Travelling writing, writing travelling: the text as journey, the journey as text

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PART ONE

AMBITIONS AND OBSTACLES
'Our discursive community is a battle of wills. What was once a struggle for food, water or money, becomes a fight to decide who possesses the most reality - especially as a form of survival after colonisation and post-industrial capitalism. Increasingly for the intellectual, everything means too much, every aspect becomes a sign.'

Stephen Muecke

Reading the Country
Of impossible differences

'Our questions choose the answers they think good:
What shape is wine? The shape of any cup.'

A. D. Hope

A short story by Jorge Luis Borges cites 'a certain Chinese encyclopedia' where it is written that animals are divided into:
(a) belonging to the Emperor
(b) embalmed
(c) tame
(d) suckling pigs
(e) mermaids
(f) fabulous
(g) dogs running free
(h) included in the present classification
(i) which behave like madmen
(j) innumerable
(k) drawn on camel-skin with a very fine brush
(l) et cetera
(m) which have just broken their leg
(n) which from a distance look like flies.

To this listing philosopher Michel Foucault responded: 'In our astonishment at this taxonomy, what strikes us with sudden force, beyond what, because of its setting, is presented to us as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own: the stark impossibility of thinking that.' (in Hayes,'70:208)

'... the limitation of our own ...' is the nub of the matter, is the challenge in writing (and reading) this paper. The paper has its limits, as does its methodology; they are unconventional, self-reflexive and intentionally ill-defined limits, which challenge prior assumptions within the genre of academic writing. Perhaps this sort of unconventional paper is equivalent to the 'usefulness' of poetry - of which Auden, in his elegy to Yeats, says, 'Poetry makes nothing happen ... it survives in the valley of its saying ... a way of happening, a mouth.' (in Geertz,'73:443) (Naturally, culturally (!),
many poets would disagree.) Along with my scepticism of the formalities of academic method comes a doubt of the impact of such writing, specifically upon its subject matter, travel literature. However, to write within this awareness is to respond to the project with neither nihilism (in which case, why bother at all?) nor a capitulation to 'the stark impossibility of thinking that', but to undertake the challenge of a work which attempts at a difference.

**Our destination**

The exploratory brief of this study is:

1) To survey a broad range of commentary which has been written about travel narratives and allied literary forms;

2) To consider a number of constituent discourses within travel writing;

3) To discuss a limited sample of 20th Century Australian travel narratives (one from each decade, 1920s to 1980s) with reference to those discourses and to the 'double quest' narrative;

4) To apply to each of the sample texts the following questions (drawn from those suggested by Katz ['87:154] and Hill ['87:24]):

   - Who are the heroes of this work?
   - What do they stand for?
   - What are they doing here?
   - What is the nature and object of the outer search?
   - What is the nature and object of the inner search?
   - Are the various goals achieved?
   - Is there a 'narrative quest' involving the author's textual representation of reality?
- Is the reader required to engage actively in this negotiation of meaning and text?

5) To discuss the overall sample in terms of the propositions (I decline to call them 'hypotheses'), that:

(a) the nominated constituent discourses cluster around the 'quest' as both theme and structuring device; and

(b) the quest has two dimensions, inner and outer, both of which are supported by the constituent discourses.

**Base camp: a challenge to expectations**

*Lavartus Prodeo* - 'I come forward pointing at my mask.'

Roman theatrical declaration

In setting out, I am making assertions which are clearly both pre-emptive and contentious. Their disclosure, rather than defence, of my approach to conventions and my method is grounded in a scepticism of 'master narratives' and their offspring, of which (as I have stated) I believe the form of writing generally found in theses and dissertations and known as 'academic method' to be one.

Firstly, I do not intend to pursue a centralizing, unifying hypothesis about travel literature. The two propositions (as outlined above, in 'Our destination') are tentatively offered, may perhaps be found to contain little substance, and in any case, are applied to a sample which is so small that wider deductions about travel literature in general cannot validly be extrapolated from it.

Secondly, I approach travel writing as a traveller, then as a reader and writer, and - to the extent that the roles are separable - in that order. I also approach writing *about* travel writing in that manner: as a traveller, a reader and writer. Thus, I 'travel' the various primary and secondary texts, moving in my own manner over their signifying surfaces and depths. The 'reading' of this literary terrain then is rather different to that which may be done
by someone who considers the same material not as a traveller but, for instance, as a surveyor, theologian, political economist or literary theorist. Each reader-writer would report vastly different findings according to his/her predisposing discipline, and each conclusion would be judged by its respective methodology. ('The human subject is as much a construction of its texts as the objects it once sought to master. Writing mediates subject and object so that the terms become interchangeable. Rather than embodying the authority of expression, writing becomes the critical self-examination agency. In the "ficto-critical" scenario, writing is no longer a matter of boundary-riding in the service of one or other of the academic disciplines; the sheep have already been let out of the paddock.' [J. Lee & S. Muecke, '90:388]) Unfortunately, mention of the 'discipline' of being a traveller invokes contradictory notions of vagabond, dilettante and picaro, as well as explorer and open-minded investigator. So be it. Travelling texts here is the methodology, not a programmatic 'proposition-test-deduction' pattern; it is a form-content - or subject-treatment - congruence. Each traveller moves differently and is entitled to do so. It is to be expected from this point that the writing up of the observations of this journey also will be unpredictable.

My approach to writing may be likened to (but is not determined a priori in theory or practice by) what has of late been labelled 'nomadology' or 'nomadic writing.' Nomadic writing, as explained by Australian anthropologist-writer Stephen Muecke is '... descriptive, but also analytical and creative. ... Nomadic writing writes itself; its authority comes from the territory covered, not the person temporarily in charge of the pen.' (in Alexander, '85:36) (This term and its application will be discussed more fully in Part Two, in the chapter 'Travelling and Travellers.') Without wishing to appropriate the label of 'nomadology' to my own writing or to seek validation of my own methodology beneath its banner, there are similarities of approach to the processes of 'nomadic writing' in the making of both this paper and my own travel writing. The pertinent aspects of nomadology, according to Muecke (in Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology) are: 'avoiding the pretence of describing a whole,' 'to contest the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition,' 'a way of representing things in discontinuous fragments,'
'an aesthetic/political stance in flight from the singular, the original, the central authority,' 'about abstract journeys: trips in intensity which involve keeping words and images on the move,' and 'writing which writes itself: its authority coming from the territory covered.'

In common with the above assertions, the paper will not employ a predominant theoretical 'device,' such as narrative or structural analysis, or semiotic deconstruction, but will employ various perspectives, and will at times move from modernist to postmodernist to (even) Romantic readings of the material at hand.

Setting out: on/of the research procedure

'A plethora of cliches surrounds the traveller-writer. The narrative is motivated by a series of sexual exchanges (actual or almost) or life-threatening scrapes (actual or almost) with its ultimate reward in survival. The main character, the traveller-writer, the personification of the impulse to liberty (pitted inevitably against the forces of constraint) takes a liminal position in relation to the accepted mores of whatever cultural time-place setting that he or she is discovered in the leaving thereof. He/she appears without fixed address or religion, protector or income. The narrative style is full of visual adjectives and active adverbs signifying high emotion in equally high, or contrastingly low, places. Against this schema of excess, we attempt to distance ourselves from this romantic and recurrent mise-en-scene, a literary construct reflecting 19th Century obsessions.'

The identity of the author of the above elegant but sceptical deconstruction of travel literature is unknown; nevertheless, the pertinence of the observation outweighs the death of the reference. The quote identifies a number of tropes, features or discourses sighted/cited in the author's travel readings: sexual exchanges, life-threatening scrapes, survival, liberty, constraint, visual adjectives, etc., emotion, and so on. But, (wait!) something sounds familiar in
this pattern: sexuality (actual or almost) ... life-threats ... survival ... liberty vs. constraint ... high emotion, low places. Here we find travel literature deconstructed, not in reductio ad absurdum (as perhaps the writer had intended) to a Mills and Boon-er, but to something which resembles (dare I say it?) ... real life.

To these 'cliches' of travel writing may be added various others which deal with the Other, exoticism, questing, etc. In turn, these have a cultural and epistemological background coloured by yet other discourses, such as fiction, ethnography, imperialism, autobiography and history - and many more. It is the examination of a limited number of these discourses - specifically, the diary, autobiography, exoticism, the Other and the quest - that will concern us in this paper. How then are we to proceed?

**Formal framework of the study**

1) The terms of the study and the propositions embodied within the investigation have been spelled out above.

2) The author's position has also been spelled out: that one may both read and write, fruitfully, as a traveller of texts. Accordingly, there is no foregone conclusion to a journey of literary investigation - one may even get lost.

3) The conceptual framework of the inquiry is asserted as simply exploratory: the nature of the subject strongly influences the method of the study. Procedure is a heuristic journey through a field of possibilities towards a not-yet known destination. Theory is used only as a staff, and (to mix metaphors) not as conceptual baggage with obligatory labels and racks.

4) The sources of evidence and authority are principally travel books, and articles in periodicals and magazines by writers and scholars from various disciplines, including many by travel writers themselves. In these secondary sources, I have not discriminated between 'canonical' and popular literature. The authority of an included quotation or idea lies simply in the quality of the comment rather than with any particular source occupying the critical high
ground. As a traveller, I value what other traveller-writers have to say about their art and activity. One of the most perceptive of these is English author Johnathan Raban who wears a number of qualifying hats: traveller, literary critic and travel writer. Equally, I value the insights of academics (such as Paul Fussell, Barbara Maria Stafford, William C. Spengemann, Janis P. Stout and Dean MacCannell) who write from various disciplinary perspectives and provide a depth of analysis which one would not expect from non-scholars. (The discussion of primary sources is taken up in Part Four, Section 4.2 of the paper.)

It will also be noticed that from time to time, I borrow from poetry and the lyrics of pop songs. 'Road' narratives, be they in books, music or film (along with love stories), dominate popular culture, and while there is probably a thesis in how some of the best travel writing forms a strong bridge between (higher) literary culture and popular culture (think of Tracks, The Road to Oxiana, The Great Railway Bazaar, Travels With Charley), it will not be pursued here. Suffice it to say that the endless road manifests endlessly in so many narrative productions, including American cinematic ones (e.g. Two-lane Blacktop, East Rider, Wild at Heart, Mad Max, even Apocalypse Now), that it might well be, as Bruce Springsteen said, that (tramps or not) 'baby, we were born to run.' And if so, allusions to the romance of the road, as found in non-prose forms are, I believe, legitimate sources of imagery and ideas within my paper, and are mentioned on that basis.

5) The review of relevant research and theory encompasses a broad spectrum of readings across the following areas: travel writings in general, ethnographic writing, literary theory, tourism, diary fiction and related forms, autobiography, the literature of adventure and exploration, imperialism, Orientalism, the Other, journalistic and political reportage, commentary on travel writing, structural analyses of 'quest' and 'monomyth' narratives, and other related areas.

6) The analytical technique and research design (perhaps too grand a description) is as follows: having discussed relevant aspects of the nominated constituent discourses, each of the seven 20th
century Australian texts will be 'interrogated' in reference the way these discourses might operate to mobilise and support the double quest narrative.

**Terminology**

A number of terms are used frequently. The definition of these is never a unilateral pronouncement, and although the following explanations are not radical departures from acceptage usage, readers may beg to disagree. (As Edward Sapir said, 'All systems leak.') Some definitions and discussion thereof follow; others less frequently used occur in their context within the paper.

*Travel* is what the traveller does: being in motion between Alpha and Omega. A condition of momentum, of inquiry and aliveness to chance. Transiting terrain and information. Processing transience. 'Travel is a boldly intransitive verb,' says Johnathan Raban; it is '... perceived as a state of being in continuous escape, perpetual motion.' (89:2) '(T)he notion that travel is a pleasure in itself, famously worth doing for its own sake, is a thoroughly peculiar one. After all, *travel* is the same word, historically, as *travail*. It is toil and sorrow ... *Travail* in its turn comes (via Old French) from the Latin *trepalium*, literally 'three stakes', a common instrument of Roman torture.' (ibid:3) Paul Fussell notes that 'Before the development of tourism, travel was conceived to be like study, and its fruits were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of the judgement.' (80:39) That is, it was - and often still is - a form of work, both physical and intellectual. (An extended discussion of travelling and types of travellers occurs in Part Two.)

*Travel writing* (travel narrative, *récit de voyage*, etc): '... is not just a first-person journal kept by a traveller. Nor is it simply a photograph in words of what a traveller observes.' (Percy G. Adams, '83: i) Nor is it solely the account of passage over a terrain, or passage through interior spaces, or of discovery, et cetera. A full discussion of the genre, its permutations and nomenclature will follow in Part Three in the section entitled 'Travel Writing'. The
terms 'travel writing', 'travel narrative', 'travel text' are used loosely and interchangeably, yet without an assertion that they are precisely synonomous.

*Culture* as used here is essentially the anthropologists' use of the term: the 'way of life' of a people, the process by which meanings are made and shared amongst them. Like most definitions, this one is not without its problems. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz says (in *Interpretation of Cultures*), 'Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.' ('73:5). However, other anthropologists respond by pointing out that cultures are also 'webs of mystification; few do the spinning, most just get caught.' (Caplan,'88:10) The term 'culture' can come to include everything in that organic collection of beliefs, assumptions and practices which underpin a society. We are left without a limit which defines the use or usefulness of the word. At this extreme, we may have to agree with Barthes that culture is '... a highly paradoxical object: without contours, without any term of opposition, without remainder.' (in Muecke,'83:411)

*M Myth* is defined in *Structuralism in Literature* by Robert Scholes as '... a body of materials, mainly narrative, which deal with a particular aspect of a given culture. Or, more precisely, the myth stands behind these materials which always reach us in some modified form, and must be reconstructed from them.' ('74:68) In Levi-Strauss's view a myth is a kind of message in code from the whole of a culture to its individual members. (ibid,'74:69) This then is not myth used in the sense that it is untrue, but, most simply stated, as '... a systematic organisation of signifiers around a set of connotations and meanings.' (Fiske et al,'87:xi) (Jean Houston's definition is also worth pondering: 'A myth is something that never was, but is always happenning.')</n>

*Text* indicates a large linguistic unit, but also includes the physical object/artefact (e.g. the book) and the complex of meanings delivered by it. Texts are generic in that they are always
codifications of social relations which have some kind of persistence over time. Subject positions are produced by the generic conventions and expectations of a text - and text, according to Barthes is not an 'object' but a 'space' between the object and the reader/viewer, one made up of endlessly proliferating meanings with no stable point of origin or closure. 'Intertextuality' then, refers to the process by which '... the meanings generated by any one text are determined partly by the meanings of other texts to which it appears similar.' (Fiske,'82:145)

*Discourse* here means a sub-system of signs together with their socially located meanings present within a text. (In turn, 'Discourse represents the mode in which ideology finds its discursive expression.' [Kress,'83:3]) 'A discourse is a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking) [which] involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterize it.' (Belsey,'80:5)

Finally, a note on spelling. 'Travelling' and 'travellers', as opposed to 'traveling' and 'travelers', are my preferred spellings. The form varies from quoted author to author, and where, for instance, an author uses the American form, with a single 'l', I retain that spelling within the quote. The traveller or writer is frequently a woman; however, unless otherwise specified, for the sake of convenience the masculine third person singular pronoun will be used, without further linguistic prejudice than is already embodied in the language.

**Constituent discourses**

Like other literary genres, travel texts are constituted by a number of discourses, some of which may be so attenuated or diffuse in specific texts as to appear only as 'background' while others function more actively as the 'foreground'. Alphabetically arranged below is a limited list of recurrent discourses which I have encountered within my reading of travel texts. You may nominate others according to your own reading and discernment:
'classic realist text'
description
diary
documentary
eroticism
ethnography
exoticism
exploration
feminism
fiction
geography
history
humour
ideology
imaginary travelling
imperialism
journalistic reportage
landscape
literary allusion
natural science
Orientalism
pilgrimage
politics
primitivism
psychoanalysis
quest
sociology
the Other
wisdom
etc ...

The list could go on, meaningfully expanding to encompass 'life, the universe and everything it', to the point of no meaningful boundary at all. In this paper I am concerned with a more finite set of discourses, which, if split into two clusters, might be characterised as the 'background' and 'foreground' to travel texts. I will write about the latter. The 'background' discourses might also be called, figuratively, the 'terrain' of a text, and the 'foreground' ones, its 'tracks'. In 'travelling a text' one passes over its general
terrain via specific (although not necessarily pre-determined) tracks. In the case of 'terrain', the attenuated or diffuse discourses which background the writing, some of the common ones which I have encountered include:

description
documentary
ethnography
geography
history
literary allusion
natural science
Orientalism
politics
sociology
spirituality

In other instances, these 'background' themes may be foregrounded by authors. Regrettfully, there is not room in this paper to examine the above issues. The boundaries to all discourses are subject to slippage and elements of one often appear in others. Among the 'tracks', the more accentuated discourses or elements which are foregrounded in a travel account, I have arbitrarily limited my discussion to the following frequently evident five:

the diary
autobiography
exoticism
the Other
the quest

The selection is principally reflective of my own interests, as well as the emphases of the authors whom I have selected. Another writer could propose here, with equal validity, five quite different discourses chosen from the larger list above, or, from beyond that list.

**Textual methodology**

My text has three methodological quirks which require brief comment. They are:
1) Quotational assemblage. In a celebrated turn of phrase (borrowed from Borges) and an eponymous essay, The Death of the Author, Roland Barthes asserted that 'The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed ...; a text's unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is ... simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which a written text is constituted.' (my emphasis) In this paper quotation will be used extensively and without further apology for the text appearing, as a consequence, both composite and 'dis-unified'. Where a writer's terminology is so apt that any re-statement would be a dilution or redundancy, I have retained the original expression, signalled appropriately. Where paraphrasing occurs, it is of course acknowledged. Insofar as the road travelled is cobbled with books, so to speak, it is fitting that appropriations (impressions upon the sole of the traveller) from these stones become the substance of the journey's reconstruction. 'I was impressed by that essay of Walter Benjamin in which he says the ideal book would be a book of quotations.' said Bruce Chatwin. (in Ignatieff,'87:26)

'Barthes speaks of the multiplicity of voices of indeterminate origin in the writable text, the polyphony of which deprives the implied author of authority ...' (Belsey,'80:129) I have taken this idea both literally and graphically: as the 'implied author', I have made explicit the contributions of many other authors, so that the 'polyphony' and the 'intertextuality' of the work are visually demonstrated in its obvious assemblage of quotes. The extension of this device has meant at times the elision of my own framing, narrating, linking or paraphrasing text. At those moments the writing may fragment into analects, with all the ruptures and lateral linkages made possible by that method. At other times, as the explicit author, my evaluation and other commentary are clearly evident.

(Acknowledging at times the Barthes-Borges notion of the moribund author, two ironies are apparent. Firstly, that both of the above 'authors' survived most robustly their self-theorised demises [auteuricide ... theory-kiri?], indeed, with reputations enhanced by this form of literally living dangerously. It might be said that
reports of the author's death - like Mark Twain's - have been 'greatly exaggerated'. Secondly, that despite the attractions of this notion, I do not claim to have withdrawn from the text, and still see myself as, at least, the assembling agent of the text's elements.)

2) 'Seamless' typography. As my quotations are no longer seen as parts constituting the fixed 'object' of a conventional text, the conventional boundaries which normally would distinguish them visually from the surrounding, framing text are graphically minimised. The text opens continually into other texts. I have eliminated margin indents, point size reduction and line compression, so that all quotations (other than epigraphic ones), while conventionally referenced and parenthesized, will appear contiguous with my own prose. The visual appearance of the medium (the text) is consistent with method of its intertextual compilation. Accompanying this typographic 'streamlining' is the general absence of footnotes, all such comment and citation of sources being built into the body of the text.

3) The self-reflexive quest. As already proposed, the making of a text may be considered analogous to undertaking a journey, and my intention is to employ this idea in the dynamics of the writing. The methodology of the study thus resembles what I call the excursive practices of its own subject matter, travelling. Specifically, this means that the work has, like any journey, identifiable stages. Each of the chapters will be another stage on the journey. As in the classic 'quest' model, each chapter may be seen as a test for the writer - if in no other sense than in the writing thereof. In addition the classic quest has an inner and outer dimension. Poised on the brink of the journey as we are, we may see the initial impetus to this excursion in terms of a 'call to adventure.' What is sought is (in two senses of the word) a thesis: to construct and return with the object of the outer quest, a document-thesis, and perhaps to also discover in the process the 'boon' of an inner quest, an idea-thesis.