

Seeing China: Travel Writing and the Prat(t)falls of Literary Theorists

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*Let Observation, with extensive view,
Survey mankind, from China to Peru. . .*

Samuel Johnson, “The Vanity of Human Wishes”

With characteristic certitude, Samuel Johnson assures us that human nature—from China to Peru, from Imperial Rome to Augustan England—bears a fundamental sameness. After all, Johnson’s poem deals with the vanity of *human* wishes, whether they are the futile dreams of lasting power and glory of ancient Roman or contemporary British worthies, and such vain wishes are certain to be found among the Incas and Chinese, as well. The method of perceiving this shared human quality is made so repetitively clear in the opening lines that they have lent themselves to parody: *Let observation, with extensive observation, observe extensively.*

Despite Johnson’s conviction that mankind shares perceptible commonalities, for years after Mao came to power it was not possible to observe much at all about China, so when Simon Leys wrote *Chinese Shadows* (1974), he had to acknowledge that he had only observed the Cultural Revolution “from beginning to end from the vantage point of Hong Kong” (ix). Even when he is

able to manage a six-month stay in 1972, he finds the restrictions onerous. Prevented from any non-official human contact, Leys finds himself “cut off from the only important reality—the daily life of the Chinese people,” and the official Chinese “realities” are nothing more than a “shadow play produced... by Maoist authorities” (xiv).

As Leys sees it, the nightmare confronting Maoist bureaucrats is that foreigners might “make some spontaneous and unsupervised contact with the people” (199). Walls are erected between people, moats dug to separate them: Chinese are not allowed into hotels for foreigners, and foreigners are not allowed to travel by rail with Chinese (20-22). In light of these restrictions, *any* contacts and insights are to be valued, even as they are questioned. Even when restricted to first class, Leys is occasionally able to talk to train personnel, who lack the usual inhibition about chatting with a foreigner, but even then Leys is forced to wonder if “they offered me the revelation (or illusion) of a Chinese humanity that had kept itself intact” (50-51).

Leys knows that it is dangerous to generalize from isolated incidents (43), but the severe restrictions on travellers bring any human contact into sharp relief. In Loyang, Leys manages to slip away from his guide and walk about freely for a time, but he soon attracts a large crowd and policemen (69-70). While in Anyang, he is able to capture a “fleeting vision” of an old-style funeral procession, which bears out for him the unpleasant fact that most of China is different from the part foreigners are allowed to visit (78). There are so many “strange restrictions” regarding exhibits and cultural displays that Leys comes to believe they are actually “prophylactic measures to isolate the Chinese from their own

culture” (83, 94), leading him to declare that the cultural policy of Maoism is “to destroy critical intelligence” (129).

When museums falsify, eliminate, and fabricate (80), when the scars of the Cultural Revolution can go unnoticed by superficial observation (84), when political propaganda denies historical truths (135), and when even everything about college lectures is “shrouded in fog” (146), it is hard to see anything clearly. Leys acknowledges that he is all too often forced to rely on “purely visual, intuitive, superficial impressions” (159), but he is trying his best to perceive a reality that is obscured in various official ways. Leys quotes a frustrated Russian attaché, who harangues him: “Do not think that you will ever understand the Chinese! Do not believe that you will ever get to know them! The Chinese are unknowable, the Chinese cannot be understood!” (181). Neither Leys nor Samuel Johnson would agree with this statement, but in 1972 it was practically impossible, in the face of all the obstacles and despite the best intentions, to “see” much of China. Leys is only granted an absolute clarity of vision in crossing the Yangtze, when he leaves the “austere world of northern China” and enters the “mellow softness” of the South (87).

Nearly a decade later, Vikram Seth produced his highly praised travel book, *From Heaven Lake* (1983), which won the Thomas Cook Travel Award. Seth, at the time a graduate student in economics at Stanford University, was spending two years at Nanjing University doing research. During his time there, Seth participated in a university-sponsored tour to Turfan in the northwest desert province of Xinjiang, but most of the book is

about his individual journey, by train and hitching rides with truck drivers, to Tibet. By nature, Seth is a wanderer who chafes at the restrictions of the organized tour. Although the restrictions are no longer as severe as those that frustrated Simon Leys, the movement of foreigners in China is still tightly controlled, with police-approved travel passes required for every destination (5). Just as a decade before, “officialdom is disturbed by too much contact between Chinese and non-Chinese” (9).

Fortunately, Seth has some distinct advantages that help him evade many restrictions. Slight of build, dark-haired, and fluent in Chinese, Seth is able to blend in, particularly when dressed in the blue trousers, jacket, and cap of an ordinary Chinese. In fact, Seth sometimes has to resort to the ploys of ostentatiously displaying his fancy digital watch and lapsing into pidgin Chinese to indicate his foreignness (34, 82-83). Seth also benefits from his engaging personality, and he gains the unexpected permission to travel to Lhasa largely because of a friendly conversation about Indian movies with the young officer who stamps his pass (11-14).

Seth makes a superb travel writer. Although still a graduate student, Seth was already a published poet (*Mappings*, 1981), and his multicultural background, language ability, receptive open-mindedness, critical self-awareness, and poetic sensitivity, combined with his extraordinary capacity for empathy, enable him to see things from multiple perspectives, and it is the fortunate reader who benefits from the resultant perceptions. To take just one example, Seth makes perceptive use of his chance encounters along the way, and he learns increasingly more about the ruinous effects and disastrous human cost of the Cultural Revolution, a topic still

officially obscured and ordinarily avoided, from an old Uighur man in the Turfan market (17-18), a young man at the Grand Mosque in Xian (30-32), and an old man with a donkey-cart near Dunhuang (61-62).

In another instance, a painful insight arises out of an initial misperception. When Seth first meets Norbu's family in a park in Lhasa, they seem to be a happy family, but Seth is profoundly shaken by what he learns of all the family suffered during the Cultural Revolution and the extent to which they are still suffering (141-146). The enlightened but subdued Seth has had his perception abruptly altered, and as he leaves Norbu's house, things have a different appearance: the elegantly sloping roofs of the Jorkhan temple are "no longer gold but black against the early night sky," and the child's paper kite, "a prisoner of string and wind, flying now in one direction, now in another, with no appraisable trend or endeavor" (146), is no longer an image of bright and lively childhood, for to the sadder but wiser Seth its erratic motion now symbolizes the capricious and deadly political whims that have shattered Norbu's family.

Happily, Seth's perceptions expand from this low point to include epiphanies and visionary insights. While walking in the mountains near the border where he will cross into Nepal, Seth becomes transfixed by the beauty of eight waterfalls, and the sight leads to a Wordsworthian vision of the unity of all things (164-166). Not long afterwards, in Kathmandu, the sound of a fluteseller's flute evokes in Seth a strong sense of "the commonalty of all mankind" (176). Throughout his travels in China, Seth has witnessed the same thing: "Time and again, with no thought

other than kindness, people have helped me along in this journey” (139). In the final pages of his inspiring book, Seth moves from Wordsworth’s visionary intensity to Johnson’s universality, for it is the instinctive kindness or goodwill that he has observed that allows Seth to hope that mankind may yet discover, embrace, and celebrate its commonalty. It is the book’s achievement that we can share and benefit from Seth’s perceptive observations.

The late 1980s treated us to three splendid books on China, two by well-known, highly praised authors, Colin Thubron’s *Behind the Wall* (1987) and Paul Theroux’s *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1988), and the third by a gifted young writer, William Dalrymple’s *In Xanadu* (1989). Thubron’s *Behind the Wall* is a wonderfully entertaining book, rich in its insights, but to a large extent it is also a catalog of the frustrations and perplexities felt by the writer in a series of baffling encounters. The opening up of China to travellers has stirred Thubron, but he regards the country as “a luminous puzzle” (2), and from the first he is gripped by the—admittedly foolish—suspicion that everyone is withholding secrets, so he feels perhaps it is true that “the Chinese were unknowable” (6).

Thubron is an intelligent, intrepid traveller, with seven previous travel books to his credit, and, as his title implies, he would like to see behind the wall of obfuscation, but he runs into numerous and varied barriers to understanding: the Forbidden City is characterized by “ever more intense barriers and deeper privacies” (29); a Communist Party secretary insists that the “feudal . . . irrational state of mind” of many Chinese is “inexplicable” to foreigners (41); even seen as “the materialization of a profound

psychological fear,” the Great Wall remains “touched with enigma” (76); it seems “foolish... to look for something more” than cigarette stubs at the ruined tomb of Confucius (81); and in narrow, ancient streets, it is possible to mistake cramped living-rooms for shops (176).

Although his book reveals a great deal about China, Thubron never poses as an expert. Indeed, he often finds himself in the same situation as when he visited the Wei shrines at Luoyang: “I studied them in amazement and ignorance” (255). In an earlier experience, the setting mirrors this mental uncertainty. When Thubron climbs Mt. Emei, the highest sacred mountain, he does not gain a Wordsworthian vision or any poetic insight, for the crest is “entombed in whiteness” (233), and the “luminous brilliance” is only a “blinding abstraction” (234). The book’s final haunting image becomes symbolic of Thubron’s quest. In the barrenness of the Gobi, the desert is overwhelming the remnants of the Wall, and, in the fading light, Thubron can find “no sign where the Wall went” (302). The paradox is that we gain so much from Thubron’s not-always-thwarted efforts to come to terms with China. In confronting so many barriers to understanding, Thubron furnishes forth insights aplenty.

Paul Theroux was an established writer when he wrote *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1998), his book about travelling through China by train. He had published novels (*Saint Jack*, *The Family Arsenal*) and short stories (*The Consul’s File*), but his first popular success was his first travel book, *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), which sparked a travel writing boom in America. It was followed four years later by *The Old Patagonia Express* (1979), Theroux’s

account of his train trip through South America. China—“more like a whole world than a mere country”—would be a challenge (1), but since the country had been closed to outsiders for so long, everything would seem fresh, presenting opportunities for “discoveries and satisfactions” (3, 7).

Theroux is conscious that “travel writing is a minor form of autobiography” (68), so a travel book will actually reveal more about the traveller than it does about the country (390). In trying to get the measure of a place whose bigness is baffling, Theroux knows he will need luck “in trying to uncover the truth” (238), and his method when faced with bafflement is to “just write it down” and make up his mind afterwards (142-143). Preconceptions are a particular problem, Theroux thinks, because “China exists so distinctly in people’s minds that it is hard to shake that fantasy loose and see the real thing” (146).

Theroux confronts any traveller’s problem of perspective—from his arriving train, Peking seems impressive, “a city on the rise,” but a closer look while walking around them reveals the new tenements as appearing “very shaky” (80)—and he knows it is wrong to see anything while in a bad mood: “you begin to blame the country for your mood and to draw the wrong conclusions” (265). Theroux may be deceived by a simple city map, but “half-obliterated slogans” make it clear “that people frankly hated these painted mottos from the Cultural Revolution” (53). In a vast factory, an observer must “look at the locomotive works very hard to see that it is an assembly line and not pandemonium” (56). So much appears contradictory or illusory, especially with regard to political propaganda, that Theroux soon formulates a general rule

about China: “you could regard nothing as true until it had been denied. Anything officially denied was probably a fact” (115).

It comes as something of a surprise when Theroux refers to *Chinese Shadows* as Simon Leys’ “gloomy and scolding account” of his visit to China (261), for Theroux’s own travel books are characterized by the writer’s distinctly dyspeptic personality, which has probably contributed to their popularity, since the writer is seemingly at pains not to sugar-coat anything. *Riding the Iron Rooster* is filled with acerbic observations. Take, for instance, the cities he visits: “The words *a Chinese city* had acquired a peculiar horror for me, like *Russian toilet*, or *Turkish prison*, or *journalist’s ethics*” (275). Accordingly, Hami is defaced (175), there is nothing good about Urumchi (183), Chengdu is “oversized and charmless” (218), and Dalian looks like decaying South Boston (329). Xiamen, in contrast, is “practical and pretty,” and Theroux seems nearly miffed that it is “almost impossible to find fault with Xiamen” (374).

A slow train makes it possible for Theroux “to comprehend the changes in the landscape” (176), and he later expands on this virtue of travelling by train: “It allowed one to make visual connections in a place that was otherwise full of shocks and bafflements. Every other mode of travel made the country seem incomprehensible” (213). Nevertheless, Theroux can be quite harsh when describing conditions on Chinese trains, which “could be bad” (194). For the Chinese, it appears, a journey by train is “a great sluttish pleasure” (127), as they like sitting in their underwear, are “energetic litterers,” and are “hellish in toilets” (200). For Theroux, a noisy train, with its constant, blared loudspeaker announcements and shouted conversations, could be “a strange experience for

anyone used to silence and privacy” (279). He is also alarmed at the extent to which the available space is quickly befouled, and he uses much of one paragraph to list the garbage, from duck bones to two used diapers, that overwhelms one family’s table (348).

Theroux’s final train, to Tibet, is “a horrible train,” but he also has a strong feeling that a traveller’s axiom—“that the worst trains take you through magical places” (407)—will prove true. And so it does. Although the train passes through the roughest land he has seen in China, Theroux finds the scenery “lovely” (408-409), and his glimpse of a “steam locomotive plowing through a dazzling snowfield” is “one of the loveliest things” he sees in China (415). On the Tibetan Plateau, Theroux encounters a world he “had never seen before—of emptiness and wind-scoured rocks and dense light” (421).

Theroux is cheered by the sight of colorful prayer flags (431), and after handing out banned pictures of the Dalai Lama, which make the Tibetans happy, he feels happier than at any time on his trip (435). His first view of the Potala brings another burst of joy—“I had never felt happier, rolling into a town” (437)—and Theroux almost immediately feels a sense of belonging: “Lhasa was the one place in China I eagerly entered, and enjoyed being in, and was reluctant to leave” (439). He even gets used to the smells, if not to the huge, fierce mastiff dogs (428, 448). The Tibetans may seem “a bit savage and unpredictable” to the Chinese, but Theroux is fascinated “to see a place for which the Chinese had no solution,” for “Tibet seemed too vast and inaccessible and strange for anyone to possess it” (440). By now, Theroux knows that the Chinese are *not* inscrutable, but in Tibet he can see them as insensitive

evangelizers who make mistakes (446). Much earlier in his book, Theroux had wondered if it were possible to shake loose from the fantasies about China and see the real thing (146). Now, at the end, when the trip has stopped being a trip and become another part of his life (451), Theroux provides us with his answer: “You have to see Tibet to understand China” (449).

The neophyte among these three was William Dalrymple. Although he is now an acclaimed writer (*City of Djinnns, From the Holy Mountain*), at the time he was still a history student at Cambridge University, who, with the audacity and enthusiasm of youth, set out to retrace Marco Polo’s journey to Xanadu, Kubla Khan’s summer palace. Dalrymple’s arduous but successful quest led to his highly praised bestseller, *In Xanadu* (1989), a double accomplishment that was achieved, as Christopher Lockwood dryly noted in the *Daily Telegraph*, “at the intensely irritating age of twenty-two.”

The Khan had asked for a sacred Christian relic, some oil from the lamps in the Holy Sepulchre, and that is why Dalrymple sets out from Jerusalem. He visits the Holy Sepulchre early one morning to obtain a sample of the oil, and the result is a hilarious encounter with Brother Fabian, the Irish Franciscan who is in charge of filling the lamps:

Motioning that I should pass the watering can up to him, the friar arched over the lamps and very carefully poured oil from the can into three of them. As he did so, each one guttered.

“I thought these lamps were miraculous. They’re supposed to be eternal flames.”

“That’s what they say,” said Brother Fabian, now struggling with the wick of one of the lamps. “But you try and change the oil without them going out. Take it from me. It’s absolutely impossible. Damn it! This wick’s finished. Pass me up the string.”

He pointed to the tray of surgical instruments. I found a ball of string and passed it to him.

“So there is nothing miraculous about these lamps?”

“Nothing at all. Pass the scissors.”

“What about the oil itself? Is it chrism? Olive oil from the Mount of Olives?”

“No, it’s ordinary sunflower oil. Comes from a box in the sacristy.” (5)

In addition to furnishing an amusing beginning, the incident in the Holy Sepulchre also serves as a perfect exemplum of the perils facing a travel writer. After all, it is very difficult to winnow the wheat from the obscuring chaff when established legend, published texts, official propaganda, and local prejudice all strive to cloak the truth and hide or ignore the facts. A lot of the entertainment—as well as enlightenment—of his book comes from Dalrymple having his expectations overturned, as miraculous account yields to mundane reality, authoritative text is contradicted by observed fact, and dream gives way to the report of experience: at a sumptuous Arab meal, Dalrymple’s momentary fantasy of being an “eighteenth-century gentleman on a grand tour” is dispelled when

a radio cassette recorder is fetched (39-40); among the ruins on the hilltop of Sis, Dalrymple's lyrical notion that he might be the first person to have seen the view for hundreds of years is rudely pierced by his travelling companion: "'Balls,' said Laura. 'People come up here all the time'" (74-75); he is told all the Greeks and Armenians had 'left' the Turkish village of Sivas, but he knows "they had all been slaughtered during the 1917 massacres" (92); the arid, desolate Iranian flatland is not "the romantic desert of Burton or Lawrence" (134); when he finally gets to China, he expects the Silk Road town of Tashkurgan to be an exciting place, but it is just a single street, "neither beautiful nor exotic" (217-218); he has read in text books that "hemp is cultivated in China exclusively for its rope-making quality," but he realizes it is "nonsense" when he is riding among "a busload of stoned Uigurs" (271).

Who says you can trust the locals for honest assessment? In northern Pakistan, Dalrymple is frantically warned about the Gujars: "'Oh sahib, sahib, these people are wicked mens... Do not cross the river, sahib. It is not safe. These Gujar fellows are robbers and murderers.'" Dalrymple ignores the warning because he has heard the like so often—the next town is "always full of deviants and perverts, mother-rapers, father-slayers and worse" (205)—and with this observation, Dalrymple confirms Nigel Barley's generalization: "It is one of the more depressing discoveries of the anthropologist that almost all peoples loathe, fear and despise the people next door" (*A Plague of Caterpillars*, 72).

Like Theroux, Dalrymple can express blunt opinions—Latika, in Syria, "is a filthy hole" (29), the Pathan tribesmen in Mansehra are "frightening" (191)—and when he is frustrated and depressed

in Tashkurgan, the town seems “ugly and cold,” the people are “gawping morons,” and “the whole business of travelling seems utterly futile” (220). Having entered China without official approval and the required travel passes, Dalrymple is forced to sneak aboard buses (269) and hitch rides with army trucks (254), cattle trucks (259), and coal trucks (259, 272). After two exhausting days riding on top of a heap of coal, Dalrymple takes a room in Charchalik. Soon after, the Public Security guards arrive (274).

Instead of being sent back, he is put on a train to Peking, and his recent mode of travel has altered his perspective: instead of the reported discomfort, he now finds the third class carriage a source of “pure luxury” (279). His response to the capital is similar: whereas it might appear dull when arriving from New York or Tokyo, it is “stunningly sophisticated” when coming out of the Taklimakan desert (284). The gardens in Chengde, with their unexpected beauty, make some things clear and others harder to understand. In Dalrymple’s eyes, the gardens have “retained some glimpse of the fragile elegance and dignity of Imperial China” (293), but that makes it even harder to understand the iconoclastic destruction of the Cultural Revolution.

When the truck is on a gravel track in the desert and Dalrymple is on top of a dirty, uncomfortable pile of coal, it is hard for him to believe that he is travelling the famous Silk Road (259-260), but he also knows the creative power of the imagination, for in his mind’s eye, he always sees Lahore at twilight, an act of creation that evokes sights, sounds, and smells (183). At the end of his quest, he must again make use of this mental faculty. In

Duolon, Dalrymple is first locked in a room by Mongolian security officers, then bundled into a Jeep with a Communist Party official (296-297). At first he thinks he is being deported, but they are soon driving across heathland, and Dalrymple catches sight of “a vast rampart” as they cross the river Alph. There is little to see—“Our vision of Xanadu was nearer the heath scene in *Lear* than the exotic pleasure garden described by Polo” (298)—except for shattered foundations and pottery shards, but Dalrymple can imagine what was there 700 years ago, so he climbs what he believes was the ramp leading to the throne of Khan, and there he performs an act of homage: he kneels, pours out the oil he has carried from Jerusalem in a phial, and then recites the beginning of Coleridge’s “Kubla Kahn,” another imaginative—and lasting—recreation of Xanadu (298-300).

At the same time travel writing was becoming one of the most dynamic and popular genres, literature departments were splintering from the impact of what Valentine Cunningham has termed a “torrent of literary theorizing” (*Reading After Theory*, 3). Prominent among the new approaches to literature was post-colonialism, “those angered investigations into imperialism,” to again quote Cunningham (24), and the post-colonialists quickly took critical aim at travel writing, as is amply evidenced by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). For Pratt, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing is nothing but colonialist discourse (53) and imperial “encodings” (91), for those writers were unquestionably thoroughly conditioned by an imperialist ideology (127).

Post-colonial travel writers are no better, in Pratt's view, because they "claim authoritativeness for their vision." Their impulse is to "condemn" and "trivialize" and "dissociate themselves utterly" from what they see (217). Pratt condemns Paul Theroux for exemplifying "a discourse of negation, domination, devaluation, and fear" (219), and for being "oblivious to limitations on [his] perceptual capacities" (220). This last claim is patently untrue, so there is some unintended humor in Pratt's dismay over her students' response in a course on travel writing: "Theroux's *Old Patagonia Express* neutralized weeks of carefully nurtured critical reading" (220). Trapped in her narrow theoretical bias, Pratt cannot appreciate that Theroux's book, as she acknowledges, has fired the imaginations of her students; instead, she is forced to lament that they are being carried away by "the ideological project of third worldism and white supremacy" (220).

In their demeaningly titled *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998), Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan extend Pratt's theory-bound assault on travel writing, even going so far as to adopt a masochistic form of political correctness that considers *all* Western discourse dealing with the East and other cultures to be necessarily and inherently an imposed perspective that distorts what it purports to report. In their narrow view, no traveller can be perceptive or receptive, for any writer is shackled and blinded by cultural biases. Well, any *white* British or American travel writer, at any rate, for Holland and Huggan admit that, despite having the genre of travel writing against them, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Pico Iyer are among the few writers who are seeking "different ways of seeing

the world that combat centuries of European prejudice” (65), thus making their argument racist as well as reductive.

Would anyone accept such blinkered nonsense if the tables were turned? Would anyone venture to argue that Kazuo Ishiguro was incapable of realistically depicting the life of quiet desperation of an English butler (*The Remains of the Day*), that Vikram Seth could not possibly write convincingly and sympathetically about American yuppies (*The Golden Gate*) or an English string quartet (*An Equal Music*), or that Salman Rushdie could not produce a sensitive and insightful report on conditions in revolutionary Nicaragua (*The Jaguar Smile*)? Or that Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility*, Mira Nair’s *Vanity Fair*, and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* are fatally flawed due to the director’s inescapable cultural blindness? We need to recall, as Paul Fussell reminds us, that the fruits of travel “were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of the judgment,” and that the travel book could be considered “as a record of an inquiry and a report of the effect of the inquiry on the mind and imagination of the traveler” (*Abroad* [1980], 39). Likewise, the point Alain de Botton repeatedly makes throughout *The Art of Travel* (2002) is that travel can engender perception and understanding: “Journeys are the midwives of thought” (54). We value artists and writers for their heightened powers of perception. In a sense, poets and painters teach us how to see, and it is thanks to their superior sensitivity that observed objects, individuals, and situations reveal what de Botton terms their “latent layers of value” (247).

Such self-inflicted wounds are seldom pretty, and the myopic approach to travel writing by some post-colonial theorists becomes

even more lamentable when one is aware that scientists and historians have been persuasively pointing out the need for and value of narrative in their disciplines. Stephen Jay Gould, in *An Urchin in the Storm* (1987), maintains that in order to “break down this final barrier between science and its public, scientists must present themselves as well as their work,” that they must “speak honestly about their own lives and dreams,” and Gould praises Freeman Dyson’s *Disturbing the Universe* (1979) for its “unflinching honesty in recollection” (199-201). In *The Landscape of History* (2002), John Lewis Gaddis is certain “that we should gain a new appreciation of narrative as a more sophisticated research tool than most social scientists—indeed than most historians—have yet realized” (81). After all, even scientists are now discovering the narrative “to be one of the most sophisticated of all methods of inquiry” (88). Since narrative is a “form of representation,” it can provide the different “angles of vision” that lead to more acute perception (105, 128), and Gaddis’s final claim for history as a discipline also holds true for travel writing, both of which can be “the means by which a culture sees beyond the limit of its own senses” (149).

It is frustrating and not a little embarrassing to see an approach to literature become so reductive and limiting. As Cunningham notes, theory can and does “open textual doors” (27), but when theory lapses into dogma, it corrupts (92), and in literary hands theory all too often becomes reductive (124), leading to its “general habit of binding and bounding” (139). For Cunningham, the best kind of reading is “a complex...engagement with the text” (147), and it might be said of travel writing that the

best kind of text is a complex engagement with the journey. Just as a literary text can furnish “instructive encounters” (150)—the reader learns through the experience of seeing a character learn—so too does travel writing, although in this case the “character” is the persona of the traveller/writer. For both traveller and reader it is a “process of discovery, of finding, of seeing clearly what [is] there” (151).

Of course, *seeing clearly* is the point (or the problem), and in travel writing so much depends upon the traveller’s persona and perspectives. Recently, Alexandra Horowitz has presented charmingly persuasive evidence that the same familiar city blocks can be seen very differently when you attempt to perceive them through the eyes of your dog, your toddler, a geologist, a naturalist, or an artist, among others (*On Looking*, 2013). The literary world is—or should be—well aware of the potency of transforming vision, as William Blake’s *Mental Traveller* cautions us to be wary of what we perceive, “For the eye altering alters all,” and Wallace Stevens’ *Man with the Blue Guitar* declares that “‘Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar.’” Not surprisingly, the best travel writers are well aware of their limitations—their lack of knowledge, their biases, their cultural baggage—but they do not try to hide or ignore them. In fact, they often go on at length about them, which contributes to the reader’s perceptions. Fortunately, the proof is in the product, and travel writing has proven to be a very rich pudding indeed!

In *Country Driving* (2010), his most recent but in some respects most pedestrian book on China, Peter Hessler gives repeated

examples of a writer trying to make sense in situations that present constant frustrations. Setting out to drive across China, following the Great Wall, Hessler often finds himself “Sinomapped” onto dead ends, washouts, and “grass tracks that led nowhere” (46) because the official Sinomaps are not to scale and most roads are unlabeled. Hessler has learned to interpret the different honks he hears while driving (31), but in China “you constantly discover something new, and revelations occur on a daily basis” (47). The rapid pace of change in the country has also made it difficult for the Chinese: “There was always some new situation to figure out, and it was hard for people to get their bearings” (56). Even the Great Wall has a meaning so fluid and shifting that it cannot be used to explain China (112-116).

In an isolated village, Hessler cannot fully understand the situation involving a mentally disabled man—“I often felt like that in China; the place had a way of making me feel slow-witted” (155)—but he recognizes that smoking can serve as a kind of semaphore: “in a world where much is left unsaid, every gesture with a cigarette means something” (232). On the other hand, the wild contradictions in the decor of a family home—a bottled pig fetus floating near the Buddhist shrine—leave him feeling perplexed: “How could anybody hope to make sense of this world?” (240). When he visits a bra ring factory, he finds that the colored bra straps can be another kind of semaphore (348), and he meets Xiao Long, the factory chemist, who sees the world “through a tight network of straps and rings” (351), which serves to reinforce the lesson he has learned earlier: “Everything depends on perspective” (314).

Hessler had recorded the complex process of trying to understand a radically different culture and society in his first book, *River Town* (2001). A Princeton graduate, Hessler was a Peace Corps volunteer who was sent to teach English in a Chinese college in Fuling, a town on the Yangtze River in Sichuan province. From the first, he recognizes that there is more behind the college routines than he had imagined (16) and that his students, despite their shyness, are not simple young people, for appearances can be deceptive (22), and there can be more to one of their essays than at first meets the eye (25). In pondering how to make sense of it all (38), Hessler deliberately varies his perspective. From a nearby mountain, he gains perspective on Fuling's size (55), but the downtown that looks good from his balcony is dirty and noisy and does not look so good once he gets there (62). Acting a scene from *Hamlet* in class transforms his students, allowing them to express emotions rarely shown in Chinese society (47-48), and as Hessler continues to study Chinese, things become clearer. At first, when he is able to recognize only a few characters, propaganda signs are unintelligible except for a single repeated word (59). The campus sign begins to change when he can read two more characters (66), then others become more familiar (72-73), but when the sign finally becomes completely intelligible, marking his progress in the language, he gains no real sense of achievement because the slogan is just trite propaganda (78).

Always trying to figure things out and always aware of his perspective as a foreigner, Hessler is able to sharpen his perception. He is able to see that the Chinese smile often masks deeper feelings

(131) and that the Chinese are happy when foreigners say they don't understand China (186). He can also perceive darker truths—that the Chinese have “strong prejudices about people from other parts of the country” (195), and that their strong sense of cultural identity makes it hard for them to consider “a non-Chinese point of view” (212). Nevertheless, near the end of his stint Hessler feels he has changed, become a new person, and is no longer an outsider (233-238). His father's visit is a revelation because it makes him see how much he has learned and forgotten, for he realizes that he no longer sees Fuling “with a true outsider's eye” (328-329). By now, college life seems comfortable, and his students have become “much fuller figures” in his eyes (342).

Hessler ends his impressive book with a dramatic incident that furnishes a painful lesson. Trying to capture what they want to remember about Fuling on a video, Hessler is filming Adam, another Peace Corps teacher, in the center of a crowd when suddenly a man pushes Hessler, blocks the viewfinder, and angrily shouts that they cannot film there. The crowd grows, becoming hostile, and Hessler realizes that they are in trouble and have to flee. Later, compulsively watching and re-watching the video, Hessler is pained to see their mistakes so clearly revealed—filming in a part of town they did not know well, Adam's show of disrespect in tossing a bun across the street, his own anger and strong language in confronting the man who pushed him—but even the camera cannot capture the moment the crowd became a threatening mob (380-385). Watching the tape repeatedly, Hessler is forced to face a blunt truth about the frightening experience: “after two years we were still *waiguoren* [foreigners], both in the

way we acted and in the way people saw us” (386). This truth is also unfair, however, for Hessler has also realized that simplicity is a mirage when dealing with the complex and uncertain, as “so many things in Fuling turned out” to be. Hessler uses a simile in an attempt to express the difficulty of trying to see beyond the surface—“It was like looking at a blank meaningless smile and suddenly recognizing a lifetime of sadness concentrated in the corner” (395-396)—but Hessler “had tried to learn as much as possible about the city and its people” (396), and that is all we can reasonably ask of a travel writer.

A travel book is a hybrid, a combination of the romance (quest) and confession (autobiography) genres, but the most engaging travel books are those in which the writer uses a correlative of his quest for knowledge and experience to give a firmer structure and greater depth to his work. In Simon Winchester’s case (*The River at the Centre of the World*, 1996), it is the Yangtze, the mighty river that both separates and unites China, and which is thus “the symbolic heart of the country” (13). Moreover, Winchester has been inspired by his viewing of Wang Hui’s 53-foot-long scroll painting of the river’s course, which was painted in 1660 (18-19). Facing the problem of how to write about the Yangtze, Winchester realizes that he can accomplish a double journey, for travelling up the Yangtze into the Chinese heartland will also be “an excursion through Chinese history” (23). The Yangtze will serve as his “gateway into the mysterious heart” of China (52).

Using the river as a synecdoche for the country also reinforces the hidden-vs.-revealed motif that predominates in travel writing,

particularly since at the very beginning of his journey Winchester is unable to make out the mouth of the mighty Yangtze. In fact, approaching from the sea, he cannot even see China: “Everything was a featureless grey glare, stripped of any points of reference” (35). Unlike Hessler with his faulty Sinomaps, Winchester is armed with US Defense Agency maps, but their “terrifying degree of accuracy” (30) can lead to him being thought a spy (32). Captain Zhu of the inspection cruiser is suspicious of Winchester for being so curious, but he thinks all foreigners “are wanting to know too many things about China” (41). But what Winchester thinks he knows can be overturned by experience. Winchester is convinced that greedy fishermen have led to the near extinction of the once revered Yangtze dolphin, but then he meets a fisherman who explains the dire situation they faced—“We had to eat. We thought we had no choice. It was the dolphins, or it was our children. Which would you choose?”—and Winchester is humbled into the realization “that judgments about China should not be lightly made” (102-104).

Winchester’s closest human contact is with Lily, the English name of the tall, self-confident young Chinese woman he has chosen as his travelling companion to help with any official obstructions (26-29), and it is through her that Winchester is brought face-to-face with Chinese prejudices. Lily is proud of Shanghai’s garish new tower: “It says to me that we Chinese... are running the place... You foreign people are on the outside. At long last. And that is as it should be” (89). According to Lily, there is no homosexuality in China “except for some ill people” (146), she does not like Wuhan or the inhabitants—“a very dirty place,

very bad people” (202)—and she sees the Tibetans as “primitive innocents” (323). On the other hand, after a fight in front of a taxi driver that shames Lily and leaves her sobbing, she puts him in his place: “You [Western people] are so damned unsubtle, so totally unaware of how we feel” (312), and the chastened Winchester resolves to try to be more aware of the feelings of those he meets.

The river remains the main character, and just as some topics, such as sex or the Cultural Revolution, are only “discussed behind veils” or kept hidden (145, 191), so the Yangtze can look “quite calm” while “doing strange things” down below (149). The perspective from the Lushan hill station makes the river appear to be “a brown swathe of winding-cloth, more than a mile wide” (172), whereas a trip through the Three Gorges painfully contrasts the dreamlike quality of the stunning natural scenery with the nightmarish ruination caused by human greed and carelessness (288). For Winchester, the Chinese may often display “a stern or forbidding visage,” but he has learned that behind the mask there may well be “a kindness and hospitality few other people can imagine” (324). The river also exhibits a similar duality. Near Tiger Leaping Gorge he sees two girls swimming in “a decorously swirling stream,” but just a short way ahead, in a stretch hidden by hills, the river turns “into a monster” (327). On the upper half of the Yangtze, there are rare places of tranquil beauty (344), but more numerous are the awesome stretches of barely imaginable power and fury, where the sound “roars up from the cliffs... a sound of distress like a dragon in pain” (345), and Winchester knows he is privileged to see beyond the surface, to witness the river revealing itself “as a thing of raw and unimaginable might” (349).

This clarity does not hold true for the source, unfortunately. Wang Hui had painted Mt. Gelandandong as the source of the great river, and Winchester knows that this was “just right—it was *spiritually appropriate*.” Unfortunately, the true technical source of the Yangtze may be elsewhere, in a “tiny and unnamed meadowland lake” (352). In trying to observe anything about China, we may be reluctant to accept the assertion of Keats’s Grecian Urn that truth—which is so often distorted, hidden, and veiled—is beauty; it is much easier to believe, particularly from a literary point of view, that beauty is truth. After all, one may be so true to a narrow (geological/hydrological) truth as to be false to a larger (aesthetic/poetic) truth. Fortunately for us, Winchester opts for Wang Hui, choosing “the spiritually appropriate, wholly photogenic, mountain-ice-fed but nevertheless not-exactly-correct source” (404), but which provides the perfect setting for a celebratory cigar: “In the midst of this magnificent scrum of young mountainhood was the glacier and the small circular pool from which, said most—and from which, said Wang Hui, in the painting at which I had looked so carefully all those thousands of miles away in New Hampshire—this great river started its long journey” (405).

The most intellectually dazzling of these books on China is certainly Peter Hessler’s second effort, *Oracle Bones* (2006). Following his departure from Fuling and the resultant success of *River Town*, Hessler is back in China as a journalist, but his job is a source of frustration. How can he write accurately and informatively about “China’s complex relationship with the outside

world” (67) when he is compelled as a journalist to track trivia and collect fragments and organize them into stories (397)? He is aware that in writing a story, any selection of details or events can deny other possible interpretations (34), but China, with its state-controlled media, makes things particularly difficult. There is, for instance, still little general knowledge of what happened at Tiananmen Square—“the big picture remained a mystery” (58)—and the Cultural Revolution is still “a shadowy period” (243). Despite continuing contact with former students Willy (now a teacher) and Emily (who has worked in a series of factories), and a growing friendship with Polat, a Uighur money dealer, Hessler, although fluent and at home in China, can still feel isolated, as though he is viewing things through a screen (129), and he is conscious that he remains an “outsider who sifted information between worlds” (425).

Hessler’s brilliant tactic is to use the oracle bones as a multi-layered, symbolic analog of his own quest for truth. Oracle bones date from the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 BCE). They are cattle scapula and turtle plastrons (undershells) that were first inscribed and then cracked through heating. This process “captured the voices of the other world,” and the cracks were interpreted by diviners (138). The “true magic of the artifacts,” however, was that they could still be interpreted, as “Chinese characters are the oldest writing system still in use” (137). “Artifacts have power; written characters breathe life into the distant past” (244), “The bones make music, and they also tell stories” (249), and from the fragments, the scholar Chen Mengjia was able to re-create the Shang world’s “calligraphy, grammar, geography, astronomy” (248).

The problem is that artifacts may tell stories that are unacceptable. The style of the Sanxingdui bronzes that were discovered in 1986 “is completely unlike anything ever discovered in China...Nobody has any idea who made this stuff” (190). The “accidental mummies” found in Xinjiang are even more troublesome, for they have “blond or red hair, full beards, and features that look European.” The Uighurs began to claim that the mummies proved the “Chinese had no right to be in Xinjiang.” Some scholars think they might be ancestors of the Tocharians, but, not surprisingly, “None of these theories appealed to the Communist Party. As the mummies became more famous, the authorities began to restrict access to them” (327-329). [Colin Thubron sees some of the preserved bodies in a half-demolished museum in Urumqi: “In the museum entrance a notice declares that its relics prove this province to be an inalienable part of China. But they suggest, of course, the opposite” (*Silk Road*, 113).] Clearly, if the artifacts do not fit with political mythology (191), it is the perception of them that must be altered, and Xu Chaolong, an archeologist who has never been published in China, bluntly states that “politics have warped Chinese archeology” (194-195).

Hessler extends his quest for truth to another level when he tries to find out about what happened to Chen Mingjia, whose story “seems to change with every telling” (383). When he finds an impressive book on looted Shang bronzes that carries no author’s name, he is told it was researched by Chen, who spent a lot of time in America, but Hessler will not be able to talk to him: “He’s dead...He killed himself during the Cultural Revolution.” However, the young archeologist is able to direct Hessler to Old

Yang, who “was with Chen when he killed himself” (222-223). But in talking to Old Yang (224-225) and to Old Mr. Zhao and Huang Zhe (227-230), Hessler keeps hearing different stories and knows that some things are still hidden. The oldest curator at the Shanghai Museum, to which Chen had given his collection of Ming dynasty furniture, recalls that Chen “was very straightforward. He always told his true opinions. Eventually, that’s what got him into trouble” (384), and the implication is that in opposing writing reform Chen was also opposing the government. Chen’s political problems began when he was criticized in articles by younger academics, including Li Xueqin, now a top academic in the field of archeology, but who was Chen’s assistant for a time (384-385). When Hessler is able to meet him at Tsinghua University, Li does not want to discuss his criticism of Chen, saying he always regretted writing it, but he was young and unable to refuse during the “horrible period” of the Cultural Revolution (388-391).

Hessler writes to and makes trips to see his former students because of an article of faith—“Whenever a person studied another language, and went to another place—or even imagined it—there was a chance that he would gain a new perspective” (426)—and Hessler gains more knowledge of Chen when he meets Chen’s younger brother, Mengxiong. Hessler has already learned that it can be difficult to connect everything—“In China, people often speak circuitously when confronted with an uncomfortable memory. The narrative emerges loosely, like string falling slack onto the floor; the listener has to imagine how everything connects” (433)—but Mengxiong speaks plainly and directly about the tragedy. Mengjia had been severely beaten by Red Guards,

and about a week after returning home from the hospital, he killed himself (434). Mengxiong is rueful about the awful time: “There were so many famous scholars and artists who were lost. Nowadays, the young people in China don’t know anything about Mengjia. They don’t know his poems or his scholarship” (436). Hessler manages to learn a great deal about Chen and his fate, but he has also sensed from the beginning “that it was too late to discover what had really happened to Chen Mengjia. His tale had disappeared with the old political campaigns, and he was of a lost generation” (454-455).

Can anyone—or, more to the point, can any one individual—see China? Obviously, no... but the whole point of Hessler’s illuminating book is about the value, validity, and necessity of the effort to *try* to see things clearly, whether you are attempting to divine oracle bones, assess artifacts, uncover the story of Chen, or see China. If, as Hessler believes, it is hard for Chinese and Americans “to imagine other perspectives” (440), then it is left to the creative medium of writing to furnish the alternative points of view that lead to understanding by enabling us to rethink the past and create the present (446). And if any further rejoinder to Pratt were needed, Hessler furnishes it in his final pages: “Writing could obscure the truth and trap the living, and it could destroy as well as create. But the search for meaning had a dignity that transcended all of the flaws” (456).

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