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BYRON, KINGLAKE'S EOTHEN AND THE "SELF" OF THE TRAVEL WRITER

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Abstract: Travel writing is a well-defined mode emerging from Romanticism and coming into its own with the explorers of the nineteenth century. In travel writing in English, Lord Byron's poems of travel and adventure - Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-1818), Don Juan (1819-1828) and Alexander Kingslake's Eothen (1838) were two landmarks of style, as well as great commercial successes. It was Eothen which first explicitly posed the question of the travel writer's "self" which Byron had raised implicitly. On the face of it the object of travel writing is to give a full picture, from first-hand observation, of the lands and places which the traveller passes through, their topography, their inhabitants, and – if the writer feels competent – their society, customs, and politics. Granted the writer's basic ability to convey meaning, the effectiveness of her or his account ought in theory to depend on exteriorizing the subject matter to a maximum, and subduing individual reflections (which risk interfering with the clarity of the picture) to a minimum. In practice this happens rather seldom. Bolstered by the performance of travel per se, the traveller's self is irresistibly drawn into a process of analysis and interpretation. Travel writing thus firmly connects with other modes of modern writing – in particular the novel – in which the boundary between the observer and the observed is fluid. The opportunity which the travel writer thus has to use external landscapes as a form of camouflage is also an escape route from the dilemmas posed by postmodernism as regards the status of the self, reflexivity, and self-consciousness. Otherness, the motor of travel writing, can be played down or played up as convenient, while the traveller both owns and does not own the anthropological landscape which he or she visits.

Travel writing has been for two hundred years a well-defined mode of self-expression. It is a fiction of the self, because while ostensibly aiming to give a full and external eye-witness account of places visited and observed, of their topography, inhabitants, society and customs, it is also powered by the communicative ability of the traveller. The intervention of the writer's "self", in inverted commas, is what has carried travel writing, as such, a very long way beyond the Renaissance concept of educative travel: the Baconian checklist of "things to be seen and observed",¹ leaving hardly any room for subjective involvement.

Travel for personal enjoyment² by the well-to-do was largely a product of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It both was assisted by and assisted the broad movement known as Romanticism. Although that characteristic pulse of the traveller can already be felt in Cervantes, in the history of things it was Romanticism that privileged the "artist", in our modern sense of the term, and the self, or as the latter was paraphrased by Berlioz, "the imperious and irresistible nature of my vocation" (Honour, *Romanticism* 246). In the later eighteenth century, a new exploration of the self in space began,

¹ Egeria, a Roman woman pilgrim to the Holy Land in 383, consciously unearthed for her sister nuns as much information as she could, with the comment: 'you know how inquisitive I am'.

² According to W. Dalrymple, *In Xanadu* (1989) 151, Coryat is 'the first Englishman known to have visited Asia purely for pleasure'. Dalrymple quotes him (184): 'I have an insatiable greediness of seeing strange countries, which exercise is indeed the queene of all pleasures in the world'.

enriched by two great innovative travel accounts, Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Goethe's still more influential *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796).

For the Romantic, sensibility and its stress on the personal and the spontaneous, is foreshadowing a new theory of travel. ...travel was not simply about seeing new sights, acquiring new information, making new contacts; it could also be about becoming a new person. What happens to the mind and heart of the traveller in the course of the journey is as important as the physical tally of incident and observation...The experience of self-discovery...is fundamental to the new kind of travel.³

This experience applied to women as well as to men: Dorothea Brooke in Rome, embodying George Eliot herself. It is one thing to imagine music, and another to make a perfect instrument to play the music on. The latter was what, in travel writing, Lord Byron achieved. The part he played in stimulating the genre is difficult to overestimate. He was read by anybody in Europe with pretensions to radical enthusiasm. "Rappelle-toi, pour t'enflammer éternellement, certains passages de Byron", wrote the young Delacroix to himself in his diary.⁴ Every Englishman abroad remarked a sculptor in 1863, "carries a Murray for information and a Byron for sentiment" (Story, *Roba di Roma* I.7); these days it would be a Rough Guide and perhaps a Julian Barnes. Byron did his preparatory work in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1811-1818), the narrative of his own travel in Iberia, Malta, and Albania and Greece, already interesting enough, but comparatively expository and lyrical. It was however with *Don Juan* (1819-1824), the first of John Murray's epic and still canonical series of travel publications,⁵ an even more commercially successful poem than *Childe Harold* and much more improvisatory, that Byron showed what the travel writer's discourse can achieve at its most virtuoso. He established a nonchalant, subtly flattering dialectic with his readers that has been envied by many travel writers (including blatantly Auden and Isherwood with *Letters from Iceland*) but bettered by none. Essential to his style, metrically as well as fictively, is his cunning freedom to comment not on himself while holding the linear narrative in suspense – throwing up the shuttlecock, so to speak, before serving. With impeccable timing, he knows to an inch how not to "let a tale grow cold/ Which must not be pathetically told". I have no room to give more than one illustration of this. Byron is ostensibly talking about stockbreeding on "one of the wild and smaller Cyclades", which would be a very dry subject in any other hands but his. In the course of three short stanzas he manages with perfect clarity: 1) to give a picture of distribution of species, 2) to describe the roasting of the Easter lamb and cooking methods, 3) to indicate settlement patterns, 4) to make ironic hits at British morality, and drinking habits, 5) with a sly glance at Queen Caroline, to jog the classically-educated reader's prurient memory of the myth of Pasiphae, the princess who, you may remember, had it off with a bull, and 6) to comment on a) genetic modification, and b) the psychology and economics of war. I quote:

But beef is rare within these oxless isles;
 Goat's flesh there is, no doubt, and kid, and mutton;
 And, when a holiday upon them smiles,
 A joint upon their barbarous spits they put on:
 But this occurs but seldom, between whiles,
 For some of these are rocks without a hut on,
 Others are fair and fertile, among which
 This, though not large, was one of the most rich.
 I say that beef is rare, and can't help thinking
 That the old fable of the Minotaur –
 From which our modern morals, rightly shrinking,

³ See I. Littlewood, *Sultry climates; travel and sex since the Grand tour* (2001) 12f, 20, 56ff. The title of the book is a homage to Byron.

⁴ Delacroix, *Journal*, May 11th 1824 ['To fire yourself for all eternity, recall some passages of Byron']

⁵ Murray turned down *Eothen* and 'cited his refusal of it as the great blunder of his professional life': Rev. W. Tuckwell, *A biographical and literary study of Alexander Kinglake* (1902) ch.1.

Condemn the royal lady's taste who wore
 A cow's shape for a mask – was only (sinking
 The allegory) a mere type, no more
 That Pasiphae promoted breeding cattle
 To make the Cretans bloodier in battle,
 For we all know that English people are
 Fed upon beef – I won't say much of beer,
 Because 'tis liquor only, and being far
 From this my subject, has no business here,
 We know, too, they are very fond of war,
 A pleasure - like all pleasures rather dear;
 So were the Cretans – from which I infer
 That beef and battles both were owing to her.
 But to resume..... (*Don Juan* ii.154.1-157.1).

That “But to resume”, drawing attention to discontinuity and intertextualizing the information given, suggests that Byron would be an interesting subject, or perhaps one should say target, for Postmodernist study. It is curious, or perhaps not, that in *Don Juan* the first classic author to give impetus to what we now think of as the writer-manipulated travel journal, should have used verse form, one of the great Romantic modes; a rhyme scheme is often of course a severe test of formal mastery. It is also here that sexual adventure is firmly on the agenda of at least the male travel writer (and Freud used to refer to the “compulsive link.....between railway travel and sexuality”). This however is not what I was invited by the University of Bucharest to talk about.

Don Juan had posed, in glorious technicolour (“a versified Aurora Borealis”, Byron's own term - *Don Juan* vii.2.3) the problem of the writer's self. Byron had been in his hero's grave for twenty years when the next must-read in English travel writing, a quite different proposition, made its appearance in 1844. It was a book in dynamic, occasionally lyrical prose by a young and unknown author, Alexander William Kinglake, who like Byron and indeed like Stevenson had Scottish blood.⁶ Having taken his degree at Trinity College Cambridge, Kinglake began to read for the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1832. By 1834, he was fed up with the conventions of the barrister's life, and still more of London “society”, so he “dropped out”,⁷ as we should say, and went off for a tour in the East, meaning the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Land. Kinglake returned leisurely from his extended travels to find his book a blockbuster and himself a famous man; he would eventually only ever write one more main work, his *History of the Crimean War*. He called his 1844 travel book *Eothen*, a title which now sounds like something out of Tolkien, but would then have been recognized, in a world of men into whom a classical education had been flogged, as a Homeric adverb meaning “from the East”, or more literally “from the early dawn”. The fascination of Western Europe with the Orient was pretty new in the 1830s; you may immediately think, as I do, of Ingres' painting *L'Odalisque*. Orientalism in literature and painting has been permanently tarred with the brush of 19th century colonialism by Edward Said (*Orientalism*); except where Said deals specifically with *Eothen*, which he mauls very severely, this is not the place to engage with the very wide range of issues that his critique raises.

Like Byron, though less noisily, Kinglake here and there lets the reader into the secret of his travel writing. I hesitate to use the term “theory”, for were there “rules” for travel writing, Kinglake was prepared to transgress them all. In order to avoid sounding “like a public lecture”, he would draft and redraft at almost obsessive length. “I could not by any possibility speak very solemnly”, he says: ‘Heaven forbid that I should talk to my own genial friend as though he were a great and enlightened community!’ (To Queen Victoria is attributed the remark about Gladstone: “He speaks to me as if I was a public

⁶ The biographical information that follows is drawn from the 1940 Macmillan edition of *Eothen* that I have used, terse but informative, by Guy BOAS.

⁷ *Mutatis very mutandis* we might compare the barrister played by John Cleese, himself a trained lawyer, in Charles Crichton's film *A Fish Called Wanda*.

meeting”). Systematically in the proofs, Kingslake “struck out those phrases which seemed to be less fit for a published volume than for intimate conversation” – good advice to any travel writer even now.

Delightfully and disarmingly, he warned the reader via his modest title page that the book was quite superficial in its character. “I have endeavoured to discard from it all valuable matter derived from the works of others....from all details of geographical discovery, or antiquarian research / from all display of “sound learning and religious knowledge” – from all historical and scientific illustrations / from all useful statistics / from all political disquisitions – and from all good moral reflections, the volume is thoroughly free”. Standing at the opposite extreme to Baconian informatics, this is still more radical than Byron; and we may reasonably ask what was left in the book after it had been stripped of all these conventional accessories. The answer is given by Kingslake himself, and very interesting it is: “My excuse for the book is its truth... My narrative is not merely righteously exact in matters of fact (where fact is in question),⁸ but it is true in this larger sense – it conveys, not those impressions which *ought to have been* produced upon any “well-constituted mind” [in other words, my comment, the non self], but those which were really and truly received at the time of his rambles by a headstrong and not very amiable traveller, whose prejudices in favour of other people’s notions were then exceedingly slight” [in other words, my comment, the self]. With Kingslake’s words here should be compared those of Peter Fleming a century later:

This book is all truth and no facts. It is probably the most veracious travel book ever written; and it is certainly the least instructive... I am appalled when I think how little I know about the Carajas. I cannot write of them objectively, for my data are inadequate and unreliable; and I cannot write of them subjectively, for I cannot say for certain that I understand them (Fleming, *Brazilian Adventure*, introduction).

Kingslake confessed: “As I have felt, so I have written” and adds that “the result is, that there will often be found in my narrative a jarring discord between the associations properly belonging to interesting sites, and the tone in which I speak of them”. Already he has anticipate huge stretches of later travel writing, and the example which he gives is a crucial one, in the context of Early Victorian religious sensibility, “the worldly tone in which I speak of Jerusalem and Bethlehem”. Did Kingslake’s theory work in practice? Its commercial and cultural success is an indication that it did. And we can understand why this was so from an extended judgment made a generation or so later by a contemporary of Oscar Wilde:

The popularity of “Eothen” is a paradox: it fascinates by violating all the rules which convention assigns to viatic narrative. It traverses the most affecting regions of the world, and describes no one of them:He gives us everywhere,.....only his own sensations, thoughts, experiences. We are told not what the desert looks like, but what journeying in the desert feels like...Herein, in these subjective chatty confidences, is part of the spell he lays upon us: while we read we are IN the East: other books, as Warburton says, tell us ABOUT the East, this is the East itself (Tuckwell, ch. 1).

A personal pronoun is a token of selfhood. Once our suspicions are roused, we need to look closely at the personal pronouns in any travel book, including Eothen. “He” and “she”, “they” and even “we” are not perhaps highly problematic. But when the writer says “I”, who is this? The “I” who made the journey? The “I” who wrote the book? An “I” constructed by the writer (Kingslake calls himself “a layman not forced to write at all”)? The “I” perceived by the people with whom the travelling writer came into brief or longer contact (Proust’s Marcel is a possible example⁹)? The “I” whom the reader wants the writer to be? We need not assume that all these are mutually exclusive: Walter Starkie, in his *Adventures with a*

⁸ There is a good example in ch. 3 of *Eothen*. According to Kingslake’s map the island Samothrace should be invisible from the Troad because the island Imbros blocks the view. But Homer says it is visible; and when Kingslake, his faith a little shaken in the completeness of the Greek poet’s knowledge, gets there, ‘So Homer had appointed it, and so it was; a beautiful congruity betwixt the *Iliad* and the natural world’.

⁹ Cf. Anthony Powell, *Faces in My Time* (1980): 214

Fiddle in Romania and Hungary,¹⁰ says that when journeying alone he liked to divide himself into two personalities and make the two converse together. For his own “I”, Kinglake makes a claim that puts Byron in the shade:

I had been journeying, as it were, in solitude [he writes] for I had no comrade to whet the edge of my reason, or wake me from my noonday dreams. I was left all alone to be taught and swayed by the beautiful circumstances of Palestine travelling....by the bracing and fragrant air that seemed to poise me in the saddle, and to lift me along, as a planet appointed to glide through space (*Eothen*, ch. 9).

This can be compared with the reported words of the Edwardian teenager extreme sports enthusiast Dolly Shepherd: “There was just a cloud and space – the balloon and me!” (Russell, *The blessings of a good thick skirt: women travelers and their world* 73). There is, to complicate matters, an authorial “not I”, as promoted by Peter Fleming (brother of Ian) in his *Brazilian Adventure* (1933), a huge commercial success, and the daddy of all ironic travel accounts ever since:

Peter Fleming had a pre-occupation, almost an obsession, with not appearing to “show off”. This self-consciousness about avoiding anything in the least resembling Hemingwayesque bluster, might in itself have become a form of showing off, had not the characteristic not been balanced in Fleming by a profound melancholy (*Ibid* 76).

In Fleming’s text there are one or two hints at method that strongly recall Kinglake: the axiom that “adventure in the grand old manner is obsolete, having been either exalted to a specialist’s job or degraded to a stunt”; the paradox “adventure is really a soft option”. Referring to what he calls the “jargon of exploring”, Fleming mentions the traveller’s sense of parody; he does not of course give this term its Postmodernist value, but the text quoted below is nevertheless interesting from the postmodern point of view, with its leaning on the words “digress”, “superficial”, “colouring”, “private code”, and “nonsense”. A key passage reads:

Here I must digress, to explain a habit, a convention, an attitude of mind – I don’t really know how to define it...which...though it was an entirely superficial, colouring our conversation rather than our thoughts, it was so constant and so often a helpful feature of that life that I should do wrong not to mention it. “We never said, “Was that a shot?” but always, ‘Was that the well-known bark of a Mauser?’....Any bird larger than a thrush we credited with the ability to “break a man’s arm with a single blow of its powerful wing”. We spoke of water always as “the Precious Fluid”. [This style of parody was] important in that private code of nonsense which was our chief defence against hostile circumstance (Fleming 150).

The pronoun “you”, singular, raises still other and stickier intricacies. The reader knows that he or she cannot be the author, for several excellent reasons, despite Roland Barthes. The author’s performance in space and time is beyond the reader; so is the author’s understanding. The author’s stamina or lack of it, accurate or faulty powers of observation, background reading and research: none of these is required of or even expected of the reader. The publisher has put the author through the hoop of professional criticism and popular taste, of which the reader, to misquote Max Ernst, “shall know nothing”. And yet on the other hand the reader must somehow be the author, must speak the same language, must access the same emotions, must follow through the same gateways to what Kinglake splendidly calls “the ...frontier of all accustomed responsibilities”. (*Eothen*, ch. 13) The artful solution to the problem in *Eothen* is to combine a shifting focus with what a classical Greek philosopher or literary theorist would probably have called *oikeiōsis*, “assimilation”. Thus the book is dedicated, in the time-honoured European manner, to an individual - a patron and friend - and Kinglake accordingly begins:

¹⁰ W. Starkie, *Adventures with a Fiddle in Romania and Hungary* (1933): 34. The passage continues: ‘in company with others, we must always sacrifice our own individuality in order to achieve the greatest happiness for all’.

When you first entertained the idea of travelling in the East you asked me to send you an outline of the tour which I had made, in order that you might the better be able to choose a route for yourself.

But by the end of the same paragraph Kinglake is contemplating a variety of listeners at the same time as he justifies his hesitancy about sending the book to the publisher:

I was unable to speak out, and chiefly, I think, for this reason, that I knew not to whom I was speaking. It might be you, or perhaps Our Lady of Bitterness [an in-joke referring to a caustic mutual friend] , who would read my story, or it might be some member of the Royal Statistical Society, and how on earth was I to write in a way that would do for all three ?

The artful “you” draws the reader into the writer’s self and experiences. The writer can then give the reader the frisson of virtual reality, and even virtual death: were the reader to transgress the limits of prudence, “after that you will find yourself carefully shot, and carelessly buried in the ground of the lazaretto”. In Smyrna at festival time, Kinglake the observant visitor is himself observed, by the “fiery eyes” of the beautiful Greek women at their windows – “the stern, grave looks with which they pierce your brain”.¹¹ The travel writer’s “self” is a lens roving between the observer, the observed, and, not less importantly, self-observer. Theoretically, the narrative’s effectiveness should depend on exteriorizing the subject matter to a maximum, and subduing individual reflections to a minimum. In actual practice, this happens rather seldom. Instead, the writer’s self, inebriated by travel *per se*, becomes an interpreter or seer mediating the unknown to the unknower. Some of the most readable travel accounts are some of the most reflective¹²; they thus connect to the novel, and to other modes of modern writing where the boundary between observer and observed is fluid. Otherness, the motor of travel writing, can be played up or played down as convenient; the traveller both owns and does not own the anthropological landscape visited.

Edward Said (*Orientalism* 157, 169, 193) flays (I must not say “ex-Coryates”) Alexander Kinglake generally, for a “superior consciousness” representative of the British imperialist nation, and specifically, for the book *Eothen* as an “undeservedly famous and popular work”, to which however Said devotes almost as much space as he does to Kipling, and far more than he does to Beckford’s *Vathek*. He mentions Kinglake in the same breath as in one passage, Mark Twain, and in another, George Eliot, in two of his favourite checklists of the damned and the righteous. It is in keeping with his holistic view of Orientalism, a view itself not immune from criticism, that he should fuse the perceived literary and ideological shortcomings of *Eothen*. Only ostensibly is the book’s purpose to show that travel moulds identity; in fact what this entails is nothing other than perpetuating the British reader’s anti-Semitism, xenophobia and “general all-purpose race prejudice” (not one of his more polished phrases). Kinglake came to the East opinionated; and by Allah, opinionated he left it. The (at very least, striking) “in the desert” episode that had been singled out by Tuckwell is for Said evidence of Kinglake “glorying” – a strange word to use about this publicity-shunning Victorian – “in his self-sufficiency and power”. Curiously, he nowhere refers to T.E.Lawrence’s much more insistent statement of what is generically the same theme. The passionate Said was a good hater; the extended assault in *Orientalism* on Bernard Lewis “and his imitators” furnishes some of the liveliest pages in recent cultural studies, a field on which the slain are far outnumbered by the narcolepts.

To end with, an attempt of my own to generalize about the self and the moving about which is of the very essence of travel. Non-movement, the stationary state, equates with contemplation, self-annihilation, and the mystic experience. An example from the 1830s which lies beyond the blunted sensibility, and perhaps beyond even the blunted comprehension, of the English-speaking reader of the year 2008, is Fanny Kemble’s self abandonment on first seeing a landscape near West Point:

¹¹ *Eothen*, ch. 5. Note of course the possessive ‘your’.

¹² A case in point from the late 20th century is the novelist Nicholas Woolaston. Having austere kept himself out of his previous books, in *Tilting at Don Quixote* (1990), written when he was already 64, he weaves with complete success interweaves a travel book (on La Mancha) with a novel that is largely autobiographical: see *Royal Society of Literature Journal*, 2008, ‘Obituaries’.

I looked down, and for a moment my breath seemed to stop...The beauty and wild sublimity of what I beheld seemed almost to crush my faculties – I felt dizzy as though my senses were drowning, - I felt as though I had been carried into the immediate presence of God (Kemble, *Journal of a residence in America* 147-148).

The traveller's movement - that *On the Road* sensation, the determined pursuit of the panic-driven flight that confirms one's own values¹³ - equates with self-consciousness, the Jacuzzi awareness of social being. Now this is a paradox! You would expect the self to be most aware of its own being when at rest. But I would claim in support the fact and the psychology of tourism, which is movement for the sake of movement, and which is the characteristic feature of the epoch we live in, in the West the most self gratifying and purely selfish of any in history, for which a global price is already being exacted by Nature.

The metanarrative of this paper is that for a number of reasons, travel writing makes a very good hacking-block for discussion of the "self" in literature. There is a lot of it, travel writing, I mean; very rarely is there "background noise" from questions of literary excellence. The tone is generally warm and confidential, if not indiscreet. It is fascinating to watch how camouflage behind external landscapes provides the travel writer with a let-out from postmodernist dilemmas about the status of the self. Furthermore, there is a feminist issue: travel writing is by no means confined to patriarchal males (Isabella Bird, Lady Brassey, Rose Macaulay, Edna O'Brien), and "the history of the woman traveler and her journey towards self-identification, the need to express a hitherto submerged identity" (Russell 218). But to return to the point at which I started: Kinglake's *Eothen* is worth a good deal more attention than it has received, and I hope I have established that it was an important landmark in what a Postmodernist would doubtless call the representation of the self through an account of foreign travel.

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¹³ Cf. Littlewood: 105-111