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Traveling Desires: Enlightenment, Commodification and the Imperial Limits of Representation

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**Traveling Desires: Enlightenment, Commodification
and the Imperial Limits of Representation**

Juliano Estrada Donatelli

IPE: 323 The Political, Economic, and Social Context of International Tourism

Professor Kontogeorgopoulos

December 7, 2020

Introduction

First published in 1975, Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar* was an instant success; equipped with only his 1973 edition of Thomas Cook's *Overseas Timetable* and his innumerable literary travel references (Theroux, 2013), Theroux set out on a transcontinental journey that began in England and stretched all the way to Japan, and back, using exclusively the famous railway systems of the world, such as the Oriental Express and the Trans-Siberian Express. His journey was a modern-day, intellectual Odyssey, riddled with luxurious amenities and elite strangers, as well as with numerous inconveniences, poverty-stricken backdrops, seedy peculiarities and picturesque, colonial decay—all of which, both good and bad, were equalized by Theroux's sardonic, deadpan narrative. Selling over 1.5 million copies (Dalrymple 2010, xx), *The Great Railway Bazaar* helped revive travel literature, (Hulme 2002, 90); it was hailed a literary travel classic and can be considered one of the modern forebears to the numerous travelogues seen today.

In this essay, I will specifically be analyzing how travel literature, which I consider to be a form of tourism, is characterized throughout Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar*. I will also draw from Theroux's *Tao of Travel*—a compendium of quotes, observations, and reflections on the nature of travel that was published in 2012—as a supplementary source to my observations in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. In doing so, I propose that the tourist desire is often contradictory. In the case of travel literature, tensions exist between the purported enlightenment of the journey and the commodification of the product of travel—the novel. This tension I argue can be traced back to imperial desires of travel and the other, which ultimately limit the ways in which these intellectual travellers perceive the subjects of their travel. In the first section, I will briefly discuss the history and concepts concerning travel literature and the tourist desire. In the second section I will discuss how Theroux engages with travel as a journey of knowledge-seeking and enlightenment. I will then transition into the third section, where I

will analyze how Theroux's journey of knowledge is commodified and contributes to a longer history of imperial relationships. This observation will then lead me to the final section, where I will explain how this imperial desire and gaze limits the ways travellers represent other countries and people.

Gazing Desire: The Tourist Gaze of Travel Literature

In a more technical sense, tourism can be defined as the “sum of the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationships and interactions among tourists, tourism suppliers, host governments, host communities, and [the] surrounding environments” (Weaver, David and Laura Lawton 2010, 2); (2012) however, in the niche of tourism created by travel literature, it may be more helpful to think of tourism in a more literary sense, in which the movement is the destination and the journey is the stay. Such travels have a long tradition both in history and literature; one needs only to look back to the famous epic of antiquity, Homer's *Odyssey* (Hulme and Youngs 2002, 2), to understand how humanity has characterized the journey, or ‘odyssey,’ proffered by travel: travel promises the seduction of discovery, drama and danger—it is quite literally the fuel of legends and Odysseus “the appropriate archetype for the traveller, and by extension for the travel writer” (Hulme and Youngs 2002, 2). Yet travel writing, throughout Western history, has served as more than just fodder for epics: during the Middle Ages, it spoke of the new discoveries made by explorers such as Marco Polo, John Mandeville and Christopher Columbus (Hulme and Youngs 2002, 2; Sherman 202, 20); during imperial expansion, it documented the scientific and anthropologic knowledge collected during colonial expeditions; (Rubiés 2002, 243) and during the early twentieth century, as less new discoveries were made and mass tourism become more popular, travel writing served as a testimony to the subjective, “inner journey” of the individual traveller (Hulme 2002, 90). Though this is a rather condensed, incomprehensive, scan of the history of travel writing, it serves as a purview, a quick glance

as to the ancestry of the modern-day travelogue, as well as, shows that no matter the epoch, one common characteristic of travel literature, and the form of tourism it involves, is that it provides an immersive and “intimate knowledge” of a traveller’s “experience of foreign cultures and languages,” an experience that those travelling in short stints would not be able to experience (Hulme 2002, 121).

In order to understand the modern travel genre, and by extension the tropes and practices of Theroux within the genre, one must understand a bit of the time period roughly between 1880-1940: Britain’s imperial heyday (Carr 2002, 71) and the age of globalization. During this time, the world’s first tourist company, Thomas Cook had already launched its first tour (Pollen, George, 2018), and the ““ease of locomotion”” afforded by the railway system was connecting tourists and travellers to places with greater ease and greater distance than ever before, facilitating the growth of mass tourism (Carr 2002, 70): the nature of travel had changed, and with it the nature of travel writing. As less new discoveries were being made, and imperial powers began to wane with the annexations of former territories, the need for the semi-official, imperial travel writer passed.

Travelling writers such as Henry James, Edith Wharton, and D. H. Lawrence (Hulme and Youngs 2002, 7)—all of whom were equally known for their travelogues as they were for their literary fictions—became the new voice of the genre. In fact, as Michel Butor explained, these writers “travel in order to write, they travel while writing, because for them, travel *is* writing” (as cited in Carr 2002, 74). In contrast to the older, more didactic travel writing authored by official personnel, the travelogues of these travelling writers and poets—“often an alternative form of writing for novelists” (Carr 2002, 74)—embraced a more subjective, introspective approach that dealt with the experiences and reactions of the individual traveller, reading more like a “memoir than manual” (Carr 2002, 74). As such, the genre was prone to exploring, with more depth than ever before, the nature of travel, as well as the

growing “anxieties [and] uncertainties” caused by imperialism and the growth of tourism (Carr 2002, 73). Doubts surrounding Western supremacy and progress, as well as themes such as the fragmentary hybridization of culture became more commonplace as these travelling writers witnessed the denouement of an empire in collapse (Carr 2002, 73). In addition, as mass tourism expanded, inviting the participation of those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the need to distinguish between traveller and tourist became ever more acute for the elite travel writers (Butcher 2003, 33-34), who insisted upon their individuality, their story, their own picture of places explored within their writing (Carr 2002, 73).

All of these preoccupations and pursuits of the modern travel writer can be considered a sphere of influence that contributes to the tourist desire. Two forms of desires detailed in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy include: desire of objects, or that the “desire for tea is simply for tea” (Schroeder 2015, sec. 2.1, para. 1), and the desire for state of affairs, or the desire for “a certain state of affairs one has in mind: that one drink some tea” (Schroeder 2015, sec. 2.1, para. 1). In the field of tourism, these distinctions are similar to those between John Urry and Dean MacCannell’s conceptualization of the tourist gaze: for Urry, the tourist gaze privileges the objects of desire—the “photographic images as seen in tour company brochures or on TV programmes,” (Urry 2002, 129) whereas MacCannell argues for more agency of the tourist, through a second gaze, which privileges the unexpected and hidden—the “invisible layers of subjectivity that cover and compose every landscape” (2001, 34). In this essay, I will be focusing on Ruud Welten’s development of MacCannell’s second gaze, which emphasizes more the tourist gaze as an “interpretative action” whose experience is constantly “supported by a language, by a narrative fed by desire” (2014, 172); in this case, the tourist gaze goes beyond merely the objects, but rather fixates on the state of affairs, the hidden, the subjective, the “narrativity and emotions” of travelling (Welten 2014, 172).

A Desire of Enlightenment: Knowledge as a Journey

Similar to ‘odyssey,’ the terms ‘journey’ and ‘travel’ evoke tales of exploration, trials of endurance, and most importantly experience, which for John Locke was at the heart of knowledge (Buzard 2002, 37). From experience, the five senses could collect “impressions” and fill the “blank slate of human consciousness” (Buzard 2002, 37), which in this way, develop the mind and gather knowledge (Buzard 2002, 37). Such belief in the correlation between experience and knowledge formed the basis for many of a journey, whether it be those embarked by scientists like Humboldt who were searching for empirical data and breakthroughs in the Amazons, or those taken by young aristocratic men of the Grand Tour, who sought the wisdom and culture of classic antiquity. Yet, no matter how one may choose to understand knowledge, it is important to recognize that, as Nancy Leys Stepan asserts, knowledge is “social” (2001, 15), and the act of collecting as “complete knowledge” is “illusory” (2001, 34). Similar to Simon Schama, when he said that “nature is always culture before it is nature,” I propose that knowledge is always culture before it is knowledge (as cited in Stepan 2001, 15). Therefore, as the traveller explores the landscape of his journey—both physically and psychologically—the terrain they cross is habited with “with memory, longing, [and] nostalgia” (as cited in Stepan 2001, 15); it is a trail already paved with “human desires and intentions” (as cited in Stepan 2001, 15).

The start of *The Great Railway Bazaar* begins with a memory: “Ever since childhood, when I lived within earshot of Boston and Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it” (Theroux 2006, 1). More than a simple recollection, this beginning is an evocation of desire—a desire for a state of affairs, a desire for the experiences surrounding trains and travel. For Theroux, the train is the most “painless form of travel” (2006, 82); it is a “moving bedroom” (2006, 82)—resilient against the “distorting emptiness of air or sea” (2006, 82)—which affords the traveler a “continuous vision, a grand tour’s succession of

memorable images” with such an ease and speed that “the body is... borne forward” and the “thoughts alight” (as cited in Theroux 2006, 81). Thus the train becomes more than an object, it become inseparable with the journey; it becomes the “drama” of the tracks, the “melancholy sight of people standing [outside] under yellow lamps”, and the interior “solitude” (2006, 81) that animates the imagination and allows Theroux to “order and write [his] thoughts” (2006, 166). As Theroux asserts: the train affords him “two directions” of travel, one “along the level rails” and the second along the “interior rim of a private world of memory and language” (2006, 166).

Despite the popularity and status of Theroux within the travel genre, not much attention has been given to his works within the field of tourism, literary studies, and anthropology; as Welten asserts Theroux treats his journeys “as objective as possible” (2014, 176); his writing is too “flat and transparent” (Welten 2014, 176). Yet, it is exactly this purported depiction of his experiences—and by extension the knowledge he gains from them—as objective, that makes his writing ripe for speculation. The “squawks” (Theroux 2006, 172) and “babbles” (Theroux 2006, 130) of various locals, the dark complexion of Bengalis, like the “black goddess of destruction they worship” (Theroux 2006, 103), the “small, monkey-faced” monks of Burma (Theroux 2006, 180), the “stupid starved creature[s]” of Iranian men, pulled in one direction by money and by religion in the other (Theroux 2006, 61), the Burmese script written like the “code in the Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Adventure of the Dancing Men’” (Theroux 2006, 201) the aromas of the various distant cities—“As Calcutta smells of death and Bombay of money, Bangkok smells of sex, but this sexual aroma is mingled with the sharper whiffs of death and money” (Theroux 2006, 213)—all of these descriptions become more than just figurative language, they become the primary experience of Theroux, his objective knowledge, the “wise men’s” version of reality

(Manufacturing Intellect. 2016), whose purported veracity becomes filed away in the reader's imagination, into their social memory that archives the place and peoples of the world.

Yet, it's not just about the knowledge gained about people and places encountered throughout a journey, but also the knowledge gained about the nature of travel and writing that when first grounded by the seedlings of temerity at the beginning of the journey are fostered by ruminations, fed by experience, so that by the end of their journey, what the travel writer can offer is more than just the "kernels of resistance" against the superficial tourist gaze (MacCannell 2001, 31), but rather a polished, erudite knowledge that they can share with their readers. What Theroux may lack in more conspicuous subjective reflections on his experiences, he makes up for with "objective" claims to truth. According to Theroux, "all journeys [are] return journeys" (2006, 298): "travel is circular," it is a "grand tour" in the shape of a "parabola" (2006, 341); it is the "inspired man's way of heading home" (2006, 341), "an addiction" (2006, 165), at times "broadening" and at others times "contracting" the mind (2006, 221), that once taken will leave them, "naked" and "most oneself" (2006, 298). Yet travel is also like "tasting wine or picking at a global buffet" (2006, 293) in which the traveller is the ultimate grader, the one who must "sample" and grade the people and places they encounter throughout their journey (2006, 294). As for the process of writing, as mentioned before, "travel is writing" (Carr 2002, 74); in contrast to fiction writing, which is a "pure joy" discovering "what the imagination knows," travel writing in particular records "what the eye sees" rather than creating "pleasing shapes" with "distributed light [,] shadow," and "the grammar of delay" (Theroux 2006, 341). Most importantly, travel writing, along with the travel writer, transforms with the journey, experiencing their own arc and proving that honesty and self-knowledge is a process; at first "droll," the writing moves "from journalism to fiction" and finally arrives "as promptly as the Kodama Echo at autobiography" (Theroux 2006, 298) right before turning back around and starting where it first began—quite

literally: “*Ever since childhood, when I lived within earshot of the Boston and Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it...*” (2006, 342)

The Price for Enlightenment: Commodification and Knowledge

Since the 17th century up until the early twentieth century, colonial and scientific explorations were at their height; according to Nancy Leys Stepan in her work, *Picturing Tropical Nature*: it was during this time period when knowledge had become a “wholesale for European consumption and exploitation” (2001, 36)—this is also what Roderick Nash refers to as the “import and export of nature” (as cited in Stepan 2001, 32). Not only did scholars and elites seek out the recent discoveries made in overseas territories, but also the public, especially the growing middle class, who had more time to pursue leisurely activities and interests (Stepan 2001, 32). Within these years, travel accounts, zoos, museums, and botanical gardens proliferated, all contributing to a more “sophisticated,” European palette for “the exotic and foreign” (Stepan 2001, 35)—it was exactly these desires that many amateur, and commercial travellers and artists, considered when representing their journeys abroad. An early example of this—which attests to the legacy of this European propensity for the exotic—can be seen in the work of the 17th century Dutch artist, Franz Post, who during his time in Brazil composed more “delicate” landscape paintings, yet upon returning to Europe and reacquainting himself with the art market, became known for his “primitive” and “exotic” depictions of Brazil, incorporating “huge, fantastic serpents” and natives peering from the jungle (Stepan 2001, 19). With the legacies of famous travellers, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Marianne North and Rudyard Kipling, only to name a few, the tropes of the Other abounded in a repertory, an archive, which developed a way of seeing and understanding not only the other but oneself as well. This is part of what Echtner and Prasad describe as the “three *un*-myths: the myth of the unchanged, the myth of the unrestrained, and the myth of the uncivilized”—all of which helped form just as much the identity of the

“West” as it did of “the Rest” (Caton and Almeida Santos 2009, 193). Such systems of classification and representation are akin to the patterns of knowledge production and imperial discourse discussed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992), both of which I will discuss later.

Similar to the earlier example of Franz Post, travel writers, such as Theroux, not only have an audience but a market—it is part of their job. In this way, every journey of a travel writer is predicated on a contract by a publisher that demands a new book to be sold and consumed by the public. This process of transforming experiences into a consumable product can be understood as commodification. As Felluga states, commodification subordinates all aspects of human life to the logic of capitalism and its monetary value (2015, 50). In the case of Theroux, his travels, his experiences, his anecdotes and words of wisdom become a commodity that echo the spirit of the “imperialist of knowledge” (Stepan 2001, 36), an archetype within colonial history, which can be found within naturalists of the 19th century, such as Alfred Russel Wallace and Henry Walter Bates, both of who depended upon the commercialization of the tropics in order to make a living and fund their own quests for scientific knowledge (Stepan 2001, 34). When asked why he writes books on travelling, Theroux himself responded in a rather practical manner: “I really like travelling, and these are really expensive trips to make” (Manufacturing Intellect 2016); it is precisely this process of commodification that allows Theroux to sustain his travels, and continue on his quest for knowledge, experience, and even enlightenment—as suggested by his book the *Tao of Travel: Enlightenments from Lives on the Road* (2012).

As Pratt argues in *Imperial Eyes*, Theroux’s travel writing exemplifies a “discourse of negation, domination, devaluation, and [a] fear that remains in the late twentieth century” that became commonplace towards the end of imperial rule (1992, 219). As can be seen in the descriptions from *The Great Railway Bazaar* given in the second section, Theroux trivializes,

dehumanizes, and rejects (Pratt 1992, 219) the cultures and peoples he encounters—which can be considered a form of “orientalist denigration” (Rubiés 2002, 256). At the same time, he both reminisces nostalgically on the colonial past through ruins, such as those found in Lahore, whose decaying “moghul and colonial splendor” emphasized its “grandeur” (Theroux 2006, 86), as well as finds repose in the “excellent examples of Anglo-Muslim Gothic” architecture found in Peshawar—“just the place to recover from the hideous experience of Kabul” (Theroux 2006, 78). The modern reality of each city becomes obsolete, eclipsed by a yearning, imperial fantasy. With this said, it should come to no surprise that Joseph Rudyard Kipling, known imperial traveller and author of the *Jungle Book* as well as the notorious poem “The White Man’s Burden,” was one of Theroux’s literary heroes (Smith 2016, 25). More than an interesting fact about Theroux, it is but one example of the many references the travel writer makes to a host of other writers, such as Joseph Conrad, André Gide and Graham Greene, all of whom, in Theroux’s eyes, have all contributed to the integrity of the literary novel: the product of “all of Western culture,” whose sphere of influence goes even beyond its own borders (Theroux 2006, 286). Yet, one needs only to briefly leaf through Theroux’s *Tao of Travel*—a 304-page book of short biographies of travellers and loose quotes from both his works and the works of other traveller writers—to understand just how much authors have influenced his understanding and construction of both travelling and the traveller; as Theroux quotes T.S. Elliot discussing Rudyard Kipling: “[Kipling’s] gift is to make people see (for the first condition of right thought is right sensation, the first condition of understanding a foreign country is to smell it)” (Theroux 2012, 17)—funny enough, this too was the quote that Theroux used for the epigraph of his first travelogue, *The Great Railway Bazaar* (Theroux 2006) which would later launch his future career as yet another “canonical” travel writer (Pratt 1992, 219).

Conclusion

Though there is much to find problematic with his travelogue, Theroux might have been right in characterizing the traveler's journey as a parabola, a return home; in fact, I think it genius to have ended with the opening scene of the book, which echoes back to the same fundamental memory of desire, a certain longing for a state of affairs: the traveller *has* come back. Yet, in this case, he has brought his readers back with him. And through his "emotive" first person travel narrative, so common within travel literature (Smith 2016, 15), the "I" between the reader and Theroux becomes blurred; as the rational, objective guide, who desperately wishes he possessed a fearless disregard for truth, so he could have simply written a trip of fiction (Theroux 2006, 341), Theroux invites the reader to see what he sees, experience what he experiences, believe what he believes. And whether or not one is convinced by the world he recreates, and the knowledge he relates, his text is but one of a large archive of works, whose "imaginative density" not only represent reality, but "supplant" it with a new "locus" of reference (Smith 2016, 15): as Said states, such "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (1978, 94). As such, the West, or in this case Theroux, defines himself against the inferior "Other," the East, who is "exotic, sensual...despotic... and in decay" (Caton, Kellee, and Carla Almeida Santos 2009, 193). This sort of pervasive dominance is what Michel Foucault describes as the discourse, or the ways in which "'facts' are conveyed in different ways" through the guileful use of language (Mowforth, Martin and Ian Munt 1998, 54).

In this sense, the implication of Theroux's writing goes beyond just the localized scope of his works—they speak to a larger feature of travel writing and tourism as a whole: given the legacies of colonialism, and the commodification of the travel experience, the ability of the travel writer and intellectual traveller to represent the places and peoples around them is rather limited. Too often the archive, or discourse, becomes the five senses through which the traveller gathers their impressions and knowledge of the world (Buzard 2002, 37).

And before long, these impressions fill the blank slate of consciousness with borrowed images that sustain themselves in a stubborn inheritance, a sly legacy that like the travel writer, encourages the traveller to see what it sees, experience what it experiences, and believe what it believes.

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Juliano Estrada Donatelli

Professor Kontogeorgopoulos

IPE 323

CWLT Writing Contest: Professor's Comments

Wow, this is a fantastic paper. It is well written and very sophisticated in its conceptual and empirical observations. The book is well chosen and you also manage to work in sources from class. I like your argument that travel literature is a form of tourism itself and I was also pleased to see some attention paid to the notion of contradictions and tensions.

I suppose the main suggestion that I would have is that the overall message is sometimes lost in all the detail, so reiteration of the same central argument in a few places would help to anchor the material.

Great job, and I hope that you have a good break

Subject: CWLT Writing Excellence Awards Entry Form [#927]

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Course for which paper was prepared IPE/SOAN 323 A The Political, Economic, and Social Context of International Tourism

Semester in which course was taken Fall 2020

Name of instructor: Nick Kontogeorgopoulos

Category Arts and Humanities

Note: Papers written in African American, Asian, Environmental, Gender, and Latin American Studies; in Honors; or in Science, Technology, and Society should be submitted in the category for which they seem most appropriate. Papers in the Race and Pedagogy category may be submitted to another category, as well.

Please attach or describe the assignment for which this paper was written:

Option 2: Analysis of Travel Writing

The genre of literature known as “travel writing” has expanded greatly in recent years to quench the growing demand for genuine tales of danger and adventure. In this option, you must choose a book on travel writing and assess the themes, style, approach, and messages found throughout the text. If you would like to analyze a guidebook rather than a book about travel, please consult with me to see if it is appropriate for this type of paper. Books on travel are usually found in their own “travel” section of bookstores, most often located next to the section containing conventional tourist guidebooks. This option allows you to combine the elements of a book review with elements of a research paper, where you must link material from the travel literature to themes and concepts covered in class and elsewhere by tourism researchers. Although most travel writing is considered non-fiction, you may choose to use fiction if it is appropriate (check with me).