

VS NAIPAUL – TRAVEL WRITER

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*Abstract: The ethno-historical significance and the narrative problematic confer **travel writing** a privileged status, much enhanced during recent decades, and the reputation of a hitherto neglected genre rose considerably. Bookshops abound in travel guides, travel books – dutifully accompanied by conversation books in as many foreign languages – and the more history-conscious customers would look for the ancient Greek and Roman travelogues with an obvious rise in the reputation of travel writing towards the end of the twentieth century. Paul Theroux, Bruce Charwin, Ryszard Kapucinski and Robyn Davidson are widely acclaimed authors, to whom **Naipaul** should be dutifully added. Assessing his own writing, Naipaul stresses the specificity of his kind of ‘travel writing’ in which does more than describe the routes he follows in his travels: “What I do is quite different. I travel on a theme. I travel to make an inquiry. I am not a journalist. I am taking with me the gifts of sympathy, observation, and curiosity that I developed as an imaginative writer. The books I write now, these inquiries, are really constructed narratives.”*

*My paper will answer the following **research questions**:*

What are the specific traits of Naipaul’s Indian travelogues? How do they fit into the context of travel writing as a literary genre further considered a subcategory of ‘life writing’? What is their relation to biography and autobiography?

*In terms of structure my paper is divided into two distinct but closely connected main parts: **Part One** which is a more theoretical in nature covers the main theoretical notions which inform Naipaul’s writing. Part Two represents the analytical section of my paper, and covers each volume of the Indian trilogy.*

The Conclusion rounds up this incursion into the domain of cultural studies. In my approach to Naipaul’s Indian trilogy we have considered his travel writings as unusual, original and difficult to define examples of a particular, almost “Naipaulian” literary genre: an unexpected and more than often intriguing mixture of autobiography, field documentation and fictional techniques. In the attempt at defining it, we are reconsidering several approaches to the genre which formed the essence of our theoretical discourse.

Keywords: VS NAIPAUL, travel writing, journey, identity, Indian travelogues.

In the Preface to *India: a Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul analyses the intimate process by which abstract ideas, “clothed with people and narrative,” become books, and how the reader is finally confronted with a double narrative:

“There is the immediate narrative of the person to whom we are being introduced; there is the larger outer narrative in which all the varied pieces of the book are going to fit together. Nothing is done at random. Serious travel is an art, even if no writing is contemplated; and the special art in this book lay in divining who of the many people I met would best and most logically take my story forward, where nothing had to be forced” (MM, ix-x, see Annex 2).

A web site publishes a chart of the different genres of *popular literature*, built up by American students of literature, and based on internet resources, enumerating as many as thirty-six different genres, among them *the travelogue* (or *travel writing*). The definition provided is as simple as comprehensive:

“Travel literature is travel writing of a non-fiction type. Travel writing typically

records the experiences of travellers in some interesting places and circumstances. It will include vivid descriptions, illustrations, historical background, and possibly maps and diagrams.”¹

It is given an equal status with: romance, action adventure, fantasy, mystery, detective fiction, and the list might continue. Surprising is the students’ including of a different category which they call *creative non-fiction*, followed by the following explanation:

“According to Columbia College Chicago, creative non-fiction ‘...comes in many forms: memoir, narrative journalism, travel writing, personal essay, descriptive storytelling... What they all have in common is a basis in reality from careful observation to honest emotional truth.’”²

Among the writers included we find David Sedaris (‘the rock star of writers’), Dave Eggers (author of the autobiographical volume *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and *Zeitoun*) and Hunter S. Thompson, author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. It is not a surprise that the American students do not mention Naipaul, both definitions may be said to contain elements which also apply to Naipaul’s travel writing.

Whatever the definition we decide to take for granted, there are two terms in the phrase *travel writing* which might be re-worded as *writing about travel*. Carl Thompson, in his *Travel Writing* (2011), suggests that:

“To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. Possibly this journey is epic in scale, taking the traveller to the other side of the world or across a continent, or up a mountain; possibly, it is more modest in scope, and takes place within the limits of the traveller’s own country or region, or even just their immediate locality. Either way, to begin any journey or, indeed, simply to set foot beyond one’s own front door, is quickly to encounter difference and otherness. All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed **alterity**. Or, more precisely, since there are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity” (Thompson, 9, emphasis in the original).

The key words are *journey* – a movement in space which can lead to discovery –, *alterity*, *identity*, *difference*, *similarity*, while the connective *and* points to the dual nature, or complexity of the discovery to follow the journey. Then, if travel is “the negotiation between self and other brought about by movement in space” (Thompson, 9), then “all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that is entailed.” (Thompson, 10)

Over the centuries, travel literature has preoccupied literary critics and historians alike, and more than once these theorists have questioned the literary value of such an enterprise as a travelogue. The holy scriptures of all religions include epics which cover large expanses of time and space. Attempts have been made at including such important imaginary ancient epics – like Homer’s *Odyssey* or the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,

¹ <https://wiki-land.wikispaces.com/Genres+of+Popular+Literature>.

² [http://www.colum.edu/SpecialEvents/cnfw/Creative Nonfiction Week 2008.php](http://www.colum.edu/SpecialEvents/cnfw/Creative+Nonfiction+Week+2008.php). Sept. 20. 2011.

Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* – in the category of imaginary travel literature, while writers like Herman Melville (with his travelogues of the South Seas), Mark Twain (with his American travelogues), or Charles Doughty (with his surprising *Travels in Arabia Deserta*) are warmly regarded by readers and critics alike. In fact, all literatures, of all times, use journey as a metaphor.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, mad Ophelia sings of her lover and compares him to a pilgrim, complete with a pilgrim's hat, a walking stick, and sandals:

“How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandals shoon”
(*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V).

In his *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift uses travel as a satire, while – as early as the 18th century, Joseph Addison defines the “citizen of the world.” Visiting the Royal Exchange, the author confesses his satisfaction at seeing “so rich an assembly of countrymen and foreigners consulting together upon the private business of mankind, and making this metropolis a kind of emporium for the whole earth...” He rejoices at the large spectrum of nationalities he encounters: Jews, Japanese, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, French. He concludes by saying: “I am a Dane, Swede, or Frenchman at different times; or rather fancy myself like the old philosopher, who upon being asked what countryman he was, replied, he was *a citizen of the world*” (emphasis added).³

Fielding's picaresque novels – *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *The Life of Jonathan Wilde the Great* (1743) and *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749) – all inspired by their Spanish predecessor *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), are all based on travel adventures. Irrespective of the historical period they belong to, travelogues all share a common trait: they are personal renderings of relevant information related to the narrator's travel experience.

The twentieth century saw a growing interest in providing a suitable definition of the genre. Theoreticians have taken turns in expressing their views. As early as 1955, A. C. Ward considered the travelogue a difficult literary form that “depends more on the character and vision of the traveller than on the strangeness or remoteness of locality” (Ward, 15). In 1994, Edward Said – a declared admirer of the genre – wrote in his *Culture and Imperialism* about its specificity of travelogues:

“The great cultural archive, I argue, is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made. If you were British or French in the 1860s you saw, and you felt, India and North Africa with a combination of familiarity and distance, but never with a sense of their separate sovereignty. In your narratives, histories, travel tales, and explorations your consciousness was represented as the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and peoples” (Said, 1994, p. xxi).

³ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 19 May 1711, <http://www.aboutenglish.it/englishpress/spectator69.htm>. 20 Sept. 2011.

Sutherland equals it to what he calls “an autobiography of the traveller,” *autobiography* being used in its dictionary sense: “an account of a person’s life written by that person.”⁴

Last but not least, according to O’Brien – in the Introduction to Gertrude Bell’s *The Desert and the Sown*, travelogues “... describe a journey in which the traveller passes through towns and villages, jungles and rivers – or desert tents and palaces – and communicates with the inhabitants who are contemplated from a certain perspective” (O’Brien, viii). O’Brien differentiates travel from tourism (seen as simply a pastime); to her,

“the real purpose of travel is a personal affirmation outside the narrow confines of one’s normal life. Travel literature ultimately is about the traveller. Artists and writers discovered exotic themes that evoked in them new realizations while discovering themselves. The resulting works reflected not just objective reality, but, as one scholar observes, a ‘subjective rhythm – the perceptions and feelings of a body moving through a space that is both real and visionary.’” (O’Brien, ix)

Nevertheless, it seems that Naipaul could not resist the temptation to combine the two: in 1994 he contributed to *Bombay: A Gateway to India*, a joint venture with the famous Indian colour photographer Raghubir Singh. The end product is not exactly a touristic guide book: in the introduction to this photographic impression of the great city, Naipaul finds artist’s motivation and method, which combines the minute attention for the detail with an insider’s view on the city called “the gateway to India.” Here is Naipaul’s comment: “One can’t just look at this work about Bombay and say: ‘Good, I have looked at these pictures.’ They need attention. The pictures have to be read.” (See Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: City from Malabar Hill (*A Gateway to India*, p. 21)

But there is a great difference between travelogues and the touristic publications that make the main merchandise in all the airport bookstores. The presence of the traveller-narrator supplants the maps and shiny pictures. Naipaul – like all the other authors of travelogues – prefers to record and share his own experiences and those of the people he

⁴ Coles Editorial Board, *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company, 1980), p. 22.

meets, and the countries visited. To cite Lin Sutherland, the emphasis is on the meaning of the author's "personal travel experience." He compares travel writers to those explorers who "have all learnt their knowledge eyes to travel and to capture the soul of other countries." (Sutherland, 2002)

Writing about pilgrimages during the early Middle Ages, Claude Jenkins reached the conclusion that there is a close relationship between travel writing and "the instinct for travel" which he sees as "innate in some natures in all ages, perhaps in far more than we often realize" (Jenkins, 43). No wonder that travelogues have often been regarded as the first literary production of mankind. The almost legendary epics of the Sumerians and the ancient Greeks – *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *The Odyssey* – abound in the adventurous journeys of the two heroes, and their encounters with half-legendary and half real people in surroundings more or less real, thus connecting them to travelogues. In his book on Renaissance travels and discoveries, Boies Penrose thinks that the mentality of explorers of all ages has been informed by "the magnetism of the myth," and that these epics "lured men to their fate in sandy deserts and tropical jungles." (Boies, 1955: 10)

It is well-known that a particular dimension of the English Renaissance was given by economic factors: the development of trade combined with the expansion of the British Empire, closely supported by the advances in ship-building and navigation made it possible for subjects of the British Crown to travel to all corners of the Empire. Robert Ralston Cawley comments upon this propensity for travel of the English:

"No wonder that with this vast variety of motives Englishmen were eager to engage in the great discoveries which were taking place. Whether their end was gain or game, whether they went to convert the heathen or improve their own minds, for country's honour or out of sheer curiosity to see what these new regions and peoples looked like, they went with an enthusiasm which swept the country" (p. 169).

Travel literature continued during Romanticism which, according to H. V. D. Dyson and John Butt, was rich in travel writing and important geographical discoveries. (1940: 283) Landmarks of Romantic travel and travel writing would be Arthur Young's *Travels in France* (1792), William G. Browne's *Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria, from the Year 1792 to 1798* (1799), John Franklin's *A Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 1820, 1821, 1822 and 1823*, Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799), or Matthew G. Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1834).

Another defining feature of the Romantic Age is a growing interest in the countries and peoples of the Middle East, a direct consequence of the translation into English and publication of the *Arabian Nights* in 1706. There are a number of factors which explain the Romantics' attraction to the Orient, such as the decision of the great powers to put an end to piracy in the Mediterranean, and the more relaxed relations between the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Thus Europeans had access to regions where Christians had not been previously allowed, and even visited the holy cities of the Muslim faith, even if in disguise. The British readers were demanding books on a larger variety of subjects, while the exploits of adventurous spirits like Byron contributed to this demand.

The significance of such travelogues – as those written by Edward W. Lane (orientalist, translator and lexicographer, the translator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, 1840), Richard F. Burton (geographer, explorer and translator, known for the pilgrimage to

Mecca, recorded in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Mecca*, 1855-6), or Alexander W. Kinglake (*Eothen; or Traces of travel brought home from the East*, 1844) – resides both in their artistry and for sparking up the imagination of their fellow writers.

A prevalent feeling of dissatisfaction, alienation, and restlessness which characterized the Victorian Age saw an exodus of a large number of intellectuals to exotic locations. In a review to one of Gertrude Bell's travel writings, *The Arabian Diaries, 1913-1914*, Lawrence Davidson has the following to say:

“Among the Europeans there was a small group of people who sublimated their dissatisfaction with the Victorian culture of the time into an exploration of those territories and peoples that were the subject of the West's imperial expansion. Ironically, their activities as explorers, soldiers and administrators facilitated the spread of the very western culture they sought to escape.” (Davidson, 2001)

Gertrude Bell's travel writings are only an example. Besides the archaeologists, who had their undeniable contribution to the Victorian view of the world, some of these travellers were individualists who took advantage of the Oriental travels and travel writings in order to satisfy their personal ambitions. “Keen anthropologists” turned into “epic heroes”, they “pursued some interest like biology, geology, archaeology, or missionary work, which added an extra dimension to the story of their adventures.” Paul Turner states that the Victorian travelogue is famous for being “a rich mixture of elements from other genres, from epic, the picturesque novel, the scientific or religious treatise, and from autobiography.” (Turner, 261) One particular trait of the Victorian Age is the presence of women travellers and, implicitly, of travel literature written by women. On the other hand, one of the elements which contributed to the increasing popularity of travel and travel writing was the expansion of the British Empire, the empire “on which the sun never sets.”

To conclude this short review of the development of British travel writing, we should mention that the twentieth century, marked by the two World Wars and their influence on the further development of the British Empire, led to unexpected changes in the relations between continents and cultures. Commercial and political interests in England triggered a growth of the interest in other countries and societies. It is the reason for which the literary value of the travelogues was greatly diminished – they were more functional and distant. There are positive examples as well: the Syrian travels of Gertrude Bell (*The Desert and the Sown*, 1907), Thomas E. Lawrence (*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 1935), or Freya Stark (*The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey in The Hadbramaut*, 1936). Though not meant to be, these travelogues may be favourably considered for their literary value: to their authors, their experience of travelling abroad is nothing but a pretext for intellectual and philosophical considerations.

Travelling, for Naipaul, comes as an obsession. If we were to draw his itineraries on the map of the world, we would be surprised at the recurrent themes which permeate his travelogues, his insistence on the Third World, and the almost total absence of the major nations of the world – except for the United Kingdom and its imperial version, the British Empire.

Naipaul's first Caribbean travelogue, *The Middle Passage* (1963) allows him – according to Zahiri – to establish “a reputation as the authentic, rational postcolonial guru of the countries on the fringe.” Commenting on the reception of Naipaul's works, Edward Said

considers that “the centre always lionized him whereas the countries on the fringe saw him as a turn-coat postcolonial” (Said, 1980). In this particular case we are dealing with a special account of Naipaul’s personal reaction to those peoples’ encounter with and understanding of modernity, which is “the extreme susceptibility of people who are unsure of themselves and, having no taste or style of their own, are eager for instruction.” Nowadays, the Trinidadians receive their instruction from advertising agencies, welcomed by everyone simply because they are elements of modernity. As a conclusion, Naipaul’s Trinidad boasts a cosmopolitanism which, according to Naipaul, is “fraudulent”: “In the immigrant colonial society... subjected for years to the second-rate in newspapers, radio and cinema, minds are tightly closed and Trinidadians of all races and classes are remaking themselves in the image of the Hollywood B-man.” (*MP*, 47)

Naipaul himself could not deny his personal, unidirectional relation with the Third World which provides the background of his whole work. India is part of the Third World. It has been considered a Mecca of all those nations which considered themselves as constituent elements of the system. Naipaul-the-writer is closely connected with the idea of the Third World.

Autobiographical Naipaul offers very little about his early life and sufficient details about his beginnings as a writer in London, the center of the colonial world. Let us – once again – insist on the basic dimensions of our discourse: the center and the fringe. The fringe – in our case, Trinidad – is linked with political movements all over the former British Empire, mostly in the fifties. Naipaul’s career found so many unexpected answers in the political uprisings on the fringe. In Naipaul’s vision, the “recently freed societies” – the settings of most of his novels and travelogues – belong to the all-inclusive, general, and homogenizing category of “Third World societies.” It is all in concordance with French demographer Alfred Sauvy who, in a 1952 article published in *L’Observateur*, compared the Third World with the Third Estate: *ce Tiers Monde ignoré, exploité, méprisé comme le Tiers État* (“this ignored Third World, exploited, scorned like the Third Estate”)⁵ (See Fig. 5). Also, the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference of 1955, with its ten principles stipulated in its final resolution, might have offered Naipaul sources of inspiration.⁶

⁵ Cited by Gerard Chaliand, “Third World: definitions and descriptions:”, http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/General/ThirdWorld_def.html, and http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/third_world_countries.htm.

⁶ The Decalogue of contains the following ten principles: (1) Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations; (2) Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations; (3) Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations large and small; (4) Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country; (5) Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself, singly or collectively, in conformity with the charter of the United Nations; (6) (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve any particular interests of the big powers; (b) Abstention by any country from exerting pressures on other countries; (7) Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country; (8) Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties own choice, in conformity with the charter of the United Nations; (9) Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation; (10) Respect for justice and international obligations.

Online source: Jayaprakash, N D (June 5, 2005). “India and the Bandung Conference of 1955-II”. *People's Democracy – Weekly Organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)* XXIX (23). Archived from the original on 11 March 2007. http://pd.cpim.org/2005/0605/06052005_bandung%20conf.htm. Retrieved 2010-02-07.

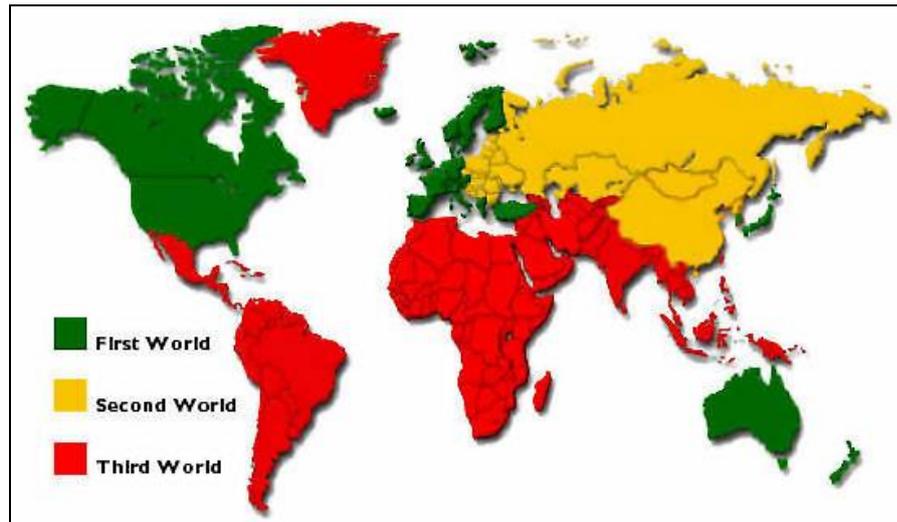


Fig. 5: Third World model

According to Zahiri, “the emergence of the ‘Third World’ coincided with his literary textualization of the fringe for the centre.” In this case, the unifying elements of Naipaul’s works are the serious problems these Third World nation-states have been facing, and which range “from development and dependency to hunger and democratization.” They are – according to Zahiri – the common thread running through Naipaul’s aesthetic productions in their entirety. These problems are the yardsticks of the Eurocentric, instrumentally “rational” traveller (Zahiri, 2005).

The continuous efforts of these newly-liberated nations to find their way did not trigger any wave of sympathy in Naipaul’s works: Third World states were doomed, their peoples did not have the necessary stamina to overcome. They were nothing but “half-made societies,” and *The Middle Passage* offers useful hints to Naipaul’s discursive construction of his native Caribbean in his first travelogue in the region.

Naipaul – who offers a wealth of autobiographical information in most of his books – has this story to tell about *The Middle Passage*: the book was commissioned by the Trinidad Prime Minister, and allowed him to travel to Trinidad, and the rest of the Caribbean. This research project gave him the chance to return the birthplace that was haunting him in his dreams:

“When I was in the fourth form *I wrote a vow* on the endpaper of my Kennedy’s Revised Latin Primer *to leave within five years. I left after six*; and for many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, *I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad* (MP, 41, emphasis added).

In the foreword to the volume, Naipaul teaches the technique any writer should follow, should he/she ever decide to write such a book:

“The novelist works towards conclusions of which he is often unaware, and it is better that he should. To analyze and decide before writing would rob the writer of the excitement which supports him during his solitude, and would be the opposite of my method....” (Naipaul, 1963a, 5). Obviously, he has no intention “to analyze and decide”. He has no intention to be robbed of the “excitement” that triggers his writing. What he really wants is a “novelistic freedom” to

approach the Caribbean, which will presumably cure him of the recurrent dream that he was “back in tropical Trinidad.”

Naipaul’s interpretation of the Caribbean – both the nations and the sea itself – has raised questions the answers to which were not always satisfactory. Writing about the Caribbean Sea, he compares it to the Mediterranean, “Europe’s other sea”:

“It was a Mediterranean which summoned up every dark human instinct with the complementary impulses towards nobility and beauty of older lands, a Mediterranean where civilization turned satanic, perverting those it attracted” (Naipaul, 1963a, 203-204).

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