

Georg Forster in Vilnius: Reverberations of the great age of ocean navigation

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Abstract. This article discusses the contribution to the studies of the ‘Eastern’ and ‘Southern’ lands in the 18th century by naturalist, travel writer, and ethnologist George Forster, who had accompanied his father, Johann Reinhold Forster, on Captain James Cook’s expedition of 1772–5 to circumnavigate the globe and who was a professor of natural history at Vilnius University from 1784 to 1787. The paper presents the background of European long-distance navigation, examines Forster’s contribution to Cook’s second voyage, and reconsiders his work completed at the Vilnian Academy against the broader perspective of the European notions of travel literature and ethnography of the Pacific region, as well as the prospect of Oriental studies, gradually emerging as an academic field in Western Europe and, later on, in Vilnius.

Introduction

When Poland-born German naturalist Georg Forster (1754–1794)¹ resided in Vilnius, Lithuania, in the capacity of professor of natural history at Vilnius University, he was translating into German the account of the last voyage of the late Captain James Cook (1728–1779), pursuing his famous dispute with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) about the origin and definition of race,² and eventually making plans for his next

¹ Forster’s Christian name is often spelled ‘George’. In this paper, I adopt the spelling ‘Georg’, which is consistent in German publications.

² Forster started the dispute after Kant had published ‘Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrasse’ and ‘Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Geschichte der Menschheit’ in *Berlinische Monatschrift* in 1785 and 1786 successively. Forster considered Kant a great thinker, but according to his own words, could not tolerate Kant’s ‘philosophical paroxysms’ and his wish ‘to shape nature according to his logical categories’. See Forster’s letter to Sömmerring, 8–12 June 1786 (Kilius 1988, 250). Kant insisted that there were four races, all of which had one origin, while Forster maintained that there were only two races, Blacks and Whites, and that they originated separately in two different parts of the world. Although a supporter of the doctrine of polygenism, which at that time was considered more progressive by the anticlericals, Forster claimed on the evidence provided by Cook’s voyages that human nature, influenced as it is by climate, is nevertheless everywhere specifically the same. Forster also presented a critique of Kant’s theory about the origin of life by defending organic power as an empirical concept. Forster, like Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), was a champion of observation against metaphysics but, in Kant’s opinion, Forster violated naturalistic ideals because the concept of an organic power attributes purposes to things in nature which are beyond the limits of possible experience and is, therefore, utterly metaphysical since one can understand purposive

expedition to the South Seas that, according to his own words, would through the intervention of *deus ex machina* liberate him from his 'Pontus' in Vilnius, and take him to New Zealand, the Society and Sandwich islands, the North American coast above California, the Kurile Islands, Japan, and maybe to the shores of China,³ a dream that failed to come true.

Forster, however, had not always been so dismissive about Vilnius, where the university had generously paid his debts and offered him a position after his book, *A Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution, Commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the Years, 1772, 3, 4, and 5*, made Forster a celebrity all over Europe but failed to improve his financial situation.

The Commission of National Education of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which negotiated the contract with Forster, placed several tasks before him, although none of them were related to his earlier experience as Cook's co-navigator. Apart from teaching, he was expected to investigate local natural resources and to assess the economic, agricultural and medical value of the local vegetation. His other responsibilities included re-opening neglected copper mines and opening new mineral fields, notably searching for new veins of rock salt in view of Austria's having gained control of the main old Polish salt mines of Bochnia and Wielichka in 1772.

Forster took his tasks seriously but most of his direct responsibilities were not completed due to various reasons. What Forster achieved was, however, an outstanding academic record, not, in a narrow sense, as important for Vilnius University itself, as it was, in a broader range of ideas, significant for all European science of the 18th century, which coincided with the age of long-distance ocean navigation and had an impact on the disciplines of geography, ethnology, philosophy, biology, etc.

In this paper, I will focus on the aspects of Forster's legacy from the Vilnius period that are relevant to his interest in the foreign cultures of the Asian and Pacific regions, and, first of all, in the so-called Southern Lands, which were undergoing transition at that time from the 'unknown world' to the world known to contemporary European scholars and studied by them. With regard to the 200-year history of attempts to introduce Asian studies into the curriculum of Vilnius University as an academic discipline, it is of critical interest to observe Forster's work at Vilnius University, which preceded the establishment of a professorship of Oriental studies by a couple of decades, and consider to what extent, if at all, Forster's appearance in the local academic world was a factor in stirring the romantic fascination and, later, scholarly

activity only through one's own experience. Although animals and plants seem to act purposively, they nevertheless do not appear to have conscious intentions. See Kuehn 2001, 343–4; and Beiser 1993, 154–9.

³ See, for example, Forster to Herder, 1 September 1787 (Kilius 1988, 401–2).

interest of Polish and Lithuanian intellectuals in cultures different from those in Europe.

It is all the more important since Forster was in many ways a pioneer, formulating his own ideas in the newly emerging disciplines of science and even establishing the foundation for the disciplines themselves as in the case of ethnology. His independent research conducted in Lithuania outside of the duties assigned to him by Vilnius University is, at its core, reflective of his long-term intellectual concerns, which had developed as a result of his ocean voyages, and of his desire to speak of those concerns to European academia, of which the scholars and students at Vilnian Academy were aspiring to be a part.

Ocean navigation and its significance

Since the time when the explorers led by Ferdinand Magellan (c. 1480–1521) completed the first circumnavigation of the globe, modern world history has often been written and read as an account of the world-wide expansion of European civilisation. After Magellan's death and by the time the French admiral Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (1729–1811) and the British captain James Cook (1728–1779) made their names as leading navigators, most of the blank spaces on the European maps were filled in with newly given names of the lands which the travellers of several generations had surveyed and charted.

In the second half of the 18th century, the great European powers planned their entry into the Pacific and started to look at the area in terms of economic and strategic considerations following the breakdown of the, first, Portuguese and then Spanish *mare clausum* regime in the region. It was an era when the European empires were competing for dominance over the world, and large-scale expeditions to unknown lands were sent out as government projects. Even though the vessels had become larger by that time, they had also become easier to manoeuvre, and the manpower required was reduced. As a result, working and living conditions on board ships were greatly improved, and the space, which was earlier cramped, became large enough to load equipment for scientific research during the voyage (Yamamoto 1990, 407).

The sea voyages of the second half of the 18th century were not simply maritime affairs. The ships of Admiral Bougainville, Captain Cook, or Jean-François de la Pérouse (1741–1788) carried astronomers, naturalists and painters who gathered and documented material on environments and people. The knowledge which was brought back to Europe by the voyagers of the 18th century was termed 'geographical discovery' even though the lands the navigators encountered on their course were mostly inhabited and, therefore, had been 'discovered' by the settlers of other races long before the Europeans even started to build their ocean-going vessels. But the

term was conveniently employed, first of all, because 'discoverers' are, by definition, entitled to the ownership of their 'discoveries', and because, in the case of the European voyages of circumnavigation, the previously anonymous lands, peoples and phenomena were not only registered but also described, analysed and incorporated safely into the continental systems of learning.

Throughout ignoring indigenous toponyms and marking the visited lands with the names of their European monarchs, sponsors, memorable dates, etc., the navigators dispatched from the continent were taming the unknown and making it familiar to invaders and future colonisers, as well as introducing systematic order into the maps and charts, not unlike their contemporary Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), who ordered all the living organisms by developing a system for naming and ranking them (Haruna 1990, 4).

Theories were tested, and contemporary marine geography was the testing-ground as a science based as much on exploration and facts as on the study of ancient records, which required knowledge of history and literature. One of the objects for which Captain Cook was commissioned by the British Government during his second world circumnavigation with the Forsters on board his ship was to search for the mythical southern continent, which appeared on European maps from the 15th century as the hypothetical Terra Australis. It is considered Cook's achievement that despite his failure to sight Antarctica he managed to navigate around New Zealand to prove it was not a part of any larger mainland and then sail at southern latitudes high enough to dismiss the possibility of a landmass with a temperate climate.

The 18th century not only witnessed the sea voyages themselves but also saw the creation of many narratives of sea travel. The first circumnavigations of the globe by Portuguese and Spanish sailors that involved drastic encounters with foreign tribes had already become the distant past for the generation of Georg Forster, and the aggressive colonial competition of the 19th century had not yet begun. Although occasional clashes with native people did occur during the visits to new lands, the narrators of the 18th-century voyages expressed themselves in academic and philosophical rather than military terms, and pure scientific curiosity was the guiding force behind their enterprises.

The accounts of voyages therefore fulfilled general interest in adventure and foreign lands. Still more important is that the accounts of the voyages made a major contribution to natural science, providing data for research in natural history, geography, geology, botany, social studies, etc. Many of the well-known narratives also added to the new understanding of the region of Pacific and Australasian societies which, in 1804, was named Oceania by French geographers. The method of creating an image of the Pacific in the narratives was, however, 'archetypically Orientalist',

to borrow the Judith Snodgrass term, in the way that they looked at the societies they encountered as an object of exclusively Western discourse and consequently neglected local voices (Snodgrass 2003, 7, 11).

One of the most influential accounts was the one written by Bougainville, and his depiction of Tahiti became a sensation. He and a French naturalist Philibert Commerçon (1727–1773), who accompanied Bougainville on his voyage of circumnavigation, together gave currency to the phrase *sauvage noble* through creating the myth of Tahiti (or New Cythera, as they named it) as an earthly Eden. The notion was spread to the literary salons and court of France and made a strong impact on the utopian visions of the French philosophers and writers before the revolution, as well as on Georg Forster.⁴

Forster's account of world circumnavigation

Georg Forster was born in the Polish province of Prussia, near Danzig (present Gdańsk) where his father, Johann Reinhold Forster (1729–1798), a German theologian and naturalist of Scottish background, served as a Lutheran pastor. When Georg was 10 years old, he joined his father on an expedition to Russia where the senior Forster was invited by Catherine II (1729–1796) to investigate and survey the situation of the German settlements on the Volga River.

Johann Reinhold was a huge authority to his son and encouraged the latter to study natural sciences. The journey to Russia was important for the future career of Georg, who learned from his father how to conduct research in the field. However, the report which J.R. Forster presented to the court was critical towards the Russian provincial authorities, and for that reason, he was no longer welcome to continue the research in Russia. In 1766, the Forsters settled in England, where Johann Reinhold's intellectual accomplishments gained him employment as a teacher of natural history and as a translator.

His son Georg was also engaged in translation work from an early age. Since Georg's education was not systematic, his Latin was relatively limited and his knowledge of Greek was not active, but he was fluent in half a dozen contemporary languages.

⁴ The first edition in English of Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde* was translated into English at an early stage by Georg's father Johann Reinhold Forster. See Bougainville, Lewis De. *A Voyage Round the World*, Translated From the French By John Reinhold Forster, F.A.S. London: For J. Nourse And T. Davies, 1772. It is believed that Georg Forster did a substantial part of the translation although his name, as a co-translator, did not appear in the book (Forster 1999, xxviii). Later, the younger Forster engaged himself in the translation of other travel accounts; apart from the narrative of Cook's last voyage translated during his stay in Vilnius, he also rendered *A Voyage to the South Sea, by Lieutenant William Bligh*, London, 1792 from English into German under the title *Logbuch der Bounty: Von William Bligh, Captain der Großbritannienischen Flotte, im Jahre 1793 aus dem Englischen übertragen und mit Anmerkungen begleitet von Georg Forster*.

Georg's future career, however, was mainly shaped by the fact that along with his father he participated in the second world circumnavigation of Captain James Cook during the years 1772–1775. This expedition, the principal task of which was to find out whether an Antarctic continent existed, was planned after the first successful voyage of circumnavigation made by Cook, from which he returned aboard the *Endeavour* a year earlier. The senior Forster was recommended for the next expedition's post of principal naturalist by the botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), who travelled with Cook on his first voyage and intended to go on his second one but had to abandon the idea because of the technical difficulties with his equipment and disagreements with the Navy Board. After J.R. Forster was employed, he then invited his 17-year-old son Georg to join the expedition as his assistant.

Over the course of the voyage, the Forsters explored the natural world in the Pacific region, observed its zoology, and discovered many hitherto unknown species of vegetation in the Southern Hemisphere. Forster's name was commemorated in some of the plants they collected such as *Phormium tenax* J.R. Forster & G. Forster, commonly known as New Zealand flax, in addition to *Myosotis Forsteri*, a New Zealand species of forget-me-not, and others, as well as *Forstera*, a group of small, perennial grass-like plants in the family Stylidiaceae with four species endemic to New Zealand and one, called *Forstera bellidifolia*, endemic to Tasmania⁵. Besides that, since Cook had a habit of naming some of the lands spotted during his voyage after his crew members, one of the stretches of water in the Sandwich Islands Group sighted on course was called Forster's Bay (now known as Forster's Passage) after his naturalists.

The *Resolution*, Cook's legendary ship, and the Forsters as a part of her crew returned safely in England in 1775. Even though Captain Cook was not a novice to the Pacific region, scientifically the route of his second voyage covered some of the *terra incognita* unfamiliar to the academic public, and his homecoming was eagerly awaited by academicians as an event which in a sense could be compared with the return of astronauts to the earth in our days.

J.R. Forster reasserted his name as a scientist during the expedition, but he became known not only for his academic ability but also for his unmanageable temper, and this could be the major reason why he was not allowed to write a narrative of the voyage and was downgraded to the status of a mere employee aboard the vessel, disregarding the previous verbal arrangement with the British Admiralty according to which Cook and the senior Forster should have shared the writing job, with Cook's journals functioning as the basic text and Forster taking charge of the complimenting entries in natural history, ethnography, etc.

⁵ The genus *Forstera* was named in honour of the Forsters by Carl Linnaeus the Younger (1741–1783) in 1780.

Before the Forsters embarked on the journey, they had made themselves familiar with many travel narratives, and the senior Forster had even translated the account by Bougainville into English. J.R. Forster therefore rather understandably had the ambition to write his own account of the voyage, which would have established his name in scientific circles and secured his financial situation since travel narratives of this kind were very popular in Europe. Eventually, however, Forster, who had already submitted the opening chapter of his account to the Admiralty but refused to edit its length, was forbidden to publish an independent account altogether before the official one by Cook appeared.

Forster was offended but not discouraged, and a two-volume unofficial account was eventually written in English and published in 1777 under the authorship of his son Georg Forster, who used his father's journals and his own records to compose *A Voyage round the World*. Although it is true that Georg relied extensively on his father's texts, the final book is considered to be his own accomplishment, in which his individual style and consolidating approach are manifested. His father was often absent from London during the nine months that Georg took to produce the book, and apparently did not get involved in the actual work of writing it whatsoever.⁶

The narrative by Georg Forster deals with St Helena and other islands in the Atlantic Ocean, and includes descriptions of the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, the Antarctic Circle, Tierra del Fuego in South America, and other territories visited by Cook's ship during the voyage, but his focus is mainly directed on the South Pacific: from the Marquesas to Easter Island, from New Hebrides (present Vanuatu) to New Caledonia, and above all, New Zealand and Tahiti. In his account, Forster provides not only geographical details but discusses at length the mode of life, material culture, social relations, etc. of the peoples he came across in the Pacific region, a fact which makes his book stand out as one of the most illustrative works in the genre and one of the most important documents in the history of European travel literature.

Cook's official account followed the Georg Forster's narrative by six weeks but it contained many official engravings whose plates were denied to the Forsters by the Admiralty and was therefore considerably more attractive to the market.⁷

⁶ J.R. Forster later wrote his own account of the voyage, under the title *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World on Physical Geography, Natural History, and Ethic Philosophy*, which was published in 1778.

⁷ See Cook, James. *A voyage towards the South Pole, and round the world: performed in His Majesty's ships the Resolution and Adventure, in the years 1772, 1773, 1774, and 1775 written by James Cook, Commander of the Resolution. In which is included Captain Furneaux's narrative of his proceedings in the Adventure during the separation of the ships. In two volumes. Illustrated with maps and charts, and a variety of portraits of persons and views places drawn during the Voyage by Mr. Hodges and engraved by the most eminent Masters*, 2 vols, London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777. The work was written with the help of Canon John Douglas (1721–1807), and

As a result, the sales of Forster's English narrative did not cover the publication costs.

Despite this unpromising start, the account written by Georg Forster was almost immediately translated into German. The translation was made in cooperation with Forster's German friend Rudolf Erich Raspe (1736–1794),⁸ but even those parts of *A Voyage round the World* that Georg was not translating himself were closely supervised by him. The title page of the translated book contains the name of Johann Reinhold Forster as its co-author, but in fact it was the work of Georg alone. As such, the account became widely read throughout Europe, mostly in its German version, and its success among European intellectuals was phenomenal.⁹

Later, it also became a practice to publish *A Voyage round the World* in the format of a digest and merge it with Cook's account, especially in French editions. In one way or another, the narrative earned the younger Forster recognition and established his name as a talented young scholar and writer. His description of Tahiti was included in collections of selected texts throughout Europe and was memorised by enthusiastic readers.

Georg Forster could converse with ease in both English and French, and in Germany he was known as a distinguished stylist, but even though his writing is expressive, he valued solid fact above anything else. The interests of Georg ranged widely, and he and his father could suitably be called natural philosophers rather than natural historians. All this is visible in his account, the language of which is both easy-to-read and polished and the text of which renders ethnographic facts in an effective way and accurately introduces many hitherto unknown Pacific peoples while demonstrating a genuine interest in their lifestyle. Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), a follower of Forster, in his five-volume work, *Kosmos*, called his book

some passages are taken verbatim from the journal of the British astronomer, William Wales (ca. 1734–1798), a co-navigator of Cook on his second voyage. Many of the engravings were based on drawings made by the famous British painter William Hodges (1744–1797), who sailed with Cook alongside the Forsters.

⁸ Raspe is the famous creator of the English version of *Baron Munchhausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, which became the source for later adaptations of Baron Münchhausen stories in other languages.

⁹ The earliest edition of the account of Captain Cook's second voyage that Vilnius University Library possesses is also a copy of the German edition *Johann Reinhold Forster's Reise um die Welt während den Jahren 1772 bis 1775, In dem von Seiner itztregierenden Großbritannischen Majestät auf Entdeckungen ausgeschieden und durch den Capitain Cook geführten Schiffe the Resolution unternommen / Beschrieben und herausgegeben von dessen Sohn und Reisegefährten George Forster. Vom Verfasser selbst aus dem Englischen übersetzt, mit dem Wesentlichen aus des Capitain Cooks Tagebüchern und anderen Zusätzen für den deutschen Leser vermehrt und durch Kupfer erläutert*, Berlin den Haude und Spener, 1784. The edition is marked by Exlibris of 'O[r]dinis P[raedicatorum] Prov[inciae] Litv[anae] FR[ater] Dominicus Siwicki', a Dominican brother and a well-known book collector of the late 18th century.

a pioneering work which greatly shaped the emerging genre of scientific travel texts rather than simply entertaining ones (Kudaba 1988, 11).

Following the success of his publications, Georg Forster was made a member of many leading academies, first of all the Royal Society in London, and started teaching at the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel. He could not, however, meet his expenses, and as his debts were growing, he decided to accept the offer of the Commission of National Education of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to take a position at Vilnius University as professor of *historia naturalis*, which was the main subject taught by science professors of the 18th century.¹⁰

Georg Forster and the intellectual climate of the 18th century

Georg Forster may not have developed an attachment to Vilnius, where he spent three years from 1784 to 1787, but he never lost his penchant for classical Greek and Latin metaphors, which he invoked to describe his ordeal in Lithuania and which he shared with most of the fellow circumnavigators of the world, first of all Bougainville, who compared Tahiti with the Elysian Fields and with the Garden of Eden and who introduced the chapter dedicated to the island with a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid*.¹¹

It was a common thing for the famous narrators of ocean voyages to balance scientific details against the ornate writing style rooted in classical literature. In their accounts, technical information such as latitudes and longitudes, Latin botanical terms, and the meticulous description of local tools and customs is interwoven with a most poetic prose. When writing about Tahiti, Forster, himself a disciple of the time, implements bucolic imagery and describes a serene, idyllic landscape, a certain *locus amoenus*, which in the language of embellished prose responded perfectly not only to the poetry of Horace but also to the paintings of the day that represented the transition period from Baroque to Rococo of the mid 18th century (Mishima 2003, 464).

We breathed the most delicious air in the world, fraught with odours which might have revived a dying man; the sea-breeze played with our hair and gently cooled us; a number of small birds twittered on all sides, and many amorous doves cooed harmoniously in the

¹⁰ The Department of Natural History was founded at Vilnius University in 1781 as an independent department of natural science.

¹¹ 'Lucis habitamus opacis, / Riparumque toros et prata recentia rivis / Incolimus' (Virgil, Book VI) ('We live in these densely wooded groves and rest on the soft couches of the river bank and in the fresh water-meadows', Virgil. *The Aeneid*, trans. David Alexander West, 2003). The full text by Bougainville himself in the English translation goes as follows: 'I thought I was transported to the garden of Eden; we crossed turf, covered with fine fruit trees, and intersected by little rivulets, which kept up a pleasant coolness in the air, without any of those inconveniences which humidity occasions... One would think himself in the Elysian Fields'. Cit. from *The Politician's Dictionary* 1775, 297–8.

deepest shade of the tree under which we were seated. ... This secluded spot, so rich in the best productions of nature, where we sat solitary with no other human being besides our two natives, struck us with the idea of enchanted ground, which being the creation of our own gay fancy, is commonly adorned with all possible beauties at once. In fact, there could not have been a more desirable spot for a little place of retirement, according to the elegant imagination of Horace, if it had only been supplied with a crystal fountain or a little murmuring rill! But water is unfortunately the only blessing denied this charming little island. (Book II, Chapter I 'Run from the Society Isles to the Friendly Isles, with an Account of our Transactions there', 1773 October; cit. from Forster 1999, 241)

The scenery lacks running water, the presence of which would make the panorama perfect, but the mere reference to its absence hints at the general pattern of the contemporary perception of paradise. Bougainville, in his own account, even described one rather sentimental scene he witnessed in Tahiti as 'worthy of Boucher's brush' (Bougainville 1772, 214), a straightforward expression of Rococo aesthetics.

The epigraph provided by Forster from Horace's verse 'Ille terrarum mihi praeter omnes Angulus ridet' ('That corner of the world more than any other smiles on me') (Odes, Book II, Ode VI, Verse 13) is likewise eloquent and suggestive of his own tone in Chapter VI in Book II 'An Account of our second Visit to the Island of O-Taheitee', which describes the second stay of Cook's crew on Tahiti. This time the island is described as 'a country which perfectly resembled a garden' (Forster 1999, 358), another connotation of Eden.

While the age of Enlightenment was gradually coming to the end, the ideas of sentimentalism (*Empfindsamkeit*), among other concepts, were resonant in the account written by the young Forster, who at this age believed with religiously motivated empathy in Providence and in Nature, which supplies 'a whole race of men with the necessaries of life' (Book II Chapter V 'Run from Easter Island to the Marquesas—Stay in Madre-de-Dios Harbour, on Waitahoo—Course from thence through the Low Islands to Taheitee'; cit. from Forster 1999, 346).

For all the sentimental responses to the surrounding landscapes by contemporary writers, however, the comprehension of nature in Forster's day was experiencing considerable changes, and his account of the landscape of Dusky Sound in New Zealand is a tribute to this transformation:

The interior ranges of mountains called the Southern Alps, appeared very distinctly, of a great height, and covered with snow on their summits. We passed by a number of shady islands, which contained little coves and rivulets; and on one of the projecting points, opposite the last island, we saw a fine cascade falling into the water, over a steep rock, clothed with thick bushes and trees. The water was perfectly calm, polished, and transparent; the landscape was distinctly reflected in it, and the various romantic shapes of the steep mountains, contrasted in different masses of light and shade, had an admirable effect. (Book I, Chapter V 'Stay at Dusky Bay; Description of it, and Account of our Transactions there'; cit. from Forster 1999, 98–9)

The Romantic Era was already under way in the second half of the 18th century, and this text is one of the first indications of the emerging perception of beauty as 'majestic' and 'overwhelming', notions that Kant was also beginning to discuss in his essays. Such an environment, which represented only danger before and was the object of worship and awe, was now offering the possibility of aesthetic experience (Mishima 2003, 465). Forster was some thirty years ahead of his time by finding glamour in the steep cliffs of New Zealand and seeing beauty not only in the pastoral and peaceful scenes, which still remained the preference among the upper layers of society, but also in the imposing and heroic panoramas which would take over the imagination of later generations.

Philosopher and scholar were two inseparable aspects embraced by the intellectuals of the day. While the texts about Pacific islands were often the means for the authors to express their ideas on the human and the divine, the critical approach and analytical comment were also considered the responsibility of the traveller of the time. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) consolidated this position in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*:

One does not open a book of voyages without finding descriptions of characters and customs. But one is completely amazed to see that these people who have described so many things have said only what everyone already knew, that they have known how to perceive, at the other end of the world, only what it was up to them to notice without leaving their street; and that those true features that distinguish nations and strike eyes made to see have almost always escaped theirs. (Cit. from Rousseau 1964, 210–1)

This remark by Rousseau is irrelevant to Georg Forster, for he was indeed a keen observer of the grand as well as of the minor, of mountain ranges and ocean vastness, as well as palm trees, starfish, mosquitoes, and their habitat. Because his father took him frequently on survey trips, he grew up believing in empirical fact. Although born into a German family, Forster spent all his youth in England and never had the opportunity to learn the speculative philosophy characteristic of German universities. It is, therefore, no wonder that Forster had a lasting academic relationship with the University of Göttingen, where pragmatic trends dominated.¹²

Forster also had faith in the mission of bringing useful instruments of civilisation to the local people of the South Pacific islands. In this respect he could be considered a typical representative of the Enlightenment, who believed in Reason and its export and, accordingly, chose a career as a naturalist. His one-time involvement with the Rosicrucians is also an expression of his belief in the values of the Enlightenment¹³.

¹² Forster never taught at Göttingen but he received an honorary degree from the university and was a co-editor of the journal *Göttingisches Magazin der Wissenschaften und Litteratur*.

¹³ Forster later dissociated himself from the Order and during his stay in Vilnius did not spare criticism for the lodges. One of the reasons for such a change in his attitude could, however, have

Forster's attitude cannot simply be reduced to the postcolonial 'violence of reason', however. He was not turning a blind eye to the evil by-products of the intervention of European reasoning, power, and technology in the South Seas.

It is unhappy enough that the unavoidable consequence of all our voyages of discovery, has always been the loss of a number of innocent lives; but this heavy injury done to the little uncivilized communities which Europeans have visited, is trifling when compared to the irretrievable harm entailed upon them by corrupting their morals. If these evils were in some measure compensated by the introduction of some real benefit in these countries, or by the abolition of some other immoral customs among their inhabitants, we might at least comfort ourselves, that what they lost on one hand, they gained on the other; but I fear that hitherto our intercourse has been wholly disadvantageous to the nations of the South Seas; and that those communities have been the least injured, who have always kept aloof from us, and whose jealous disposition did not suffer our sailors to become too familiar among them, as if they had perceived in their countenances that levity of disposition, and that spirit of debauchery, with which they are generally reproached. (Book I, Chapter VI 'Passage from Dusky Bay to Queen Charlotte's Sound—Junction with the Adventure—Transactions during our Stay there'; cit. from Forster 1999, 121–2)

Conscious attempt at objectiveness prevented the author from idealising the Pacific cultures and the 'noble savage', as well as those who were part of creating the image. The same goes not only for Forster and for the judicious James Cook but also for Bougainville himself, who was among the first to promote the idea of lost paradise. Even while evoking mythological comparisons in his descriptions of the Pacific islands, Bougainville tried to be as impartial as possible by pointing out the negative aspects of Tahitian society both in his account and his journal of the voyage, for example, social inequality.

I have mentioned above that the inhabitants of Tahiti seemed to live in an enviable happiness. We took them to be almost equal in rank among themselves; or at least enjoying a liberty which was only subject to the laws established for their common happiness. I was mistaken; the distinction of ranks is very great at Tahiti, and the disproportion very tyrannical. (Cit. from Célestin 1996, 89)

It is evident that Georg Forster was a product of the complicated set of philosophical ideas of the 18th century, but he was also a unique researcher and his views continued to develop throughout his life into a distinctive system of ethical principles which he always advocated ardently. Forster was a forerunner of many trends in ethnology (making field observations, recording data, and possessing the capacity to interpret the findings in a broader cultural context), and his keen observations made him one of the most perceptive ethnographers among the circumnavigating voyagers.

been entirely mercantile, for he made debts while a member due to his disastrous inability to manage finances.

Forster's follow-up to his previous research during his stay in Vilnius

It was not a coincidence that Forster was invited to teach in Vilnius. He was personally acquainted with Marcin Poczubutt-Odlanicki (1728–1810), rector of Vilnius University, and with Franciszek Bukaty (1747–1797), ambassador of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in London, who had already on one occasion offered Forster a post at the University of Krakow back in 1778.

The Commission of National Education, the central educational authority in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, was entrusted with the high hopes of the academic community during the age of Polish Enlightenment, when education was regarded not only as a promise for raising scientific standards but also as a means for the survival of the nation.

In 1782, following the abolition of the Society of Jesus, which had established the university in Vilnius, the Vilnian Academy was secularised and, under the protocol of the Commission of National Education, renamed *Schola Princeps Magni Ducatus Lituaniae* (The Principal School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). Poczubutt devoted all his energy to converting the institution into a European intellectual centre. Special attention was paid to the teaching of mathematics and natural sciences, focusing on the practical side of the disciplines and the economic needs of the country (Bumblauskas 2009, 422). New departments were introduced, local teachers were sent abroad for further studies, and foreign researchers with a reputation of academic excellence were invited as guest professors.

Among them was Georg Forster, who came to Vilnius hoping for new possibilities in his own research practice. In the process of negotiations with Forster, the strategy of the Polish community was to appeal to the celebrity's sentiments by reminding Forster of his Polish roots. Forster was indeed interested in the Polish language and learned some while in Vilnius. His other enterprises, however, were often frustrated.

On his way to Vilnius, Forster was granted an audience with the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II (1741–1790), on 24 August 1784, in Vienna. During their conversation, Forster expressed hope that he would discover a nation in Poland which would be as gentle as the Tahitians, but Joseph II was sceptical on that point.¹⁴ After having spent some weeks in Vilnius, Forster would come to share the Emperor's negative opinion.

Later, while proceeding to Lithuania, Forster not only met in Warsaw Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski (1734–1823), who was a co-founder of the Commission of National Education, but was also introduced to King Stanisław II August Poniatowski

¹⁴ Forster to Sömmerring, 3 February 1785 (Kilius 1988, 124).

(1732–1798) in Grodno where the Diet was held. Forster also made the acquaintance of Charles Henry Nicholas Othon, the prince of Nassau-Siegen (1745–1808), who circumnavigated the globe as a passenger alongside Captain Cook's French rival Bougainville, later serving as a Russian rear admiral, and who had arrived in Grodno from Constantinople. Forster had a chat with him and the King, who was eager to learn more of the voyages, about Tahiti and the South Seas. His Majesty had received from Bukaty the account of the last voyage of Captain Cook¹⁵ and invited Forster to view its illustrations together.¹⁶

In Vilnius, Forster was installed in the lodgings inside the so-called *Collegii medici*,¹⁷ next to two French surgeons, an Italian professor of chemistry, and a Hungarian professor of the practice of medicine. Concerning other colleagues, Forster already knew Andreas Strzecky (1737–1797), professor of astronomy, whom he had previously met in London.

After settling down, Forster engaged himself in the preparation of the curriculum of natural science courses, preparation for his lectures, and taking care of the laboratory and the library in the Department of *Historiae Naturalis*, which before him was headed by Professor Jean-Emmanuel Gilibert (1741–1814), a French botanist, famous for his work *Flora Lithuanica inchoata, seu enumeratio plantarum, quas circa Grodnam collegit et determinavit Joannes Emmanuel Gilibert*. Forster, as the head of the Department of Natural History, was expected not only to lecture on his subject but also to conduct research with an emphasis on the practical application of local natural resources to Lithuanian agriculture, medicine, and economics. Responding to the assignment, Forster wrote articles on the vegetation of Vilnius, 'Hortus botanicus Vilmensis' and 'Diarium faunae florumque Vilmensis' (1785–1787), which were left unpublished and are now preserved in Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen (Kudaba 1988, 16–19).

Forster built his courses at Vilnius University on fieldwork, and arranged expeditions to the suburbs of Vilnius where he surveyed local minerals, rocks, plants, etc., kept a written record of his finds, and introduced them to his students. During his first year at the University of Vilnius, Forster taught botany and mineralogy and later

¹⁵ The full title of the account is *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Undertaken, by the Command of His Majesty, for Making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere. To Determine the Position and Extent of the West Side of North America; Its Distance from Asia; and the Practicability of a Northern Passage to Europe. Performed under the Direction of Captains Cook, Clerke, and Gorf, in His Majesty's Ships the Resolution and Discovery, in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, and 1780. In Three Volumes. I and II Written by Captain James Cook. F.R.S. Vol. III by Captain James King. L.L.D. and F.R.S.*, London, 1784.

¹⁶ Forster to J.R. Forster, 22 November 1784 (Kilius 1988, 58).

¹⁷ Now Pilies 22.

he added zoology.¹⁸ Since he was uncertain about his Latin, Forster had to write down all of his lectures beforehand, and in the classroom he read from his notes rather than talked.

On the other hand, Forster expanded on the contents of his lectures, introducing, among other problems, issues of ethnography. He would show the students items from his collections acquired during his voyages and his drawings.¹⁹ As revealed in his letters, Forster had taken engravings of the Sandwich Islands along with him to Vilnius but then packed them up and sent them to his publisher Johann Karl Philipp Spener (1749–1827) because he feared they would wear out from frequent display, even though he had already limited their demonstration in Poland to a minimum.²⁰

Forster eagerly evoked his memories, encouraging his disciples to travel, explore nature, and do their own research. When not in the classroom and not obliged to lecture in Latin, Forster was an engaging companion, knowledgeable in many fields, including physics and chemistry, and eager to share his opinion with others. In the beginning, students were few, but eventually the number of those who attended Forster's classes increased to 30 or 40 persons.²¹

Forster made several close acquaintances during his stay in Vilnius, and it is known from his letters that he gave a present of North American seeds to Ignacy Jakub Massalski (1726–1794), bishop of Vilnius, with whom he was on friendly terms and whose hospitality he enjoyed nearly every week.²² Forster also corresponded widely with his contemporaries while he stayed in Vilnius, and 165 letters survive to this day.

In early 1876, encouraged by the German physician and anatomist Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring (1755–1830), Forster decided to compose a composition in memory of Cook as the admission essay for the Marseille Academy award competition. It did not go smoothly, for Forster was struggling with his French and eventually had to

¹⁸ In the prospectus of lectures of 1786–7 at Vilnius University, Georg Forster announced his course on the natural history of animals together with the introduction of principal authors who had studied the subject and the terminology of zoology. According to the prospectus, Forster was planning to proceed from the classes, species and subspecies of mammals, birds, amphibians, insects, etc. and finish the course with a discussion concerning the races of people. See *Prospectus lectionum in Alma Academia et Universitate Vilnensi: scholae principis* M. D. LIT: nomine insignita ad instaurationem studiorum ex Anno 1786 in Annum 1787 propositus, Vilnae: Sac. Reg. Majestatis, S.a. The syllabus was written in Latin with a translation into Polish.

¹⁹ Forster had his father send him 'the things from Tahiti' along with minerals and books and was worried about not yet having received them by the end of 1784. See Forster to J.R. Forster, 27 December 1784 (Kilius 1988, 104).

²⁰ Forster to Spener, 12 February 1785 (Kilius 1988, 126).

²¹ Forster to his future father-in-law, renowned classical scholar and librarian Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812), 8 April 1785 (Kilius 1988, 148).

²² Forster to Sömmerring, 13–17 January 1785 (Kilius 1988, 106).

give the idea up, mainly because it was difficult for him to switch to written French irregularly while he had to concentrate hard in his everyday life on giving lectures in Latin and learning Polish. Later, however, he wrote a biography of Captain Cook in German *Cook, der Entdecker* (Cook the Discoverer), which was published as a preface to the German translation of the official account of Cook's third voyage and is regarded by many as the most significant original work produced by Forster in Vilnius.

As a result of the conflicts with the British establishment over the official narrative of the voyage, Georg's father continued to harbour resentful feelings both towards the Admiralty and Cook himself that did not quite subside even after the captain's death in Hawaii. Georg, however, did not share this resentment. He held Cook in high esteem, considering him a fine sailor and an educated person with the enthusiasm and the spirit of a true explorer. Forster admired his unique work and his contribution to European science thanks to the numerous discoveries on all his voyages. The memoir written in Vilnius describes Captain Cook as an extraordinary explorer superior to any of his predecessors and is also filled with respect for his person. In this essay, Forster criticises Rousseau and his idea of 'noble savage' and opposes it by expressing belief in the European Enlightenment, progress, and navigation. In Forster's opinion, Cook's achievement lay in his broadening of European horizons, and promoting Europe's commerce and trade with the rest of the world.

Under pressure from his publisher, Spener, Forster rendered his monument to Cook's memory in a style more popular than he himself would have desired. It balanced out agreeably the academic element of the essay but later Forster wrote to his friend Friedrich Ludwig Wilhelm Meyer (1758–1840) that no other work had cost him more strain and demanded more patience. He confessed that what was important to him and what made his work satisfying was not so much the praise for Cook, who indeed, in Forster's view, deserved all the acclaim in the world, but the opportunity to elaborate on his own philosophy as an author, especially in the light of his opposition to Kant.²³

The translation of the account of Cook's third and last voyage from English into German took even more of Forster's time in Vilnius. This work to which he dedicated himself 'praestanda praestiren'²⁴ was completed in Lithuania and published in four volumes by Spener over a period of two years.²⁵ Forster dedicated his translation

²³ Forster to Meyer, 2 April 1787 (Kilius 1988, 362–3).

²⁴ Forster to Spener, 1 September 1785 (Kilius 1988, 169).

²⁵ The full title of the account in Forster's translation is *Des Capitain Jacob Cook dritte Entdeckungs-Reise, welche derselbe auf Befehl und Kosten der Großbritannischen Regierung in das stille Meer, und nach dem Nordpol hinauf unternommen, und mit den Schiffen Resolution und Discovery während der Jahre 1776 bis 1780 ausgeführt hat. Aus den Tagebüchern des Captain Cook, und der*

to Emperor Joseph II after having written to him from Vilnius and asked for his permission personally.²⁶

In the beginning, in order to make things faster, Spener planned to translate the first part of Cook's account himself, entrusting Forster only with the second part. But eventually the translation of the first part was delegated to a geographer, Matthias Christian Sprengel (1746–1803) from Halle, and the result, in Forster's judgment, was so unsatisfactory that he had to go all over it again himself while simultaneously translating the third part of the account.²⁷

Forster's intent was to convey the meaning of Cook's words rather than provide a literal translation of his account. He, nevertheless, tried to be as faithful to the original as possible, omitting only the specific terminology of navigation when he thought it burdensome for the understanding of the text. By translating the account of Cook's last voyage, Forster expected to introduce new concepts to the German public and to correct previous inaccuracies.²⁸ The German book is supplied with engraved plates, charts, a map of the second voyage to which Forster was a participant, comparative vocabulary of various Pacific languages—including those of Tahiti, the Marquesas, New Zealand and Hawaii—and extensive footnotes and commentaries on 'the fifth part of the world', which later became known under the name of Oceania.

At an early stage of the translation process, Forster had been sent some of the engravings of Cook's last voyage by his brother Karl Reinhold (1756–after 1803) but not the complete set which he had been shown previously in Grodno by King Poniatowski.²⁹ The King later lent Georg his copy of the account when Forster was returning to Vilnius via Warsaw after his wedding in Germany and had another audience with His Majesty.³⁰ Later, controversy was started by Banks concerning the copper plates of the original engravings for the German edition and English proof sheets of Cook's account, which Forster received from the Admiralty and assumed to be his own property although they were actually intended for Spener. This misunderstanding was eventually cleared up and the copies were sent to their legitimate owner by Forster himself, even though the last ones of them, mostly those which were related to the Society Islands and the Friendly Islands (present Tonga),

übrigen nach seinem Ableben im Commando auf ihn gefolgt Befehlshaber Clerke, Gore und King, ingleichen des Schiffs Wundarzte Herr Anderson herausgegeben. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Georg Forster etc. Mit Zusätzen für den deutschen Leser, ingleichen mit einer Einleitung des Uebersetzers vermehrt, und durch Kupfer und Karten erläutert, Berlin: Bey Haude und Spener, 1787–9.

²⁶ Forster to Joseph II, 1 February 1787 (Kilius 1988, 346–7).

²⁷ Forster to Meyer, 2 November 1786 (Kilius 1988, 306–7).

²⁸ Forster to Spener, 18 September 1786 (Kilius 1988, 299).

²⁹ Forster to Spener, 14 March 1785 (Kilius 1988, 139).

³⁰ Forster to Spener, 2 November 1785 (Kilius 1988, 183–4).

were dispatched from Vilnius only in May 1787. Spener, in turn, was forwarding the plates to the engravers to work upon.³¹

Besides his duties in Vilnius, Forster found enough time to concentrate on his own research. In a letter from Vilnius to Sömmerring dated 16–17 January 1785, Forster was anxious to have his own *Vom Brodbaum* (1784), a study on the economic and cultural functions of the breadfruit throughout the Pacific region, translated into Latin so that he could give a keynote lecture on the subject should the King visit Vilnius University as he had promised more than once. Forster considered that the description of the breadfruit would also be necessary for his thesis on the plants of the South Seas, and the lecture itself could serve useful in securing royal financial assistance for the publication of this future work.³²

Soon, Georg Forster indeed wrote a book entitled *De plantis esculentis insularum Oceani australis: commentatio botanica*. It was about the fifty-four species of edible plants of the islands of South Seas gathered by him and his father during their circumnavigation of the world. He had presented the work for the degree of doctor of medicine at Halle in 1785 during his brief return to Germany, but later he decided to publish it not as a *dissertatio pro gradu* but as a treatise.³³ By April of 1786, he finished the manuscript of the version for publishing, appended with a small brochure entitled *Florulae insularum australium: prodromus*, which was a list of the botanical discoveries by both Forsters with short *differentiis specificis*, definitions after the pattern of Linnaeus. Many of the plants were described and catalogued here for the first time, and the entire project was intended as proof of his and his father's visit to the South Seas and also as protection of their exclusive rights to the discoveries. According to Forster, his father had previously made a mistake by sending a collection of dried plants from the South Seas to Swedish physician Abraham Bäck (1713–

³¹ See Forster to Banks, 11 December 1785, and Forster to Spener, 26 December 1785 and 7 May 1787 (Kilius 1988, 188–94, 381). Forster was annoyed that Johann Ludwig Wetzel (1736–ca. 1811) intended to beat him at publishing the translation of the account of Cook's third voyage after having obtained in London eight plates of the engravings. In spite of that, Forster continued his own translation in hopes that the first volume would be released by St Michael's Fair the following year. See Forster to Lichtenberg, 10 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 229). Later, Spener settled the differences with Wetzel, whose translation was indeed published in 1787, around the same time as Spener started to put out Forster's version, and was titled *Capitain Cook's dritte und letzte Reise, oder Geschichte einer Entdeckungsreise nach dem Stillen Ocean: welche auf Befehl Sr. Grossbritannischen Majestat zu genauer Erforschung der nordlichen Halbkugel unternommen und unter der Anführung der Capitaine Cook, Clerke und Gore, in Sr. Majestat Schiffen, der Resolution und der Discovery, während den Jahren 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779 und 1780 ausgeführt worden ist: aus den Tagbüchern der Capitaine James Cook, M.d.K.S. und James King, D.d.R. u. M.d.K.S. eine Uebersetzung nach dem zwoiten grossen Englischen Ausgabe in drey Banden in Quart, mit einigen Anmerkungen von Johann Ludwig Wetzel*.

³² Forster to Sömmerring, 16–17 January 1785 (Kilius 1988, 107).

³³ See, for example, Forster to Sömmerring, 20 February 1786 (Kilius 1988, 209), or Forster to Sömmerring, 19–20 March 1786 (Kilius 1988, 223).

1795). Linnaeus the Younger came across the collection and included the names of the plants in his *Supplementum Plantarum systematis vegetabilium*, crediting Bäck in each case, 'as if he had ever been to Tahiti'.³⁴ According to Georg, the names that had originally been suggested by the Forsters were often either abridged or misspelled in the book by Linnaeus.

Whatever the initial intention by Forster, *De plantis esculentis* was eventually published twice, once as a dissertation and once as a commentary. The differences were minor, mainly in the title, as the earlier edition in Halle was named *Dissertatio inauguralis botanico-medica de plantis esculentis insularum oceani australis* (Halae ad Salam: Typis Franckianis, 1786). The *Commentatio botanica* version was released later the same year in Berlin (Berolini: Apud Haude et Spener, 1786). It is of note that when *De plantis esculentis* was published in Halle Forster complained with annoyance in his letter to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799) that his father, who had been supervising the publication on its way to press, had overlooked many misprints, and inserted, without consulting his son, his own bitter note in which he attacked the person who had given their plants to Linnaeus the Younger. Georg then demanded that the page were reprinted in all the copies yet unsold.³⁵

In 1786, Forster wrote an essay for his publisher Spener's historic calendar.³⁶ It was entitled *Neuholland und die brittische Kolonie in Botany-Bay* and was about the new British penal settlement in Botany Bay. For this article, which was also one of the first introductions in German of Australian geography and inhabitants, Forster consulted not only John Hawkesworth's *An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere* but also the account of Cook's last voyage. He then referred to the maps in order to calculate the area. With all the work he had done, Forster was distressed when he found out that Spener had edited his essay heavily in order to fit it into the pocket-size calendar.³⁷ After suffering Forster's indignation, Spener later re-released the essay with all the previously omitted parts back in place.³⁸

Throughout his life Forster continued to be interested in cross-cultural observations, making his *A Voyage round the World* a book of considerable anthropological value.

³⁴ Forster to Christian Gottlob Heyne, 25 May, 1786 (Kilius 1988, 247).

³⁵ Forster to Lichtenberg, 5 November 1786 (Kilius 1988, 310–1).

³⁶ The full title of the callender is *Historisch-genealogischer Calender oder Jahrbuch der merkwürdigsten neuen Weltbegebenheiten für 1787, enthaltend die Geschichte der wichtigsten Staats- und Handelsveränderungen von Ostindien*, Leipzig, 1786.

³⁷ Forster to Spener, 20 November 1786 and 21 December 1786 (Kilius 1988, 321, 330–1).

³⁸ Forster to Christian Gottlob Heyne, 21 January 1787 (Kilius 1988, 343). The new version appeared in *Allgemeines historisches Taschenbuch, oder, Abriss der merkwürdigsten neuen Welt: Begebenheiten, enthaltend für 1787 die Geschichte der wichtigsten Staats- und Handelsveränderungen von Ostindien*. Von M. C. Sprengel, Berlin: Bei Haude und Spener, 1787.

The results of his observations in Vilnius are mostly revealed in his letters to his friends and family in which he often ventures into the domain of popular ethnology. Forster took interest in the daily life of the local lower classes, whom he called ‘Polish *Pécherais*’ on one occasion,³⁹ as well as in the physical appearance, hairstyle, and clothing of the Polish and Lithuanian nobility. He also gave opinions about the Polish language. His judgments, however, were rarely flattering. Local character, according to Forster, was a laughable ‘mixture of Sarmatian or nearly Newzealandian rudeness and French sophistication’, and native common women fell far behind German ladies; in all the engravings of Cook’s voyages, ‘one would not be able to find more pitiable and repulsive creatures’.⁴⁰

Forster’s enthusiasm to study Polish was also weakened by his realisation that it was ‘a difficult and barbaric language with much too many different consonants which are so lacking in the Tahitian language’.⁴¹ The comparison between Tahitian, where vowels are in abundance, and Polish, where consonants are profuse, appears more than once in the letters of Forster. In Forster’s opinion, ‘both languages would gain by switching between them what each has in excess’.⁴²

Despite the unrestricted nature of his remarks in private, Forster’s insulting depiction of Vilnius and its people only became commonly known after his death, when the main part of his private correspondence was revealed to the general public, and helped cement German stereotypes in regard to Poland. Forster himself never exposed prejudices of this kind in his published works, and they were absent from the few letters which were printed during his lifetime.

Back to Germany

In 1787, Forster received an offer to join the first Russian long-distance oceanic expedition, which was to be led by Captain Grigory Ivanovich Mulovsky (1757–1789). Mulovsky, who had the experience of service in the British Navy, planned to sail to the South Seas from England via Cape of Good Hope then proceed to the North Pacific, reach the Russian coastline southward from Okhotsk, circumnavigate the Kuriles,

³⁹ See Forster’s letter to Friedrich Justin Bertuch (1747–1822), 23 December 1784 (Kilius 1988, 101). *Pécherais* is the name that Bougainville called the Yahgan Indians of Tierra del Fuego, whom he characterised as suspicious and hideous people and attributed such temperament to the influence of their harsh environment in contrast to the friendliness and beauty of the Tahitians that, according to him, were the product of a mild and bountiful climate (Staum 1996, 160). The Tierra del Fuegians were called *Pécherais* because this was the first word the natives uttered when they saw the French sailors approach.

⁴⁰ Forster to Lichtenberg, 18 June 1786 (Kilius 1988, 255–6).

⁴¹ Forster to Therese Heyne, 13 December 1784 (Kilius 1988, 87).

⁴² See, for example, Forster to Bertuch, 23 December 1784 (Kilius 1988, 102).

and then survey and claim for Russia the north-west part of the American coastline which Cook left unexplored. Mulovsky was also charged with making the effort of opening up trade with Japan by first attempting to obtain fresh provisions from the residents of the northern Japanese coast and also by gathering reliable information on the country, which had been closed for foreigners for longer than a century by that time (King 2007, 109–10). The options of exploring the coast of China or founding a settlement on the Kuriles that would serve as an outpost for Russia's direct trade by sea with Japan and China were also considered.

For the voyage, Russia wanted a person who had already been to those places and approached Georg Forster with an offer to participate in the project. He at once set out to negotiate the best conditions for himself, his wife, Therese Heyne (1764–1829),⁴³ and his daughter, who was born in Vilnius.

Forster also relied on the Russians to intervene on his behalf so that he could be relieved from his obligations at Vilnius University. The Russian ambassador in Warsaw, Otto von Stackelberg (1736–1800), stepped forward and requested the Commission of National Education to grant Forster a leave before his term at Vilnius University was completed, and Catherine II herself negotiated the matter with King Poniatowski. As a result, Forster's 8-year contract with the Commission of National Education was terminated.

Before leaving Vilnius, Forster forwarded to Poczobutt the books, minerals, and other natural objects that he had acquired for the Vilnian Academy⁴⁴ and his collection of fossils. He also prepared all the catalogues and finished an inventory of his botanical garden and seed stock.⁴⁵

⁴³ Therese Heyne, who became known as Therese Huber after marrying her second husband, is one of the first independent female German authors. Her epistolary novel and fictitious travelogue, *Abentheuer auf einer Reise nach Neu-Holland* (Adventures on a Voyage to New Holland), is set partly in Botany Bay, New South Wales, and partly in Norfolk Island, which was first visited by the Europeans in 1774 during Cook's second voyage and was described in Forster's *A Voyage round the World* (Book III, Chapter III 'Discovery of New Caledonia—Account of our Stay there—Range along the Coast to our Departure—Discovery of Norfolk Island—Return to New Zealand'). Botany Bay, as the site of penal colony, was also treated in Forster's essay *Neuholland und die brittische Kolonie in Botany-Bay*, which was written during his and his then-wife Therese's stay in Vilnius. The description became the source of inspiration and reference for Therese, whose novel is considered to be the first work of world literature to be set in either the penal colony of Australia or Norfolk Island.

⁴⁴ One year earlier, 'an assortment of rocks and minerals' was displayed by Georg Forster to Ludwika Byszewska (ca. 1758–after 1799), who was a lady at the court of King Poniatowski and who visited Vilnius University in 1786 and was entertained by Rector Poczobutt and professors. Forster introduced her to his wife at the family's apartment, where the guest was impressed by the portrait of 'the Honorable father of Mister Forster who won fame as a participant in the expedition of the Honorable Mister Cook'. See Byševska 2008, 77–8.

⁴⁵ Forster to Sömmerring, 22 July 1787 (Kilius 1988, 393), Forster to Poczobutt, 28 July 1787 (Kilius 1988, 394), Forster to J.R. Forster, 6 August 1787 (Kilius 1988, 396).

After Forster had left Lithuania, however, his projects came to a disappointing end. First of all, Russia entered into a war with the Ottoman Empire and conflict with Sweden broke out, forcing Russia to postpone the expedition around the globe indefinitely since all of Russia's naval forces were rallied to meet the crisis.

Around that time, another proposal came up for Forster. Fausto de Elhuyar (1755–1833), a celebrated Spanish Basque chemist, informed Forster, whom he had first met in Dresden, about an opportunity to move to the Philippines to work for the *Compañía de Filipinas* but directed him for further contacts to Antonio Valdés y Fernández Bazán (1744–1816), the minister of marine and the Indies in Spain. Forster, who would have preferred service for the King of Spain directly, declined the offer but recommended his father, Johann Reinhold Forster, as the most suitable candidate for the post (Gil Novales 1980, 193). Valdés, however, let Elhuyar, as an intermediary in the matter, know that the services of the Forsters were not required (*ibid.*, 195).

After it became certain that the Russian expedition was cancelled, Vilnius University invited Forster to return. He was openly flattered but refused the invitation, considering that the experience of teaching in Vilnius once was more than enough.⁴⁶ Eventually, Georg got the position of head librarian at the University of Mainz.

In addition to his numerous fields of activities, Forster maintained his interest in Eastern cultures and literature all through the later years of his life. In 1790, he came across the English translation by Sir William Jones of Kālidāsa's Indian drama *Abhijñānaśākuntala* under the title *Sacontalá or The Fatal Ring: an Indian drama*, which had been released one year earlier. Next year Forster published the first complete German version of the drama, *Sakontala, oder der entscheidende Ring: ein Indisches Schauspiel*, with extensive commentaries based on English sources. The translation initiated German interest in Hindu literature and philosophy and caused Indian literature to be a source for German Romanticism.

In 1792, when the troops of the French Republic took control of Mainz, Forster joined the provisional government of the Mainz Republic as a high official. The following year Prussian and Austrian coalition forces regained control of the city, and Forster, who had been sent to Paris on an official mission, was blacklisted and could no longer return to Germany. When he fell fatally ill in Paris, lonely and forgotten, economist Piotr Paweł Maleszewski (1767–1828) and other Polish emigrants whom he had known back in Vilnius stayed at his bedside (Kilius 1988, 32). Georg Forster died in Paris in early 1794.

⁴⁶ Forster to the Swiss writer, Johann Georg Zimmermann (1728–1795), 4 May 1788 (Kilius, 404). It took five years for Vilnius University to finally find a successor to Forster. In 1792, the professorship of *historiae naturalis* went to Ferdynand Szpitzgel (also known as Szpicnagiel; 1760–1826), a graduate of the University of Vienna, whose contribution to the discipline of natural science at Vilnius University is, however, undistinguished.

Conclusions

The invitation of Forster to the Vilnian Academy was part of a larger project of turning the school into a foremost centre of European knowledge. The academy was undergoing a transformation into a modern university, and Forster was approached because of his fame. His presence was expected to make a reputation for the university and attract more students to the classes of natural history. In a letter to his father sent from Kassel before his trip to Lithuania, Georg admitted that he was asked to teach in Vilnius because of his 'significance', but he expressed hope that he would be 'someone of real value, not only of significance'.⁴⁷

Despite all his efforts in Lithuania, however, Forster felt so isolated from all European academic affairs that he compared his situation with living 'beyond Cook Strait'.⁴⁸ Addressing his friends who failed to send him requested books, Forster would ask rhetorically whether Poland and Lithuania were no longer part of this planet and were 'situated further than Japan or Kamchatka'⁴⁹ or else whether his correspondents who were leaving him starved for academic news perhaps thought that Vilnius was 'somewhere beyond Japan'.⁵⁰

On the other hand, all those three years in Lithuania Forster managed to keep himself afloat as an active European academician alert to the latest information in the field of his research and never falling behind fresh scholarly trends. He begged his friends and colleagues to send him books so that he would be able to keep pace with the rest of the 'cultured world' and, finally, be called back from his *pontus* to the 'land inhabited by human beings'.⁵¹ For example, he asked Spener to buy him a copy of *Hortus Malabaricus* by Hendrik van Rheede (1636–1691) which he thought indispensable for the scientific processing of the plants discovered in the South Seas.⁵² Forster also wished to obtain faces, sketched in ink, pencil or crayon, representing the different classes of East Indian society, and not some imagined faces but 'real ones' drawn by artists who had actually travelled to the region such as Tilly Kettle (1735–1786) or his fellow co-navigator Hodges. He was also looking for portraits drawn from life in the North and South Americas.⁵³

Generally, it could be said that although his stay in Lithuania gave him little emotional satisfaction, Forster fulfilled his promise to be a valuable contributor to

⁴⁷ Forster to J.R. Forster, 3 March 1784 (Kilius 1988, 40).

⁴⁸ Forster to Lichtenberg, 10 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 232–3). Cook Strait separates the North Island from the South Island of New Zealand.

⁴⁹ Forster to Spener, 10 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 234).

⁵⁰ Forster to Meyer, 26 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 241).

⁵¹ Forster to Spener, 10 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 234).

⁵² Forster to Spener, 10 April 1786 (Kilius 1988, 238).

⁵³ Forster to Sömmerring, 22 March 1787 (Kilius 1988, 357).

the academic life of Vilnius University, and the legacy of his prolific work done in Vilnius is of considerable importance to European science and to Polish–Lithuanian knowledge as a part of it. Forster complained that it was not easy to ‘survive in exile’ but he confessed to Sömmerring that in Germany he would not have done nearly as much as he did in Vilnius in the same period of time, something he ‘would not have admitted to any Pole’.⁵⁴

While in Vilnius, Forster also continued to be considered an authority on non-European cultures by the governments who had plans to strengthen their influence in the Asian–Pacific region, as is evident in the case of Russian project, and he stirred considerable interest among the Lithuanian and Polish elite in the voyages to the South Seas and Cook’s expeditions.

Although this interest did not rise above the popular level, for those who had contacts with Forster during his Vilnius tenure either in person or by means of his written work, the South Seas were brought to life through the memories and images of distant foreign lands that were constantly popping up in his conversations, letters, and judgments, often in a most casual and matter-of-fact way, while some of the Forster’s research papers of the period were in part or in whole dedicated either to his voyages or to the various aspects that came to interest him during those travels.

This intellectual engagement by Forster cannot in a strict sense be considered a contribution to the discipline of Oriental studies, at least not in Vilnius academia, whose representatives were not expected by Forster himself to be proper recipients of his knowledge, but it is without doubt that Georg Forster’s presence played a role in introducing into the local intellectual environment familiarity with the lands on the opposite side of the globe, especially with the islands in the Southern hemisphere, since Forster’s, as a traveller’s, awareness and expertise, remained very much a part of his daily life as is clearly witnessed in his texts, both of academic and personal nature, written during his Vilnius period.

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⁵⁴ Forster to Sömmerring, 26 March 1787 (Kilius 1988, 361).

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