

“‘WHAT AM I DOING HERE’: CONTEMPORARY BRITISH TRAVEL WRITING: FROM REVIVAL TO RENEWAL”

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“I hate travelling and explorers¹”. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ famous declaration at the beginning of *Tristes Tropiques*, in a section entitled “An End to Journeying”, has given food for thought to countless commentators. His provocative philosophical journey is one of the most influential texts in social science in the second half of the twentieth century and its influence in the field of travel writing may surely also be qualified as profound. The first complete English edition of the text was published in 1973 by Jonathan Cape, a publisher very much associated with what could be termed the new wave of British travel writing in the later 1970s and 1980s. If one would have to retain a particular year for the beginning of this renewal of a long-established genre in Great Britain, the travel book or travelogue, 1977 seems to be appropriate. Although it has to be pointed out that Paul Theroux’s *The Great Railway Bazaar*, his account of a long train journey through Asia, gained considerable public acclaim very rapidly after its publication in 1975, 1977 stands out as a year during which at least two key works of the past 30 years first appeared: Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *A Time of Gifts*, the first

volume of his account of a walk from Rotterdam to Constantinople, on which he set out in December... 1933². It should be stressed, though, that Leigh Fermor was a well-known author by the 1970s. His first travel book, *The Traveller’s Tree: A Journey to the Caribbean Islands*, came out in 1950. The other major text to be retained from that year is *In Patagonia*³ by Bruce Chatwin, an author our title is alluding to⁴. His account of a journey through Patagonia and Fireland in the 1970s was immediately recognized as an original approach to what is usually referred to in English as travel writing. Since his death in 1989, Bruce Chatwin has become the most emblematic figure among British travellers of the past forty or fifty years. He is certainly one of the most original authors in contemporary British travel writing and, arguably, in British literature in the second half of the twentieth century. Whatever the case may be, his first book is one of the seminal works of the period we purport to consider

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* [1955], tr. John and Doreen Weightman [1973]. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 15.

² Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts* [1977]. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979. The sequel, *Between the Woods and Water*, was published in 1986. The last volume is still eagerly expected.

³ Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia* [1977]. London: Picador, 1979.

⁴ Bruce Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1989.

from the following angles: how do contemporary authors conceive of their work? How does literary criticism account for the renewal of the travel book? What is the situation today, some fifty years after Claude Lévi-Strauss' statement?

Authors on their journeywork

Claude Lévi-Strauss obviously did not intend to deny the interest as such of the travel account. Indeed, he specifies a few paragraphs into his text that there are no doubt exceptions: "every period has had its genuine traveller⁵." His main purpose was to foreground, amongst other aspects, the many problematic links between travel writing and imperialism and to launch an appeal for a more systematically reflexive approach in representations of the other. It so happens that Bruce Chatwin attended a lecture by Lévi-Strauss at the Sheldonian in Oxford, on November 18, 1970, which has left at least a trace in his unpublished notebooks, kept in the Bodleian. Be that as it may, having struggled with the shape of his Patagonian manuscript, Bruce Chatwin decided to reduce it considerably in length, as his editor Susannah Clapp explains in her memoir: "What had begun as a big book with a short style ended by being short in every respect: short sentences, short paragraphs, short chapters. Various manuscripts have sums scrawled in the margin by Bruce when he was trying to work out how much had been cut... My calculation at the time was that we reduced the length by between a quarter and a third of the original⁶." The result was an elliptic account, particularly in terms of self-representation,

focusing largely on people and characters encountered, much more than on the day-to-day proceedings of the traveller, an original approach within the field of travel a writing that was noticed – and praised as such – straight away by his editor. This is how Susannah Clapp sums up the book's dynamic approach to the genre:

"It was pungently expressed and delighted in paradox. It hovered teasingly between fact and fiction. It abstained from personal revelation but was full of autobiographical material. Even its central subject was a contradiction: the Patagonians were, it turned out, not one nation but a multinational collection of expatriates and exiles, many of whom felt most at home with themselves when they were abroad⁷."

One will recognize certain aspects here that may also seem more largely characteristic of postcolonial concerns with mobility, displacement and hybridity. Clapp was possibly influenced herself by contemporary criticism at the time of writing, in the 1990s... May it suffice here to retain the idea that Chatwin decided to problematize the stance of the traveller in his writing, no doubt partly in response to Lévi-Strauss' appeal, by use of literary techniques, a strategy that has become a key feature in contemporary texts.

As to poetics, one could suggest that the *discontinuous* is one of the most striking characteristics of his approach to literary representation. This can also be said about another major figure in the field, Jonathan Raban. His most original work in terms of narrative techniques is his account of a journey by boat around Great Britain, entitled *Coasting*. In the preface to the Picador Travel Classics edition, Raban explains that he also decided to

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁶ Susannah Clapp, *With Chatwin: Portrait of a Writer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1997, p. 31.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 25.

change tack in terms of writing: “I began to hate the *and then, and then, and then* form of the conventional travel book⁸.” We have no time to go into any detailed analysis of this highly-stimulating work, the discontinuous strategies of which represent an interesting reflection as such on the historical context of the work, a British traveller looking at his own country at some distance during the Falklands War. Our point here is to draw attention to another significant example that is an illustration of particularly dynamic, reflexive approaches to the genre.

The point is still further enhanced by another major voice in contemporary writing, Redmond O’Hanlon, a singular traveller, in that O’Hanlon received both scientific and literary training at Oxford⁹. In his brief introduction to the Picador Travel Classics edition of his first travelogue, *Into the Heart of Borneo*, the author outlines what he suggests to be the perfect travel book, adding that his appears to be an unattainable ideal:

“The perfect travel book should be as true as fiction and use the methods of fiction. It should be beautifully structured, many-layered, full of interlocking stories, resonant knowledge, compressed dialogue, narrative force. Its descriptions of the look and feel of a country, a landscape, should be far more vivid than any film could ever be. The length, the difficulty of the actual journey, are as nothing compared to

the importance of their re-imagining; it’s all a question of intensity¹⁰.”

What interests us mostly here is the stress on the techniques of fiction. Contemporary writers are obviously not the first ones to rely on such strategies. It can be argued, however, that the systematic use of these is one of the key features of their texts. This is at least what David Lodge has also suggested in an essay which will allow us to take into consideration the views of some critics on the poetics of contemporary travel writing.

The travel book today

In his essay “The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?”, first published in 1992, Lodge proposes to consider contemporary travelogues as non-fiction novels: “The non-fiction novel, which applies fictional techniques, such as free indirect style, scenic construction, present-tense narration, prolepsis, iterative symbolism, etc. to factual narratives. [...] There has been in Britain in recent years, [...], something of a renaissance of literary travel writing, much of which perhaps belongs in this category of the non-fiction novel¹¹.” Lodge notably refers to the three British authors mentioned so far. Given the essay’s date of publication, it could of course be supposed that Redmond O’Hanlon is implicitly alluding to Lodge’s observations in the preface quoted above. Once again, it is not our purpose here, to determine the matter, but to underline certain views held in common by authors and critics

⁸ Jonathan Raban, *Coasting* [1986]. London: Picador, “Picador Travel Classics“ series, 1995, preface, p. xvi. See also our essay “Jonathan Raban’s *Coasting* and Literary Strategies in Contemporary British Travel Writing“ in Kristi Siegel (ed.), *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle and Displacement*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002, p. 281–289.

⁹ Redmond O’Hanlon’s Phd-dissertation *Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin: The Influence of Scientific Thought on Conrad’s Fiction* was published in 1984 by the Salamander Press in Edinburgh.

¹⁰ Redmond O’Hanlon, *Into the Heart of Borneo: An Account of a Journey Made in 1983 to the Mountains of Batu Tiban with James Fenton* [1984]. London: Picador, “Picador Travel Classics“ series, 1994, p. v.

¹¹ David Lodge, “The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?“ in *The Practice of Writing* [1996]. London: Penguin, 1997, pp. 4–19, p. 8.

on what contemporary travel writing is trying to do. The numerous parallels with contemporary fiction are stressed by Lodge. Given the pronounced literary dimension of these contemporary travel books, or at least a significant number thereof, it seems possible to affirm that the genre represents one of the most dynamic or poetically subversive domains of British literature in the past thirty or forty years.

This is partly due to one of the most prominent features of contemporary works, their rich intertext, which Barbara Korte calls their “postmodern accents”, that is – the foregrounding of effects of mediation at work in the representation of the journey: not only through the observing eye on the road (or at sea), but also via inter- and meta-textual references,¹² the meaning of the experience becoming only apparent during the writing stage. Incidentally, the examples she then analyzes are *In Patagonia* and Chatwin’s complex account of three journeys to Australia merged into one text he preferred to simply consider a “novel”: *The Songlines*, one of the most original works, in structural terms, in contemporary literature. Randall Stevenson describes it in the following terms in volume XII of the *Oxford English Literary History*: “Distinctions between novel, travel writing, and other forms were further blurred in Chatwin’s mixture of autobiography,

¹² Barbara Korte, *Der englische Reisebericht: Von der Pilgerfahrt bis zur Postmoderne*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft, 1996, p. 196: “Das vielleicht herausstechendste Merkmal postmodern orientierter Reiseberichte ist die explizierte Art und Weise, in der sie die Aufmerksamkeit auf das Vermittelte der in ihnen geschilderten Welt lenken – ein Vermittelte nicht nur durch die Wahrnehmung des reisenden Ich, sondern vor allem auch durch den Akt des Berichterstatters, also durch die Vertextung der Reise.“ (Engl. translation: *English Travel Writing: From Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

fiction, anthropology, and mysticism in *The Songlines* (1987), his bestselling account of travels in the Australian outback¹³.” Whether mysticism is one of the book’s key aspects may be a matter of debate. What is more interesting to us, is the idea of the mixture which some critics would certainly be tempted to qualify as “postmodern”. The matter is complex, as Chatwin also draws on literary history and works that are discursive mixtures in their own right, notably Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

As to the anthropological dimension, one can only note in passing that a number of the issues discussed by contemporary anthropologists, notably questions relating to reflexivity, are also raised in some of the travelogues coming under consideration here. The most obvious illustration are Redmond O’Hanlon’s works, in which sustained (rather than compressed) dialogue is used to stage discussions about point-of-view, thus foregrounding the question. Another example would be the travel accounts of the trained ethnographer Nigel Barley, in particular *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1983), in which Barley purports to narrate the parts of field experience so many anthropological monographs simply leave out. Numerous interesting links can thus be established between travel writing and narrative ethnography¹⁴. Such close relations are nothing new, since many travelogues of past ages are more or less obviously or at least partly proto-ethnographic. It could even be argued that a non-institutional form of ethnography

¹³ Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England?*, volume XII of *The Oxford English Literary History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 482.

¹⁴ See our essay “*In-Betweeners? — On the Travel Book and Ethnographies*“ in *Studies in Travel Writing* N° 4. Nottingham: The Nottingham Trent University, 2000, pp. 78–105.

was first practised by travellers and writers, such as Herodotus in Antiquity, Jean de Léry in the XVIth century or Captain Cook in the XVIIIth to name but three obvious examples. But this is not our main focus and it seems to us that one would hesitate to call these works non-fiction novels.

Beyond the end of journeying

If such generic aspects of contemporary travel writing thus necessarily need to be studied within the historical framework of literary conventions, it may also be pointed out that the new wave of texts published from the 1970s onwards represents a renewal, rather than just a revival. One of the most striking shifts to be noticed is the one to systematic or at least more systematic relativizing of the observer's point-of-view in a significant number of contemporary works which manifestly aim at placing the author's outlook into perspective, addressing implicitly or explicitly the issue of reflexivity. We may not always be dealing with the particularly unsettling form of self-questioning that so distinguishes James Agee's account in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the extraordinary book he published together with the photographer Walker Evans in 1941¹⁵, but analyses of the functioning of some of Lodge's criteria, such as ironic self-representation, scenic construction or symbolism easily show that these questions are frequently raised by contemporary travellers. A very striking example is the latest account of Colin Thubron (born 1939), *Shadow of the Silk Road*, published in 2006¹⁶. I would like to illustrate

this by looking at several passages from the book, to suggest that the art of travel writing continues to be practised by some of its foremost authors, such as Raban, O'Hanlon and Thubron, even though the new wave may have ebbed out in quantitative terms somewhere in the later 1980s.

Shadow of the Silk Road is Colin Thubron's ninth travel book, his first account, *Mirror to Damascus*, having been published in 1967. Among his best-known works are two books of the 1980s, *Among the Russians* (1983) and *Behind the Wall* (1987). More recently, Thubron has notably published *The Lost Heart of Asia* (1994) and *In Siberia* (1999). Although it would be difficult to affirm that Thubron's earlier works count among the most experimental in terms of literary strategy, his distinguished style draws both on his impressive knowledge of foreign cultures and a subtle, ceaseless questioning of his own perception, systematically confronting it with the other's point-of-view. A striking *mise-en-scène* of such a meeting is this admittedly imagined dialogue between the traveller and an Asian "grizzled entrepreneur":

"He : *What are you going for?*

I [piously]: *For understanding. To dispel fear. What did you go for?*

He: *To trade in indigo and salt from Khotan. Why should your understanding dispel fear, idiot?*

I [worried]: *It's true, it may confirm it.*

He: *Are you, then, afraid?*

I: *I'm afraid of nothing happening, of experiencing nothing. That is what the modern traveller fears (forgive me). Emptiness. Then you hear only yourself.*

He: *'Nothing happening'. I offered two pounds of incense to the Buddha for that. As for yourself, you'll hear that anyway. I know a sorcerer in Bukhara, sells bronze mirrors. There's only yourself in this world, he says. The*

¹⁵ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.

¹⁶ Colin Thubron, *Shadow of the Silk Road*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2006.

rest is illusion. There's just you. Nobody else. Is that why you go alone? Only pilgrims and madmen go alone. Which are you? [Silence]. You should take a concubine. [Tugs his beard]. Which is your country then?

I: *England...*

He: *England does not exist [Silence]. [...]"* (25–26).

It may seem at first that Thubron has invented a new form to represent the theme of the culture clash in the form of a mini-playlet. It so happens, that there is a precedent in Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana*, the famous account of his journey to the Oxus published in 1937 which Paul Fussell considers to be one of the masterpieces of modernist travel writing¹⁷, a work that is also one of Thubron's intertexts, as he travels along the Silk Road. We are thus dealing here with a particular form of literariness that brings into play not only Byron (Robert), but also Bunyan (see the word pilgrim) and possibly even Chaucer (pilgrims discussing, exchanging on the way). The theme of the quest for self-identity is dealt with in ironic terms: *Which are you?* – [Silence]. The notion of Englishness is given a similar treatment (*England does not exist*). And so is the fear of the traveller of meeting with nothing new or, even worse, nothing at all. The playlet may also be read as a confession in disguise. What am I doing here?, Rimbaud wondered in a letter, and so did Chatwin in his last book. Colin Thubron proposes a variation on the question: *What are you going for?* One of his answers is to be found a few pages further, carefully phrased, in punctuate terms: "To follow a road is to follow diversity: a flow of interlocked voices, arguing, in a cloud of dust" (31).

¹⁷ See Paul Fussell's ground-breaking study *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

But it would be erroneous to imagine that the traveller is trying to draw a picture of a road leading nowhere. As he moves on west, the Silk Road resounds increasingly with themes that are characteristic of postmodern debates. For instance, the notion of hybridity is introduced via observations of people encountered in Western China whose distant origins are mixed: "The Uighur are more than fifty per cent Caucasoid – so genetic research reveals – and here at Keriya, at the desert's south-east reach, survive the most hybrid people of all. [...] A mixture of Iranian, Tocharian, even Bactrian turned them into a walking memory of peoples who had vanished. A rosy-faced man reminded me of a friend in England, but he wore a faded skull-cap and had a limp" (115-6). The resemblance may not be entirely convincing, but somehow faces encountered along the Silk Road take on the contours of almost forgotten peoples, emblems of living history. Thubron insists that hybridity is an ancient historical phenomenon, besides being an intellectual concept in common use of late. In his careful wording, the Silk Road is seen as a vital or revitalizing thoroughfare of human bio-diversity, turning *ad absurdum* anthropological rêveries about isolated societies and their culture supposedly disconnected from other human groups:

"And you could go mad, I imagined, tracing the origins of the simplest things. The peppers in my pilau would return to India, I fancied, the sesame on my bread to Central Asia. I pictured the onions flying westward off my neighbour's plate, while his pistachio nuts disappeared to Persia. China, of course, would claim the paper napkins and the rose wilting on the counter; while the complications of iron metallurgy split our cutlery west and east. And what of ourselves, I wondered, our complicated blood (I was sodden with pilau now)? Along the ghost of the Silk Road, among today's

inhabitants, haemoglobin and DNA tests have linked western China by an indelible trail far to the Mediterranean” (116).

In Thubron’s writing, the Silk Road conjures up images of the past, discarding more recent phantoms of supposed splendid isolation when it comes to commodities and even human groups. Yet, he also takes a keen interest in observing recent developments and noting opinions of people met on the road such as those voiced by a Khyrgyz: “We’re a poor country. We never looked for independence. It just fell into our hands. We have had battles and rebellions against Moscow. But it was all done for us by others – Poles and Baltic people” (162-3). Another interesting example is his visit of a school in Iran: “(...) I sidle into an English language college, where I am passed from teacher to teacher. They have never seen an Englishman before, and I feel suddenly responsible for my country” (319). The feeling may appear absurd, though all too human, reflecting postcolonial anxieties about what seems at best to be a form of patronizing, if not an illustration of collective arrogance and denigration, as another remark suggests: “A moment’s silence yawns. I try to fill it with some understanding, but hear myself only condescending, British” (321). The intended resonance is manifest, as the book’s title also suggests. The traveller is making progress in the *shadow* of the Silk Road, under a “troubled cloudscape”, one reads in the book’s penultimate passage (344). The times alluded to belong both to the past and the present. A timeline is presented to the reader at the end to put the narrative one more time into perspective. Colin Thubron’s journey is both a thoughtful inquiry into some of the most polemical issues in current intellectual debates and a humanist errand which aims at rubbing the traveller’s brains, as Montaigne put it, against those of

others encountered on one of the oldest pathways from East to West (or vice-versa).

Speaking in more general terms, Charles Forsdick notes that “the rise of travel literature (...) crystallizes a series of concerns central to contemporary literary and cultural studies; relating to colonial and postcolonial issues: interculturality, translation, the desire to describe grounds of comparison according to which the metropolitan and non-metropolitan may co-exist in a non-hierarchical relationship¹⁸.” It seems to us that Colin Thubron’s book is a memorable example of such a comparatist aim to represent experience from an intercultural, and if possible non-hierarchical or at least less markedly hierarchical point-of-view, a feature that appears as one of the hallmarks of the most reflexive in contemporary travel literature. Such writing also questions the functioning of certain received notions central in travelogues, as Loredana Polezzi has pointed out: “This situation may give rise to both production and reception scenarios which do not easily fit with well-worn binary models of ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’. Increasingly often (...) authors address multiple, complex audiences¹⁹.” Significant shifts in terms of writing and reception are thus at work in contemporary writing, which will no doubt leave their mark on literary studies and literary history in particular. “Travel, Loredana Polezzi underlines, (...) is a multiple activity, encompassing temporary and voluntary displacement, repeated movement, exile, diaspora. Places of origin are often plural and

¹⁸ Charles Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French & Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 158.

¹⁹ Loredana Polezzi, “Translation, Travel, Migration” in *The Translator: Studies in Intercultural Communication*, special issue ed. by Loredana Polezzi. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, Volume 12, Number 2, 2006, pp. 169–188, p. 158.

unstable (...). ‘Arrival’ and ‘destination’ are equally ambitious notions (...)” (174). As our understanding of the term “travel” evolves, it does not seem to be too much of a surprize, that certain key notions in representations thereof are also coming under scrutiny in contemporary texts, since travel writing does continue to aim at partly reflecting the real, even if the writing involves various processes of fictionalisation. Contemporary travellers do not merely travel in the footsteps of their predecessors, reactualising and rewriting, to a certain extent, previous itineraries. While the predominant role of intertextuality may strike

us as one of the chief postmodern features of contemporary works, aspects of reflexive observation have also been given particular attention to in a number of the narratives referred to above. Such texts bear witness to the dynamic potential of the genre. “Discourses of exhaustion”, to borrow Michael Cronin’s phrase²⁰, are simply not convincing, as the notion of *polyidentity* seems to offer sheer infinite possibilities of observation.

²⁰ Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2000, p. 17.

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