Extract from AMIGONI, David, Colonies, cults and evolution*, 2007, Cambridge University Press, pp.85-87*
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At the conclusion of the first edition of his work, unchanged in the second, Charles Darwin reflected on travel and the observation of nature as sources of cultivation and self-improvement:

[admiring beauty] depends chiefly on an acquaintance with the individual parts of each view: I am strongly induced to believe that, as in music, the person who understands every note will, if he also possesses a proper taste, more thoroughly enjoy the whole, so he who examines each part of a fine view, may also thoroughly comprehend the full and combined effect. Hence, a traveller should be a botanist, for in all views plants form the chief embellishment. Group masses of naked rock even in the wildest forms, and they may for a time afford a sublime spectacle, but they will soon grow monotonous. Paint them with bright and varied colours, as in northern Chile, they will become fantastic; clothe them with vegetation, they must form a decent, if not a beautiful picture….

Nothing can be more improving to a young naturalist, than a journey to distant countries. It both sharpens, and partly allays that want and craving, which, as Sir J. Herschel remarks, a man experiences although every corporeal sense be fully satisfied. The excitement from the novelty of objects, and the chance of success, stimulate him to increased activity. Moreover, as a number of isolated facts soon become uninteresting, the habit of comparison leads to generalisation. On the other hand, as the traveller stays but a short time in each place, his descriptions must generally consist of mere sketches, instead of detailed observations. Hence arises, as I have found to my cost, a constant tendency to fill up the wide gaps of knowledge, by inaccurate and superficial hypotheses. (*Journal* 1845, 476, 479-80)

Darwin draws on the language of taste and cultivation in music to guide the reader in the appreciation of nature. The reading of cultural inscriptions serves as a powerful analogy here in the sense that Darwin stresses the importance of an aesthetic understanding that strives to unify part and whole: it is important for the botanist to understand the whole picture created by coloured floras and entangled vegetation. Darwin also reflects on the desire for self-improving knowledge in ways that directly appeal to science as an intellectual pursuit. For Darwin, self-improvement is founded upon sensation and desire: seeing nature in 'distant countries' is a means of allaying a 'craving' for mental satisfaction, even though the bodily senses be satiated. But the excitement and novelty of nature also sharpen the desire for mental satisfaction, which looks beyond 'the fact' and towards the speculative building of generalised theories. 'The chance of success', or ambition in constructing new knowledge, is an important motivator in travelling to distant countries to discover the secrets of nature.

Darwin cites Sir John Herschel as the authoritative theorist of controlled intellectual desire. Herschel made this connection between knowledge and desire in his influential *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830), which Darwin later described as having stirred in him 'a burning zeal to add even the most humble contribution to the

noble structure of Natural Science'. Herschel's account of 'the mind of man' held that 'his views enlarge, and his desires and wants increase, in the full proportion of the faculties afforded to their gratification'. Herschel's view of the mind cultivated by science continued to uphold mind as a divine gift. Herschel's discourse indeed warned of the dangers of atheism attendant on materialism that might 'foster in its cultivators an overweaning self-conceit' which might lead them 'to doubt the immortality of the soul and to scoff at revealed religion'. Such warnings were issued especially in connection with the question of the transmutation of species, where the ambitious, over-reaching mind might deny its dependence on its divine origins – though as we have seen, Herschel himself was utterly transfixed by this 'mystery of mysteries'.

For Herschel, mind was the only faculty which gave humanity an advantage in, as Foucault put it in his formulation of the anthropological turn in western thought, 'that perilous region where life is in confrontation with death'. For Herschel opens his account of the principles of natural philosophy by stressing the maladapted nature of man: physically, man is 'remarkable only for the absence of those powers and qualities which obtain for other animals a degree of security and respect'. Without mind man would

> be disregarded by some, and hunted down by others, till after a few generations his species would become altogether extinct, or, at best, would be restricted to a few islands in tropical regions, where the warmth of the climate, the paucity of enemies, and the abundance of vegetable food, might permit it to linger.

Herschel's nature is an arena of limits, scarcity and threats from competitors; the extinction of the human species lurks as the ultimate expression of finitude. Without mind, the limited capacities of the human body might allow the species to 'linger' as, at best, isolated inhabitants upon tropical islands. It was a capacity for imitation, reflectiveness and aesthetic appreciation that enabled humans to become colonists who cultivated more than 'the crude productions of the soil'. Man 'approves and feels the highest admiration for the harmony of… [nature's] parts, the skill and efficiency of its contrivances. Some of these which he can best trace and understand he attempts to imitate, and finds that to a certain extent, though rudely and imperfectly, he can succeed'. In one sense, Darwin's *Journal of Researches* validates this narrative. But Darwin's writing also supplements it, turning Herschel's narrative on its head, and finds unfamiliar sources of meaning in images of mimicry, as well as lingering, stray colonists. And it locates new ways of explaining the laws of life through encounters with some very differently constituted, yet in their way highly effective, inhabitants of tropical islands.