

The Permanent Tourist:
Guidebooks in Travel and Education

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Introduction: Guidebooks in Education and Travel

About a year ago I heard a paper presented by Gary Day at the University of York on the fate of theory in higher education. He looked at the ways in which university departments had been brought within the auspices of a culture of inspection. In a world where higher education commands a fee and is thus becoming more and more commodified, there must be some means of assuring the quality of the product on offer, as there are for other kinds of product on the market ranging from telecommunications to food safety. In particular, he references Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980) and Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* (1995) as landmark moments in a drive to render the skills gleaned from English courses more quantifiable.

If a Higher Education course is a commodity in which students are investing time and money, they need to feel certain that by the end of the course they will have received the skills in which they have invested, otherwise they will select another course from the market. These guidebooks to literary and cultural theory are thus an important means of providing the students with the skills they require. They minimize the students' personal response to texts, providing instead a checklist of what various authors and critics 'do.' It is a scenario in which the reader is rendered entirely passive, as if he or she simply absorbs from the manual a basic sense of how they should approach a text if they want to give it a post-colonial, gay, or Marxist reading.

To do this is to measure English and the human sciences against the material progress of science and technology – criteria by which they will always be judged wanting since the study of English per se does not achieve material results. Instead, the trend is to generate a set of students who will at least read and think in certain routine ways, which in this case means not thinking for themselves at all, merely consuming and absorbing passively the skills which their theoretical manuals provide. The use of guidebooks in higher education in many ways thus forestalls the possibility for really creative individual work and expression, generating instead a gradually homogenised discipline, English Literature.

The production of a passive reader and routine patterns of response informs my idea of guidebooks more generally. It is in the nature of guidebooks to present stable meanings and self-contained units of information. At the same time, the construction of a guidebook means that it is not amenable to interrogation. To depend on a guidebook is not to know what questions we would need to ask in order to disavow the contents of that book. The user of the guide – whether reader or traveller – is thus in many ways a passive figure. In this paper I look both at travel guides and fictional representations of the Guide and suggest that the line dividing them might not be as clear as it seems.

Twain's Itinerary

In 1895, bankrupt following his disastrous investment in the American Publishing Company, Mark Twain embarked on a round the world lecture tour to prop up his flagging finances. The offspring of the trip was the book *Following the Equator*, first published in London in 1897. It basically is a satirical account of

travelling in British colonial possessions in Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, India and South Africa.

The longest section of this huge book is devoted to India. At one point Twain records a visit to the Indian religious city of Benares, sometimes known as Varanassi. Caught up in a dizzy swirl of activities and unable to get his bearings, he noted how difficult it was to find time to visit all of the numerous places of historical and cultural interest in a short space of time. Lest we fall into a similar trap, he proposes a neat itinerary following which pilgrims might most assiduously visit all of the city's shrines.

Item Number Six on this itinerary is *The Well of Fate*. Here, pilgrims are instructed to lean down into the well. If they cannot see their own reflection in the water, it is an omen of coming death for which the pilgrim must prepare. The itinerary continues:

Handily situated, at your very elbow, is opportunity for this. You turn and worship the image of Maha Kal, the Great Fate, and happiness in the life to come is secured. If there is breath in your body yet, you should now make an effort to get a further lease of the present life... You must get yourself carried to the well of long life (Twain 1897: 486).

At the well, prayer before a member of the priestly Brahminical class, combined with a donation will, according to Twain's itinerary, guarantee salvation. But there is more to be done on the tour of the city: item Ten on the list explains how to 'make salvation sure' by making donations at further temples, and item Twelve points out the need to 'get your redemption recorded' (Twain 1897: 491) by yet another Brahmin for yet another fee. Thus the pilgrims place themselves entirely in the hands of the Brahmins who control when, where and at what cost people must pray, thus controlling the social and financial lives of the people. Twain makes this point explicitly: the banks of the River Ganges in Varanassi are the scene of a twelve-yearly festival which is considered to be a period of 'peculiar grace' (Twain 1897: 470) when a 'greatly augmented volume of pilgrims' flock to the city. The precise timing and location of the religious activities are only released by the Brahmins at the latest possible moment, thus maintaining a dependence among the populace on the Brahmins and mystifying what could be controlled by the majority in the interest of the priestly class.

Twain's itinerary supports his desire to expose the means by which the elite class maintain a state of dependence upon them. His proposal turns out to be a deeply ironic one, allowing the pilgrim to prepare only for death, and he concedes that it is not the route which Hindu pilgrims actually follow at all:

I do not claim that the pilgrims do their acts of worship in the order and sequence above charted out in this Itinerary of mine, but I think logic suggests that they ought to do so. Instead of a helter-skelter worship, we then have a definite starting place, and a march which carries the pilgrim steadily forward by reasoned and logical progression to a definite goal (Twain 1897: 491).

Without the benefit of a logical route to follow, Twain believes the pilgrims waste valuable time in the helter-skelter of their religious devotions. The route they actually prefer to follow around the shrines on this reckoning is inefficient. But what kind of efficiency is it that enables a pilgrim to prepare only for a timely death?

There is a stark warning in Twain's reasoned order and logical progression. Whenever we follow this kind of itinerary, it provides no opportunity for arriving at any destination or conclusion other than that of its writer. Twain satirically suggests that such sequences enable us to prepare only for death. But the joke is on anyone who does not realise the extent to which received passages of guidance play a very powerful role in generating structures of behaviour and response.

Nature, logic, tradition, and religion are all entities of which Twain is deeply suspicious. 'Older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together' (Twain 1897: 480), he says of Varanasi. But the point is again an ironic one for history, tradition, logic and legend each serve in a different way to stabilise social relations, to guard against change by identifying and forestalling potential sources of individual thought, expression and activity. Pursuing the logical route around the sites of devotion does not lead to any greater emancipation from a state of subjection to the Brahminical caste than does pursuing the religious route. The Hindu pilgrims travelling around the temples and shrines of the holy city of Varanasi are equally dependent on the Brahmins for survival if they pursue the conventional route or Twain's proposed radical (but actually impotent) new route. To move beyond dependence, then, is not simply a question of choosing from pre-existing sequences as these have been formed with the interests of different minorities in mind. Moving beyond these constructs requires the pilgrims to be able to carve out a sequence of their own.

Selective Amnesia

I suggest that a selective amnesia characterises the history of reception of the work of Mark Twain. A good example is Tony Tanner's *The Reign of Wonder*, an erudite study charting the emergence of the vernacular hero as a central figure in American literature from the 'ecstatic first step' (Tanner 1965: 64) of Walt Whitman, through Twain, Stein and Hemmingway into the days of the moviegoer. The progress suggested by Tanner is entirely linear. Each generation makes a contribution to what Tanner, following Twain, calls 'a system of reduction' (Tanner 1965: 104), gradually liberating the English language from the highly-flown style of Great Britain and putting in its place an idiom more in keeping with the rhythms of American life.

According to Tanner the development occurs unilaterally not only between the generations but within the *oeuvre* of each individual writer, as if every page of literary output was furthering the development of vernacular narration. Thus he writes of the 'gradual and arduous development' (Tanner 1965: 105) that took place in Twain's travel writing throughout his career from the early *Innocents Abroad*, through *Roughing It* and up to *Following the Equator*:

Whereas in *The Innocents Abroad* the naïve Mark Twain learned to reassess the conventionally honoured but found nothing to put in its place, in *Roughing It* the naïve narrator is not only disabused of his romantic expectations but he discovers a set of positive values in the West which he set about incorporating... (Tanner 1965: 114).

Tanner sets out to demonstrate the reasoned order and logical progression leading to Twain's realisation of a perfect vernacular narration. This sequence is altogether too neat, drawing only one or two examples from books which are hundreds of pages long and probing none of the interplay between progress and nostalgia which those books express. The sequence culminates with *Huckleberry*

Finn, where Tanner detects a ‘mode of writing... that offered minimum intervention between reader and object’ (Tanner 1965: 117). This is at odds with what Twain himself knew – that no narrative can entirely prevent itself from filtering the image of what it represents. Its writer can however try to present his narrative as if it were unmediated, and this in effect is what Tanner’s (guide) book does.

The vernacular hero in American literature is the subject of an even more important writer on Twain, Lionel Trilling. His work on *Huckleberry Finn* guides us through the moments in that novel where we can detect the emergence of what Trilling calls the un-coerced self. That is, the individual who can be best relied upon to self-regulate via a presumed innate instinct for moral right. The guidebook which leads us to this conclusion also implicitly invites us to celebrate the social conditions which enable this morally right hero to prosper. It is therefore a profoundly conservative conclusion to which Trilling’s guidance points. The selective view of Mark Twain that we receive from these guidebooks thus fully ratifies a conservative cultural politics without inviting us to look elsewhere for our information.

Imperial Discourse at Work

The manuals I have looked at have been constructed in such a way as to erode the possibility of readers thinking beyond the conclusions that the writers of the manuals provide. *India: The Rough Guide* is part of a series of self-help manuals assisting independent travellers to make their way around other countries. It provides everything from accommodation ideas to bus timetables, from price codes to useful phrases in the local language.

The section about the city of Varanasi is introduced with a by-line from Mark Twain’s *Following the Equator*: ‘Older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together’ (Abraham et al 1996: 222 c.f. Twain 1897: 480). The name of the famous writer is used to sanction the authority of the guidebook itself. It is part of that aspect of a book’s construction which Gerard Genette calls the *paratext*. This includes material such as jacket blurb, chapter headings, sub-titles and so on all of which according to Graham Allen exist in order to uphold ‘the correctness of the authorial (and secondarily, of the publisher’s) point of view’ (Allen 2000: 107).

The Rough Guide uses Twain to promise its readers tradition, history and legend whereas we saw earlier that Twain could at best be described as suspicious of all three. I would suggest that there is an even better by-line from *Following the Equator* that could have carried out this work even more effectively. Twain discusses everything he considers ‘satisfyingly Oriental’ (Twain 1897: 340) and enumerates ‘ruined cities and mouldering temples, mysterious relics of the pomps of a forgotten time and a vanished race.’

Following the Equator is dripping with classic Orientalist assumptions of the late nineteenth century. The notion of empty space was an important stimulus to colonisation and it is a notion fully at work in Twain’s portrayal of a people no longer present – a vanished race. Australian independence from Britain is dismissed as ‘unwise’ (Twain 1897: 335). The Sri Lankan Capital Ceylon is celebrated for its ‘sentiment, and oriental charm’ (Twain 1897: 336) and its ‘barbaric gorgeousness’ (Twain 1897: 357). A generalised figure, Indian Woman, is assigned a metonymic function which enacts the classic Imperial discourse of identifying the East as weak,

feminine and vulnerable, waiting only for penetration by the strong, modern, male Western explorer (Twain 1897: 347).

Ruined cities and vanished races – these are the stock notions of an Imperial discourse which sets the East up as backward and primitive, past-looking and waiting for salvation and elevation to be provided by the modernising sophisticated West. In general, the linkage of American writers of this period to classic European colonial discourse remains understudied. And the guidebooks to Mark Twain are a case in point: Tanner and Trilling emphasise the individual hero with innate instinct for moral right and make no reference whatsoever to this foundational moment of U.S. cultural Imperialism.

Of course, in our day as in Twain's it is the business of the guide book to show its readers that they can see all of these things and more in Varanasi – if they follow the advice provided by the guide. Roger Chartier says of such books that they exist 'to cancel themselves out as discourse and produce practical results in behaviour recognized as being in conformity with social... norms' (Chartier 1994: 20).

Not only does the process of cancelling *The Rough Guide* out as behaviour of course mean buying it, but the further practice of following the guidance provided has the further effect of actually constituting the very social norms it purports to merely reflect. Guidebooks not only satisfy but actually create the requirements of a passive reader. So following Twain, the *Rough Guide* propounds a list of what might be considered satisfyingly Oriental, thus constituting the Orient for the Western traveller. In contrast to Twain's own proposed itinerary of Varanasi – which farcically enables the traveller to prepare only for death - the *Rough Guide* suggests

Among the most popular routes is the **Panchatirthi Yatra**, which takes in the Pancha (five) Tirthi (crossings) of Asi, Dashashwamedha, Adi Keshawa, Panchganga and finally Manikarnika... For the casual visitor, however, the easiest way to see the *ghats* is to follow a South-North sequence either by boat or on foot (Abraham et al 1996: 327).

This is precisely the kind of sequence to which Twain's own writing on Varanasi was opposed, for to adhere to it is to become entrapped within the Brahminical hierarchy which ties millions of Indians to poverty. That such a state of affairs is perpetuated by *The Rough Guide* (with its own publishers' interests at stake) is further evidenced when its authors note of Varanasi's Wisdom Well that 'only the Brahmins have access to its waters, considered to be liquid knowledge' (Abraham et al 1996: 330). Twain was constantly probing ways in which traditions, knowledge, and ritual behaviour become fixed in the interests of particular groups (though as we have seen, he was not independent of imperialist discourses himself).

The Rough Guide by contrast probes nothing. Rather than enabling its readers to think of Indian culture and history as multi-faceted and various, it actually commodifies these entities just as I suggested that literary theory has become fixed for passive consumption in a higher education sector driven by a need for accountability. In a real sense therefore the product sold by the guidebook is India itself. If we remind ourselves that the series sells manuals on hobbies, sports, music, languages as well as countries we will note even more strongly the sense in which Rough Guides Limited's practice operates to package up an entire culture and offer it for the passive consumption of the reader/ buyer. In fact what this approach provides is a case study in how cultural differences are eliminated, rather than a rigorous addressing of cultural specificity.

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How then is it possible to use a guidebook without becoming trapped within the straitened parameters by which it is defined? The Indian novelist R.K. Narayan wrote a novel entitled *The Guide* which can illuminate my idea of how pedagogical documents can function like guide manuals – to constrict and contain individual thought.

The Guide's main character Raju has been in prison for defrauding Marco, a man to whom he had previously acted as tour guide and whose wife Rosie he had stolen to help her become a dancer. After his release, Raju slowly falls into the role of a spiritual guide to the people of Malgudi. This is motivated by a sense of greed; if the people think he is holy they will pay him for his thoughts. It is the same monopolisation of the creative process I have revealed in *The Rough Guide*. When Raju realises that his veneer of spirituality has given him a real hold over the people he reflects 'self help is the best help' (Narayan 1958: 39). The point is both advocated and ironised by Narayan. The people come to the Guide for help. The help (for which he is paid) is to advise them to help themselves. Thus as they appear to help themselves they in fact help him to tighten his grip on them.

It is the same grip that he had earlier been able to tighten around Marco the tourist. For Marco arrives in Malgudi wanting to be told what there is to see there, thus placing himself entirely in the hands of his guide. Licking his lips at the imminent pay day, Raju reflects:

A man who preferred to dress like a permanent tourist was just what a guide passionately looked for all his life (Narayan 1958: 7).

The permanent tourist is like the passive reader I have identified. In the case of users of *The Rough Guide* they are literally the same person. The provider of the guidance secures his own interests by preventing any kind of thinking or questioning beyond his own agenda.

Newly arriving visitors in the fictional city of Malgudi automatically ask the question: 'Where are you going to take me first?' (Narayan 1958: 51). But Narayan's guide carefully resists answering this question until he has asked some preliminary questions of his own: how long is the visitor planning to stay; what is his budget; does he have a penchant for ancient ruins, or religious sites, or natural landscapes? That is, there are no already existing must-see sights in Malgudi, simply awaiting the arrival of the eager tourist. The essential sights worth visiting are only rendered essential by the guide's constitution of them as the principal things worth seeing. By appearing to satisfy the interest (curiosity) of the visitor, he in fact upholds his own (professional) interest.

Narayan demonstrates this via his depiction of the kind of historical, technical and scientific facts Raju chooses to pass on to the tourists. These again depend on the guide's perception of the nature of the tourist's interest:

If he was the academic type, I was careful to avoid all mention of facts and figures and to confine myself to general descriptions, letting the man himself do the talking. You can be sure he enjoyed the opportunity. On the other hand, if an innocent man happened to be at hand, I let myself go freely. I pointed out something to him as the greatest, the highest, the only one in the world. I gave statistics out of my head. I mentioned a relic as belonging to the thirteenth

century before Christ or the thirteenth century after Christ, according to the mood of the hour (Narayan 1958: 49-50).

There are no attractions waiting to be viewed which are not in some sense constituted as attractions in the guide's very process of taking somebody to see them. And having got there, there are no facts about them which exist prior to the guide's narration of them. The visitor hears what he in effect wants to hear. And in letting this happen, the guide too achieves what he wants to achieve. Self help is the best help.

Of course if what we see and our response to it are determined by what information we receive from so partial a source, these experiences become unhinged from any physical spatial location. We could be literally anywhere in the world, from a fictional Malgudi to a modern day Varanassi. But the modern day city itself is also in a sense constituted by the information which represents it. If there are no sights worth seeing or facts worth knowing anterior to the guide's constitution of them, then where we go when we are travelling becomes less important than the fact and experience of travel itself.

It's interesting then to note that this is also the case in the travel writing of Mark Twain. Varanassi in his account was as we have seen older than legend, history and tradition. The *Rough Guide* decides in advance that these form the essential character of the city and directs its users towards the means of satisfying a curiosity to view that character when visiting the city. By directing them in this way, the guidebook actually constitutes their response.

In Twain's earlier travel book *The Innocents Abroad*, the ancient city of Ephesus is also described as older than tradition itself (Twain 1869: 421). And Damascus similarly is as old as history (Twain 1869: 457). Both of these descriptors are used about Varanassi in *Following the Equator* and subsequently in the *Rough Guide* to India. The important differences between Varanassi, Ephesus and Damascus are thus collapsed in the implementation of a guidance where all three cities are constituted for the visitor out of the same basic building blocks – the promise of history and tradition in the abstract rather than concrete ascertainable facts in the specific. When this elision occurs, it could be said that the visitor to each city is visiting all of them simultaneously. He could literally be anywhere – provided there is a guide to create the experience for him. The destination of travel is less important – in the guide's terms – than the abstract experience of travel as such. Travel then, in Umberto Eco's terms, takes place only in hyper reality.

Hyper reality in many ways is the archetypal domain of postmodern living, or rather, of the incommensurability of theoretical knowledge with lived experience. The postmodern world is one in which we are constantly assailed by information from all sides, information endlessly played and replayed, defined and redefined, so that the distinction between original experience and secondary representation becomes ever harder to maintain. The paradigm underpinning this problem in postmodern cultures is that of the simulacrum: in a world where it has all been said and done – or perhaps more importantly, done and then said – before, the difficulty of escaping from the always already repeated becomes seemingly enormous, leaving us trapped within so much postmodern kitsch.

Thus it might be that what we really want to find when we are travelling is something always already lost because always already experienced, in another place at another time. But if the dubious activities of the guide render all times and places experientially congruent with each other, then this desire for what has already been lost becomes cathected as what we are already experiencing. The desire for what is

lost, that is, becomes both a desire for what has already happened and for what continues to happen. Desire, in postmodern vocabulary, becomes a nostalgia for the present (Jameson 1989: passim). Narayan's guide expresses this as follows:

Later in life, I found that everyone who saw an interesting spot always regretted that he hadn't come with his wife or daughter, and spoke as if he had cheated someone out of a nice thing in life. Later, when I had become a full-blown tourist guide, I often succeeded in inducing a sort of melancholia in my customer by remarking, "This is something that should be enjoyed by the whole family," and the man would swear that he would be back with his entire brood in the coming season (Narayan 1958: 49).

Nostalgia for the present is defined then as precisely that state in which distinguishing between original experience and secondary representation becomes impossible. The signals by which we might make such a distinction become overloaded and blocked in a world laden with copy after copy after copy. This was the problem Twain recorded in his *Innocents Abroad*. Wherever you go, the guides always show you the same things – monuments, relics, works by masters (Twain 1869: 287) – so that you see nothing else and in effect see nothing at all.

But of course the tourist always commands more agency than he realises in these situations, if only because travel is never only about seeing *things* just as higher education is never only about producing homogenised results. These experiences also are about expression, exploration and the apprehension of growth and change. The premise of the guidebook in education is that there is some answer, some skill, neutrally waiting to be acquired passively. The premise of the guide at a tourist site is similarly that we are to be taken to view something out there, which is simply awaiting our arrival. But if we refuse these premises, we in fact refuse the very logic of the guide.

Twain demonstrates this very clearly in *The Innocents Abroad*. He asks his guide in Italy a set of ridiculous questions and amuses himself at the guide's expense, to the extent that the guide 'grows so tired of that unceasing question... that he dreads to show us anything at all' (Twain 1869: 295). By refusing to play the game of passive tourist versus active guide, Twain silences the exclusivist drone of the guide and allows other sources of information to flow.

Moreover he refuses to kit himself up in the excessive means recommended by a guide, expressing disdain for the 'fantastic mob of green –spectacled Yanks, with their flapping elbows and bobbing umbrellas' (Twain 1869: 467) who are his travelling companions. We might remember here that Narayan's permanent tourist Marco was in the guide's words a man who *prefers* to dress like a permanent tourist. There is then a matter of agency, a matter of real choice. What Twain wanted more than anything else was to go somewhere and find that no previous writer had been there (Twain 1869: 514). For then there is no prior guidebook directing our experience and constituting our response and only then can we refuse the dual role of passive reader and permanent tourist.

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