

Travel as Disenchantment: A Perspective in Transformation

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Abstract

Exploration accounts pursuing a rather *austere* and *closed* journal-format had to adhere to an already-established type or structure of narrative. In several cases this act of adherence stands out as a highly self-conscious narrative device. The narrative then perceives itself to be a continual of previous narratives that established the 'modes' in the first place. But the narrative equally identifies itself as a 'predecessor narrative' that would eventually affect as well as guide 'successor' narratives. The result normally is a *cluster of narratives* that *defines* a specific locale across a certain time-span. The traditional use of the first-person narration employing an experiencing 'I' has been the customary way of attesting to the much-needed element of veracity. In representative early exploration narratives written by Continental explorers it is possible to discern different shades of 'reality' differently cognized. It is apparent, then, that what is played on the narrative level is even more than the essential cultural-political significations; it is also the author's location in terms of discursive engagement that is pinpointed. Textualisation or narrativisation becomes linguistic devices of stratification, codification that successfully naturalises the cultural shock of an initial contact. Through an analysis of the 'worlding' process discernible in two representative early exploration narratives this paper tries to show the ways a narrative *manufactures* its own points of reference and structures of significations in order to facilitate its individual agenda.

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In the multiplicity of literary genres travel writing, notwithstanding its rather *undertheorized* status assumes a unique status due to both the ethno-historical significance and narrative problematics. Travelogue as a distinctive form of writing predates almost all known genres and can comfortably be traced back to a hoary antiquity where the borderlines between the travelogue and the epic gets inseparably blurred, as in the case of *Odyssey*, and since then travelogues have been popular for representing a more or less coherent narrative. The precise problem is, in the interest of coherence a narrative needs to negotiate its relation with the 'reality' that engendered it in the first place. It is a well-known Aristotelian concept that plot implies a story with its crudities meticulously removed, a narrative with layers of literary devices draped over it for purely

aesthetic reasons. As it is apparent, what in the process gets compromised is the element of veracity. Even as formal a genre as the historical fiction allows itself a certain amount of 'fictional calibration' in the interest of an 'organic' plot-structure and enjoyable reading. But the point is, the 'generic expectation' that a novel or a poem is supposed to fulfill is to delight regardless of the truth content, the narrative is generally not supposed to generate or provide authentic information that might be exploited by the reader.

The status of a travelogue, on the contrary, resides on the element of veracity; the generic identification 'travel narrative' itself evidently shows it to be a commentary on or description of a specific geographical body that in reality exists. It is considered, then, a sort of narrative counterpart of a palpable reality.

The ultimate touchstone of an aspiring travelogue was (and still remains), of course, the element of authenticity which is considered the direct effect of the firsthand nature of experience. This element of authenticity encourages the readers to trust in the narrator and his agency, and this ultimately becomes a narrative or textual device to manipulate the readers' attitude to the narrative development through reinforcing the experiential authenticity, or to be more politically correct, as in the case of almost all the travelogues written in the time of the expansion of European colonies, the legitimacy of the narrator's perspective. One natural offshoot of this 'validation of the narrator's voice' is a generic characteristic of a travelogue, which is the employment of the 'I' or self as narrator. Due to the employment of this technique the textual time-space more or less corresponds to that of travelling itself: it then becomes a useful way of engaging the reader as it makes the narrative a sort of running commentary on the incidents or proceedings that the narrator has to encounter or be a vital part of.

All these successfully demonstrate the highly functional role that narrative plays in the overall scheme of ordering the experience. The essential significance of the narrative is certainly not limited as the narrator's primary device of ensuring readership and establishing experiential authenticity, its pivotal implication lies in the way it virtually constructs both a New World and a definitive perspective of looking at it. In the era of Europe's overexposure to her radical others and unprecedented widening of conceptual maturity through (in)formal introductions to alien worldviews; -all made possible due to audacious explorations, she experienced a huge explosion of words, images, fantasies, be it sexual or ethno-cultural. It is apparent, then, that what is played on the narrative level is even more than the essential cultural-political significations; it is also the author's location in terms of discursive engagement that is pinpointed, his ideological affiliation unfurled, and his individual perspective delineated. On the level of description or the narrator's verbal response to an alterity that potentially resists interpretation and delineation in constricted boundaries of a certain language, textualisation or narrativisation becomes linguistic devices of stratification, codification that successfully naturalises the cultural shock of an initial contact. Again, from the 'innocent' domestic readers' perspective it also neutralises or

effectively conceals tension in the contact zone, persuading him to enjoy the smooth flow of the proceedings, derive satisfaction from the fact that for the all-seeing gaze of an educated New World explorer, nothing is adequately capable of resisting 'scientific' incursions. Narrative has been traditionally exploited to maintain this façade of authority or control over the bulk of information gleaned even when oftentimes it could not process or 'contain' ethnic phenomena the explorers encountered for the first time.

Given the essentially critical status of the narrative, - the linguistic construct itself and the function it was supposed to perform, it is plausible to argue that in a very subtle yet rudimentary manner the narrative or the text produces, or to be more unambiguous 'manufactures' the reality the readers are supposed to be provided access to, and also the version of reality that the narrator perhaps prefers. This is precisely where the basic argument of his paper assumes shape.

In more than one sense Europe in the time of what can comfortably be dubbed as 'the flight of imperialism' risked a collapse into unreason due to an overexposure to her radical other. The sense of security afforded by the resolution of the debate over the precise format of planet earth, the victory of the Newtonian model over the Cartesian one, began to appear a brief moment of rather facile optimism of 'ordering' the rest of the world in the glorious shadow of a meticulously stratified Europe. This dream of conceiving a place anew included both the insertion of European language as well as culture, and also conversion into the only faith that could rid the macabre multitudes of the New World of their animality; the saviour being, of course, Christianity. The whole project could incite a sense of urgency, importance, humanitarianism among the countrymen back home and also was able to derive sufficient justification for the inflexible measures it had to resort to (bloodshed, to begin with) only through operating from within the discourse of religion that stressed the dire need to uplift the benighted, ignorant souls of the natives.

To achieve this, narrative had to play a fundamental role since the natives first had to be shown as undergoing hellish existence, eagerly awaiting a light from above in the form of the gospels. In *Marvelous Possessions* Stephen Greenblatt has adroitly quoted Michel de Certeau who terms this narrative mould as 'scriptural operation'¹ which was premised upon the overall fallen status of the New World inhabitants. Once it is granted that narrative is tentatively capable of constructing a certain version of reality, it becomes plausible to argue against Greenblatt who maintains that in New World descriptions words necessarily precede narrative, that the flow of the language striving to clarify any ethnic phenomenon always trail behind the act of sight or sensory appropriation itself, words being the 'physical consequence' of the events.² The narrative not only articulates what is other than or opposite to the present,- a fact that Greenblatt had already acknowledged³; it fabricates an expedient present that in turn encourages the narrator to build further upon his own fabrication. The narrative, then, naturally

appears doubly alienated from the real, as it could be viewed employing Platonic vocabulary.

It is entirely possible to show instances of this narrative feature in a number of representative travelogues or journals, beginning from Columbus whose narrative exemplifies a rather abrupt unfolding of this specific aspect of the New World descriptions. The element of aggressiveness was something new in Columbus' approach; in no previous inroad the voice of the coloniser or that of the empire, of political expansionism was this much pronounced. Columbus in a certain sense had been the first to exploit the discourse of the empire to the full extent and in the process render it capable of adopting blood-and-iron policy when the situation demanded it. Indiscriminately ruthless as he had always been in his dealings with the natives, Columbus was entirely convinced about the immense technological superiority of his own culture, and hence acted with the calm confidence that the worst possible scenario could always be avoided by military intervention. But it is not even this overweening attitude that categorically confirms the narrative's status as a 'colonial' one, suffering from an insufferable 'planetary consciousness'; it is rather the justification for the act of aggression, the justification that it is only rational as well as normal for a primitive civilisation to be controlled and trained by an advanced civilisation. This logic provides the much-needed formal rationale of the cycle of exploitation; it also bears witness to the essential malleability of the 'scriptural discourse'- a discourse premised upon the Christian principle of brotherhood, but was somehow successful in interiorising the totally opposite principle of violence. It was only narrative that was capable of systematising this discourse and fine-tuning its functionality through arranging the necessary 'groundwork' for its operation.

Columbus could always discern, quite strangely, distinct signs or gestures on the part of the natives that convinced him that the natives were ready for submission, or they were even absolutely prepared to gift their landmass to him. This tremendous shortsightedness, albeit an honest one, since he was pathetically unaware of the sheer amount of cultural difference at work, was nonetheless manufactured, structured by even older narratives on cultural contacts. This user-friendly concept reaches as far back as circa AD 60 when Quintilian proved himself to be too optimistic by proclaiming that his system of 'chironomia' was a universal sign-system; an elaborate inventory of gesticulations that he hoped would make sense to every human being notwithstanding ethnic differences.

There are a number of anecdotes recorded by Columbus himself that show how this system (which is, after all, based upon the common sense of a certain culture) ceased to function or made no sense to the people for whom it was intended. The repeated voyages, then, in more than one sense, turned out to be a series of disappointments, of disillusionment, as regards the 'simplicity' of cross-cultural negotiation. Although in the initial foray it was unanimously concluded that the natives are simple-minded folks with a primitive yet straightforward linguistic schemata that made perfectly decipherable sense to every 'native' of the

New World irrespective of spatial distances, the later voyages proved this to be a naïve optimism, demonstrating that even two adjacent villages suffered from the inescapable legacy of the Tower of Babel.

The primary purpose of the civilising mission was to eradicate drastically all these variables of culture and paint the New World in a monochromic hue. At the beginning of that intricate task of ethnic erasing, either in the form of a formal rationale or ceremonial justification, the encounter narrative had to accomplish the objective of depicting the alien as dissatisfactory, primitive in a rather atavistic way, crude and potentially dangerous. It appears natural that the element of pleasant wonder at the refreshingly new gradually gave way to, as it is apparent in Columbus' texts, a disenchantment with what can be termed 'outlandish'.

Now, the fundamental argument of this paper is, travelogues on the New World, or journals or log-books have traditionally registered this discomfort with the 'Other'. The most interesting point would be, this tone is discernible in the records of explorers who were much less overtly 'colonial' in their exploits, instantiated by both their insistence on the adventure-aspect of the whole voyage, and also sincere attempts at cross-cultural negotiation. One representative journal shows all these features and yet characteristically remains bitter whenever a native community resists a prefabricated profile; it is the journal(s) of Captain James Cook. Another vantage point of approaching the journals would be Cook's familiarity with the concept of 'noble savage' as popularised by Montaigne in the mid-sixteenth century.

As the extract cited here from his first journal amply demonstrates, he doesn't deliberately sentimentalise the narrative voice here; rather this personal observation appears a sudden break in a discourse which remains mostly objective.

From what I have said of the Natives ... they may appear to some to be the most wretched People upon Earth; but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition...This, in my opinion, Argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessarys of Life, and that they have no Superfluties.⁴

Even though there are diverse critical standpoints or discursive affiliations from which it is possible to analyse this significant remark, there cannot be any doubt that Cook really meant what he said, since this sentiment has been corroborated by similar subjective effusions that can be traced scattered throughout his journals.

In spite of that, his irritation at the inhabitants of several islands he came across is equally apparent: a series of disillusionment that began in the initial part of the Endeavour voyage, at the Success Bay in Terra Del Fuego, to be continued

throughout the second and third journals of the second voyage, to find a sort of culmination in the Matavi Bay. There may be, and indeed are, several different, separate, even mutually exclusive factors contributing to this aversion which in turn could and did justify certain belligerent approaches that Cook initially decided to avoid, as exemplified in his elaborate 'codes of conduct' to be strictly maintained with the Tahitians documented in the 3rd chapter of the first journal.

Considering the spatiotemporal constriction it is not feasible to clarify all the relevant factors contributing to this mindset which tends to run counter to the oftentimes professed (and 'official') motto of humane and impartial treatment of the natives but nonetheless the fact remains that the Europeanisation of the new worlds of far east and far west entailed a gloomy tale of exploitation and destruction not only of native population and everything it included, but the entire biodiversity of a certain area. And narratives, be it travelogues or diaries or journals or excerpts or fictions or logbooks or illustrations or 'scientific' and 'geographic' disquisitions or even diplomatic top-secret documents, - all minutely bear witness to, and in a very apparent way validates this strategic extermination.

But as the recent theorisations by Tony Birch suggests, recourse to well-planned act of methodical aggression or 'strategic violence' is not necessarily required to successfully execute a full-fledged cultural domination. The academic paraphernalia of documentation and stratification and the consequent construction of 'hegemonic histories' are enough to effectively elide the native voice as well as history.⁵

Therefore, the narratives appear to pursue a closed cycle; from appreciation to depreciation, to put it in a nutshell, and in a certain sense it becomes a sort of obligatory movement. The operation of 'Getting to know the 'New World' and the murky incidents of interaction with the natives that followed reflect to a large extent a feverish attempt at 'ordering', at a formal codification. This imposition of normativity is embodied as much by the act of naming or cartographic enterprise as by the act of exploration itself, since they all are means of naturalization that function as the ideological accompaniments of what Mary Louise Pratt popularizes as 'anti-conquest'. But both the act of naturalising the 'unprocessed' alien experience and the act of neutralising tension in the 'contact zone', supposed to be performed by narrative, required a formal devaluation of the culture encountered. And the narrative achieved just that through an image-construction process that is visibly at work in Cook's journals.

An application of Paul Ricoeur's theory of imaginative construction or structuration as it is achieved in speech or narrative would reveal a cognitive axis at work in the texts. This innovative model of 'functional imagination' strives to stipulate the aesthetics of imagination by showing it as constantly negotiating elements that tend to negate each other. At the one end of this axis Ricoeur has placed reproductive or representational image; that is, image being a trace of the perception, weakened impression. On the other end he posits what he terms

‘productive’ image; image being constructed in terms of absence, of what is other than present.⁶

An application of this structure to the narrator’s perspective as it develops in the journals under consideration would reveal not only the element of unease as the perceiving self matures experientially, but also a pervading disbelief towards the ‘golden state’ of existence the uncivilised natives allegedly enjoy, and the need, therefore, to comprehend alterity in the way that facilitates the simplicity of first impression, which is almost always, in these cases, coloured by the shock element of the initial contact. And as it has been already argued, this ‘pervading disbelief’ characterised a number of representative travelogues of that time, narratives that problematised the heavily Christian concept of noble savage by way of providing counter-myths.

This curve of chronic disillusionment which was discernible in Columbus’ texts, is remarkably prominent in the Endeavour journal itself which, since it is the first journey to familiarise Cook with the ‘real others’, arrests this arc of progression satisfactorily. In this journey Cook had been expressly ordered by the Admiralty not to engage in any conflict with the natives, and proceed with extreme caution by way of bartering that was the Continentally agreed technique of establishing relations, and more so when ‘first contacts’ are concerned. But as it happened, his way forward proved to be one continuous series of revelations in that his experiences of contacts turned out to be subversions of his preconceived notions of the noble savages dwelling in ideal conditions, the culmination being, notably in his case, not any stray act of cannibalism, but the dawning realisation (continuing in the second voyage as well) that the natives are able to plot complex political manoeuvring for personal gains. As a result, Cook’s projection of the natives, as it develops through the journals, is in accordance to Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of the image-projection as the ‘trace’, the weakened impression of the initial conception. Intriguingly this attitude, often masquerading as anthropological objectivity or academic impartiality, striving to ‘expose’ the reality of a certain community before Continental intrusion, in effect subtly justifies the ‘rule of law’ that colonisation brought. A useful example of some sort of continuation of this phenomenon should be the 2007 movie *Apocalypto* directed by Mel Gibson, where after almost two-and-a-half hours’ sickening bloodshed projected as regular rituals of a certain tribe of South America, the final twist provided in the form of the advent of Europeans from across the seas can be interpreted as a vivid image of the advent of law and order as well.

The fundamental argument has not been that all travelogues to the New World were vicious or colonially motivated as regards the native population; it is rather about the way older narratives ‘condition’ and manipulate later narratives which, in turn, oftentimes follow a logic that establishes a pattern sometimes avoiding the narrating subject altogether.

In Cook's case particularly this model of a comparatively more autonomous narrative is applicable, since here the movement between objectivity and subjectivity is abrupt and unpredictable. But Columbus' travelogues negotiate with a much more gradual disconcertment where the pathetic inadequacy of older 'guiding' narratives compels them to curve out a logic on their own.

Notes

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)58.

² *Marvelous Possessions*, 63.

³ *Ibid*, 61.

⁴ *Captain Cook's Journal During his First Voyage Round the World Made in H.M. Bark "Endeavour"*, 1768-71, Preface by W.J.L Wharton, London, 1893, Project Gutenberg, p.318-19, 15th April 2009 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8106/8106-h/8106-h.htm>>.

⁵ Tony Birch, 'A Land So Inviting and Still Without Inhabitants', in *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, Edited by Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttal, (Routledge: London & New York, 1996), 178.

⁶ Sue Rowley, Imagination, 'Madness and Nation in Australian Bush Mythology', in *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, Edited by Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttal, (Routledge: London & New York, 1996), 132-33.

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