

## THE WRITER AND HIS FRONTIERS

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We know it is one of the many conceits of the writer's Muse to insist that, ultimately, physical reality is superfluous to the mission of the imagination, and to proceed to demonstrate this through a seemingly effortless erosion of geographical frontiers in the result, without his own physical participation in that activity of erosion. There are of course exceptions - writers of the temper of a Joseph Conrad, Hemingway, Graham Greene etc. spring easily to mind. So does Anton Chekhov whose memorable trek across Siberia to the penal island of Sakhalin, by a fortunate coincidence, is being accorded its centennial celebration by writers and scholars from various parts of the world. His journal: "A Journey to Sakhalin" belongs easily under various classifications - criminal psychology, the writer's own psychology, sociological documentation etc. but of course, is a classic also in the universally appealing genre of travelogues. Literary academicians may spend several lifetimes tracking the cast of Chekhovian characters to their origins in this odyssey of a writer and his social conscience; the appeal of this work as the diary of a sensitive and courageous traveller through hostile and unpredictable terrain and its story of the human species earns it an assured place in the literature of travel documentation, insightful, compassionate, yet clinical in its attention to the minutiae of reality.

The infusion of just this dimension of "local colour" or other hallmarks of authenticity into the general literary product does therefore belie the earlier stated claims of absolute autonomy in the province of the imagination, exposing an intrinsic awareness of the need for just such "realistic touches", even in works of "pure" fantasy. Additionally, it acknowledges, in the main, the contributions of the prosaic reportage of voyagers and adventurers in the overall mission of literature. It does not require any long-winded scholarly argument to recognise that Othello's rhetorical strategy for laying siege to the heart of Desdemona was pure, unabridged Herodotus or, to abandon chronology for a moment, shares inspiration with the Victorian anti-slavery literature on the theme of the "noble savage", which in turn

owed its existence, not only to the presence of freed slaves in Victorian England and the activities of the conscience-stricken European, but to the numerous narratives clinical and detached, embellished and subjective, of the latter-wave explorers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sean O'Casey's famous exchange with W.B. Yeats over this vexed question of the frontiers of reality in the labour of imagination, is absolutely accurate but, at the same time, somewhat overstated:

"Your statement is an impudently ignorant one to make... Do you really mean no one should or could write about or speak about a war because he has not stood on the battlefield? Was Shakespeare at Actium or Philippi...?"

The author of *Orinoko* certainly never stood on the banks of the Amazon.<sup>4</sup>

It all boils down, it would seem, to the question of the choice of one's inspirational material. When Shakespeare abandons Herodotus and his tall tales - which, in all fairness, Herodotus does acknowledge as hearsay - and chooses to rely instead almost entirely on the imagination to scale the frontiers of distance, the result, aided and abetted by the power of evocative language, has been the unprecedented adoption of an English writer by the indigenes of a land which he has never visited, as a native son in his own right, no less. Chekhov was at least physically present in Sakhalin, and his portraits were of real life, his canvas the entire sociological reality of a penal island. That the descendants of Sakhalin islanders should effectively adopt him as a "son of the soil" is therefore no mystery but a socio-political act of gratitude and remembrance. Shakespeare, by contrast, posthumously enjoys a dual nationality at best, or the suggestion of a dubious parentage at worst, simply because of his deftness at imbuing the scene of a specific drama with an unusual degree of authenticity - or more accurately still, conviction - in his deployment of local colour. It is a phenomenon with which I have remained fascinated since my mature encounters with Shakespeare, a fascination dealt with at some length in my essay, "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist". That essay could very easily be re-titled "Shakespeare's Unrecorded Voyages"; I shall borrow a brief section of it to provide the last word of this contribution.

Firstly however, I would like to tackle the very phenomenon of the nomadic urge in humankind and its varied motivations - with naturally, a prejudiced look at the career of this urge on the continent of Africa. In some other encounters, I have had cause to refer to the writer as the frustrated explorer sublimating his terror of the unknown in verbal, magical conquests of the frontiers beyond the immediately admissible. Norman Mailer's famous paean to the first American intruders in outer space remains one of the most extravagant testaments to this essence of the explorer *manqué* in the average writer. The obverse of the coin does however accurately complete the picture - the explorer or adventurer as the frustrated writer - and with some vengeance! But who really is this latter creature? Is there really much distinction to be made between the manifestation of the spirit of the intrepid adventurer and that of the modern-day tourist? It is tempting to see one as being vaguely creative and the latter as belonging firmly in the category of the passive consumer. It is a convenient distinction, but the occasional consumable product of the experience of launching one's self, or being launched passively into unfamiliar territories - be such

a product in the form of the familiar travel journal, diary, or even artistic sketches - water colours etc. - does succeed in confounding, periodically, the somewhat snobbish distinction between these categories.

Even common piety, we do acknowledge, the impulsion to move ever further into hazardous terrain in order to discover the marvels of the Creator and of course do some agitating on his behalf among complaisant or resentful indigenes, has not failed to produce a substantial crop of tourists through the ages. João dos Santos' travel book on the Bantu kingdoms is an instructive example of those monks and clerics of nearly all religious persuasions who prove themselves not merely addictive travellers but passionate journalists, being usually drawn from the literate class of their societies. Their mission then overlaps both commerce and geography as by-product, the by-product becoming latterly catapulted into principal ends-in-view while the original divine mission is gradually forgotten or relegated into completely subservient positions. What I have referred to as the latter-wave voyages of exploration in Africa, deliberately, for reasons of usually ignored historical comprehensive-ness, are of course filled with such easy transformations that some, especially African commentators, do claim that the proselytising missions were, from the very outset, pure camouflage, and that commerce or the opening up of new markets or the search for raw materials for Europe's industrial revolution constituted the real spur towards these risky undertakings. The historian Wallace Norestein comments on the post-Napoleonic economic distress in Europe which led many British adventurers to abandon the safety of their shores:

"The chief reason why the Scot (he refers here to the famous Mungo Park) went so far away from home was because his own country had so few resources, and he had imagination enough to guess that he might better his chances by seeking out richer countries".

Not quite the consumerist latter-day version of the adventurous tourist in the many secluded versions of paradise of our modern African continent. The idyllic picture postcard, ready inscribed with "Wish you were here" in order to conserve precious energy in the enervating regimen of these retreats, is a far call from the desperate plunges of the earlier explorers into the unknown, and the uneven literature which has survived their incursions. Their demarcation of mountains, valleys, plains and rivers in cold contours, their frequently naive literary efforts to cope with strange cultures, histories and sociologies may not match Shakespeare's stay at home conjurations of alien vistas; they nevertheless contribute to the pool of source material, even of the suspect variety which their societies required to complete a reasonably congruous model of the world-congruous that is, from their own self apprehension in the logical or divinely appointed order of the world. The results were of course variegated. Hammon and Joblow offer a blunt rebuttal of any lofty literary expectations in what, after all, could only be a by-product of this adventurism.

The personal background and ambitions, linked to the commercialism of British motives in Africa did not make for a literature of philosophical speculation, nor for flights of poetic fancy. The explorers are prosaic and practical.

Not always even that, alas! Not all accounts of the voyages of "discovery" were

tempered by such factual control, which frankly, is not to be totally regretted. What would reality be without a little embellishment? How does a sponsored explorer fire popular imagination at home unless he steps a little beyond the frontiers, not merely of truth but of probability. The very nature of the adventurer, at least from the majority of writings that we know - take Stanley, Livingstone or Frobenius, for instance, is thoroughly marked by a sense of unique self-regarding. The ego is all. It is almost a preconditioning - no one else, imagines the voyager, will ever tread the specific terrain which he traverses. His lies or, shall we simply say fiction, are concealed for eternity. And if another explorer does follow the same route and land on the same spot, he can always claim that that new adventurer entered from the North whereas he, the original, entered from the South. Among some of these British gentlemen adventurers there did even appear to be a basic recognition of this dimension of entertaining literature as a normal product of their adventure. Wrote John Speke to John Petherick:

"It has just struck me that you could not do better than write a short description of your travels in Africa, well loaded with amusing anecdotes and fights with natives: the thing would sell admirably just at present, and for the future would keep the world looking anxiously for your peregrination".

It is not on record that John Petherick retorted, "Get thee behind me Satan". Indeed the question in John Petherick's mind was probably: why should I have to make the next peregrination at all? If facts dry out or prove inadequate, may imagination not do the rest? The Wagnerian cadences of a Joseph Thomson, disciplined and precise narrator of adventures that he was in the main, betrayed a fundamental romanticism of his vision. Thomson was of course, at least in his younger days, a humane individual, even an egalitarian in his approach to the autochthones of the African continent. Who knows, perhaps this early attitude before its later corruption was the product of a conviction of the hidden pot of gold in the marshlands of the continent. It certainly kept him going, charging the dragons of despair on his white charger. "We might imagine" he declared:

"that some all-powerful evil genius held sway over the land and kept some lovely damsel, or great treasure deep hidden in the interior, surrounded by a land teeming with horrors and guarded by the foul monsters of disease, of darkness and savagery. That land is the pestilential coast region where so many adventurous modern knight-errants have been doomed to die in their attempts to reveal to the world the fair spirit of Africa".

In another message he even expands his mission to a national agenda: "We may be a nation of shopkeepers but we have a warm heart to everything which keeps burning brightly the sacred lamp of that chivalry in which there is much daring, more self-denial, and a more tender regard for the weak and oppressed than ever was practised by ancient knighthood.

Thomson's preference is obviously for the Arthurial knight-errant who certainly travelled light; his numerous colleagues had a different idea; they were knights of the Crusade and they travelled with full court. Stanley's safari for instance consisted of a large retinue of African carriers often forcibly pressed into service. They carried his

sets of solid silver tea service, complete with changes of table linen, jars of confectionary, tons of lead, beddings and other creature comforts. Not for him that charm of independence which both Thompson and Lugard describe as accompanying a "farewell to civilisation" and the satisfaction of having to rely "henceforward... solely on one's resources". Samuel Baker was another explorer who did not believe in the denial of the habits of "civilisation". He travelled with a portable bath which however did have the practical advantage of being convertible into a dinghy or a wine-tub, while Richard Burton's first line of defence against the perils of exploration were cases and cases of brandy. As for "defending the weak and oppressed" this, almost with very few exceptions, took the form of severe floggings for their press-ganged native carriers for all forms of infraction from slackness to stealing and, in Stanley's case most notoriously, even hangings for desertion.

And yet a constant in the attitude of adventurers on the African continent appears to have been a sense of mystery, often highly romanticised from the first encounters. Thus the first arrivals in the Kingdom of Monomotapa, on seeing the ruins of Zimbabwe, concluded that they had indeed stumbled on the legendary land of Ophir, the biblical supply source of riches to King Solomon. Frobenius on his part never forgave the ancient civilisation of Ile-Ife for not being the lost city of Atlantis. Without a doubt it took the trade in human flesh and its need for rationalisation to erode, first the romance, then the factual. The writer and indeed artist - for we must never forget that there were indeed purported graphic representations of the marvellous of these hitherto unexplored lands, several of whose original models, till today, have yet to be encountered - the artist in the traveller continued indeed the tradition of contracting the frontiers of the real, only, this time, for far more sordid reasons. Eighteenth and nineteenth century European literature deformed the sensibilities even of the "civilised" reader to an extent that can, till today, be held accountable for much of the racism that yet persists in the world.

The earliest explorers of tropical Africa were not however the Europeans, another fact of history which is given such scant regard in major accounts of the "opening up of the Dark Continent". Two millennia before Herodotus, Herkuf, the governor of Egypt's southern province under Mernere, 2275 B.C. penetrated deeply enough into Central Africa to bring back a pygmy, perhaps, the first known human "souvenir" from the tourist enterprise along with ivory, ebony, frankincense and skins. He sent back regular reports of his profitable expedition down the Nile, which, as may be imagined, intrigued and excited Mernere beyond description. Immediate orders were sent back to ensure that the pygmy be brought back under maximum security conditions:

"appoint excellent people who shall be beside the dwarf on each side of the vessel" - this was to ensure that the small creature did not fall into the water.

"When he sleeps at night", Herkuf's instructions continued, "appoint excellent people who shall sleep beside him in the tent... inspect him ten times at night. My majesty desires to see the dwarf more than the gifts of Sima and Punt".

The explorer Henu followed that same route some three hundred years later - his accounts are engraved in extant stone chaplets - Herodotus did not appear until

430 B.C. and then, as we know only too well, quite a fair proportion of his accounts were hearsay and he did admit as much. His first-hand reports however do shame some of the nineteenth century accounts already referred to in their detailed respect for the reality of Lower Egypt and parts of present-day Sudan. The range of these contributions to knowledge - of one kind or another - is of course limitless, attesting often far more to the personality of the diarist than to the material base of his commentaries. From the factual but excitable tradition of Herkuf the Egyptian to the mixed-bag accounts of a Herodotus and the embellished plagiarisms of a Diodorus Siculus, then again the formalist tone of Abdul Hassan ibn al-Mas udi who penetrated parts of East Africa in his pious wanderings in A.D. 916; a resurgence of Herodotian pastiches in the *Journal of Eden* through the voyages of Captain Lok in the sixteenth century, not to forget the master yarn-spinner himself, Richard Haklyut through to the latter-wave nineteenth century narratives - the matter-of-fact Tower-son, the pathos of Mungo Park or the brash, possessed and often racist impudence of a Frobenius... Africa as a continent has certainly undergone every nature of trans-mogrification at the hands of travellers and adventurers, cartographers, scientists, mavericks, missionaries and slavers. Is it any wonder that one's empathy leans towards the contribution of that poet-dramatist who made no pretence of ever setting eyes or foot on the continent, yet evoked all the awesome aura of his own selected arena on that land mass? And that very fact constitutes its own irony for the disclaimer is still disputed; North African and Middle Eastern scholars do claim that Shakespeare at the very least must have been a sometime visitor to North Africa and the Arabian peninsula.

The matter is even more serious. In an article in "Cairo Studies" - among several others on the same theme - M.M. Badawi informs us that William Shakespeare was, in the opinion of many of his countrymen, an Arab, whose real name, cleansed of its anglicised corruption was Shayk-al-Subir. This theme is one with which I find myself in more than a little sympathy. Judging from the evocative poetry of "Anthony and Cleopatra", I am more than willing to share the view that, at the very least, Shakespeare must have sailed up the Nile and kicked up sands in the shadow of the pyramids. How else could he have captured the tones, texture, smells, even tastes which were so alien to the wintry climes of Elizabethan England!

For a fuller elaboration of the argument I can only refer you to the essay already cited and attempt only a very brief summary here. With the magnificent exception of "Anthony and Cleopatra", Shakespeare demonstrates no real interest in infusing local colour into the setting of his plays. How much of Venice is truly experienced for instance, in "The Merchant of Venice". Fascinated Shakespeare was, without question, by the mercantile cities of Italy, their exotic argoslies and the mercurial temper of their inhabitants, probably a legacy of his acquaintance with the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Shakespeare's uses of the correlates of places however was never really to flesh them out, but as metaphors borrowed from outside the arena of drama to establish an enhanced climate of relationships, emotions or conflicts: "Her bed is India, there she lies, a pearl". (*Troilus and Cressida*) Neston finds Achilles' brain as barren as the banks of Libya while Ulysses deems it a kinder fate to parch in Afric's

sun than be withered by the arrogance of Achilles' eye. And so it runs throughout nearly all of Shakespeare's drama, even for the actualities of England, Scotland and Wales in his history plays. "Anthony and Cleopatra" remains the exception, and what an exception! Here is a piece of Anthony's after-dinner chat on the agricultural practices of his adopted home:

Thus do they, sir, they take the flow o' th' Nile  
By certain scales i' the pyramid: they know,  
By the height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth  
Or foison follow. The higher Nilus swells,  
The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman  
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain  
And shortly comes to harvest.

Both in such deceptively clinical passages and in contrasting lines of sublime lyricism, the author of "Anthony and Cleopatra" does indeed provoke thoughts of a suspect nationality or at least the possibility that he was a witness to marvels of un-English textures and redolence:

The silken tackle  
Swells with the touches of those flower-soft hands  
That yarely frame the office. From the barge  
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense  
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast  
Her people out upon her; and Anthony  
Enthroned i' th' market place, did sit alone  
Whistling to th' air: which, but for vacancy  
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too  
And made a gap in nature.

As scholars mark the anniversary of Chekhov's well publicised pilgrimage to Sakhalin, following his route on maps, even by motor-car and aeroplane, so do we hope that some poets and scholars will one day reveal the secret route taken by William Shakespeare when he visited Egypt for reasons, and in circumstances that, remain a mystery. It certainly seems a more viable tourist project than many other eccentric ideas dreamed up by scholars for Shakespeare's numerous anniversaries, including the digging up of his bones to confirm indeed that he was not Shakespeare, only this time, that he was Christopher Marlowe. I place myself squarely on the side of the opposition school - the shadowy Shayk-al-Subir offers far more attractive exploratory vistas than yet another Englishman, the author of Tamburlaine. The travel diaries of the Shaky could then be imagined lurking under some stones anywhere between Tripoli and Alexandria, a teaser that justly takes poetic licence from Shakespeare's own lyrical realism. It has already enticed North African, Arab poets, dramatists, translators and scholars into its service, thanks to a work which assails even the hardest national chauvinist with a longing for exotic places, applauding, even envying the passion of Anthony's renunciation of nationality and instant naturalisation in a new-adopted home.

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch.

Of the ranged empire fall: Here is my space.

It is not merely Anthony's voice we hear, but that of the poet, whose feat enables even the vicarious voyager to participate in the act of appropriation and in the embrace of alien lands declare: "Here is my space".