

Review Article

Travel, Travel Writing, and the Construct of European Identity

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Abstract

It has become a Structuralist truism in the social sciences to state that individuals define themselves by what they are not. It has equally become evident that travel—and particularly the voluntary, temporary, and perspectival type that we call tourism—is predicated on interaction with the Other. Travelogues are particularly salient “social facts” in this regard, for they both index such processes of identity formation, as well as contribute to them. Two edited volumes, Rolf-Hagen Schulz-Forberg’s *Unraveling Civilisation: European Travel and Travel Writing* (2005) and John Zilcosky’s *Writing Travel: The Poetics and Politics of the Modern Journey* (2008) provide compelling examples of how the multifarious and complementary processes of travel and travel writing not only index, but construct, European identity.

Keywords: European identity, Other, alterity, tourism, travel, travelogues

The fruit of a 2004 international conference at the European University in Fiesole, Italy, *Unraveling Civilisation: European Travel and Travel Writing* (2005) brings together scholars from ten countries to examine the notion that Modern Europe was constructed, at least in part,

through the dual processes of creating and disseminating European travel accounts of the Other. Befitting this part-historiographic, part-Saidian endeavor, the articles in *Unraveling Civilisation* are organized by Rolf-Hagen Schulz-Forberg chronologically, extending from pre-Modern European history and ending with a brief foray in postmodern criticism. The multivocal volume makes an admirable attempt at a difficult task, one haunted by the fundamental question: “what is travel?” Although the tourist’s travelogue is the most represented in Schulz-Forberg’s volume, the reader is aware that there are many other forms of travel, such as immigration, diaspora, business, and military movements—but it is unclear how appropriate it is to subsume their literary products under a single genre. This problem unfortunately muddles the overall cohesiveness of the volume, but the editor must be credited with his decision to open the book with three theoretical chapters that attempt to unify these disparate types of travel.

The most far-reaching effort is made by James Buzard, who, taking a critical eye to the equally disparate academic field of cultural studies, engages in a highly theoretical, anthro-philosophical explanation of what constitutes travel—or, more precisely, what *does not* constitute travel. (This is another example of that structuralist truism at work.) Building on anthropologist James Clifford’s venerable article, “Traveling Cultures” (1998: 17–46), Buzard concludes that travelers may constitute a particular mobile culture irrespective of their actual motives for moving. Whether intentional or unintentional, it is the search for, and description of, difference that defines this culture. And thus the search for difference is itself relative; “someplace different” can mean something different to different people; one can succumb to the “lure of the local” (Lippard 1998) just as equally as the Swedish travelers Agneta Edman discusses (chapter 13) can succumb to the sexualized, fetishized Oriental Other.

Linguist Lorenza Mondada also shows us that travel is a socio-cultural activity: intersubjective, indexical, and performative (67); it aims to produce knowledge by fleshing out a perception through writing. “Seeing,” she writes, is a “condition for both saying and knowing” (69). Mondada analyzes a number of seemingly similar travel accounts where authors use the verb “to see,” and reveals the ways in which the language itself subtly references prior knowledge, prior accounts, and prior understandings of that which is seen. She points out that while the verb “to look” presup-

poses that the target of the gaze has an autonomous existence, the verb “to see” indexes a direct linkage between the subject and the object. This is not just a foray into semantics, but has real material consequences for students of tourism and travel writing. The fact that the most common idiom used in this genre is “to see” means that both gazer and gazed co-construct the gazed-upon object. A tourist site is always put under a “way of seeing” (Alpers 1991; Berger 1977) or, as John Urry famously contended, a “tourist gaze”—a socially organized process of seeing a place, which decontextualizes a site from its social-spatial milieu, and imposes a narrative claim upon it (2002: 1). The “tourist attraction”—the synergy of visitor-site-marker per MacCannell (1976: 41)—is thus created through prior understandings, preconceived notions, and earlier experiences with the place and its “reproducible re-presentations,” sensory forms that exist completely apart from the site itself and, owing to their ability to be copied in this Age of Mechanical Reproduction, can circulate quickly and efficiently across the world (Di Giovine 2009a: 13–14, 376–97). The travelogue is a “reproducible re-presentation” par excellence.

After such compelling theoretical arguments, it comes as a slight disappointment that the overwhelming majority of the chapters deal with northern Europeans discovering the primitive in their own backyards: we read about the French in Ukraine (chapter 6), British in Russia (chapter 5) and Germany (chapter 12), and Germans in Poland (chapter 7), Italy (chapter 8), and London (chapter 11). Though most of these chapters may make valuable contributions to their particular area studies on their own, together they seem monotonous, and one longs to read about the converse—the Other’s account in northern Europe. (Andrei Zorin (chapter 8) does write about Catherine the Great’s trips to the Crimea, but the Prussian-born czarina’s musings of her state can hardly be considered Eastern or subaltern.) One must not forget to apply the lessons taught by Edward Said (1994), and later Panivong Noriendr (1996) and Penny Edwards (2007): representations of alterity circulate and may become embraced by both subject and object, such that even the majority culture may find itself in a representational double bind, a paradox in which they are compelled to play out common stereotypes of themselves (see also Barth 1969). Tim Youngs’s concluding chapter analyzing the account of an African Brit who retraced the route of the 1960s Freedom Riders through the US South poignantly turns this on its head. As a minority of African descent in an

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Anglo-European world, Gary Younge viewed the African American struggle as part of his heritage, and undertook this trip as a type of pilgrimage only to find it unexpectedly reinforced feelings of his own Britishness (334).

Indeed, just as travel is predicated on a visceral tension between exploring oneself and the Other, so too does the genre of travel writing precariously straddle the dual planes of subjectivity and objectivity, qualities which Schulz-Forberg in his commendable introduction calls *utile* and *dolce* (useful and sweet). Many genres attempt to provide *utile* eyewitness accounts—such as journalism and post-Geertzian anthropology—but none do it with such a concentrated effort at achieving *dolcezza*. It is this genre-defining, pathos-filled subjectivity that makes travel writing not only attractive and enduring, but, almost counter-intuitively, gives it authenticity. Indeed, authenticity, far from being an intrinsic quality in a site, is a subjective *narrative claim* about a place's ability to mediate between the visitor's life history and that of the imagined society (s)he is visiting (Di Giovine 2009a: 26–27). Arguing that the metropolis barrages the traveler with “semiophores”—a “rush of meaningful signs” (263)—Schulz-Forberg shows in his own chapter on Germans in London that collectively understood intangible markers, such as stereotypical sounds and smells, provide a means of authenticating an experience and describing the indescribable through a process he calls “inter-sensuality” (271).

Describing the indescribable is a common theme in travel writing, and seafaring explorers in particular were compelled to innovate ways of dealing with the problem of speechlessness. Examining the expedition accounts of nineteenth-century sea captains—including that of Robert Fitzroy, the Royal Navy captain who navigated the *Beagle* on Charles Darwin's famed expedition—Søren Dalsgaard also reveals the inter- and intra-textual natures of both travel and travel writing. Far from merely providing an official account of a particular expedition, the published captain's log was really part of a larger whole, “a sort of on-going publishing adventure, in which several authors are inspired by, quote from and enlarge upon a huge work in progress” (252). Just as Schulz-Forberg's urban German travelers made meaning of London through prior memorial frameworks, so too do these intrepid explorers imbue discovered lands with remembered descriptions penned by different captains about different places.

Plinio Freire Gomes's chapter on conquistadores' attempts to describe the indescribable encountered in the Americas provides another worthy

perspective. Their cosmological and moral understandings of the world were ineffective in making meaning of the New World Other:

“indescribable” things appeared to be so because they lay beyond good and evil exhausting thought ... The expression ‘I do not know how to describe’ does not prove that the narrator is unable to narrate—it does not invalidate his message whatsoever. Quite the opposite, this conceptual vacuum is meaningful in that it implies two statements: 1) “I was there to witness”; and 2) “I do not understand what I have witnessed.” (91, 94)

This conceptual impasse, it seems, led the conquistador-cum-travel writer to re-present alterity cartographically. Maps are not mere indicators, but “social facts” that express specific viewpoints in support of particular interests; in so doing, they shape one’s vision of the world and the creators’ place in it. “[I]t is the map, hardly alone, in collaboration with other sign systems, which *creates* ideology, transforms the world *into* ideology, and by printing the world on paper *constructs the ideological*” (Wood and Fels 2008: 190). And just as what a writer leaves unsaid is as important as that which (s)he utters, so too, Gomes points out, are the cartographic “blank variations” (104) important to analyze. Gomes’s piece is ultimately a reminder to researchers of travel writing to never forget to consider alternative forms of re-presentation; maps, like the written word, are cultural artifacts; they are equally contextual and equally symbolic, and may be as indexical and constitutive of identity as literary works.

John Zilcosky’s edited volume, *Writing Travel: The Poetics and Politics of the Modern Journey* (2008) picks up where *Unraveling Civilisation* left off by providing a sophisticated mix of articles from leading social and literary theorists. According to Zilcosky in his acknowledgements, the book is ultimately the product of a relatively tight social network of scholars, rather than the product of an international conference as *Unraveling Civilisation* was; this may explain why, despite a broader thematic and geographic reach, *Writing Travel* seems more cohesive. Like *Unraveling Civilisation*, *Writing Travel* tackles the issue of how the image of Modern Europe was constructed through the production of the Other. However, whereas most of the articles in the former volume located the Other within greater Europe, *Writing Travel* includes gender, race/color, and class as primary

categories of alterity. It also provides an examination of a minority group's reaction to its Othering—which was so longed-for in reading Schulz-Forberg's volume. Indeed, Todd Presner's chapter on "seafaring Jews" shows how the emphasis placed on maritime escapades by some Jewish writers—who are stereotypically considered non-sailors—is an attempt to rewrite the myth of the "wandering Jew" and allow Jewish Europeans to make an equal claim "to world history and place them in line with the European Universal" (117). Last, although in his introduction Zilcosky echoes Schulz-Forberg's view that travel literature is a particularly culturally-situated genre (9–10), there is a greater emphasis on different media forms such representations can take—from poetry to graffiti (chapters 4 and 11), from letters (chapter 3) to depictions in and of "virtual reality" (chapter 10). All of these elements work to better complexify and problematize an already complex and problematic genre, opening new venues for further scholarly exploration.

Much has been written about moving through places in travelogues, but Barbara Korte deals with the equally important—yet less frequently problematized—aspect of moving through time. For Korte, a travelogue is a prime example of what Mikhail Bakhtin called a chronotype: "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (29). Arguing, as Kant does, that space and time are *a priori* categories "through which we always perceive, make sense of, and act in reality" (26), Korte deconstructs temporality in these chronotypes. This is not an esoteric endeavor, but is fundamental for understanding the ongoing process of identity formation, especially given that the Grand Tour—and, I would add, modern tourism—is a process of personality development that is meant to take place across time and space. In addition, the concern to link past and present through the medium of a monument—particularly the ancient ruins of Southern Europe for Grand Tour-goers—continues to be a concern in contemporary cultural travel, particular when they involve heritage sites (Di Giovine 2009a). Korte's words ring true:

[The] awareness of one's self means that one is aware of one's existence in time—that is, one's sense of identity from past through present to future, but also one's ability to change. ... Tourism is often conceived as a form of travel in which the traveler is harassed by time, even to the

point where space seems to shrink and distances seem to collapse, where the journey is subjected to the temporality of a capitalist society that values efficiency and punctuality and hence promotes a strict social management of time. (42)

If there is one form of travel that overtly embraces a chronotypical structure for the creation of identity, it is the pilgrimage; early Christian texts from Augustine (1958: 191) to the *itineraria* of Egedia (see Sivan 1988) and the Bordeaux traveler (see Elsner 2000) posit pilgrimage as a life-changing experience that occurs through sequential movements through time and space. Exploring issues of pilgrimage, Grand Tour travel, and authorship, Kelly Barry's chapter on Goethe's "Third Pilgrimage" and *Italian Journey* points out, "Pilgrimage is defined by emulation" and that imagined "fellowship with pilgrims past and present" intensifies the experience (62; see also Victor Turner's 1974 discussion of *communitas*). Barry shows that Goethe not only emulated the practices of those who came before him, but also constructed his writings with the conventions of pilgrim texts that could be emulated. In so doing, Goethe deftly reconceptualized literary authorship, "relinquish[ing] an emphatic conception of author as individual creator" and "detach[ing] writing from individual expression" (73).

The chronotypical play on one's identity is also important in Julia Hell's article exploring "ruins travel" through 1940s Germany. The Grand Tour emphasized the formative quality of traveling through the ancient ruins of European civilization, and travelogues from this era attest to a type of tourist gaze that not only imbued meaning on the object, but imaginatively reconstructed it. But what happens to this reconstructive tourist gaze when one is traveling in his own destroyed city, where viewers entertain lived memories of how it appeared? Hell argues that these post-apocalyptic travelers, such as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Hans Erich Nossack, engaged in a "reconstruction of the real" (126), which includes coming to terms with their moral and historical situation. This makes such ruins more difficult to visualize:

Classical ruins let us imagine what was once there, they function as fragments of a lost whole that can be visualized. This is not the case here: these are not skeletal ruins, exposing the raw structure of what existed before the disaster. The cities' "new appearance" opens a gap

between the image of the past and of the present: "Now it requires a real effort of the imagination to think back to that Cologne which I knew well ten years ago," Spender writes. (133)

Fear is also a predominant theme in both travel and travel writing, and seems to imbue the experience with authenticity. Gabriela Nouzeilles provides a particularly interesting chapter on alternative travel and adventure tourism, where tourists attempt to get off the beaten path by (supposedly) risking their lives. Yet Barry's contention that tourism is predicated on emulation continues to ring true. As these backpackers, nomadic travelers and adventure tourists strive to go where no one has gone before, they usually follow their own culturally specific *itineraria* such as the *Lonely Planet* series of guidebooks, and, in the long-run, "paradoxically... end up being the vanguard of commercial tourism" (197; see also Di Giovine 2009b: 222). Furthermore, she contends, by "playing at being the primitive Other, the nomadic tourist comes full circle, ending up much closer to the post-modern tourist and his fondness for simulacra of reality" (198).

Real fear, real tensions, and real uncertainties do exist in travel, and it is good that the volume ends with Georges Van Den Abbeele's exploration of the fascinatingly haunting site of Angel Island, a sort of anti-Ellis Island outside of San Francisco where countless Asian immigrants were indefinitely incarcerated immediately before reaching the United States. Rather than being a place for reaggregation after their grueling journey across the Pacific, these would-be immigrants find themselves in troubling liminality, their travel completed before reaching their final destination. To explicate such indescribable tensions, these predominantly Chinese travelers turn to a culturally specific medium: poetry. Just as Jonathan Culler's chapter deconstructs Baudelaire's poetic works, so too does Van Den Abbeele's parse some of these poems, but while Baudelaire pens his on paper, these immigrants scratch them into the walls of their cells. Although Van Den Abbeele is loathe to use the term, this is, of course, graffiti in its purest sense (*graffiti* literally means "scratches"). But I hasten to add that we should also look at it through the culture of the producers: scratched into the stone and wood walls, such poems are evocative of *shih-shu* ("rock-and-bark poetry"), with which the mythological Ch'an (Zen) poet Han Shan littered the mountainside during the T'ang dynasty. But while the elusive, yet mobile, hermit Han Shan used the medium of *shih-shu* as a way of dis-

seminating his poems, these immigrants' works are as immobile as their creators. This chapter thus reconfigures the question, "Does [travel] writing take place while traveling or during respites along the way?" (246), as neither the traveler nor the finished product move, and the immigrants' "respites" are not of their own volition. The immobility of the traveler and his writing is overcome only by the way the poems emotionally move their future audience (thankfully the U.S. National Parks Service stopped Angel Island's demolition). It is precisely this quality that bestows authenticity. As Van Den Abbeele states, "The claims of authenticity in such texts are validated by the eyewitness testimony gotten from first-hand observations written down, temporally as well as spatially, on the spot" (240).

With this statement, Van Den Abbeele summarizes the major points of both volumes: travel is a visceral, embodied experience with alterity, one that has the potential to deepen an individual or group's identity. Travel writing, though disparate, can be considered a genre of chronotypes built around an attempt to describe the often indescribable barrage of sensations and semiophores, whose very subjectivity is the locus of authenticity.

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