

## The Rovers' Return: the books of travel and the ways of worldmaking

**HRC: Canberra, February 2011**

There have always been travel books, they start long before such antique European classics as Marco Polo's *Travels* and Hakluyt's *Voyages*. The off-duty aesthetic sport of 'seeing as' recommended by Wittgenstein might lead one to take the *Book of Exodus*, the *Qur'an*, the tales of their pilgrimage told by those who sought out the Buddha under his bo tree, or – the originary travellers' textbook – the *Odyssey*, all of them as being, as no doubt they are, formative strata in the geomorphology of the form.

The archaeology of knowledge teaches us that form goes all the way down to the beginning and that therefore with the vast topic in hand, travellers and their narratives are shaped by deep structures compelled upon and discovered by strange surges of longing upon the part of irretrievably ancient migrations and the stories about themselves the primitive migrants accumulated. But if we foreshorten this history very drastically and cut it back to the dates at which old Europe emerged into its new birth at the Renaissance, if, to compress even more violently to the moment at which Portugal, Spain, Britain and France turned ambition, greed and curiosity into the beginnings of empire, then we find the special, early meanings of the verb 'to explore' taking on its radical geographical force. Even so, it is not until the 19th century that the assortment of terms around the verb, especially the nouns 'explorer' and 'exploration', extend their global and cartographic reach, and Walt Whitman urges his 'Pioneers O' onto their 'pleasant exploration' and the *Pall Mall Gazette* reports that Mr Stanley has resumed his explorations in Africa.

Just a little later, the old, bitter joke listing the cast of characters in the epic of empire might be used, with a few additions, to shape the items in an encyclopaedia of travel: first, the explorers, then the missionaries, then the settlers, then the soldiers, finally the tourists. Between the missionaries and the settlers, we might insert the anthropologists, after the soldiers, the journalists, along with the tourists the refugees, the wanderers, the exiles, the artists, a weird new caravan of the lost, coming to find safety, a new life, themselves ...

With these last, we have joined modernity and may approach our imperial theme. What does the vast crowd of those travellers who have committed themselves to following the footprints

of the great explorers, and have then gone on to turn those prints into print, teach us about our ways of worldmaking?

That world, no doubt, has been a long time on the make. Globalisation, as malediction or as slogan of hopefulness, may have only been around for three decades or so – the years of neo-liberal economics, the drunken deregulation of capital, of limitless borrowing, the pretence that debt is credit, all that – but trade began to move massively west after – what? – 1500 or so, from China to India along the Silk Road to Europe via Venice and on across the continent and the Atlantic and the prairies until stopped by the Pacific coast, and rebounding in great waves backwards.

Not everybody, however, is persuaded that this rolling process, sweeping through five centuries, thereby constituting what is so euphemistically named the developed world, is either unitary or coherent, and of course the banking collapses of the past three years and the consequent returns of the violently repressed history of 1929, has done much to encourage old social democrats of the necessity of sovereignty and the strengths of law, nation and the state. As the term 'globalisation' became popular as a concept offering to grasp and hold a new world order, so revisionists placed a timely question mark over it, as being misleadingly tidy, premature, even long-lived in any case and as having historical precedents with better claims to the title. Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson were among the earliest such sceptics<sup>1</sup> (although makers of an alternative tradition cannot overlook the nowadays overlooked farsightedness of J A Hobson and Graham Wallas,<sup>2</sup> these days largely dispatched to the least disturbed shelves in the Amnesty bookshop<sup>3</sup>). They suggest that "the current international economy is *less* open and integrated than the regime that prevailed from 1870 to 1914", that "genuinely transnational companies appear to be relatively rare" and that what they call "liberal multilateralism", by which they mean trade bloc agreements amongst geographical neighbours in the rich world, will assume defensive positions from which they hope to salvage sufficient sovereignty to keep allies and electorates happy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalisation in Question*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996. See especially pp195-201, pp136-151.

<sup>2</sup> J A Hobson, *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, London: Grant Richards, 1894; Graham Wallas, *The Great Society*, London: Macmillan, 1914.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. by Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

This short detour into the cul-de-sac of modern economics serves to counterpose the small redoubts of localism against the tidal waves, erratic, uncontrollable, contradictory, of global financial movements and the marketers who jump employment as their crazy pilots. In Clifford Geertz's images, the "blurred genres" of social thought can only come at astigmatic vision of a *pointilliste* kind.<sup>4</sup> The books of travel may indeed be well arranged into just such a pattern.

## II

A *pointilliste* pattern nonetheless can only become visible when a spectator has learned to see dots as mass, pricks of colour as blocks of form, spots of pigment as figures in a landscape. There again, we have learned from so much intelligent theorisation of all the spectator must do on his or her part to bring off the art of 'seeing as' – learning to see points of paint as being realisable as *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, and coming to share a little of Matisse's vision of the great happiness and fulfilment of solitary sunbathing.

Arranging the best works of greater and lesser travel writers as a *pointilliste* image of a runaway world is therefore a teacherly task. Such a task, after a whole decade of the new millennium, can only start out from some hard home truths. All travellers, and their sometimes entranced, sometimes distracted audiences, are presently pulled by either end of a contradiction. They are each – travel writer and vicarious traveller alike – aware of the globe as everybody's single island home. They feel this singularity all through, just as they have earnestly conned the lessons taught by explorers, pilgrims, scientists and settlers, that the peoples of the world are incorrigibly various. They have even, in a stiff neologism, invented with Levinas's help, a moral philosophy of 'alterity' and 'otherness' with which to direct aright their human sympathies and their moral imagination.

At the same time, however, and for the period of almost one whole deadly century, they have only been able to teach and learn these lessons by way of the ruthless exploitation of global resources and of their own advantages of access to these. Travellers, whether writers or readers, have gone to find out the strangeness of alterity, dead or alive, and in doing so have led the way for the millions who have followed, whether as investors, salesmen, pirates,

---

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, chapter 1.

burglars or ever so simple tourists. They have shown the others their own rich otherness, and not a soul among the others but wants to join the brave new world the newcomers bring with them. When Prospero breaks his staff, he rejoins the old world not as a magus but as a citizen, and Miranda, her powers of wonder still undimmed, starts her career as a well-off housewife.

John Gray, unappeasable and peregrine pessimist, names this acute convergence of contraries for what it is. Berating Jeremy Rifkin's massive and genial call to join his amiable world-consciousness, he writes derisively,

Climate change is not mainly the work of sinister corporate interests and weak-kneed or corrupt politicians. It is a direct result of the energy-intensive civilisation in which the affluent part of humankind lives, and which the rest very much wants to join. While humans are more interdependent than ever before, they are at the same time destabilising the planet ...

The essence of any catch-22 is that there is no way out, but Rifkin shrinks from this cruel logic, with the result that his argument verges on incoherence. How can human empathy possibly defeat the force of entropy, an irreversible physical process? [Can] an increase in altruism lead to the repeal of the second law of thermodynamics?<sup>5</sup>

The little showers of neologisms which have sprinkled the pages of the human sciences these past seventy years or so in the effort to catch and hold onto the vast and slippery mystery that other peoples and their creations can be "so utterly their own and so deeply part of us"<sup>6</sup> have largely fallen on the more likeable aspects of human nature. 'Otherness', 'alterity', 'empathy', '*autres pays, autres moeurs*', '*mentalites*' and the august resonance of 'interpretation' and 'relativism' on title pages have arranged themselves as conceptual frameworks for the understanding of places travelled to and of the people discovered (as the verb goes) at the journey's end.

The greatest poet and supreme fictionalist of this late Romantic idiom is of course Clifford Geertz, and like all great poets, his mastery of the diction entails a judicious irony towards its latent tendency to sanctimony and the innocent supposition that in using these shiny new concepts (a bit dulled after 40 years) one is freed from the deathly old errors of ethnocentrism, chauvinism, positivism, ideology and all that.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilisation: the race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, reviewed by Gray, *Guardian*, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, p54.

Not that irony, in the day of (in another revolting neologism) 'ironising' and of the "moral hypochondria" (Geertz's phrase) which goes with it, gets either traveller or tourist, soldier or settler, let alone the missionary-anthropologist, out of trouble. Geertz<sup>7</sup> himself is blunt as well as very funny at the expense of the various kinds of academic travel writing which, since about 1930, have tried, from very varying positions, to tell the truth about the weirdness of other human beings in more or less distant places or periods. He is then rather more censorious of those latter-day Pyrrhonists, many of them once his pupils and admirers,<sup>8</sup> who deny that one can say anything truthful, objective or non-exploitative about any (as they say) subaltern subjects.

Writing a criticism of contemporary anthropological angst and its vanities, Geertz counterposes to deconstructive postmodernism his own domestic but solidly clinker-built style of thought ('style', that is, in Nietzsche's strong sense as being "all the strengths and weaknesses of one's nature fitted into an artistic plan").<sup>9</sup>

Geertz concludes his unprogrammable advice to anthropologists with an implicit acknowledgement of John Gray's forked conundrum, although more hopefully put (he elsewhere and frequently spoke of "the duty to hope").

Prescriptive criticism – this is what you must do, this is what you must not – is as absurd in anthropology as it is in any other intellectual enterprise not dogmatically based ... whatever use ethnographic texts will have in the future ... it will involve enabling conversation across societal lines – of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race – that have grown progressively more nuanced, more immediate, and more irregular. The necessary thing (so at least it seems to me) is neither the construction of a universal Esperanto culture, the culture of airports and motels, nor the invention of some vast technology of human management. It is to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: the anthropologist as author*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. James Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late 20th century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, or Gavanath Obeyesekere, *European Mythmaking in the Pacific*, Princeton, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufman, New York: Random House, 1974, para 290.

<sup>10</sup> Geertz (1988) p147.

Geertz's is a happier as well as less brutal world than John Gray's. The two men are alike, however, in seeing that the world is now inextricably jumbled together, that its creatures all have their urgent, voluntary errands and that their eyes are bright with purpose. In these circumstances, style is to be preferred to method. (I cannot resist inserting here the parenthesis that nothing is more harmful to academic thought in the citadels of reason than compulsory graduate courses on research methodology as now practised.)

Anthropology, as I have suggested, is just one highly self-conscious form within the genre of travel-writing. Universal mass travelling which begins with world warfare in 1914 and slowly extends under the thrust of internal combustion and aeronautics until another world war crowded world geography, showed combatants and civilians and the countless individuals who were both, how the other half lived and died, the boredom, the horror and the glory (in Eliot's startling trinity) of either experience.

Travellers are not refugees, neither are they migrants. Migration happens when enough people move together to find not so much a destination as relief. All those millions of, first, Europeans (Irish, Poles, Norwegians, Italians, Germans) and then Far East Asians (Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese) set off across the Atlantic and the Pacific in search of all their own country could or would not provide: food, shelter, safety, an absence of police, work and pay. The desperate refugees were either ejected or in flight. They had, as one says, nowhere to go; they had nonetheless to go somewhere else. Their tales have of course been told often, and as often are too painful to re-read: the atrocities of the 20th century – Armenia, the Gulag, the Nazi death camps, the Chinese civil wars, Hiroshima, the Balkans, the South American rainforests and tyrannies – all end with long lines of the defeated and the evicted trudging slowly and directionlessly through a devastated landscape, dying where they fell, until somehow and somewhere someone called a halt.

Good old travel – this is my scherzo – is lighter in heart and in historical baggage though still with plenty to carry, as we shall see. For one thing, travel as in travel-writing, is voluntary. People who travel in this sense have the leisure, the cash, even the cultivation to do so. A traveller is sensitive to his or her sensibility, and although the conventional snobbery is for the traveller to quiver with a *frisson* of distaste at the idea of being mistaken for a *tourist*, the traveller's true historic formation is to be found where all the ladders of modern voyaging

start, which is to say round about 1763, when the Seven Years War ended, and the eager young bloods of the propertied classes set off to complete their education on the Grand Tour.

### III

Tourism by then was rather less than eighty years old but its origins go back to the first pastorals. In John Fowles's admirable novel *Daniel Martin*,<sup>11</sup> the novelist lends his hero a favourite passage from Restif de la Bretonne's eighteenth-century quasi-autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas*, set in the decades before the French Revolution. In it, while remembering his childhood in deepest Burgundy, the Frenchman describes shepherding his father's sheep into an unknown, rich and beautiful combe – 'la bonne vaux' – where he finds unparalleled fecundity, rare (but not legendary) birds and wildlife which he has never seen before, and what he senses as a perfect congruence of man and nature, a harmony of free, mutual life which properly belongs to Paradise. Momentarily, the sacred valley, which he never found again, realises the dream of perfect peace which was to haunt the Romantics, inaugurated their great tradition of landscape painting, and remains for us as their potent legacy.

These sacred valleys and lost domains are scattered through the geography, the demography and the poetry and paintings of the next two centuries. In Britain their line is traced both northwards and westwards by a route whose landmarks are the ruined Cistercian abbeys left abandoned after the dissolution of the monasteries, pillaged a little for their stones by the locals, muffled and girded in outline by ivy and erosion. Then at a moment heralded by Thomas Gray's great poem 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' in 1753, a bold new cadre of homegrown painters fell to imitating the grand ruins and sunny prospects of the mighty French classicists Claude and Poussin, turning ruins into lovely natural phenomena the point of which was to occasion sublime and beautiful feelings in the beholder.

Taking his cue, the young philosopher and politician from Ireland, Edmund Burke, published in 1759 his definitive essay<sup>12</sup> explaining the difference between the two. The beautiful was, as many commentators have pointed out, a feminine creature of softness, delicacy, a hint of gratifying voluptuity and of humane congeniality. The sublime, on the other hand, was a fearsome patriarch, full of 'horrid power', bleak, massive, unyielding, enormous. The home

---

<sup>11</sup> John Fowles, *Daniel Martin*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

of the first was the cultivated English garden with its soft curves and seductive boskiness. Its painter was Claude. The realm of the second was the Lake District, or better still the Alps, where the mighty rocks and chasms, the torrents and peaks combined the authority of grandeur with the discipline of indifference. Its first painter was the seventeenth century Neapolitan, Salvator Rosa.

Either way, there was a moral lesson to the sentiments in all this. Indeed, it was dead on cue that in 1759 Adam Smith published his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, more or less alongside his great friend David Hume's *Dissertation on the Passions*, each philosopher professing a quite new insistence on the assertive centrality of the emotions to human nature and moral conduct. Smith and Hume provided an aesthetics of the moral life in which reasonable sense could be made of the world by matching passions to eventualities in such a way as to form a coherent narrative.

Smith and Hume, in their plain Scots and sensible way, wanted no truck with such crazy excesses of feeling as exhibited by Ranters or Covenanters; they commended the 'middling' (but exceptional) virtues of the 'civil affections'. They foresaw nonetheless the coming victory of sensibility over sense, just as Jane Austen did forty years later. A contrary tide was running high and wide and it was being ridden with giddy excitement by such as Beethoven, Wordsworth, Rousseau, Turner and Immanuel Kant. This exhilarating demolition gang blew up the canons of Hume's 'middle station' and taught a primary correspondence between the colours, the dizzy chasms and sheer cliffs, the sheer excess of mother Nature and the nature-given disposition of an equally gifted humankind.

This brief sally into the historical struggle between Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of true and just feeling serves to pick out the new signposts directing travellers ever since, along the narrative routes which led and lead to discovery: self-discovery, for sure, and discovery of the new – the really new, certainly, where no-one, it seemed, had ever been before, and then, as these places became a bit crowded (Everest, the South Pole, the unplumb'd, salt, estranging seas), the new-as-far-as-me-my friends-and-my-readers are concerned.

It was and remains a terrific era of narrative formation and it was (as they say) no accident that the English who had created the industrial revolution, in turn devised for and had devised by their ruling classes the story and geography of the Grand Tour. Recoiling from the filth,



the noise, the jumbled, menacing throngs of London, the new Gomorrah, they concocted new kinds of town; the spa, the watering place and the resort entered the English language at the same time and redesigned also the books of architecture in order to include public parks and ornamental water, grand crescents in white stucco and pretty little squares, colonnades, porticos, assembly rooms to assemble in and drink the horrible-tasting waters for the sake of one's skin or one's digestion. These new towns – Bath, Cheltenham, Droitwich; Carlsbad, Aix-les-Bains, Lausanne – borrowed their cosmetics from their Palladian origins in Italy and their classical tutors in Greece; the northern Mediterranean littoral was the source of all the tourists' land-and-townscape, and of, first, the industry and then the culture, the very way of being which is shaped and taught by the moral economy of home and history.

Until Bonaparte invaded Italy in 1796 the roads, the cross-channel ferries, the inns on the way and the *pensione* on arrival were packed with the English and with the Scots who had taken the main road to London. In the first thirty years of the Grand Tour the ratio of passports issued in Rome to British visitors (a passport being at the time just that: paid permission to step from the boat onto the quay) outnumbered all other nations five to one. Already by 1784 over three hundred elegant English wintered in Nice, another one hundred and thirty in Naples.<sup>13</sup> They went to pay tribute to art and architecture; they went with serious interest in antiquity; they went to satisfy cultivated acquisitiveness, and bought for their collections; they went for their health, for sunshine and disgusting mineral water; they went for sex, because for a young blade on the Grand Tour anything goes – it was hard, as Byron's example proves, to damage a reputation in and because of foreign parts; finally, they went for a taste of danger, for the gratifying Kantian terror of gazing at and then crossing the Alps, for daring – with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu – to dress up as a man and penetrate the portal of the Mosque in Istanbul, for pitching across the Bay of Biscay in an old passenger tub barely one hundred feet long.

It is Boswell, of course, who writes the definitive story of the sensitive grand tourist, packing his or her day with a daunting work rate, checking out the right, the truthful feelings to feel, keeping up with the demands of the flesh, paying homage to art, history, God and girls. In Milan, Boswell "drank chocolate and got into spirits", admired the *Duomo* to sincere distraction, imagined himself in contemplative old age at the convent, quoted well-loved

---

<sup>13</sup> Figures in Jeremy Black, *The British and the Grand Tour*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, p21.

Latin poetry on cue and for his own pleasure, and so to Rome to join his dear, unlikely friend, radical and atheist John Wilkes, found the "campagna charming", but here he is at St Peter's: "Entered church; warm. Ah! noble, immense; quite rapt. Walked around. At last, kneeled and adored ..." on to Naples ("a delicious spot, *praetor omnes ridet*"), admires the bay briskly and sincerely, Virgil in hand, suffers from some sort of eczema, back to Rome after a month for a six-day "course in Antiquities and Arts", talking Latin to his friend Morison, and keeping a notebook in French (this is full-dress Grand Tourism, all right). He leaves nothing out, this conscientious (but all-delighting) fellow:

We saw the ceremony at the Minerva, where his Holiness was carried on a magnificent chair, decorated with a figure of the Holy Ghost ... After this there was a procession of Roman girls ... some to be married and others to become nuns ... Only a few were pretty and most of the pretty ones were nuns ... We viewed the celebrated Forum. I experienced sublime and melancholy emotions as I thought of all the great affairs which had taken place there ... We entered the famous Colosseum, which certainly presents a vast and sublime idea of the grandeur of the ancient Romans ... It was shocking to discover several portions of this theatre full of dung ... climbed the Palatine hill in the afternoon ... walked to where the house of Cicero stood. A statue there resembles him a great deal. Struck by these famous places, I began to speak Latin. Mr Morison replied. He laughed a bit at the beginning ... saw the Baths of Diocletian ... saw a strange fellow sitting in the sun reading Tasso to a group of others in rags like himself ... saw 'Moses' by Michelangelo; horns, though sacred, yet ludicrous as like satyr; rest of the figure superb.<sup>14</sup>

On and on, tireless, energetic, sybaritic and egotistical for sure but also ingenuously attentive and alive to everything about him; our Grandest Tourist.

Boswell is a charmer, a hard man to leave. Erudition, enthusiasm, licence and extravagance mingle in him in such immediately recognisable ways. He is one of us, but one of us because he was like it first. Innocent as he is, he teaches succeeding generations what and how to feel, arranging himself and the landscape of Virgil's birthplace at Pietole under the spreading beech ('patulae fagi'), sitting on the spot, no doubt, where the master beheld the gentle slope to the water's edge and penned the first lines of the *Eclogues* – "qua se subducere colles / Inapiunt Monique ... usque ad aquam". This was the pastoral image invented by the new pedagogues of sensibility in the eighteenth century, authorised by Virgil and turned into pictures everybody could find in the Campagna by Claude and Poussin.

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Private Papers of James Boswell: Boswell on the Grand Tour 1765-66*, Frank Brady and Frederick Pottle (eds), London: William Heinemann, 1955, pp53, 62-3, 64-5, 66. My elisions.

There are certainly many mansions in the house of fictions written for tourists and their predecessor travellers (a class distinction to which we must return). Those with the money took the routes marked out by Grand Tourists and their painters – Calais to Paris, Paris down Saone and Rhone to Marseille for the boat and Nice for the *Promenade des Anglais*, east to the Alps, a hard journey, and then the sweet fullness of Piedmont, Milan, Florence, Rome, Naples, and back west via Venice. Those more penurious tourists sticking to their island home, made in turn a new kind of more homely journey in order to visit what had been ignored and unvisited, and had then suddenly assumed journey-worthiness, meriting the tourist's gaze and demanding this new way of seeing, with new guides on hand to teach new visioning.

Wordsworth, having written the great poems which did so much to make the new sensibility and its rapture before the works of nature, then wrote the textbook pedagogy for the tourist's coat pocket.

A resident in a country like this which we are treating of, will agree with me, that the presence of a lake is indispensable to exhibit in perfection the beauty of one of these days; and he must have experienced, while looking on the unruffled waters, that the imagination, by their aid, is carried into recesses of feeling otherwise impenetrable. The reason of this is, that the heavens are not only brought down into the bosom of the earth, but that the earth is mainly looked at, and thought of, through the medium of a purer element.<sup>15</sup>

Eight years later, John Keats followed the senior poet's instructions, up early to a June dawn, climbed Skiddaw by 6.30, and above the mist was able to take delightedly in the view of the Scottish coast, the Irish Sea, Helvellyn and Scawfell, "ten miles before Breakfast with two others, very good sort of fellows ... I felt as if I were going to a Tournament".<sup>16</sup> Thus and thus the great poets mark out that singular kind of journey which the traveller makes in order to discover the strangeness of his or her homeland, the unfamiliar hidden so satisfyingly in the family's storehouse of value and boxes of memory.

Thus far, this brief reminder of our constitutive historicity, of the way the tales of old travelling beat the tracks we blithely follow two hundred years later, has been, as I said, light

---

<sup>15</sup> William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes* (1810), E de Selincourt (ed), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p47.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, selected by F Page, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, p132.

enough of heart, cheerful as one is at the start of the holidays, well fed, well slept, well educated. It would, however, be to betray an adjacent history not to darken these sunny tales with much grimmer and more brutal parallel lines on another map. It would also be to flout the lessons of a different historiography, and to do so, in this city, with inexcusable discourtesy.

I am therefore heeding the minatory voice of that great émigré historian, John Pocock, when he admonishes Anglo-Europeans to look at the globe from what both Europeans and North Americans think of as the underneath.<sup>17</sup> From such a position the Antipodean sees a world made by oceans, the invisible routes on whose waters are at first thinly marked by the intrepid sailors of tenth century Polynesia before being subject to the industrial cartography initiated by the always amazing Captain James Cook ( let alone his utterly pedestrian successor in another part of the ocean, the portly Captain George Vancouver) . The world envisioned from underneath is only intelligible – only 'made' – by the patterns of voyages. If Sydney is the centre of the globe, the globe's vast insides which are the outback are only there to be crossed, or to be avoided altogether by sea travel. Such a voyage is then bounded by the archipelagos of New Guinea and Indonesia and so, heading always for the reassurance of land on the horizon, our tiny craft makes its narrow passage past Singapore into the Bay of Bengal and beholds the huge sub-continent sundered and shadowed to this day by the historical tatters of a threadbare Union Jack still flying over Sydney and Auckland.

By this point, turning the globe in one's hands, or being turned on its surface by the winds of ocean, the sheer mass of the history of empire, heavy as the atmosphere, lies all about the voyager. He and she sail into the defile of the Red Sea, leaving to port the recruiting posts of the Somali Rifles, the Royal Sudanese Police, the Kenya Rifles, before entering the Suez canal, Disraeli's great purchasing coup in 1875 when Khedive Ismail was so strapped for cash, then the site of British disgrace only eighty-one years later.

Our imaginary or our actual travellers now burst into the bright Mediterranean, and old history fairly overwhelms them, pressing heavily from every quarter, from Byzantium and Jerusalem, from Caesar and Alexander, from Athens and Troy, from Bonaparte in Toulon, Roosevelt in Teheran, Tito in Trieste and along the length of the north African coast, again

---

<sup>17</sup> J G A Pocock, 'Deconstructing Europe', first published in the *London Review of Books* in 1991, collected in his *The Discovery of Islands*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

seized by the Prophet, rearmed and reawoken and revengeful. The only thing for our imaginary and imagining Australian or New Zealander is to run for the old country through the Straits of Gibraltar, still flying the flag, only to find on passing Start Point and entering Plymouth harbour before the Hoe that this has become no longer home but 'Europe', and that Antipodeans have little part in the new, unwritten history of a quondam imperial power now deeply puzzled as to its dissolving sovereignty in an electronic field of markets.

The journey I have sketched out follows the *un*making of a world which, as Pocock saw after the great unmaking of 1989 when the Wall came down and the Iron Curtain with it,<sup>18</sup> still does not know how to contrive a new historical narrative, of progress and emancipation, of safety and sufficiency, for the benefit of all peoples.

Writing and rewriting history, as R G Collingwood admonished us three generations ago, is the only means to collective self-knowledge which we have, the necessary step before deciding what to do next being to discover how we got into this mess in the first place. The easy-going history with which I began said what it had to say about the historical making of a traveller's sensibility and imagination, such a traveller being somewhere, whether active or latent, in all of us. Or rather, all of us with a bit of leisure, goodish health, and spare cash.

The travellers whom I shall line up on identification parade in a moment possess all these latter advantages. In the complete history of voyaging, however, the millions-strong majority were there under a variety of involuntary persecutions, impelled by poverty, pressed into naval servitude under the lash, compelled by law to deportation eleven months' journey away, sold as so many goods into slavery, all the other side of a vast ocean. It has been one of the mightiest of intellectual restorations this past half-century, that historians have composed so much history from below, rescuing, in Edward Thompson's immortal words, "the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity".<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> My own necessarily half-baked effort to redraw the world map as it dissolved was written while it was doing so: Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: everyday life and the Cold War*, New York: Basic Books, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p12.

The slave ships to the United States and death and life on the plantations, the convict ships to New South Wales, found their Edward Gibbons in Eugene Genovese and Robert Hughes.<sup>20</sup> The terrible nature of these journeys is communicable only by the sheer bulk of numbers – of numbers transported and numbers of corpses tossed overboard at sea; of numbers measuring the foetid space below deck allotted per person; of numbers of foot mutilations or backs lashed into shreds and carried out as retribution; of numbers executed for armed resistance or mutiny.

These travellers' tales have also entered the collective memory and found honour where honour was due. Their great painter is Sidney Nolan, their poet Allan Curnow. It is much to the point that Genovese's title to his great classic includes our key concept, 'world making'. But the world thus made for our moral imaginations by such abominable misery is incompatible with the gregarious genialities and agreeable solitude of reminiscent travelling. There is simply no room among the books of travel in which to put, say, the hideous reminiscence of Hector Crèvecoeur when, on his walking holiday near Charlestown in 1770 or so, he

... perceived a Negro, suspended in the cage and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already pecked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places; and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped and tinged the ground beneath. No sooner were the birds flown than swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood... Had I had a ball in my gun, I certainly should have dispatched him, but finding myself unable to perform so kind an office, I sought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could.<sup>21</sup>

Crèvecoeur gives the poor wretch some water, and later learns that, in response to God knows what provocations, the man had killed his overseer on the plantation.

Travel writing, even at its sternest, cannot pay its dues to such horrors. If the world is to be made for each of us on the move, it will have to be in a comic form. When Clifford Geertz begins one of his essays<sup>22</sup> with a lengthy eye-witness account, written in the 1880s, of a

---

<sup>20</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: the world the slaves made*, New York: Pantheon, 1974. Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Hector St John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, New York: Signet Classics, 1963, p172.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Found in translation: on the social history of the moral imagination', in Geertz (1983) pp36-54.

Balinese suttee, in which three beautiful young widows jump willingly into a deep vat of blazing oil, he casts horror into comic form.

Geertz is a traveller all right, if as a professional vocation. So having as radically unsettled his reader as Crèvecoeur did, he teaches a shaky, three-cornered balance (this is not just the best one can do, understanding well *requires* shakiness) between one's decent Occidental liberalism, one's rapture before the "high gorgeousness" of exotic display and aesthetics, and one's keen ear for "the ground bass of passionless horror" which are all part of travel's own fascination and difficulty for travellers.

Kenneth Burke once defined comedy as "the maximum of forensic complexity" and the central subject matter of the human sciences as being the "rhetoric" or "the grammar" of *motives*.<sup>23</sup> A comic vision will encompass human misery and cruelty by seeing them not as tragedy but either as stupid mistakes, acts of blind obedience, or shameless cheating. For Burke, therefore, as he said, "even bad books and trivial remarks are legitimate objects of study". Burke braced himself against Weberian doctrines of detachment and judiciousness. His comic vision, like Geertz's, *and* like the best travel writing (for our ultimate point of reference is *art*), conserves an incongruity of perspective. It dispatches the traveller to compare the incomparable in antique lands. In its emphasis on the study of emphatic clusters of dramatic meaning it dissolves the rigidity of conceptual habit so the world can be seen afresh. It cherishes error as an aspect of truth. It sees the duck, takes it for a rabbit, and wonders what other kind of creature it might also be.

#### IV

It is time, in an extended last movement of my remarks, to call as witnesses a sample of these writers about travel who have perforce won for themselves recognition over the past seventy years as practitioners of a particular if rather loosely defined *genre*. Even if the genre scarcely appears in the syllabus of degrees in literature, 'travel writing' is a classification to be found in any bookshop and its durability, like that of the novel, has long outlived exaggerated reports of its demise circulated thirty or more years ago.

---

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, pp135-8.

At that juncture, it was much supposed<sup>24</sup> that, in Paul Fussell's words, at the end of world war, "the idea of literary travelling must seem quaint and a book about it a kind of elegy".<sup>25</sup> No sooner had he set this down than there was not only an enormous demand for just those classics of travel from between the wars to which Fussell was singing his cheerfully funereal farewell, but a surprising new crowd of travel writers signing ready contracts in the publishing world, themselves filled with a quite new sensibility finding its expression in geographies new and old, but audibly travelling in a tradition well known and in good repair, plentifully equipped with an ample poetics, a selection of politics and a wide range of narrative choices.

Travel writers are making works of art at the same time, naturally, as they are writing history; their readers, consciously or otherwise, respond to the imaginative power, the local and formal beauty, and the truthfulness of the prose. So latter-day explorer-travellers – Redmond O'Hanlon, Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Colin Thubron, Jonathan Raban – it's a mostly male business, this – pick up the form, the idiom, the conventions of Robert Byron, Peter Fleming, George Mallory, as *they* went to distant lands to look for trouble in the years of *L'entre deux guerres*.

As always with literary form, there is a spasm of class struggle to be fought as one picks up one's airline tickets or as one turns to the typewriter. For how shall these intrepid but recently departed travellers prevent themselves becoming mere tourists, which for such a long time – since Thomas Cook hit the heights – has been a term always of condescension and often of contempt. In *Abroad*, Paul Fussell allows himself a frequent use of the downward inflexion. Travellers are free to go anywhere; they go pretty well alone; they overcome all obstacles in their way, an awkward official in Turkestan, a lame horse in Tartary. They live hard but romantically; they are brave (naturally), light-hearted, trenchant, well-off but never rich, mechanically resourceful, home-lovers and home-haters, cultivated ... oh, the good traveller, mostly male but with a few tough women thrown in, is quite wonderful. But the tourist, hemmed in by 'passports and queues and guided tours and social security numbers and customs regulations and currency controls,<sup>26</sup> this creature is not only in a state of "lamb-like

---

<sup>24</sup> By, for example, Evelyn Waugh, V S Pritchett, Graham Greene, all as summarised by Paul Fussell in *Abroad: British literary travelling between the wars*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

<sup>25</sup> Fussell (1980) p227.

<sup>26</sup> Fussell (1980) p



subservience to red tape which is perhaps the most striking characteristic of modern man", he and she is a *bore*, and almost certainly lower middle class as well.

No-one could doubt that tourists, on some more cordial definition, are the people who mostly do the travelling these days. They are those who follow where the solitary traveller has been first (well, not *first*, you understand, people live there already, but first from your place). Even then, the travellers almost certainly had predecessors. In the end we may have to say that the distinction between tourist and traveller is either a historical one (early visitors in small numbers and having had a bit of a hard time count as travellers), or a snobbish one ("my dear, there were such crowds of *tourists*").

For our purposes, we shall say that travellers went there first and marked out the route for tourists. Every generation of tourists has a traveller predecessor; the travellers not only invented the route, in most cases they wrote the sacred texts which first recruited the tourists. They shaped the story whose charm drew people after them. But when we delightedly follow Redmond O'Hanlon's paddle marks down the Orinoco, we are hardly in tourist country. There are, moreover, such splendid travel writers as Norman Lewis, Rycard Kapucinski, Eric Newby, all of them still writing until the day before yesterday, who join the generation of pre-war travellers directly to the writers of the past twenty-five years. Martha Gellhorn's entry into Dachau and Norman Lewis's memoir of wartime Naples, his lost, attentive wanderings through its devastated architecture, sit easily on the shelf beside those doughty American journalists who followed the flag to Vietnam and produced such classics of travelling to war as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers* or, on a different, just as horrible a battlefield, Joan Didion's *Salvador*.<sup>27</sup>

All these latter writers, moreover, wrote plenty when the sounds of war, whether world or cold, receded. They bring out for my purposes something cheerful, genial and encouraging about the long-lived domesticity of this form, this style of writing. There again, the whole tradition of travel writing plants us squarely in the middle of the old puzzle: when talking about books, do we look to understand the writer's intentions, the grammar of his or her

---

<sup>27</sup> Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988. Norman Lewis, *Naples '44*, London: Eland, 1983. Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, New York: Bantam, 1969. Joan Didion, *Salvador*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1983.

motives, or do we try to identify the reader's pleasures and purposes in picking the thing up in the first place, the kind of inquiry now glossed as 'reception theory'?

Since I take from my hosts in Canberra the banner headline, 'ways of worldmaking', the answer must cut both ways. To the question what is the point and pleasure of travel writing, the answer must be that its authors tell us what it is like *being there*, and we follow them because we want to know that. At the same time, writer and reader have felt come upon them just such an urgent desire as D H Lawrence's in January 1921 and on the way to Sardinia: "comes over one an absolute necessity to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction. A double necessity then: to get on the move, and to know whither."<sup>28</sup>

In the reader's case, no doubt, the "absolute necessity to move" may be happily fulfilled by the book. The move is imaginative, and that's enough. With some readers, the imaginative journey may lead to their taking the actual journey, exactly because the writer has described so alluring, piquant, delicious, maybe dangerous a place, that it comes over them to go there themselves and sample delight or danger.

Such an urgency is a good deal easier to indulge in the days of mass air travel than in the day of the Lawrences' awful old ferry and slow trains. The old traveller has been there first; that is what puts travellers at such an advantage over us, following in the tracks of a book and assuming thereby the mien and manners of the tourist.

There is nonetheless something far too glib about this. Sure, Robert Byron was an early bird beholding the amazing beauties of Samarkand, and Wilfred Thesiger was the last because the first European to cross the Empty Quarter of Arabia on foot and camel, living like a Bedu with a handful of the men as guides. But Byron was preceded by any number of British or Russian soldiers trying and failing to bring imperial rule, and Thesiger's amazing journey was hardly more than routine for his Bedouin comrades, as well as being for him a series of Army orders.

Thesiger had official military duties as cartographer and in search of locust control in the late 1940s, but he concludes to himself that he had gone to leave far behind the modern life which

---

<sup>28</sup> D H Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, collected in *D H Lawrence in Italy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Travel Library, 1985, p1.

had lost its rhythmic connection to the past, lost "leisure and courtesy and conversation", and to rediscover among remote peoples the wisdom of visual grace and the natural accommodation of shapely ways of life.

It was, when Thesiger wrote, a poet's lament already a hundred and eighty years old. It had been sung by Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray, most unstoppably by Wordsworth. It is always and everywhere becoming true, and always there are places to which one may travel to retrieve old mysteries, grace and shapeliness. One coarse way of answering Thesiger and dozens of writers like him is to enumerate the daily contents of the good life as lived on the passage of the Empty Quarter: temperatures of 45°; water rationed to a quart of horrible-tasting, warm, salty, dirty liquid; after shitting, there is only sand as an astringent for one's arms and a sudden cascade of camel urine as a douche for one's hands.<sup>29</sup>

Yet such conditions do nothing to deter us, except for a few invincibly sybaritic armchair travellers. It was exactly these hardships and many more which Thesiger went to find, and which all travellers may savour as the other side of exotic luxury.

For it *is* a luxury, after the ghastly inauthenticities and industrial dreariness of consumer modernity, to find the freedoms of the desert, the majesty of the dunes, the thrilling, bitter waterhole. So it is to brace oneself against the inconceivable white cold of Antarctica, to savour the delicious shelter of a tiny tent crammed to the edge with burly bodies in thickly padded coats while the wind batters the tent walls at 90 miles per hour.

The imagination luxuriates in the absence of luxury. Imagined hardships are a keen pleasure. The pleasure of those who have undergone these extremities is keen and lively in retrospect. Thus and thus writer and reader together make a world.

The world is made out of the stuff of being there, and of pretending to be there, in either case *on foot*. The readers need the writers as their travelling companions on the journey. The bond with the author<sup>30</sup> is unusually strong when you are taken on a journey. The author must be comradely, brave, attractive enough, boundlessly interested and interesting, self-aware but unegotistical. In all these matters, the travelling author must be artist in much the same way

---

<sup>29</sup> Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Travel Library, 1991, pp

<sup>30</sup> D W Harding's phrase in *Experience into Words*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1963.

as a novelist, and the great novelists certainly take us travelling with them often enough: with Dickens up and down the Thames, with Melville on the *Pequod* to the South Atlantic, with Forster to Florence and to the Malabar caves, with Henry James on his little tour, with Lawrence all over Italy.

The demands one makes of one's travel-writing travelling companion are, therefore, much the same as those one makes of one's master, the good novelist, but also the same as those one makes of the historian – the books of travel must be truthful as to the facts – as well as those one makes of a trustworthy guide who is, by the end of the book, one's friend. His tale has held us from play and the chimney corner by making for us a new found land and giving us its key.

To bring off this old enchantment and, I suggest, to sort a little among the great piles of tempting works by way of providing a rough poetics and politics of the books of travel, we might call a register of our best writers according to the old joke mentioned earlier, which lists the sequence in which world conquerors arrive among remote peoples on strange shores.

First, the explorers. They go where none have gone before, or rather and more likely, where no-one one knows of from the home country has gone, anyway not recently. Naturally, there are lots of other, different, foreign and exotic people when they get there, but that's the point. Explorers of the truly uninhabited – South Pole, South Pacific, Sahara, Himalaya – are necessarily few and, as the strong phrase has it, far between. More sociable explorers – Peter Fleming, Robert Byron, Wilfred Thesiger, Patrick Leigh Formor, Graham Greene – walked alongside ways of life said to be vanishing, and paid open-hearted tribute to their colour and variety. They shook warm hands with difference and otherness, and made us see these qualities. All of them Oxford-and-Cambridge gentlemanly English, they figured out a still-living style in which to make a world which for their readers fitted together home and away.

After the explorers, the missionaries. My missionaries are the human scientists, the great authors who arrived under the distant protection of the colonial police or the BBC. The anthropologists are come armed with Max Weber's rules of judicious objectivity and Robert Park's role of observer-participation. They aim to turn scientific method into a world-making vision, hardly noticing their own bluff or bluffing manner. They are Sir Arthur Radcliffe-Brown, Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Professor Normalien Claude Levi-Strauss, and

then, hero of the next generation, all-American world-maker, Clifford Geertz, in whose work objectivity and loving kindness become synonyms, and keen moral sympathy dissolves into historical understanding.

After the missionaries, the settlers, who are of two sorts. The first, mostly Americans, have come to roam their home country as being large, as generous, as unplumb'd and estranging as the sea itself. On the road in the sixties, Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck, in the seventies William Ferris, in the nineties the Anglophile American Bill Bryson, and the Americophile Englishman Jonathan Raban, each setting out to wander the more unvisited and vast eternities of the natives' land, to rediscover its recent history written in dustbowls and abandoned motels, to tell their own people of the weird world just outside the front porch. In the British Isles and Ireland, and at the turn of the new millennium, Robert Macfarlane, W G Sebald and Tim Robinson set themselves to show how the Lake District, the Trossachs, the Suffolk coastline and the Irish littoral are as unfamiliar and as much to be wondered at as Tartary and Persia.

The second, separate group of settlers are mostly British and have come, indeed, to settle. They have come to realise a picture of the good life as lived under the sun and according to those lost rhythms of organic and agrarian living the old explorers were searching for. They are hard to dislike, eager, idealistic, sentimental as they are, come as the gate-crashers came to the Great Gatsby's parties, "conducting themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with an amusement park" and "with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission".<sup>31</sup> They buy little olive groves and vineyards, they restore Provençal and Tuscan farmhouses, they are fired by the decency, energy and inanities of Peter Mayle and Carole Drinkwater.

Perhaps the advent of the soldiers is better named the coming of the journalists, and they have been trooping their colours around the world and remaking it for our comprehension across the whole reach of my subject-matter. They went to war, no doubt, but also came to wander, sometimes even to settle. They include, at their best, Martha Gellhorn, Norman Lewis, Eric Newby, James Fenton, Neil Sheehan, Paul Bowles. All of them enlisted in assorted wars, travelled to find what sort of world survived the bloodshed and the destruction, taught us by

---

<sup>31</sup> F Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York: Scribners, 1925, p50.

exemplary storytelling what warfare did on behalf of the exhaustion, famine and settled or unsettled peacefulness which it brought as its consequence.

The rovers return: "see, they return, and bring us with them". But T S Eliot will provide us with a sort of valediction, as well as an epigraph to the intellectual expedition joined here. He writes in *The Dry Salvages*, having told us firmly "that time is no healer".

Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;  
You are not those who saw the harbour  
Receding, or those who will disembark.  
Here between the hither and the farther shore  
While time is withdrawn, consider the future  
And the past with an equal mind.  
At the moment which is not of action or inaction  
You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being  
The mind of a man may be intent  
At the time of death" – that is the one action  
(And the time of death is every moment)  
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:  
And do not think of the fruit of action.  
Fare forward.

As Huck Finn said of *Pilgrim's Progress*, "the statements was interesting but tough".

## V

In his classic and eponymous essay, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Nelson Goodman offers a phenomenology of the theorising of experience. By way of an alliterative medley as heading this universal human activity - 'Words, Works ,Worlds' - he adduces the half dozen practices which , whatever the mode of experience to hand, scientific, artistic, historical or just plain old living, make the intense inane of the flux of being into a world with shape and significance . Thus we compose and decompose what we find with what we need; we give weight to its infinite aspects and then order them to suit ourselves; we delete from what we see what we don't need and supplement it with what we do; we deform it in the name of aesthetics or in the name of truth. 'For,' Goodman writes, ' there is no more a unique world of worlds than there is a unique world.' The aphorism is intended as an epistemological proverb. It will serve me as a guide to the tales all the rovers bring home on their returns.

NB Readers will recognise two allusions in this final paragraph to my guides in much of the lecture: first and as quoted, Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* ( Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing,1978)and pervasively, Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), though quite without assenting to Oakeshott's Toryism .