14 Prose other than fiction: the travel narrative

Objectives

- to get a sense of the travel narrative as a literary genre
- to acquire some sense of the development of the form
- to understand the conventions of this genre

Why We Travel

We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate. We travel to bring what little we can, in our ignorance and knowledge, to those parts of the globe whose riches are differently dispersed... The beauty of this whole process was best described, perhaps, before people even took to frequent flying, by George Santayana in his lapidary essay, 'The Philosophy of Travel'. We "need sometimes", the Harvard philosopher wrote, "to escape into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure hazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship, and to be compelled to work desperately for a moment at no matter what."

Iyer, P. 'Why We Travel'. Saturday 18 March 2000. Salon.com.

Questions of Travel

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free,
And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?

Elizabeth Bishop

What do we mean by travel literature?

Looking into another vast field of written examples, it makes sense to open not only with this first question, but with other basic questions also:

- What kind of travel are we referring to?
- What's the difference between a traveller and a tourist?
- How is a guidebook different from travel literature?

These are not easy questions to answer. Since the genre of travel literature or travel writing has some strong similarities to autobiographical accounts, how they are distinguished from one another is another problematic query, along with: 'Who is the audience for travel literature?' This chapter will try to give you some help with both raising questions and finding answers so that, by the end of the chapter, you will be in a strong position to shape your own answers to these questions; there aren't any 'right' answers, only answers that can be thought through individually with advice from scholars who think about such matters.

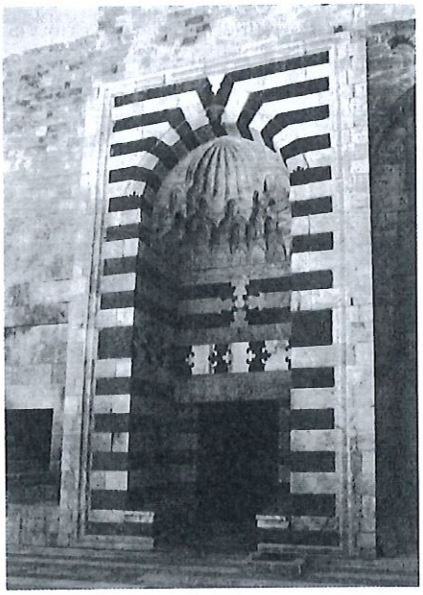
We use the term travel 'narrative' because this term, which is often used for fiction, applies here also, for it is most often 'the representation' of a story – the story of someone travelling somewhere. Tourists travel but they don't always try to share their story with others in a carefully written form. Guidebooks certainly provide information about places, but their intention is primarily expository, informational and often evaluative.

Activity

Two accounts of the citadel in Aleppo, Syria follow. Note that you are dealing with two very different approaches to travel writing: the first is a guidebook for travellers, and the second, which is subtitled "autobiography", is a traveller's account of visiting the same area.

1 Note as many similarities and differences as you can in the two writers' approaches, paying particular attention to purpose, tone and language.

2 Given that both writers are 'travellers' from the outside, consider the effect of their presentations on their likely audiences, as well as their handling of their outsider role.



Ancient gate of the Old Citadel, Aleppo, Syria

Jordan and Syria: A Survival Kit

The citadel dominates the city and is at the eastern end of the souks. It is surrounded by a moat, 20 metres deep and 30 metres wide, which is spanned by a bridge on the northern side. Entrance to the citadel is through a 12th-century gate and behind this is the massive fortified main entrance. Although finely decorated on the outside, the inside is a succession of five right-angle turns, where three sets of solid steel-plated doors made a formidable barrier to any occupiers. Some of the doors still remain and one of the lintels of the doorways has carvings of entwined dragons, and another has a pair of lions.

Finlay, H. 1987. *Jordan and Syria: A Survival Kit.* Australia. Lonely Planet.

The Coast of Incense

I climbed down fifty high steps into an immense Byzantine hall on pillars, and then wandered over the Haram and the palace of the Egyptian Caliphs and the medieval precautions round the great gate, with secret posterns and holes to pour pitch down on the assailants. There is a horrid prison, deep down with no windows and a hole in the roof for letting good down – I always dislike going into prisons and offer a little prayer for all the unhappiness that must have been spent inside them.

> I went all over this citadel with a Christian of Aleppo, an employee of the French delegation very anxious to tell me how anti-French he was, but as I was their guest and being particularly nicely treated I had to snub him promptly. He took me all over the bazaars which are the nicest I know in the East, all narrow vaulted with stone and little square openings in the vault letting down shafts of light. As you look at Aleppo from the citadel, you can see a green expanse in the middle and these are the bazaars.
>
> *Freya Stark*

It is clear that much traditional travel literature is written with a consciousness of being read and appreciated by others, not just for its content, but also for its style. Its **genre boundaries**, as with so many other forms, are fluid and elusive. There are many examples of how travel literature blends, steps out of its 'bounds', and enters the territories of other genres.

One striking example of such mixtures would be the work *Luca Antara* by Martin Edmond, whose works range over travel, biography and poetry. Travel is certainly at the center of this work, as Edmond examines the story of a Portuguese servant, Antonio da Nova, who is sent out in the 1600s to discover more about Luca Antara, one of the islands believed to lie to the south. When da Nova's crew mutinies on the west coast of Australia, da Nova is rescued and led across Australia by Aboriginal people. This work of Edmond's is such a mix of autobiography, travel writing and fiction that it has puzzled critics and reviewers. Nonetheless, it is able to be included when travel literature is considered. In any study of travel writing, the same problems are likely to be encountered. However, even though its boundaries are unclear, there are certain features that can be found in much of this literature

Some aspects of travel literature

1 One feature that travel literature shares with autobiography is its **voice**.

Most often, the travel narrative will be told by the 'I' who makes the journey. This **univocal** voice can sometimes be joined by another. Sometimes the voice takes on a **persona**, as in some essays by Samuel Johnson and Charles Lamb, for example.

Washington Irving in *The Adventures of Geoffrey Crayon* (1835) employs the persona of Mr Crayon to describe, among other things, a 19th-century American travelling in Europe. His is not a work of only travel writing, but includes short stories and essays also.

Combining two aspects, persona and **companion**, Mark Twain sets off to visit Europe with a fictional companion, Joseph Harris, whose views about their travels are often included. His work, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), and Irving's are their own literary versions of the 'Grand Tour'. This name was given to the kind of travel regarded in the 17th and 18th centuries as an opportunity for mostly upper-class Europeans to acquaint themselves with classical roots and great art. It later became an idea embraced by artists and by Americans, though perhaps with less lavish resources.

Washington Irving

Mark Twain

2 The writing about travel can be presented in something as short as an essay or as long as a substantial novel.

3 Longer examples of travel literature can usually be described as having a defined **beginning**, **middle** and **end**. These narratives tend to be **circular**: they begin at home, embark on and pursue an itinerary, which may be highly organized or somewhat spontaneous, and are completed by a return home – the traveller departs and the traveller returns.

In *Passenger to Teheran*, written in 1926, Vita Sackville-West departs from a particular English train station and returns there:

Passenger to Teheran

One January morning, then, I set out; not on a very adventurous journey, perhaps, but on one that takes me to an unexploited country whose very name, printed on my luggage labels, seemed to distil a faint, far aroma in the chill air of Victoria Station: PERSIA.

In May of the same year, after a journey that included a route that circled south to Iran and Delhi and then back through Russia and Poland, the writer finishes her journey:

Was I standing on the platform at Victoria, I who had stood on so many platforms? The orange labels dangled in the glare of electric lamps. PERSIA, they said.

Vita Sackville-West

It's difficult to imagine a more precisely circled journey, perhaps one that is almost too neat in its balance (although the departure scene is not the opening of the book).

4 Another aspect to consider is the difference between travel literature that pictures an ongoing journey with stops and descriptions or reflections along the way, and one that involves a journey *to* a particular place in which the bulk of the work is centered on that place. While Sackville-West's work is an example of the former, William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* is an example of the latter:

> **City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi**
>
> After having visited the city of Delhi at the age of seventeen, mesmerized by the great capital, so totally unlike anything I had seen before...

And later, Dalrymple returns:

> Five years after I had first lived in Delhi I returned, now newly married. Olivia and I returned in September. We found a small top floor flat near the Sufi village of Nizamuddin and there set up home.
>
> *William Dalrymple*

5 The issues of subjectivity, objectivity, and whether an account is a mix of fact and fiction are also likely to arise when looking at travel writing. One of the earliest narratives, which tells of the travels of Sir John Mandeville (published between 1351 and 1357), is a complex tissue of personal experience, rather fantastic descriptions of customs and creatures and pieces of the travel accounts told by others. Below is a sample from his description of Egypt, a place he did not actually visit himself. Mandeville didn't always believe he had to visit a place in order to include it in his narrative.

> At the deserts of Egypt was a worthy man, that was an holy hermit, and there met with him a monster (that is to say, a monster is a thing deformed against kind both of man or of beast or of anything else, and that is clept a monster). And this monster, that met with this holy hermit, was as it had been a man, that had two horns trenchant on his forehead; and he had a body like a man unto the navel, and beneath he had the body like a goat.
>
> www.travellersinegypt.org

6 Finally, the **purpose** of travel that eventually becomes travel writing might be considered. In some cases, the writing impulse may be the strongest force of all, as may be the case of Twain's account of tramping through Europe. However, travel is undertaken for many purposes and many of these journeys end up being recorded in journals, diaries, and short accounts, as well as long narratives that the writers want to share with a wider audience. It might be useful to consider some of the purposes that have characterized travel writing over the years.

The purpose of travel writing

To find oneself

As Iyer notes in the epigraph to this chapter on page 225, some journeys are about finding something about oneself, or 'finding oneself'. Indeed, very often, the writer will reveal that the journey has elicited or pushed them to some new perception about their own life, choices and history.

Freya Stark writes in her combined autobiography and travel narrative, *The Coast of Incense*:

The Coast of Incense

It always surprises me to notice how short a time is taken by events that have been so slow in coming... Perhaps one of the advantages of my perpetual seesaw between illnesses and activity was the learning of this lesson: the saving up through long periods for some treasured enterprise which came and went like lightning, but illuminated the past and the future as it went by.

Freya Stark

In *A Fez of the Heart: Travels Around Turkey in Search of a Fez*, Jonathan Seal closes the book with an epiphany:

A Fez of the Heart: Travels Around Turkey in Search of a Fez

Looking back, I realized that the fez had been the means to an end, not an end in itself, for I had failed to trace this elusive hat to its origins... The end had been Turkey itself. The fez had guided me to the divisions that modern Turkey denied... but that made her intriguing, endlessly different, and finally the country she was.

Jonathan Seal

Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries* articulates the truism that the self that leaves home is not the same one that returns:

The Motorcycle Diaries

The person who wrote these notes passed away the moment his feet touched Argentine soil again. The person who reorganizes and polishes them, me, is no longer, at least I am not the person I once was. All this wandering around "Our America with a capital A" has changed me more than I thought.

Che Guevara

These three extracts above are only a tiny sampling of the many examples of the impulse not only to travel but to record travel.

Curiosity

Very early in the history of travel narratives, a great many accounts were driven simply by curiosity and fascination with places not yet experienced by outsiders or even described. Wanting to know, or even to understand, the 'other' certainly produces as vast an array of travel accounts as does the search for the self.

Whether it is Ibn Battuta, the Muslim traveller of the 14th century, setting out to visit all the countries of the Muslim world and covering 75,000 miles, or Mary Kingsley, travelling unaccompanied to West Africa in 1895, a desire to know the world beyond immediate horizons has continually been a strong motivation.

A modern, first-time travel writer, Jason Eliot, explains his impulse to go to Afghanistan in a way similar to Joseph Conrad's fascination with maps as a child and a determination to 'go there', a curiosity that eventuated in Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*. In the first pages of *An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan*, Eliot tells a friend:

> **An Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan**
>
> If I must look for a beginning, I have to go back to when I was twelve years old, my mind spinning from a turn-of-the-century account I'd just read of an explorer's travels through what was then Turkestan, to which the northern portion of what is now Afghanistan belongs. The names meant very little to me them, but I felt the living image of them nonetheless, and longed to know if the descriptions I had read were real.
>
> *Jason Eliot*

Religion

Spiritual journeys also account for a good many travel narratives and these have had a long history. Very early travel accounts such as *The Book of Marjery Kempe* (written in the late 1340s) or the 17th-century Japanese poet Basho's descriptions of his travels embody such journeys, and there are many such 'pilgrimages' that have been recorded and, in turn, inspired others. Whether to the Christian Shrine of Compostela or on the Islamic *haj* to Mecca, travellers follow their devotional impulses and often record them.

The search for family roots

Another motivation for travel and for accounts of them arises from the desire to search out the roots of one's family and origins. Often, this search is allied with **genealogical research**, the study of family connections and beginnings. If you search under "travel for roots and family history" on the internet, you will discover a multiplicity of sites that give accounts of trips which are offered or journeys that have been made by people in search of their 'roots'.

Allied to this form is the 'return to roots' account, such as can be found in *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* by Suketu Mehta. In this work, we are first introduced to the family roots he left behind at age nine and to which he returns 21 years later. Here is another example of the travel narrative that is not about moving along an itinerary, but a journey to a single place that will be carefully studied. Speaking of such a return, Mehta writes:

Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found

I existed in New York, but I lived in India, taking little memory trains. The fields at dusk. Birds flying home overhead, your car stopping by the side of the road and you getting out. Noticing minute things again: the complexity of the gnarled peepal by the roadside, the ants making their way around it.

Suketu Mehta

Travelling to write in an informed way

To the motivations already listed should be added writing, which both involves travel and emerges from a political angle on the place visited, as in Elizabeth Hardwick's essay, 'Sad Brazil', from *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*:

Sad Brazil

I had been here in 1962 and now, 1974, I returned. Indeed it is impossible to forget the peculiarity and beauty of this rich and hungry country. Paradox is the soul of it. Droughts and floods, fertility and barrenness come to reside in each individual citizen, creating instability of spirit that is an allurement and a frustration, a mixture that was formerly sometimes thought of as feminine. It was the time of the installation of the new President, Geisel, under the military rule. Latin America's wars are, for the most part, of the internal kind, the kind beyond armistice. Heavy police work that gives the generals time to run the country. General, the word itself appears to be a sort of validation, a kind of Ph.D without which General Peron and General Pinochet might have appeared to be mere citizens presuming.

Geisel, the new President of this land of color – olive, black, mixed, European, Indian, reddish brown like dried flowers – turned out to be a lunar curiosity thrown down from some wintry, arctic celestial disturbance. He is thin and colorless, as ice is colorless. A fantastical ice, solid in the heat of the country. No claim to please, astonish, nothing of the cockatoo or macaw. Dark glasses shield the glacial face, as if wishing to filter the tropical light and darken the glow of the chaos of bereft persons, the insects, slums, French fashions, old ports at Bahia and Recife, the brilliant, irredeemable landscape.

Elizabeth Hardwick

Both Hardwick's essay and Mehta's detailed study of returning to Mumbai combine vivid and concrete impressions of place with acute political analysis, another variety of travel literature.

A brief history of travel writing

In order to set your reading of travel narrative in some sort of context, we have looked at some aspects and some purposes that characterize and generate, respectively, this very large body of writing. As Casey Blanton writes in her study *Travel Writing: the Self and the World*, "the texts, in the end, seem inexhaustible" (Blanton 2002).

Another way to look at travel writing in a superficial but global way is to divide its history into three periods: Medieval and Renaissance, 18th and

19th centuries, and the 20th and 21st centuries. We have, in fact, looked at extracts from some of these.

Medieval/Renaissance travel writing

Just as with autobiography, this form of writing has occurred since Greek and Roman times; in fact, both Homer's *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid* could be considered to fall under the umbrella of this genre.

We have already mentioned both Marjery Kempe and Sir John Mandeville. However, along with Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* (the account of his travels), we have the other striking journey of Marco Polo (1298). These men both travelled impressive distances, one for mercantile reasons, the other as a devotee of Islam. In them are represented three of the principal motivations for travel in these early centuries: curiosity, trade and religion. So much explorative travel was accomplished during these years that the 16th century is often called 'The Age of Discovery'.

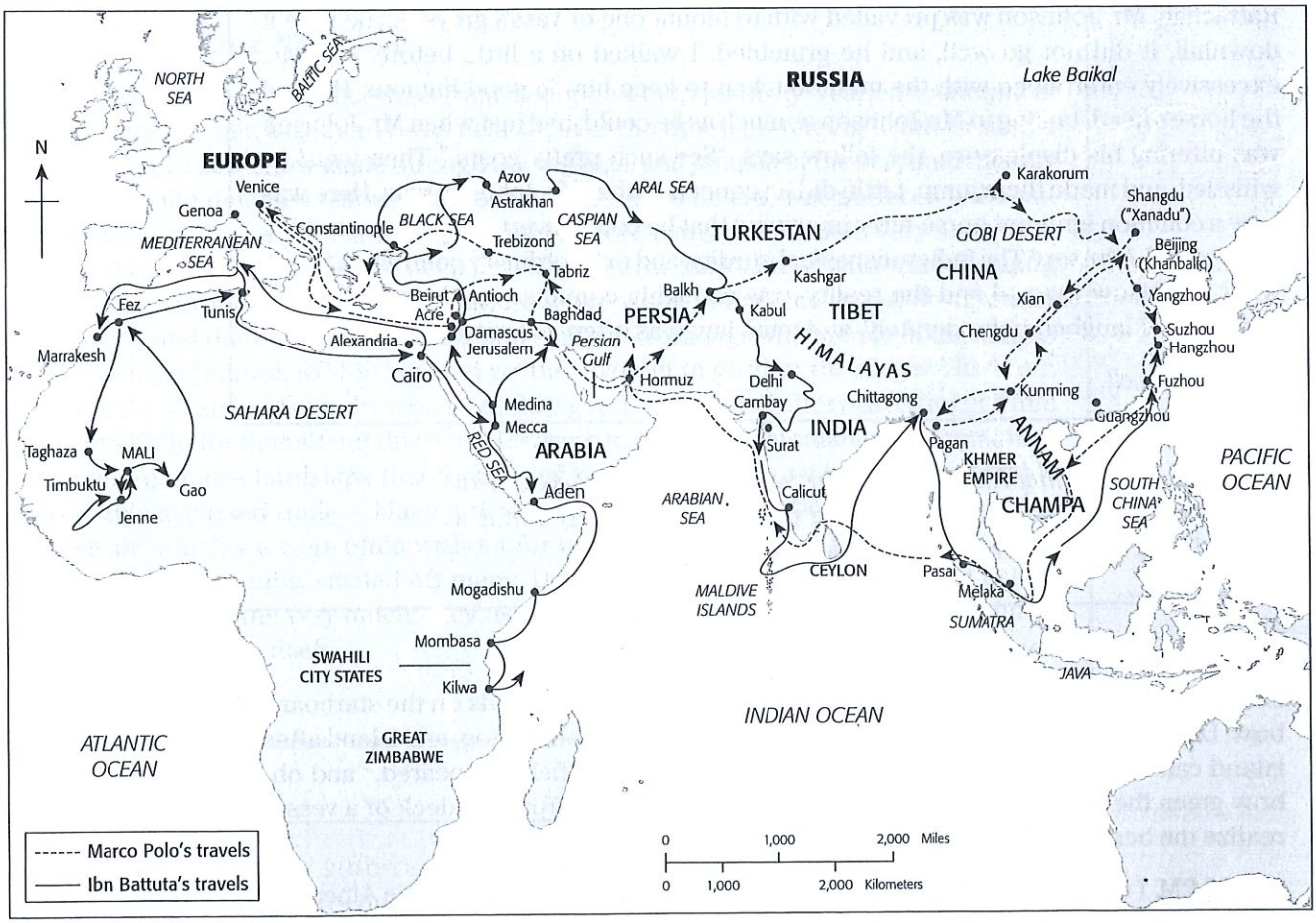
If there was any doubt that many early travellers were both setting out on journeys and writing about them, Peter C. Mancall's 2006 anthology, *Travel Narratives in the Age of Discovery*, offers 37 documents relating travel in Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Europe written between the 15th and 17th centuries.

Activity

Look at the map of Ibn Battuta's and Marco Polo's trips.

1 What similarities and differences can you see in their routes?

2 Do you think their purposes in travelling can be discerned or guessed at from these routes?



Map to show the travels of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo

The 18th and 19th centuries

During these two centuries, travel became more and more available and accessible and the travel narrative flourished as well.

Other aspects of Samuel Johnson's work (the 18th-century essayist and critic) were his accounts of his travels in the Hebrides and in Wales. However, his colleague and biographer James Boswell seemed more suited to this kind of writing. Sir Walter Raleigh summed up Johnson's version as "the most ceremonious of diaries," but a sample of Boswell's work suggests a good deal more talent in this realm.

The Portable Johnson and Boswell

We rode on well till we came to the high mountain called the Rattachan, by which time both Mr. Johnson and the horses were a good deal fatigued. It is a terrible steep to climb, notwithstanding the road is made slanting along. However, we made it out. On the top of it we met Captain MacLeod of Balmeanach (a Dutch officer come from Skye) riding with his sword slung about him. He asked, "Is this Mr. Boswell?" which was a proof that we were expected. Going down the hill on the other side was no easy task. As Mr. Johnson was a great weight, the two guides agreed that he should ride the horses alternately. Hay's were the two best, and Mr. Johnson would not ride but upon one or other of them, a black or a brown. But as Hay complained much after ascending the Rattachan, Mr. Johnson was prevailed with to mount one of Vass's greys. As he rode it downhill, it did not go well, and he grumbled. I walked on a little before, but was excessively entertained with the method taken to keep him in good humour. Hay led the horse's head, talking to Mr. Johnson as much as he could; and just when Mr. Johnson was uttering his displeasure, the fellow says. "See such pretty goats." Then *whu!* he whistled, and made them jump. Little did he conceive what Mr. Johnson was. Here was now a common ignorant horse-hirer imagining that he could divert, as one does a child, *Mr. Samuel Johnson!* The ludicrousness, absurdity, and extraordinary contrast between what the fellow fancied and the reality, was as highly comic as anything that I ever witnessed. I laughed immoderately, and must laugh as often as I recollect it.

James Boswell

Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World* is another account of travel at the end of the 19th century (in this case sea travel) and is a lively and readable account of this voyage:

Sailing Alone Around the World

Early on the morning of July 20 I saw Pico looming above the clouds on the starboard bow. Lower lands burst forth as the sun burned away the morning fog, and island after island came into view. As I approached nearer, cultivated fields appeared, "and oh, how green the corn!" Only those who have seen the Azores from the deck of a vessel realize the beauty of the mid-ocean picture.

At 4:30 P.M. I cast anchor at Fayal, exactly eighteen days from Cape Sable. The American consul, in a smart boat, came alongside before the *Spray* reached the breakwater, and a young naval officer, who feared for the safety of my vessel, boarded, and offered his services as pilot. The youngster, I have no good reason to doubt, could have handled a man-of-war,

but the *Spray* was too small for the amount of uniform he wore. However, after fouling all the craft in port and sinking a lighter, she was moored without much damage to herself. This wonderful pilot expected a "gratification," I understood, but whether for the reason that his government, and not I, would have to pay the cost of raising the lighter, or because he did not sink the *Spray*, I could never make out. But I forgive him.

Joshua Slocum

One particular travel narrative in the 18th century stands out as being quite different from accounts of people who decided that they would venture out to a different part of the world for pleasure and keep a record of it.

The travels of Olaudah Equiano, as they are reported in *The Interesting Narrative,* were published in 1789. His account is of something we could call 'forced travel', as he was captured in his homeland of Africa and recorded in his narrative that sea voyage in painful detail. Although, when he became a free man, Equiano embarked on voyages for commercial and even adventurous purposes later in his life, his searing account of travel in a slave ship could be counted his most powerful writing:

The Interesting Narrative

One day, when we had a smooth sea, and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped in the sea; immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. – Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many. During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck.

Olaudah Equiano

Activity

Looking back at the 20th-century extract from Pico Iyer on page 225, write a short commentary on how the three extracts from the 18th and 19th centuries reflect (or do not reflect) the kind of thinking about travel that this 20th-century man expresses.

The 20th and 21st centuries

Travel by both women and men ranged across the world during this period: at the turn of the century, Isabella Bird continued her writing, including works on Korea and China. Caroline Kirkland's *African Highways* continued the interest in that continent that had drawn Mary Kingsley to it. Mark Twain's adventures in the 1860s in the 'wild' west of America were reported in *Roughing It*. All of these writers were close precursors of the great range of exploration and of the styles of travel writing of the 20th and 21st centuries.

At the end of this chapter are included three examples of more recent travel writing, and you will be invited to look at certain stylistic conventions as they appear in these samples. Before we do this, it will be good to review some of the conventions that have been either implicitly treated in this discussion of travel literature or need to be explicitly identified.

Conventions of travel narrative

Again, the conventions we might identify as those of travel literature include the traditional trio of **plot**, **character** and **setting**.

The plot in many of these works is the story of **movement** and then of **discovery**. Whether the discovery is of a place, a people, or a deeper sense of the self, it is a likely element and expectation in travel writing.

The planning of a **goal** as well as an **itinerary** are both conventional parts of such narratives. Another stylistic choice involved here will be the choice of **structure** for the movement of the narrative: will it be linear or circular?

Who the **characters** of the narrative will be, and how many, are matters of the scope decided upon by the travellers. Do they hope to explore the landscape, the people and their ways of living, architecture, the influence of colonialism or imperialism and the possibilities for trade? There can be a multitude of such purposes. Whether purpose is established in advance of the journey, or used as a principle in retrospect, in order to give a frame or structure to the writing, is likely to be a question for the reader to consider.

Voice is a central matter in the construction of travel literature. Will the voice be singular, univocal? Will more than one voice be heard? There are many opportunities in travel literature for multiple voices to make their way into the story: companions in travel, people encountered, whose voices are woven into the writing. Previous travellers along the same route may be alluded to or they may be quoted.

Tone, so much a part of voice, will have a significant role in any travel narrative. There is a great range of possibilities here, and any consistent or changing attitudes about what the traveller sees and conveys will critically affect the reader's impressions and judgments both of the voice and of the treatment of 'the other'. Such tones, conveying these attitudes can cover a whole spectrum from admiration and wonder, to irony, self-deprecation, and even dismissiveness. Through tone and, of course, through choices of **language**, the writer may well convey a desire to

identify, or at least empathize, with people they encounter, or they may objectify them. In addition, whether the narrative is written in the **present** or the **past tense** can affect the reception of the tale of travel.

Travel takes people places and so, of course, the handling of **setting** will be a crucial element to such narratives, whether the travel is to a single place or a succession of places. Within the place, will the self be foregrounded or will the speaker recede into the background and give way to the presentation of people and/or setting? Different people will also foreground different aspects. We have seen this earlier in the brief history of travel writing.

A final sampling of post 19th-century travel literature

"The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land."
G. K. Chesterton

Activity

Read the following three extracts carefully. Make some notes about:

- what attitude the pieces reflect generally (dismissiveness, objectification, respect, for example)
- what particular aspects or conventions they include (persona, purpose, voice, for example).

Once you have completed your notes, write a short essay entitled: 'Style in modern travel writing.'

City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi

'Our village was famous for its sweets,' said Punjab Singh. 'People would come for miles to taste the jalebis our sweet-wallahs prepared. There were none better in the whole of the Punjab.'

We were sitting on a charpoy at International Backside Taxi Stand. For weeks I had been begging Balvinder's father to tell me the story of how he had come to Delhi in 1947. A stern and sombre man, Punjab would always knit his eyebrows and change the subject. It was as if Partition were a closed subject, something embarrassing that shouldn't be raised in polite conversation.

It was only after a particularly persistent bout of badgering, in which Balvinder took my side, that Punjab had agreed to relent. But once started, he soon got into the swing of his story.

'Samundra was a small and beautiful village in District Lyallpur,' he said. 'It was one of the most lovely parts of the whole of Punjab. We had a good climate and very fertile land. The village stood within the ruins of an old fort and was surrounded on four sides by high walls. It was like this.'

With his hands, the old man built four castle walls. From the details that he sketched with his fingers you could see he remembered every bastion, every battlement, each loophole.

'Our village was all Sikh apart from a few Hindu sweepers. Our neighbours were Mahommedan peoples. We owned most of the land but before 1947 we lived like brothers. There were no differences between us...' Punjab stroked his beard. He smiled as he recalled his childhood.

'On the 15th August 1947 the Government announced Partition. We were not afraid. We had heard about the idea of Pakistan, but we thought it would make no difference to us. We realized a Mahommedan government would take over from the Britishers. But in our Punjab governments often come and go. Usually such things make no difference to the poor man in his village.

'Then, quite suddenly, on the 10th of September, we got a message from the Deputy Commissioner in Lyallpur. It said: '"You people cannot stay. You must leave your house and your village and go to India." Everyone was miserable but what could we do? All the villagers began loading their goods into bullock carts. The old men were especially sad: they had lived their whole lives in the village. But we were young and could not understand why our grandfathers were crying.

William Dalrymple

Japan: Perfect Strangers

As I spent longer in Japan, I increasingly came to feel that the "empire of signs" was, as I had half expected, the most complex society I had ever seen, and to that extent, the most impossible to crack. If nothing else, its assumptions were so different from those of the West that to understand it seemed scarcely easier than eating a sirloin steak with chopsticks. The Japanese might drink the same coffee as their American counterparts, and their magazines might boast English titles. But how could one begin to penetrate a land where shame was more important than guilt, and where public and private were interlocked in so foreign a way that the same businessman who unabashedly sat on the subway reading a hard-core porno mag would go into paroxysms of embarrassment if unable to produce the right kind of coffee for a visitor? Japan defied the analysis it constantly provoked; Japan was the world's Significant Other.

By the same token, I also found that discussions among foreigners about the true nature of Japan continued endlessly, and fascinatingly, yet never seemed to come to anything new. Every foreign "explanation" of the country seemed finally to revolve around exactly the same features – a reflection of the place's homogeneity, perhaps, but also of its impenetrability. How every foreigner wondered (in unison), could a culture promiscuously import everything Western, yet still seem impenetrably Eastern? How did the place remain so devoted to its traditions even as it was addicted to modernity and change? What to make of a people with an exquisite gift for purity as well as an unrivaled capacity for perversity? And how on earth could a land of ineffable aesthetic refinement decorate its homes with the forms of cartoon kitties?

Japan, for the foreigner, was all easy dichotomies: samurai and monk, Chrysanthemum and Sword, a land, as Koestler wrote, of "stoic hedonists." If the test of a first-rate mind, as Fitzgerald once wrote, is the ability to hold two opposed ideas at the same time and still keep going, Japan had the most first-rate mind imaginable.

To me, however, all these familiar contradictions seemed finally to resolve themselves into a single, fundamental division: between Japan of noisy, flashy, shiny surfaces and the Japan of silence and depth. The first – the face of modern Japan – afforded a glimpse into a high-tech, low-risk future, a passage into the clean, well-lit corridors of a user-friendly utopia, where men glided on conveyor belts into technocentric cells that were climate-controlled, sweetly scented and euphoniously organized by a PA system. Here

was society as a microchip, a tiny network of linked energies. Commuters functioned like computers, workmen like Walkmen. Every morning, armies upon armies of workers – men all in jackets and ties, women all in look-alike skirts and blouses – surged through the subways of Tokyo, undifferentiated, unerring and undeflected.

Pico Iyer

Round Teheran

Then the bazaars are full of surprises; in one place it is a sword stuck up to the hilt into the wall, Rustem's sword, they say, Rustem being their favourite heroic character; and in another place it is an open courtyard, shaded by large trees, where one can buy all kinds of junk, laid out in little chess-board squares on the ground, for a few farthings, every kind of thing from old sardine-tins to silver kettles pawned by Russian refugees. Nothing more tragic than this evidence of the Russian catastrophe; here is an old gramophone record, and here a pair of high button boots, very small in the foot, with a pair of skates screwed on; they speak, not only of present-day personal misery, but of a life once lived in gaiety; and all theoretical sympathy with Lenin vanishes at the sight of this human, personal sacrifice made on the altar of a compulsory brotherhood. Russia seems very near. Indeed, in Asia the different countries do seem nearer to one another, more mingled, than do different countries in Europe, by some contradiction, despite the enormous distances; here in Persia one cannot lose sight of the fact that China, Russia, Turkestan, Arabia, surround us, remote though they may be, and buried each in a separate darkness; perhaps because vagrants from out of these neighbouring regions find their way to the Persian bazaars, and wander with an air of strangeness, in different clothes that proclaim the country of their origin, an Arab in his burnous, a Russian in his belted shirt, a Turcoman in his shaggy busby, unlike Europeans, who differ from one another, if at all, only by their complexions. In the open courtyard of the bazaars, the green field as it is called, nationalities jostle, poking amongst the junk-stalls for some scrap of treasure, a buckle, or a collar-stud, while the vendors squat near at hand, with lacklustre eye, less concerned to sell than to see that nothing is stolen.

Such a desultory life I lead, and the life of England falls away, or remains only as an image seen in an enchanted mirror, little separate images over which I pore, learning more from them than ever I learnt from the reality. I lead, in fact, two lives; an unfair advantage. This roof of the world, blowing with yellow tulips; these dark bazaars, crawling with a mazy life; that tiny, far-off England; and what am I? and where am I? That is the problem: and where is my heart, home-sick at one moment, excited beyond reason the next? But at least I live, I feel, I endure the agonies of constancy and inconstancy; it is better to be alive and sentient, than dead and stagnant. "Let us", I said, as we emerged from the bazaars, "go to Isfahan."

Vita Sackville-West