

### ***A Voyage to The World in the Centre of the Earth: A Critical Introduction***

*A Voyage to The World in the Centre of the Earth Giving an Account of the Manners, Customs, Laws, Government, and Religion of the Inhabitants, Their Persons and habits described: With several other Particulars. In which is Introduced the History of an Inhabitant of the Air, Written by himself. With some account of the Planetary Worlds* (which I shall from here on refer to as, *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*) was published anonymously in 1755 and is a fascinating though, as yet, critically unexplored novel. This essay intends to show, through both close attention to the text and a broader investigation into the history of the book's production, that the novel offers a fascinating and unique insight into both the social and political context of its period as well as the developing nature of the literary marketplace in the mid-18th century.

#### **Plot Synopsis**

The book opens with the narrator giving some information about his background: that he was the second son in a well to do family, but was abandoned by them when he spent what little inheritance he had. Because of this, he made friends with the captain of a ship and journeyed to Naples, where, upon climbing Mount Vesuvius, a hole opened up beneath him taking him on a long fall to a world in the centre of the earth. Here, he is found by an old man, who takes him to his home. Whilst at their home, the narrator describes some of the things that he finds curious about this world: the fact that man is totally at peace with animals, resulting in all the animals being tame and the fact that no human, even the emperor, is considered above, or better than, any other. The narrator is then flown to the city by a bird where he dines with the emperor and meets Mr Thompson, an inhabitant from the outer world, who has spent over a hundred years in the centre. Mr Thompson then tells a tale of 'an inhabitant of the air' and his many reincarnations and adventures through space and on earth. Once Mr Thompson's long tale has ended, the narrator hears of an uprising in the Earthly Quarter of the central planet, where criminals who fall to the central earth are put, and the emperor decrees that all the males of the Earthly Quarter be castrated in their sleep. The next day the narrator encounters an old acquaintance, Mr Worldly, who tells him of his family's sadness and regret over his disappearance. After his permitted year in the centre of the earth, the narrator flies back up to the outer world, where he becomes suspicious of the evil intentions of those around him and retreats into solitude. He writes his book, and hopes to return to the centre of the earth.

## Critical analysis

The author of *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* is clearly preoccupied with three intertwined central themes: social justice, religion and philosophy. The book opens with clear animosity towards the British social structure of the period, especially the way in which social standing was determined by birth, ‘I was born a younger Brother, and met with the same fate those gentry generally do, *viz.* to starve for want; whilst he that had the good Luck to come into the World first, is riding in his coach and fix.’<sup>1</sup> It is this misfortune, resulting from nothing other than birth order, that results in him sailing to Naples and falling to a world in the centre of the earth where he discovers a world that has a seemingly perfect social order: ‘in this country there are no degrees of nobility. Everybody is equally respected, if they are honest, and a particular regard is shewn to nothing but old age.’<sup>2</sup> The narrator immediately compares this social structure to that of Britain’s by claiming that the people of the central world are, ‘astonished to hear that on Earth, almost the whole of what God created alike for the use of every individual is in the hands of the few.’<sup>3</sup> This is a very radical criticism to make in the 1700s, a century in which ‘There seemed no shortage of Englishmen, or, as it was often said, of Englishwomen, whose prime ambition in life was to climb up the social ladder.’<sup>4</sup> This relatively radical sentiment that threads through the novel is linked to the narrator’s other, slightly less radical, views on religion.

The author seems to see Britain’s social inequality as linked with its Catholic past and explores this through the tale of ‘the inhabitant of the air’ told by Mr Thompson. In this inset story ‘the inhabitant of the air’ describes a Catholic priest as someone who, ‘would not have quitted his pipe and bottle for the salvation of all mankind, and instead of having charity for the whole world, would sacrifice their souls and bodies to his own ambition.’<sup>5</sup> His attitude towards the Church of England, however, is much more positive, seeing it as a selfless force that has ‘charity enough to allow all mankind to be in a state of salvation.’<sup>6</sup> This may not be surprising considering that, throughout the century, ‘popular anti-Catholicism emerged regularly in times of stress, and was revived annually on November 5.’<sup>7</sup> However, the views of the narrator are not as clear cut as they may initially seem.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* (London, 1755) p. 2

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>4</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 65

<sup>5</sup> *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*, p. 133

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550-1760*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1987) p. 250

This complication is seen in his admiration of the religion of the inhabitants of the central world, which he claims is ‘blessed with all the morality taught us by the Christian religion in its purity, and without its adulteration.’<sup>8</sup> This comment alone moves the narrator away from the popular belief into regions of dissent by going against the law of Exodus 20:3 ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’<sup>9</sup> The narrator seems to be well aware of this unorthodox statement by claiming, ‘I shall give no account of their Religion being certain it will disoblige those of a different way of thinking with them.’<sup>10</sup> However, whereas religious minorities such as Catholics and Jews suffered at the hands of intolerance throughout the century, the same was not true of Christian dissenters, so much so that Lord Mansfield claimed in 1767, ‘It is now no crime for a man to say he is a dissenter; nor is it a crime for him not to take the sacrament according to the Church of England.’<sup>11</sup>

The narrator’s dissenting version of Christianity seems to be brought about through the philosophical and scientific beliefs expressed by those in the central earth. This is again explored through Mr Thompson, who tells the narrator that there is much more to the universe than earth, and that there is much more life in it than man, who, ‘has the arrogance to say that this small Grain of sand which we possess is the whole that God created to be inhabited.’<sup>12</sup> Although the insignificance of our solar system against the backdrop of the universe was discovered in the previous century, it was only just beginning to settle in the general public consciousness.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas ‘the realization that the earth was a lesser planet of one relatively unimportant star among millions proved less chastening than one might expect,’<sup>14</sup> it still ‘made the hypothesis of a God unnecessary for some men.’<sup>15</sup> For the narrator, however, it seems to do something in between the two; the knowledge of worlds and life beyond our own lead to a belief in better religions and of more effective social structures than experienced on earth. All in all, the main thing this knowledge seems to show is the complete inadequacy of man.

Whilst it is clear that *A Voyage to the World to the Centre of the Earth* contained views which could be seen as radical, there is still a large question concerning how such a mixture of social, religious and political views was both produced and received within the literary marketplace. This is an important line of inquiry to follow as it will not only enlighten us about the state of the literary

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<sup>8</sup> *A Voyage to the world at the Centre of the Earth*, p. 87

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 20:3 KJV

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Sharpe, p. 245

<sup>12</sup> *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*, pp. 107-108

<sup>13</sup> James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1986) p. 1

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 1-2

marketplace by 1755, but it will also enlighten us about the peculiar contents of the book. The best way to explore how the book functioned in the literary marketplace would be to see how it progressed through Robert Darnton's communication circuit, described in his essay, 'What is the History of Books?' which I have simplified slightly into four categories: influence, author, production and reception.

### ***A Voyage to the World in the Centre of The Earth* and what came before.**

Whilst *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* is relatively unique in its themes and ideas, it also borrows from previous writers' work for its style, and even some of its content. It is immediately obvious from the opening sentence that the narrator is aware of other similar works whilst trying to distance himself from them by claiming, 'It is not my intention, as is common amongst writers of travels, to entertain my readers with an account of my birth, parentage and education.'<sup>16</sup> He also references specific contemporary authors such as Swift, whom he criticizes for translating foreign languages in his works 'with no other view than to fill up a page'<sup>17</sup> and Sir Richard Steele, whom the narrator's friend in the central world claims is, 'one of the best writers from your world.'<sup>18</sup> Whilst the authors he directly mentions are clearly a great influence on his account of an extraordinary voyage, and some of the more satirical aspects of the novel, there is also a great deal of influence from authors that are not mentioned. The most obvious of these is Henry Fielding, whose style of breaking the fourth wall between reader and writer has been adopted. This can be seen at the end of chapters, where the narrator often makes remarks such as, 'if this is your hour of dining or supping, I will give you a fair opportunity, by concluding this chapter.'<sup>19</sup> However, the author has not only taken some of the stylistic effects from Fielding, he even has a scene remarkably similar to that of Book one, Chapter five of *Joseph Andrews*, in which the noble central character is seduced by a seemingly honorable mistress, who turns to rage when, through piety, the protagonists do not give in.<sup>20</sup> These similarities may not be surprising, as, in the 1750's, 'the shadows of Richardson and Fielding loom large.'<sup>21</sup> It is clear, therefore, that whilst many of the ideas and themes within *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* are unusual, and even unique, the style and even some of the content are still influenced by the popular writing of its day. This foundation of literature that came before is relevant to the rest of the chain of

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<sup>16</sup> *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*, p. 1

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164-170

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.53

communication that the book went through. However, what it most directly sheds light upon is the question of the novel's author.

## The Author

Whilst *A Voyage to the World at the Centre of the Earth* is anonymous, related by the nameless narrator, there was, at the time of publication, a possible author suggested. This suggestion was made in the only review of the novel, which observed that it seemed to be written by 'the author of the *Dog-birds, Glums, and Gawrys*'<sup>22</sup> Whilst *Dog-birds* was also anonymous, the other text the reviewer seems to be referring to, *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, A Cornishman*, in which Peter Wilkins visit the country of Glums and Gawrys, is written by Robert Paltock. The evidence for this belief, unless the reviewer knew more definitely about the authorship than he let on, seems to hang on one main factor: that both novels are fantastical voyages that feature subterranean worlds. However, there is also much evidence against this claim. The first is that, the two books we know were authored by Paltock, *Peter Wilkins* and *Memoirs of the Life of Parnese, a Spanish Lady*, both contain dedications to Paltock's friends and are signed R. P. and neither of these appear in *A Voyage to the World at the Centre of the Earth*. It would seem unlikely then, that Paltock was the author, though, certainly not impossible. Because of these uncertainties it is best to build a profile of the author out of what we can glean from his text. The first aspect of the author, that he was a reader, has already been discussed. However, he was not just a reader of those works published during his own lifetime, but also of classical and medieval texts. This is clear, for instance, from a footnote in which the author tries to persuade readers to read William of Newburgh's 'History of English Affairs',<sup>23</sup> and his knowledge of the ancient patrician families of Rome.<sup>24</sup> Because of this, we can tell that he was certainly well educated and almost certainly male. However, his book is not just littered with classical references, but also scientific ones, such as an accurate description of how a planet's atmosphere is key to its daylight:

'[The sun's] rays meeting with [the atmosphere], are refracted, and by that means occasion an equal and universal light. For the sun itself would be of little service to you, were it not for your atmosphere; without that, he would appear as a red hot piece of iron.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Monthly Review, 12 (1755: May) p. 395

<sup>23</sup> *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*, p. 12

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 185

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 39

The nature and possible origin of the author's astoundingly diverse knowledge is also suggested in a tiny, unassuming part of the novel: the fact that the narrator briefly mentions going to a place called Will's Coffee house: 'I met the captain at Will's Coffee House in Scotland Yard.'<sup>26</sup> Aytoun Ellis writes of Will's Coffee House, 'Of all the coffee-houses established under the commonwealth none is of greater interest or had a more profound influence on literature for a century or more, than the establishment . . . known as Will's.'<sup>27</sup> The Coffee House had many notable visitors, such as Swift, Steele and Dryden and was a place, 'enabling rich and poor to meet together for a better understanding one of the other; giving the "unlearned" in search of "good learning" a chance to acquire it from the masters of any particular branch of knowledge'<sup>28</sup>. This certainly gives us a possible reason for the author's varied knowledge and, even if he did not frequent Will's himself, shows that he wanted to be associated with its reputation. After all, the scientific description he gives of the atmosphere is clearly presented with the intention of educating, as is much of the other scientific, and even philosophical content of the novel. Therefore, it would seem possible that the varied and often unusual content of the book has arisen out of the kind of learned conversations and debates that took place at Will's. This unusual desire to explore, and possibly to teach, matters of philosophy and science and to examine their link to radical social and religious views, within the form of a novel is fascinating to bear in mind when considering the novel's next stage in the communication circuit: production.

## **The production**

*A Voyage to the World at the Centre of the Earth* was published only once, in 1755 by S. Crowder and H. Woodgate at The Golden Ball, in Pater-noster Row, London. Stanley Crowder had previously been apprentice to Sir James Hodges<sup>29</sup> who 'dealt largely in chap-books and penny histories'<sup>30</sup> whilst at the same time selling 'literature of a higher order, such as works of navigation and books on popular science.'<sup>31</sup> It may well be this background of working with both the lower, and higher orders that resulted in a product which seemed to mix both the scientific and learned, and the more popular voyage novel. However, it doesn't seem that the publishers quite knew how to

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

<sup>27</sup> Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee Houses* (London: Specker & Warburg, 1956) p. 58

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69

<sup>29</sup> *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1726 to 1775* ed. by H. R Plomer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932) p. 68

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

market the book. The advertising for the book seems have been relatively limited, consisting of a couple of adverts in newspapers with no other information than the name and price of the book.<sup>32</sup> It doesn't seem that those in charge of placing the advertisements within the papers quite knew how to place it either; an advert in *The Monthly Catalogue* for March 1755, places the book under 'Miscellaneous', along with *A Proper Explanation of the Oxford Almanack* and *A New Theory of Human Nature*, instead of under 'poetry and entertainment', with novels such as *Fanny; or The Amours of a West Country Lady*, and *The Rival Mother*.<sup>33</sup> However, more insight as to the publisher's aim for the novel can be seen in the physical book itself.

At first, the physical aspect of the book seems unremarkable: the book is relatively slender at 277 pages and, being duo-decimo, about the right size to fit in a pocket. The pages are of a basic quality, with simple black printing. The book is bound in calfskin, and has two thin bands of gold on the front and the back forming a border around the edge. However, whilst the book may be simple, its good quality binding and covering are still a slight selling point, as can be seen in one catalogue from 1785, which describes the book as, 'neat and gilt'.<sup>34</sup> All of this, and the price of three shillings, show that the book was being marketed to people of moderate income. However, the title page of the book shows much more clearly that, whilst they were trying to attract a wide audience, they were also trying to attract an inquisitive, and possibly educated, one. This can be seen most clearly in the font sizes, showing what they consider to be the most important, and relevant aspects of the title. The key words are, 'Voyage' and 'World', two very common words in travel literature, however, it is quickly followed by the more unusual, 'centre of the earth.' The eye is then quickly drawn to the next three boldest groups of information, 'History', 'Inhabitant of the Air' and 'Planetary worlds'. These key words constitute an interesting mixture of language familiar both to the front pages of a novel and of a popular science book. Almost all of the language suggests some kind of exploration, with 'Voyage' and 'Planetary worlds' suggesting a more physical exploration, whilst 'history' and even 'inhabitant' suggest a more academic form of exploration. However, both forms stay grounded in the world of more popular fiction: creating a blend of the fictional and factual worlds that the author is clearly trying to bridge with his work. However, whilst we have built up a clear image of the author's possible aim for the novel, as well as a brief sketch of what inspired it, the final phase of Darnton's communication system, shows that the marketplace was unprepared for such a novel.

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<sup>32</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer* (London, England), April 5, 1755 - April 8, 1755; Issue 1389.

<sup>33</sup> *The Monthly Catalogue for March, 1755.*, London Magazine, or, Gentleman's monthly intelligencer, 24 (1755:Mar.) p.142

<sup>34</sup> James Robson, *A Catalogue of a numerous collection of the most curious and valuable books in all languages, comprehending the libraries of John Staker, M.D. the Revd J. Dockwray, ... to be sold cheap, this day, 1785* (London, 1785) p. 218

## Reception and Readership

Despite the apparent efforts made by the author to combine his radical philosophical, social and political views and scientific knowledge within a popular form of storytelling, and then market it for a wide audience, *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* does not seem to have been received very positively by the general readership of the 1750's. The Monthly review branded it unflatteringly, as 'a Philosophical Romance'<sup>35</sup>, and compared it to, 'some other late marvelous performances, which we have had the ill luck to peruse.'<sup>36</sup> The very vague wording of the review, and the offhand suggestion that three very different books may have the same author, could suggest that the reviewer had not read all of the book. Regardless, however, this mildly damning review still seems to reflect something of the general attitude towards the book, which, even five years after the first publication, had not sold out.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately though, with this book, we are lucky enough to have a record of some of its owners.

We know that Sir Thomas Gillibrand Esq of Chorley Hall owned a copy of *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* because his bookplate is in a copy of the novel at Chawton House. There is also a surprising volume of records of the novel in the named collections of wealthy and well educated men who were recently deceased, including: Mr John Hutton, of St Paul's Churchyard<sup>38</sup>, John Staker M.D or Rev. J Dockwray<sup>39</sup> and, most impressively, Major Thomas Pearson,<sup>40</sup> whose enormous collection of books was sold in 1781 for £1807.<sup>41</sup> However, as Robert Darnton notes, 'Reading remains the most difficult stage to study in the circuit that books follow.'<sup>42</sup> We don't know how highly the text was valued by any of the novel's owners other than Chorley's, whose book shows little sign of being read more than once: there are no comments or other inscriptions and the spine and pages are in near perfect condition, free of tears and creases. However, the fact that these men owned the book at all tells us something about the success of the book.

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<sup>35</sup> Monthly Review, 12 (1755: May) p. 394

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* p. 395

<sup>37</sup> *Public Ledger or The Daily Register of Commerce and Intelligence* (London, England), Saturday, May 17, 1760; Issue 109.

<sup>38</sup> Sam Paterson and W. Bristow, *A catalogue of the large and curious English library of Mr. John Hutton, Late of St. Paul's Church-Yard, London, Deceased* (London, 1764) p. 131

<sup>39</sup> James Robson, p. 218

<sup>40</sup> Thomas and John Egerton, *Bibliotheca Pearsoniana. A catalogue of the library of Thomas Pearson, Esq. (deceased) containing A very Extensive Collection of the best and rarest books in Every Branch of English Literature* (London, 1788) p. 133

<sup>41</sup> William Younger Fletcher, *English Book Collectors*, ed. by Alfred Pollard (London: Keegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Company Ltd, 1902) p. 256 (accessed via: [http://www.munseys.com/diskfive/enbo.htm#1\\_0\\_2](http://www.munseys.com/diskfive/enbo.htm#1_0_2) on 08/12/2010)

<sup>42</sup> Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2002).

All of the owners match at least a part of the target audience that the author of *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* seemed to be writing for: the educated. However whilst the Catalogues of these men mainly contain chapters on subjects such as ‘Mathematics, Arts and Sciences’<sup>43</sup> and ‘Dictionaries, Lexicons, &c. various Languages’<sup>44</sup> they also seem to have had, like the author, more popular reading tastes, with Thomas Pearson’s catalogue containing 13 out of 234 pages dedicated to novels and Romances. Whilst this seems to show an interesting acceptance of the novel by certain members of the educated community, there is not a large enough sample of evidence to say, with any certainty, how the novel was received. Instead, we must simply accept the fact that, whilst the book seems to have been of interest to certain educated and presumably wealthy members of society, the book did not have a great deal of impact elsewhere in the market.

## Conclusion

So far this essay has attempted draw an accurate picture of the life of *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*, right through from conception to readership. It has also tried to show how some of the central themes of the novel were a departure from social norm. However, what is the value of studying this relatively unusual novel, which was not especially appreciated in its own time? Its unassuming covers do not hide an unappreciated masterpiece of the English language: its satire does not bite to nearly the same level as Swift, nor is it as humorous as Sterne. However, the novel is an example of a work which manifests many of the diverse aspects of the changing world around it: from an increasingly complex social order, to a gradual movement toward religious pluralism. However arguably the most important aspect of this book is that it challenges the assumption held by many that ‘most novelists of the 1750s did nothing more than fiddle at the margins with the old.’<sup>45</sup> Instead, it shows that the literary marketplace, rather than only producing pale imitations of Richardson and Fielding, was actually, to some extent, experimental and innovative in its desire to keep up with a century ‘marked more by change than by continuity.’<sup>46</sup> In the present case, the combination of science and fiction would not be picked up again until the end of the century, and become truly popular until the next century, with the likes of E. A. Poe and H. G. Wells, who turned the combination of science and fiction into the touchstone genre of western literature of which *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* was a seed.

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<sup>43</sup> Robson p. 3

<sup>44</sup> ibid

<sup>45</sup> Keymer, p.

<sup>46</sup> W. A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, (London: Longman, 1998) p. 1

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