

ing a safe distance from actual madness, this allows for the creation of a second self, an elusive identity to be acted out in front of the metropolitan reader.

The book closes with a suggested reconsideration of the identity of the author, not as a lonely figure involved in heroic struggle against precursors (à la Bloom), but as a figure of urban sociability, the artist of language that is seen as by its nature, dialogical. In this context, Lamb emerges as neither marginal, nor minor, but as a *par excellence* author.

**Bálint Gárdos**

#### Notes

1. Accessed 2 November 2012 <[http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/other\\_categories/article1157920.ece](http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/other_categories/article1157920.ece)>.

2. H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), and especially his *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

3. Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 190–222.

4. Unaccountably, he makes no reference to Gerald Monsman's *Charles Lamb's as the London Magazine's "Elia"* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2003), which reprints some of the magazine texts and offers insights into the ways in which Lamb changed them for the collected edition.

5. Felicity James, [untitled review], *The Byron Journal*, 38.2 (2010) 192–193.

6. P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. 21 vols. (London: Dent, 1930–4). Vol. 16, p. 220.

7. Most importantly in the late Thomas McFarland's influential *Romantic Cruxes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

## The Quest of the West – Heroes of Transformation

Peter Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2011)

It is a much-needed break from discourse oriented literary considerations to let such books as Whitfield's *Travel* have a considerable intellectual impact. Finely illustrated and bound, it is an adventure narrative, a natural history, an overview of the roving Western mind, and an account of 4500 years' narratives of geographical movement from within the Mediterranean, Europe, and America. Travel literature as a genre, as the author points out, is in constant formation, open to theory but also exact in its historical and cultural relevance. The author manages to balance his work between academia and artful entertainment, without bias or didactic message but with quantities of wondrous diversity categorized into neat stages of a suggestive larger scope. The historically sequential chapters lead from religious deliverance through political tyranny to global ecology. The style of the book is light and elegant, simple and clear. Whitfield evokes much more than he claims, a vision beyond correct listing and cataloguing, where different genres and disciplines merge to reconnect semiotic elements. His cases of travel writers are linked not simply through the common genre and chronology, but through a single aspect: how travel writing relates to human conditioning. The

author proves authoritative in evaluating works and tendencies, a sharp-sighted enough critic to see the essence of different genres, eras and figures of travel literature. Whitfield's book, neither too scientific nor too artistic, succeeds in evoking new perspectives from an existentialist point of view, perspectives on identity, culture, psychological drive, and the reflective capacity. Both encyclopaedic and narrative, it is an introduction to travel literature studies and a springboard for further comparative research, and also a read for the wider public. Due to the work's specific relevance to the Anglo-Saxon literary world, it is first and foremost an essential supplement to any area of English literature. The traveller's point of view is both a sum and a challenge of prevailing cultural phenomena in the stationary world.

On the periphery of academia, in a shifting phase of its paradigm, travel writing is a vast and growing field of much diversity and contradiction. Its current tendency is mainly the processing of materials. Specific areas of research increase by the day. Conferences, regular venues abound, monographs and reviews are published almost weekly. General overviews of the genre are also appearing, and in their line what Whitfield represents is that golden mean between critical steadiness and the verve of receptivity to travel's associations, maintaining its romance and charm. The discipline now includes an immeasurable field including tourist

journals, scientific exploration, sociological and political aspects of migration such as exile or immigration and anthropological field-work, not to mention military documentation or the legal culture of travel. Literature based on the theme of journeying must be distinguished from these. The criteria for travel and literature are to be mapped contemporarily, as it is done with less academic rigour but more invaluable insight and perspective by Whitfield. Through his efforts it is made clear that the reality of the story is beside the point: whether the narrator relates the truth or a poetic construct is indifferent. The essence of the genre is the transformation of the subject, both the travelling and the reading subject. It is more than general cultural exchange, which effects but does not necessarily transform the subjective psyche. Therefore the abundance of related contemporary discourses such as displacement, globalism, hybridity, mobility, translation, gender or liminality offer themselves to brace travel literature with the necessary theoretical conditioning. Whitfield emphatically invites such considerations but the distance of the book from theory is maintained – it is thus capable of gaining perspective over millennia of consciousness.

Since there is no "single transcendent principle valid for all travel texts" (x),<sup>1</sup> the essence of the genre is transformation itself: it is discourses of transgression that are brought into view by Whitfield's implications. Travel litera-

ture as a self-reflective genre is closely related to questions of identity, and points to the morphing of Western man, beyond his Westernness. A hero's journey, travelling is an allegory of life as movement, as transformation. But it is more directly the allegory of Western restlessness to become one's self in a removed, foreign context. "The writer plays a double part, as both spectator and actor" (x), and thus the interim is established. The Interzone, the liminal field of the traveller is identical to that of the writer. Through this wormhole all other liminal genres come into play within travel writing, and it becomes a clearly structured rite of passage both in its original reality and in its narrative translation.<sup>2</sup>

Practically, "human history without travel is unthinkable" (vii), and indeed Whitfield makes an initial summary of geographical movement in documented human history in the *Preface*: "First, humanity overspread the earth through the process of migration, forming communities and cultures that flourished for long periods in isolation from each other. Then later, through exploration and resettlement, this isolation was broken down, and the movement began towards the one world which we now inhabit" (vii). In this sense, movement seems as an inevitable and necessary part of life in general. But the "reintegration of mankind" has been brought about by the ceaseless conquests, explorations by the West. Despite Edward Said's deconstructive proposal that the

concept of the West is an ideological fiction and a political enterprise,<sup>3</sup> there undoubtedly is a literary phenomenon which can be labelled as "the quest of the West." The psychological, philosophical reasons for Western restlessness are not specified, but the fact speaks for itself that "the literature of international travel is predominantly European" (viii). Whitfield's Eurocentric perspective "tries to identify successive paradigms of [its own] travel and travel literature: we have the literature of exploration, conquest, pilgrimage, science, commerce, romanticism, adventure, imperialism, and so on" (viii). The full view of the progression of eras, however, projects a larger, more general conclusion: "literature becomes . . . an agent, in the gradual reintegration of mankind; it becomes a form of discourse through which one civilisation thinks about another, and about itself" (viii). The following sketch of the book directs attention to the most progressive representatives and developments of travel writing, using the most important general tendencies and backward approaches only as backdrop.

The ancient world provides the pure prehistory for the book, mythology depicting life as an ordeal, a challenge. Three monolithic narratives reflect the major aspects of Western travel writing. Gilgamesh, the father of all travellers, is a supreme knight-errant, a demigod seeking metaphysics in immortality. He is on a direct existential quest, probing the question of existential transforma-

tion. His is the archetypal story of the Fall into the human condition. A divergence from this most archaic trace, the Exodus of the Old Testament is the travel narrative of collective, tribal identity, transformation, and fate: religious and political deliverance into freedom in a new life projected by divine promise. As a counterpoint the Odyssey is a human adventure story of individual challenges and ways of overcoming. The hero's journey consists of a series of liminal events and critical situations of "encounter with the alien" (3). The consequential Classical literature is where the foundation of Western empires of dominance is grounded. Herodotus already reports the clash of cultures with a "hint of contempt" (6). Growing xenophobia motivates the genre from here on, paired with a sense of cultural superiority over all others. This ancient hubris reaches its classical summit in Alexander the Great's imperialistic story. The Romans continued to develop the genre in a "mastery of themselves and their forces" (10).

The Christian era presents the "pilgrimage narrative . . . greatly expanded" (16) in religious tourism, and tinted with "political and racial hatreds" (21), marking the "Crusade as a form of colonisation" (21). Lured further by the East, the genre of travel writing proper emerges with Marco Polo: "the experience itself is centre stage" (26), the experience of a first person. Polo's stories, though superficial in observation, "excited the envy of Europe, and thus created the

essential conditions for the Age of Discovery" (29). A parallel tendency is Mandeville's "intellectual tease" (30): the "search for novelty, for what is alien" (32). The fourteenth century external gaze was, however, disrupted by attempts to internalise movement. A primal instance of Christian mysticism surfacing in travel appears in Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux*, inspired by Augustine's warning for travellers to consider themselves. Dante's *Divine Comedy* as an inner journey stands out from the centuries as "a vision of the entire universe, but the development of that vision is presented as a real, personal experience, a real journey involving purification through suffering and awakening. It clearly takes us back to the archetypal paradigm of travel . . . as we move through space . . . we are transformed" (38).

The Age of Discovery was defined by rationalisation of the fear of the other: primarily by branding non-Europeans and non-Christians as inferior. This unfortunate self-delusion stigmatized European and Christian attitudes for four hundred years to come. The ideals of "discovering," "taking possession" (39) were boosted by the apparent success of Columbus's "grandiose claim" (43). Whitfield suggests "mystery and confusion within his mind" (47), and reflects that conquistadors like all conquerors "cannot interpret what they see" (47), amply proven by their travel writings. The scientific Western mind then listed and categorised unfamiliar phe-

nomena revealed by the conquests, concluding great factual collections such as Hakluyt's. The political cause that was served by these catalogues grew even greater in fervour, but "travel was now . . . an intellectual force" (63).

Rationalisation was continued by seventeenth century non-conquerors "observing and reporting" (79) ceaselessly. One movement of opposition to this disenchantment of the world was satire. Another way of interpretation was an integrating, spiritual stance, for example the Jesuit Matteo Ricci's revelation, "who sensed that the only way to understand China was to cease to treat it as a foreign land, and become part of it. This is the great gateway of imagination through which the traveller must pass – to recognise that there is no foreign land, for he is the foreigner" (120). Shakespeare's late work, the last romances illustrate the transformative effect of journeys "as first ordeals then turning points, causing the destruction of the character's old life, and offering the first stage of regeneration into a new" (124). Bunyan's removed goal of the Celestial City is the driving force behind *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Eighteenth century travelling for knowledge broadens the geographical horizon, but also enlarges cultural complacency and hubris. The Pacific still "a realm of mystery" (127), further diversification of movement and knowledge are manifest in travel writing. The age of Reason confirms Western identities through intellectual means, but the

intellect has also produced its own critique in moral philosophy as well as in literature. The fictional travels of Defoe, Swift and others claim to reveal more "truth about humanity" (176) than rational accounts of real journeys. Voltaire prefers to "travel in the mind" (178), disillusionment being the cause of his internalisation.

*Candide's* escapism gains popular momentum and desperation in the "Romantic age when the purpose of foreign travel was not to confirm one's existing identity, but to take one outside it" (179). The American empire-building era coincided with the birth of many new and democratic disciplines of enquiry such as biology, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and mountaineering. Scholars and archaeologists begin to find evidence not only of racial and cultural equality but of the other's possible superiority in occupied cultures like India. Artefacts, however, still go to the British Museum. On the other hand, new forms of otherness appear in nineteenth century travel writing such as nature. The "mystical conviction that the life of nature . . . was reality" (206) brought new life to literature in the works of John Muir, and Thoreau and Emerson's transcendental group, whose ideal was a radical turn of the attention to "adventuring at home." Walden is an "inverted travel book" (206), where transcendence is gained through nature. Another reinterpretation of the travel concept was the critique of Twain, Stevenson and others, and the indirect

critique of Edward Lear's surrealistic travel journals. Melville's vision of the human struggle was placed into the wilderness of the sea, outside not only of social but elemental context. Verne and Loti promoted "human power and nature's magnificence" (239). Kipling's depths depict the "savagery released when the veneer of civilisation breaks down" (240). Joseph Conrad is a turning point in travel literature: he "introduced travel as metaphor of shifting identity" (240), and the method of dissecting the self. His heroes are men placed in extremis riddled with inner conflicts, outside the confines of civilisation: he founds the modern theme of struggling to overcome fear, alienation, crisis and self-doubt.

By the turn of the century, an old paradigm was indeed over. Robert Louis Stevenson's dictum "There is no foreign land; it is the traveller only who is foreign" (243) echoes mystical interpretations of the Middle Ages on a popular level. There has been a "paradigm shift in travel writing in the past hundred years . . . travel has something vital to teach us, and writers must undergo some form of personal transformation" (243). Much migration of writers going on, much searching. "Where is the transcendent knowledge in our hearts, uniting sun and darkness, day and night, spirit and senses?" asks D.H. Lawrence (253). The escapism of Durrell, Van der Post transcending the travel genre in his visionary, philosophical travel books, Paul Theroux's satirical spontaneity, all

glorify the benefits of travel for their transforming effect. Feminism on the other hand is a merciless critic, "exposing the mentality of male power underlying much travel writing" to "free the idea of exploration and endurance from some of its historical burdens" (274). Bruce Chatwin takes travel writing to being a postmodern collage. In his revolutionary approach he breaks down conventions lacking context and psychological depth. And besides all this formal experimentation, there is still room for serious, informative, compassionate objectivity in the contemporary genre. Kerouac's *On the Road* was a decisive road novel for the second half of the century, sending generations on the road. He portrayed travelling as a quest in the mythological sense. Bowles's characters face the annihilating force of the sky in North Africa, and either die, or redefine themselves in the foreign context. Despite the artless tourist invasion of the world, "yet another aspect of consumerism" (viii), most recently environmental writers have put down a new cornerstone, extending the role of travel literature. Peter Matthiessen's work is presented as the culmination of moral and environmental travel, "indebted to the 'deep ecology' of the existential philosophers such as Heidegger. . . . 'The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist . . . they have no meaning, they are meaning'" (281). In today's travel literature the force of change proves to be both actual and theoretical, both personal and collective,

geographical and psychological, natural and civilisational.

In a *Postscript* entitled *Re-imagining the World*, Whitfield draws the conclusion that the new paradigm necessitates redefinition of our Western identity after an age of dislocation and dissolution, and millennia of historicalisation/externalisation. It is not the task of this book, but the task of future travel literature to express these new meanings, these new contents of the geographically defined self. Whitfield claims that what everyone is seeking in travel is freedom “to move . . . out of non-being into being” (283). The existential weight of travel literature calls for the urgency of serious considerations in the genre. “Travel is a genre in which matters of ultimate spiritual importance can be discussed” (281), and “the worthwhile travel writer has to keep alive the idea of the inner journey, the transforming experience” (x). And so with this realization, “the genre has come full circle from the era when it was the servant of conquest and domination, political or cultural” (281). The book takes a small but important role in the redefinition of a genre, summarising the past of travel writing, and highlighting the progressive representatives of the Western psyche, heroes and narrators of transformation.

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#### Notes

1. Peter Whitfield is the author of more than a dozen works of history, literary criticism and poetry, including *The Image of the World: 20 Centuries of World Maps* (1994),

*The History of English Poetry* (2009), *The History of Science* (2010), *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*. This book has been reviewed by *The Oxford Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Australian* (in March-April 2012).

2. The roots of liminal, transgressive theories are to be found in Van Gennep and Turner’s anthropology of prehistoric rituals. Theories of otherness such as Lévinas’s also designate the barrier of the self to be overcome.

3. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage & Random House, 1979).

## **(What) Does It Really Mean?**

Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kaščáková, eds., *Does It Really Mean That? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2011)

Ambiguity is a phenomenon very old and also very broad. It can merit and reward literary interpretation but, perhaps for the same reason, has also the dangerous potential to result in bland analysis and windy (or missing) conclusions. To organize a collection of essays around this ironically Janus-faced phenomenon can be tricky: is the theme of ambiguity narrow enough to organize the essays into an at least loosely coherent collection; if not, is it interesting/relevant enough to offer new insights to the writer and interest to the reader? Especially when the audience of this book is obviously not the common reader of literature