

The Disappearing Discoverer: Leichhardt and Enlightenment

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Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. It receives all its matter from the myths [...]¹

When the explorer and naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt disappeared in the middle of the Australian continent in 1848 – the fateful year of Germany’s failed revolution – he left hardly a trace, and turned into a myth that haunts German-Australian cultural memory to this day. Leichhardt, who wanted to “force [his] way into the interior of Australia” and to “go right across the continent,” represents an intellectual and historical paradigm – the European Enlightenment – and simultaneously embodies its failure.²

It was by virtue of his individuality and subjectivity that Leichhardt ventured into unexplored geographic and epistemological territories. In a way, Leichhardt’s journey into the Australian interior repeats Petrarch’s ascent of Mont Ventoux. Petrarch, who famously climbed Mont Ventoux in the 14th century for no other purpose than the climb itself, inaugurated the renaissance notion of subjectivity. We should bear in mind that he did so by entering a space that was previously restricted to the gods. Upon reaching the summit however, Petrarch recounts how his copy of St. Augustin’s *Confessions* fell open at the following page: “And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not.”³ Moved by these words, Petrarch quietly descends the mountain having discovered subjectivity itself.

To the same extent that Petrarch was more interested in unleashing the Self than in contemplating nature, Leichhardt’s repeated assertion that his sole purpose was to act in the name of science can also be understood as an inverted testament to the power of European subjectivity. In his last letter to his brother-in-law he wrote:

I’ve had the pleasure of hearing that the geographical society in London has awarded me one of its medals, and that the Parisian geographical society has conferred a similar honour upon me. Naturally I’m very pleased to think that such discerning authorities consider me worthy of such honours; but whatever I have done has never been for honour. I have worked for the sake of science and for nothing else; and I shall continue to do so even if not a soul in the world pays any attention to me. I am fearful of losing God’s blessing, should I give way to vanity and confound the driving ambition to be acclaimed and famous with the genuine, quiet and laborious striving after knowledge.⁴

Although Leichhardt's willpower, diligence and meticulousness do testify to his strictly scientific aspirations, his adventurous self-sacrifice clearly also speaks the language of honor, glory and self-fashioning. On closer inspection, the lines just quoted also contain the philosophical backdrop for the myth surrounding Leichhardt's disappearance. If one understands the mythical figure of Leichhardt as a continuation of the project of European Modernity, which, as Adorno and Horkheimer outline in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has positioned humanity and the subject at the centre of the world in order to destroy knowledge based on myths, then Leichhardt's remark about not "letting vanity take the reins" can also be read as the inherent aporia of Enlightenment thought; it has itself become the very thing it sought to overcome in the first place. The totalitarian mastery of nature and the Self paradoxically turns into myth. "What men want to learn from nature," Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote approximately a century after Leichhardt's disappearance:

is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive.⁵

Many reports from Leichhardt's family and from expeditioners who had no desire to participate in a second trek with him testify that Leichhardt was quite capable of inflicting destructive force upon himself and others. Already as a high school student Leichhardt was obsessed with the idea of disciplining his body.⁶ He almost starved himself to death several times and repeatedly marched overnight the 40 km from his school to his hometown in Trebatsch. Also, on Leichhardt's first expedition to Port Essington he frequently underwent moments of inhuman suffering, much to the discomfort of his companions. He often embarked upon individual side-expeditions to further his scientific collections and repeatedly jeopardized his own health in the process: "At one time, for example, he was without food for 36 hours and it took him four days to find his way back to the camp, where he arrived exhausted."⁷ In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer described the aporia of instrumental reason as a form of thinking that was determined to expel all that was mythical from the world only to become a myth itself: Enlightenment. Leichhardt, likewise, had gone off to explore the last remnants of the Australian mainland in an attempt to expel myth and to complete the human domination of nature, only to become a legend in his lifetime. Upon returning from his first expedition, during which he was considered to have gone missing and was presumed dead, he wrote in a letter:

We did come to Sydney, it was quite dark; we did go ashore, and then I thought to see my dear friend Lynd. So I went up George Street to the barracks. [...] And there was such a greeting. I was dead, and was alive again. I was lost, and was found.⁸

Thus, already after his expedition to Port Essington, Leichhardt was both an Enlightenment figure and a myth. Dead and alive, found and lost. As an example of a middle-class explorer, the historical figure of Leichhardt signifies nothing less than the European Enlightenment turned into myth at the edges of Western modernity, edges that in the context of postcolonial criticism still persist in disappearing.

Notes

¹ Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso, 1997, 12.

² Leichhardt, Ludwig, and Marcel Aurousseau. *The Letters of F. W. Ludwig Leichhardt*. London: published for the Hakluyt Society by Cambridge U.P, 1968, 992.

³ Petrarch, Francesco, and Rodney John Lokaj. *Petrarch's Ascent of Mount Ventoux: The Familiaris IV, I*. Roma: Edizioni Dell' Ateneo, 2006, 101.

⁴ Leichhardt, Ludwig, and Marcel Aurousseau. *The Letters of F. W. Ludwig Leichhardt*. London: published for the Hakluyt Society by Cambridge U.P, 1968, 994.

⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, 4.

⁶ Südfels, Aliya-Katarina. "Ludwig Leichhardt und Alexander von Humboldt." *HiN* XIII, 24 (2012). <http://www.potsdam.de/u/romanistik/humboldt/hin/hin24/inh_suedfels.htm#_ftn36>

⁷ Südfels. Translation: Dennis Mischke.

⁸ Favenc, Ernest. *The Explorers of Australia, and Their Work..* Christchurch, N.Z.: Whitcombe, 1908, 109.

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