwood, Harmondsworth (Penguin, 1973) p. 79

¹²After Adam's initiative, Calton Hill became associated with the graves of famous men. This led in turn to the idea of creating a national monument as a sort of "Caledonian Valhalla": this eventually became the unfinished replica Parthenon, but the first proposal was a Pantheon.

http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn_05/articles/fehl.html

¹³David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 251

¹⁴James Fieser, *Hume's Pyrrhonism: A Developmental Interpretation*, <http://www.utm.edu/staff/fieser/vita/research/humepyrr.htm>

¹⁵The allusion is, of course, to James Hutton. Keith Montgomery argues that most accounts "present an excessively narrow, empirical–inductive view of geological science that diminishes the creative brilliance... and imaginative insight that lead to the development of Hutton's theory". Keith Montgomery, *Siccar Point and Teaching the History of Geology* in *Journal of Geoscience Education*, vol 51, number 5, November 2003, p. 504

¹⁶James Fieser, *Hume's Pyrrhonism: A Developmental Interpretation*.

¹⁷David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 252–253

¹⁸David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 252

¹⁹Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey* (ed. D. Masson, London, 1896–7) vol 1, p. 287

²⁰Iain Gordon Brown, *David Hume's Tomb: a Roman mausoleum by Robert Adam*, p. 398

²¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol 1, p. 258

²²With apologies to Tom Phillips

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Design for Monument to David Hume

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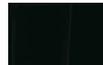
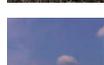
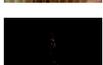
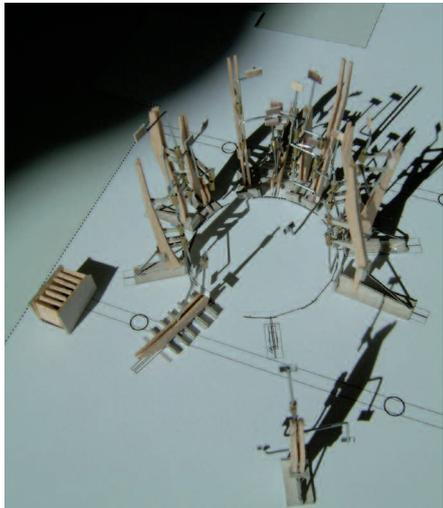
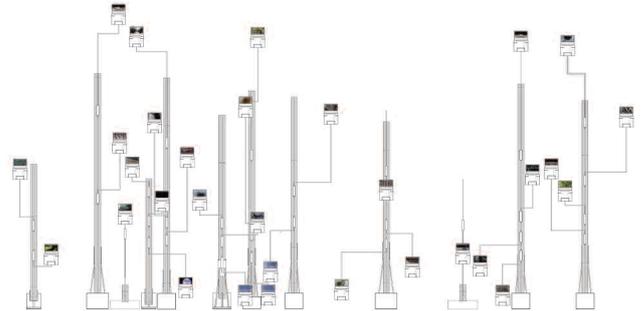
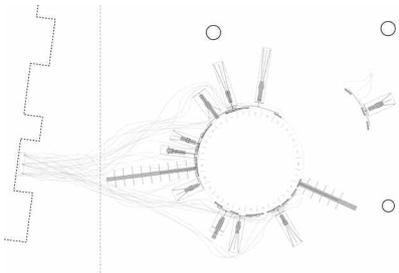
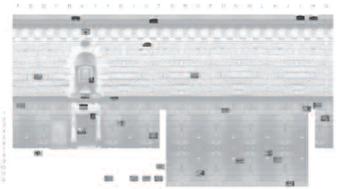
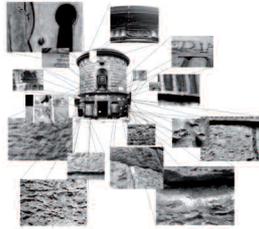
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Robert Adam's original drawing of Hume's Tomb, 1777



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