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Travel, Literature, Spirit: A Personal Meditation

Ihab Hassan

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Days and months are travelers of eternity. So are the years that pass by. Those who steer a boat across the sea, or drive a horse over the earth till they succumb to the weight of the years, spend every minute of their lives traveling. There are a great number of ancients, too, who died on the road. I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind — filled with a strong desire to wander.

—Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Far North*

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

"My Destination"

I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stable. The servant did not understand me. I myself went to the stable, saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance I heard a bugle call, I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me, asking: "Where are you riding to, master?" "I don't know," I said, "only away from here, away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination." "And so you know

your destination?" he asked. "Yes," I answered, "didn't I say so? Away-From-Here, that is my destination." "You have no provisions with you," he said. "I need none," I said, "the journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don't get anything on the way. No provisions can save me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey."

—Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*

I am no traveler of eternity, not yet, only a cosseted drifter, but I know that travel begins in childhood dreams, and wise old men die peregrine. We all think of our failures — the best think, as Robert Lowell said, with "suicidal absolution" — and wonder: where, where on this journey, did I swerve? That swerve, is it not part of the road? Perhaps only the absolved know it.

Still, though few fare in such absolution, journeys continue to beckon. Men and women have an errant disposition. They go, hoping to catch one last, clear glimpse of the mystery, hurtling on a wet, crowded boulder through space.

Journeys do join time and space, human identity and human mortality, in a secret motion. Yet I think of travel mainly as the story of time, that arch voyager, a tale of days and months as Basho says, and so in some measure the tale of all sojourners, born to traverse their own span. Whatever its metaphysics, travel also throws us, pell-mell, into the world. We wake up one day and find ourselves there — Cape Town, Lahore, Paris, Sapporo, Perth, Milwaukee — without quite knowing how or why. There we stay, or move on, or backtrack.

What, then, brings on the traveling mood? Though I am no Ishmael — driven out to sea by that damp, drizzly November in his soul — I think his mood can move us all. Or at least some version of it, packaged for a Crystal Line or Princess Cruise.

Certainly, I know counselors against travel. Thoreau boasted sourly that he traveled much in Concord; and Emerson sadly confessed that place is nothing, his giant goes with him wherever he goes. Travel may betray some insufficiency in us, a prickly need that deeper or happier natures refuse, a whim like a wound. Still, wandering the earth, we learn a little its ways and run against the stranger, within ourselves, we most dread to meet. We experience the world sensuously — that foreign, high-pitched ululation or wail, that rich, funky smell of garlic and urine — feeling the shock of differences even as we absorb each shock to some dark core. Seeing how human beings vary in language, custom, creed, color, mien, we try to coax our divergences into wider civility. Shall we ever do better, turning our variousness into proofs of hospitality in a shared home?

The evidence of the past millennium is grim. We fill mass graves with others around the world, fertilize them with the killing fields. Or else we ironize travel, turning it into a sly, kitschy, postmodern joke, like that ad for Kuoni travel: Michelangelo's David with a camera, in canary-colored shorts, blue shades and Day-Glo frames. For the desperately naïve, the exotic can be packaged, sterilized. You are in Cairo or Calcutta? Look at the index, look at the monitor of your guide; don't look left or right where dirt, danger, squalor live. (It's really the obverse of those sleek SUVs in suburbia, out on supermarket safaris.)

Can we wonder that yuppies now take their Grand Tours in Patagonia, the Gobi Desert, the Nullabor Plain, and when the gods go crazy in the sky, they now shower the Kalahari with empty bottles of Pepsi or Coke?

But let's curb our own irony here: Myth and Romance live. Who has not turned the corner of an alien street and come suddenly upon Helen — she whose face launched those Grecian ships — Galahad, Bluebeard, or Tamerlane? Who has not heard, on a foreign pavement, somewhere over and behind the left shoulder, the hollow step and sigh of Infinity?

Voyages whisper loss, departure, things thrown to the wind. As Ecclesiastes put it, man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets. Yet in voyages we also hear the cadences of the universe, going hence, coming hither, a sound not wholly our own. Like quests, pilgrimages, initiation rites, shamanistic trances, near-death experiences, like epic journeys and orphic descents to the underworld, travel aspires somehow to what it can never possess or know. And this gives it a darker glow. Yes, journeys enact childhood dreams, but in later age, they may hint the void. What if the traveler can never return, or returned only as a pale revenant, a wan, unwelcome ghost? Who knows when dispossession lures us to naught, when it promises rebirth?

And is not America itself an ambiguous realm of nothingness and plenitude? Boundless in the eyes of its European settlers, its space became a vacancy, fancy-filled. In emptiness grew the American Dream. For space is not place; it is nearer the Absolute. Is it what drew migrants such as myself here? Robert Pinsky warns his daughter about a certain kind of immigrant, in "An Explanation of America":

Such a man — neither a Greek adventurer
With his pragmatic gods, nor an Indian,
Nor Jew — would worship, not an earth or past
Or word, but something immanent, like a shadow . . .

I, myself, sometimes feel that arid immanence in happy exile, as if the desert could roll over the Atlantic, past the Mississippi, the Great Plains, the Rockies, to lap the Pacific. Nietzsche admired nomads, *chandalas* (outcasts): their freedom comes from traveling light, from a wide restlessness, he thought. I, too, admire them, but I know that if a dead shadow fell across my path, I would shudder out of its way.

Motion is no mere kinesis. Motion is an intellectual, often spiritual thing, and travel is a metaphor, rife with mischief and right for our times.

Paradoxically, travel, mobility, is a root, a radical, Mary Campbell says in *The Witness and the Other World* (1988). Motion animates our myths of origins, our earliest literatures; it acts in metaphor, our most essential figure of speech, which etymologically means a change of place. As soon as we are, we learn to go. Movement becomes an attribute of power, lately of glamour, earlier of devilry or divinity. A meteor in the sky, a man on a galloping horse, strike awe in the sedentary heart. A jet-setter — preferably on the Concorde — with an

unlimited air travel card strikes envy. This is no levity. Why else do joggers attract so much irritation or derision? What tempts village ruffians to pelt a passing car? Even a man in a light skiff arouses a harassing instinct. "They shouted at me, they yodeled, they threw stones," Paul Theroux laments as he rows around Cape Cod.

Bruce Chatwin gives that lament a deeper tone. In *The Songlines* (1987), he moots the idea that natural selection has designed us, from brain cells to big toe, for a career of seasonal journeys through thorn scrubs and blistering desert. But why, I wonder, couldn't natural selection, which alters in a few generations the beak of the finch, finally adapt human beings to the quiet computer, the cushioned jet? Is the brain more indurate than a beak? And supposing, as Darwin notes in *The Descent of Man* (1871), that the migratory instinct in certain birds overcomes the maternal, what can this tell us of women, who are not fowl? And is it true that migratory species aggress less than those with fixed abodes? Would this apply to Hun and Tartar? Further, were the wandering tribes of Israel right to consider settled states, with all their pyramids and ziggurats, as behemoth or leviathan? And did the ancient Egyptians really project on the next world the journey they failed to make in this one, as Chatwin claims?

I have found no answer to such queries and speculations, only hints, aphorisms, further queries. But I know that travel writers overflow the libraries of the earth. And the best of them — don't miss Freya Stark — write shamelessly well. After all, the traveler we read is foremost a writer, often an *artist*. This artist may choose to make the curiosity and solitude of travel an allegory of the human condition. Like Jonathan Raban, say, they offer themselves as examples of the estranged hero, reporting on the foreignness we suspected, but failed to experience, in our world.

But the journey also becomes symbolic of the writing process itself and of the artist's own quest for self-understanding. In this perspective — a kind of silent *translatio* — inner and outer world, letter and deed, translate into one another. Indeed, in some cases the author need not travel at all. He can, like Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (1974), let his imaginary Marco Polo do all the wandering for him on dusty roads. Or, like Emily Dickinson, she may simply board her frigate, a book, ride her courser, a page of "prancing poetry."

And isn't Michel Butor right: travel becomes itself a kind of writing? Romantic voyagers — François René de Chateaubriand, Alphonse de Lamartine, Théophile Gautier, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert — were often bookish writers; books frequently inspired their trips, and since they were writers, they often read on the trips, wrote journals, and produced books of their own later. Butor says, "They travel in order to write, they travel while writing, because for them, travel *is* writing." Besides, most travelers mark (write on) the lands they visit; they name or disfigure them in some clear or hidden way.

Finally, writing itself is a kind of travel, a text of secret displacements. "If reading is a crossing — even if it often pretends to be only an erased passage through the cloud of whiteness — writing, always the transformation of reading, is necessarily even more so." Even as Butor writes two words in a sentence, the earth turns, traveling also in space with its writer. If this is a conceit, it still makes a larger point.

Always, though, I have needed to remind myself while traveling that this is also my life: the journey is a fragment of autobiography, first lived, then written down. But the living and the writing are never the same.

How can they ever be? I walk or ride or fly, gawking at odd things in far-away places. I may even make mental notes of my experience — but they are not my experience. The “bio” and the “graph,” despite all of what the scribes say (that goes for Jacques Derrida too), never wholly parse in nomadic autobiography.

Think of it. You write it down: this means you recall, you invent. Memory is the mother of the Muses, but she could have been their daughter too. Autobiography is living by other means, not only after your death but also while you live. Autobiography literally re-creates your life: entertains it, creates it again in another mode, redirects it because writing makes you see what you ignored about yourself. And so you endeavor to become the person you have written out. We not only “construct” — hateful jargon — ourselves in autobiography; we reconstruct our past *and* future as well. It’s dizzying.

In traveling, though, there come moments of brute existence, unmediated by writing, perhaps by any words at all. They may be moments of mortal peril. Or of the natural sublime, demanding surrender to some awesome scene. Or of erotic frenzy, another kind of self-loss. Do not mock. The ambivalent lure of otherness — other features, other accents or hues — rages in every exotic fancy, not to say lymph or gland. This call of distant loves hints at surcease from selfhood, weird rebirth. The eros of travel is sinister, and a ruttish metaphysician born.

Travel and autobiography may be twin aspects of our internal life — I almost said of the soul. But travel casts a wider net over the human condition, our whole roiled postcolonial world. It is not only the economic fact of travel, its incalculable revenues; it is also its geopolitical impact on nearly everything we know, we do.

For international travel, Dean MacCannell argues in *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), has become the sign of our civilization, the best indication that modernity has triumphed over other social forms. Certainly, the non-modern world has not disappeared; it has been artificially preserved as the scene of tourism. Thus sightseeing becomes an attempt, doomed to failure, “to overcome the discontinuity of modernity, of incorporating its fragments into unified experience.” This insight, which applies only to certain kinds of travel, invites some further reflection on the geopolitical space we inhabit.

We live in a time of planetization, globalization, and retribalization, each tribe seeking new autonomy. We live also in a time of realignments, a world chaotically and sometimes viciously interactive. Yet current realignments — deals and whispers in the geopolitical dusk — are themselves evidence of an older process. The planetization of the earth may have begun with neolithic hunters or with the first outcast who mated elsewhere. But with Christopher Columbus, Sebastian Cabot, Ferdinand Magellan, Vasco da Gama, Francis Drake, the earth became interactive in another way. This was an exuberant and

bellicose moment for the West, grievous for other people who gradually fell prey to colonization, excepting some, like the Japanese, so remote and intractable as to stay free. Later, industrialization in the West made its power and knowledge paramount. By the middle of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger could bewail “the complete Europeanization [he did not say Americanization] of the earth and of man,” an infection, he claimed, that “attacks at the source . . . everything that is of an essential nature.”

Heidegger proved purblind in politics. Where he saw only sameness, we perceive now variety, a gallimaufry of cultures. Where Heidegger saw only hegemony, we see now rivalry and interdependence, whether in ethnic cleansing or global warming. We see shifting tectonic plates in geopolitics as in the earth’s crust. And withal, the individual traveler, adventurer, seeker, still remains intent on plunging into essential being.

True, there is travel and travel. Some will put you on the Seabourne Goddess, the Lindblad Explorer; some will earn you a knighthood or a seaswept grave. Yet travel — even in the cultural bubble, say, of a Japanese tour — always crosses lines, transgresses realms, and so reminds us obscurely of our homelessness in the world.

It is something you feel when you are packing a trunk and three suitcases to leave. How can any of it avail to preserve your identity when you are crossing Asia or Amazonia in a boat or train? Or when you become lost (as I was once lost, in a Shanghai crowd) and suddenly panic as a tide of Sinic faces carries you toward a destination you half-welcome, half-dread. It is a feeling of self-loss, hardly unique to feeling lost in China. Michael Parfit captures it perfectly, in *South Light* (1985) as his plane from Christchurch to McMurdo Station, Antarctica, passes the “point of safe return”:

Here in this airplane we have left all the encumbrances of our identities behind. . . . Now all that is important about who and what I am is in two orange bags I can carry by myself, and is here in the aircraft with me. . . . I have become lighter, freer, less burdened in life, and if my life itself ceases somewhere off on this unknown trajectory on which I have launched myself, it will perhaps not make as much smoke going out as I had thought. I have thrown my dreams into a sack over my shoulder and headed out.

For saints, homelessness is really at-homeness everywhere. Think of pilgrimages — crossings between the sacred and profane — pilgrimages East and West. Think, say, of Eleanor Munro’s luminous work, *On Glory Roads* (1987), which shows that cosmic myths sustain pilgrimages even as they mirror the motion of migrant birds or planets. Munro responds to the force of these myths in local rites at Lourdes, transfixed “because through those imprisoning bodies, some entangled yet separate will had glinted out with shocking immediacy.” In the pilgrim’s movement, then, we find a recapitulation of natural rhythms — the tides, the seasons, the stars — as well as the cultural history of humanity. We also find a presence that suddenly rushes to fill every moment and every place.

But look East now. The same intuition tacitly inhabits many texts. One classic example, Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Far North* (circa 1693) will do. Basho took several journeys, pilgrimages to places hallowed by their natural beauty or ancestral piety. He traveled also to renew his own spirit, strewing verses as he tramped along, one foot in this world, the other, he said, in the next. Still, in the spirit of Zen, he drew his imagery from the tap-roots of the earth, the quivering instant.

For Basho, though, Being never shows its beauty bare. It is mediated by every cherry blossom or frog in a pond. It is mediated as well by history, ancient sages, priests, heroes such as the tragic warrior Lord Yoshitsune and his giant retainer Benkei. Indeed, the epiphanies of Being abound in the very sordid midst of life:

Bitten by fleas and lice
I slept in a bed
A horse urinating all the time
Close to my pillow.

Basho's journeys betray no defiant transgressions. We hear no brash, self-vaunting notes, the kind Walt Whitman strikes in "Song of the Open Road," or Huck Finn sounds as he prepares to "light out for the Territory ahead." We hear not the jubilant cry, "I did it!" — the kind I gave out at Port Said.

I did not come to "Oriental serenity" early in life; I have hardly come to it at all. I feel closer to characters such as the eponymous hero of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, all rage and error, though I admire more and more Basho's way.

Still, I ask myself: why, why do so many Western travelers risk their lives far from societies they seem to disavow? Often, they elude their own sahib-kind, which they find more dangerous and repugnant than any natives. Often they themselves go native, repugning a life they perceive as vapid, sated, noxious, a delirium of boredom and high-tech genocide. Culture shock is what they experience on returning *home*. In short, their journeys are as much quests as escapes — rarely pilgrimages — no less judgments on Occidental reality than forms of dissent and assays in utopia.

Why, again, all the errancy, the long desire, the clenched teeth and gimlet eyes? Here we touch on something strange — something I want to call the traveler's "wound." Frequently this is a literal, if obscure, infection, a mysterious disease such as the Grail King's. Herman Melville suffers it in *Typee* (1846), Francis Parkman in *The Oregon Trail* (1847), Ernest Hemingway in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935). They all endure some debility, some "pathetic flaw" (Melville), a failure in their pampered immune systems. It is as if, in each traveler, two organic as well as cultural orders struggle more than meet. Thus the wound, secret agon of the blood, throbs also with infections of the colonial plague. Yet the wound is not only external, a gash in history, cicatrix of cultures. It is also in the traveler's mind, in his or her divided consciousness, alienated state.

How does this wound — an asymmetry of being — affect the wanderer in each and all? Is travel writing a search by the homeless for the route home? Are only imaginary homes such as Oz real, which Salman Rushdie says is anywhere and everywhere, except the place from which we began. I like to think of the traveler's wound as the mark of whim, Emersonian "*Whim*": "expect me not to show cause why I seek," he cries in "Self-Reliance." That is spirit in action, the gleam of light within, "more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages."

In my life, I have taken some intellectual and fewer physical risks. I have never endured ultimate tests: torture, outstaring death, loss of a beloved — yes, my first wife — the black dog of despair. I have never even seen a corpse. And as I have had no experience of the limits, I have no ultimate, not even penultimate, knowledge of myself. Perhaps that is what I thought to find in my easy journeys.

Why do you and Sally travel so much, friends ask? Oh, I have ready answers to give, give even myself. "I lecture, I go to international conferences." Yes, like the wandering scholars of the Middle Ages, like jongleurs and troubadours, I move around, without danger or squalor, pretending to serve literature. Or I say, "I go to revive my mind in historic places." What, like that dank, malodorous cave on Patmos, which I once visited because D. H. Lawrence had written in his *Apocalypse* (1931): "O lovely green dragon of the new day, the undawned day, *come, come* in touch, and release us from the horrid grip of the evil-smelling old Logos!?" Or again, I might murmur: "Well, there are moments, certain moments."

And there were, such as that early morning stroll, on a summer day, by the Sound of Arisaig, Scotland, when I walked in a soft western breeze through lush, green woods of creeping moss, larch, fir, oak, giant pines, the rustle of some unseen rivulet, somewhere off toward Drimindrach, light playing everywhere, gleaming on the water and flickering through the canopy of Druidic trees, and I thought: here everything flows and flashes and breathes, even stone breathes, and I, seemingly alien to this scene, also breathe, what can this vast, silent con-spiracy of breath mean? Then I thought: it is enough that I see it, so much living beauty; that is what the unspeakable conspiracy means. But that was only a moment — it could recur in the awesome desertscapes and mountainscapes of Uluru (Ayers Rock) or southern Utah — and it came late in my life.

I went to the antipodes also late in life. I was in my mid-sixties then, old by any reckoning except my own; that reckoning was a child's, the child within us all. I felt wholly myself, except for an arthritic hip joint, enough to impede jogging, and remind me on long walks that a body in pain aches also for the lightness, the transparency of youth.

Could age become youth in the antipodes, pain a rarer joy? All was inverted Down Under. July brought snow; drizzle fell from clear skies; swans glided in black plumage; trees shed bark instead of leaves. And whoever had seen a wallaby, wombat, dingo, platypus, kookaburra, pademelon, gecko, emu, or

bandicoot in the rightside-up world, or woken to the screech of galah, rosella, and sulphur-crested cockatoo? All was inverted in Oz, was everything possible there too? I began to read about Australia, as I had once done about America, before ever setting foot on their invented shores, and what I read helped to reinvent my life just a trifle more. But it's what you see, what you sense and feel, what seeps through the flesh, that changes your life even more. (Couldn't Emerson's shadow "giant" see?)

Uluru, the heat and flies and shimmering, dry flood, blood-red, of Australia's Red Center. Can you see it, the sheer, mad improbability of that rock, the size of a city cubed or of a smoldering asteroid upended in the earth — can you see it without sharing, at least for an instant, the aborigine's sacred awe? Without thinking, Something passed this way long ago. Without altering permanently two or three synapses, a few circuits in your brain.

Certainly, for most of us, much of the time, travel may intensify our self-concerns, the needs of our bodies, the itches of our minds. Like bedridden invalids, we feel every pain, every discomfort even, as a betrayal of the universe, absent nurse. And so the desert flies at Uluru or Giza, the crippled mendicants near the Taj Mahal, the stench of excrement along the Great Wall of China, leave on us an impression as lasting as the Seven Wonders of the World.

Still, journeys may somehow recover for us the quiddity of existence. However tawdry, gaudy, arduous, equivocal, they may suddenly pluck the nerve of our lives, suddenly dispel the amnesia and anesthesia, the complacent nihilism, of our habits. They are metaphors, displacements, portages, crossing not only cultures but realms of our being, even as they put our selves at risk. For in homelessness — in no strange land — we may at last find our ease, become at ease, in the world. And like the great contemplatives whom Evelyn Underhill has lucidly described, we may attest to a "world that is 'unwalled,'" a personality progressively emptied, unlimited.

These are friendly abstractions. But why do I personally travel? Certainly not for the lambent moment. It would be more honest to say: I don't know. It would be more accurate to admit: it is the form my impatience takes — impatience, our *only* sin, Franz Kafka says. And it would be more satisfying — aesthetically, mythically, metaphysically — to think: all my journeys recapitulate my first, out of Egypt — or is it out of the womb? — and rehearse another, yet to come. In any case, I find wise and pleasing these lines of Zbigniew Herbert about the journey we all take:

Then your native land will seem small
a cradle a boat tied to a branch with your mother's hair
when you mention its name no one at the campfire
will know which mountain it lies behind
what kind of trees it bears

So if it is to be a journey let it be long
a true journey from which you do not return.