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

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TRAVELLING WRITING, WRITING TRAVELLING

The Text as Journey, the Journey as Text

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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SCHOOL OF CREATIVE ARTS

1991
ABSTRACT

Travelling Writing, Writing Travelling travels the writing which writes of travelling. This thesis is seen as an investigative journey itself, while journeys are seen as resembling texts. Part One's point of departure is to question several expectations of formal thesis-writing. The paper proposes that in travel narratives (a) some constituent discourses cluster around 'the quest' as theme and structuring device; and (b) the quest has two dimensions, inner and outer.

Part Two, 'Travelling Writing' covers broad issues in travel literature: metaphors of 'journey as text' and 'text as journey'; genre, definition, variations and fiction; travelling in general and travellers (adventurers, anthropologists, explorers, tourists, nomads, women travellers). Travel writers are discussed, as is 'an incomplete history' of travel writing, with attention to Romanticism, American, and British work.

In Part Three, 'Writing Travelling' several major constituent discourses of travel narratives are examined: the Diary, Autobiography, the Other (in terms of imperialism, place, tourism, topography), Exoticism (as spectacle, erotica, nostalgia, anthropology, tourism, etc.), and the Quest (sublime quest, myth, and the double quest).

Part Four, 'Australian Travel Writing,' considers aspects of 'writing Australia,' Aboriginality, the Outback and accounts by Australian authors. Seven Australian travel narratives - one per decade, 1920s to 1980s - are discussed at length and in relation to the five nominated constituent discourses and the 'double quest' narrative. The texts are interrogated as follows: Who are the heroes of this work? What are they doing here? What is the nature of the outer and inner search? Are the various goals achieved? Is there a 'narrative quest' involving the textual representation of reality? Is the reader required to actively negotiate meaning and text?

The Conclusion summarises the answers to the above questions, and evaluates the earlier propositions. Within the limited sample of Australian texts the constituent discourses are seen to cluster around 'the quest,' with their quests having inner and outer dimensions supported to varying extents by those discourses. Discussion of the idea of 'the travel writer as shaman,' in terms of that writer's analogous role of 'messenger between two worlds,' concludes but does not end this text's journey.
To my mother,
Joan Dorothy Borthwick
'... Who comes here regrets that he ever studied
Morning after morning to be close to floating fame.'

Meng Chiao

Wandering on Mount Chung-nan
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PROLOGUE

Reader, on starting from somewhere else

Traveller: How can I get to the Town Hall?
Policeman: If I were you I wouldn't start from here.

Academic method, of the traditional thesis-testing model, may
be seen as a minor type of 'master narrative'. As a meta-discourse
(like Marxism, Socialism, psychoanalysis, etc), it has assumed over
time and in relation to the writing of academic dissertations or
theses, the status of almost an epistemological imperative. In the
late 20th Century, the set of critical practices known as
'postmodernism' (which may be typified by, among other things, a
sceptical attitude to all meta-narratives) has rightly challenged the
contemporary validity of such inherited, and sometimes constricting
ideological structures. In turn, postmodernism itself has become fair
critical game, due its own tendencies towards a 'totalising'
theoretical posture.

When confronting the reified conventions and discursive
practices of traditional academic method, the writer (as a traveller
of texts) is confronted by a forked road. On the one path there is the
awareness that there may never be an end to the seeking, gathering
and evaluation of a true scholar's information - that is, to the
preparation for the journey which should proceed diligently,
linearly from Proposition to Test to Proof. On the other path there is
a traveller's knowledge that the journey perfectly prepared for is the
journey perpetually postponed.

In short, even though this (the imperfect but only 'here/now')
moment may not be the optimum point of departure, the writer-
traveller must embark from it with all that has been gathered up
until this moment - and with that only. Thus I set forth, in some
trepidation of my study's inadequacies, towards the official edifice,
the 'Town Hall' of formal presentation. I am at once awed by, and
defiant of, the impossibility of reducing the enormous tract of
literature known as 'travel writing' (and further writings about
travel writing) to a smoothly mapped itinerary of Proposition-Test-Proof. For what real journey of exploration can travel its antithesis, a pre-mapped path? The object of exploration changes its form with every attempt to comprehend it. "Nothing is completed, but ever completing". (Spengemann, '74:6)

The double movement of the paper's title, Travelling Writing, Writing Travelling, contains both the challenge and the methodology of the study: to travel the writing which writes the travelling. In addition, there is a self-reflexive brief in the paper's method. In considering, as proposed, the engagement (by writer and reader) with a text as analogous to undertaking a journey, my intention has been to employ this idea in the dynamics of writing this thesis. The methodology of the study is grounded more in the excursive practices, as it were, of the study's own subject matter, travelling, than in the discursive practices of conventional academic method. In challenging some of the conventions of thesis writing, this paper will be in a sense an 'anti-thesis.'

The paper is an outgrowth of my own work as a writer of travel narratives. A travel book is the Creative Portfolio half of my PhD submission, and is complementary to this thesis, the other half. There are similarities of approach shared by both documents. The Creative Portfolio was written in a semi-experimental manner. Similarly, I have adopted a semi-experimental, albeit less radical method, in writing the following 'formal' component of my submission, the thesis. It shares (to a degree) the Creative Portfolio's self-reflexivity, its decentred, quotational narrative and its sense of text unfolding as, and with, its own journey of investigation. On the other hand, I have not been so imprudent or so impervious to institutional protocols as to jettison the major conventions of academic method. Still present herein are inter alia the conventions of a delineated study, a broad literature review, the scrutiny of a nominated sample, the offering of certain propositions, and the attempt to draw conclusions.

It must be borne in mind that I have approached this study not from the perspective of a scholar of English or comparative literature (neither of which I am), but that of a creative writer and
a traveller - whose long term interest is in the travelling as much as in the writing. In this work I wanted to look widely at the symbiosis which links aspects of both activities - without travel there is no travel writing; without the stimulus of travel writing I suspect there would be much less travel.

Travel writing is so vast, so diffused at the edges that it evades the desire for a stable object of analysis. My paper does not examine a specific set of relations prevailing at a given time between say, travel writing and socio-political conditions, or the novel, or some other fixable 'unity', although it does consider the broader cultural matrix and milieu within which travel writings are generated. Closer focus is drawn upon the internal or nuclear elements, i.e. specific constituent discourses, of selected travel texts. The field of travel literature is broad, as are the questions which could be posed: those which I apply reflect my interest in the idea of 'the journey as quest.' My enquiry is free-ranging: its major part surveys the general field of travel writing, and includes much material on what is said about travel writing. The discussion of actual texts forms a smaller part of the paper.

'The Journey' is the subject matter, the leitmotif and the organising principal of this paper: we will travel this thesis itself as a journey. 'The Text as Journey, the Journey as Text' is both the sub-title and the analog proposed for this study. In travelling the thesis, I will make some reference to Joseph Campbell's model of the 'monomyth', the heroic quest. We, reader, are already on the brink of Stage One of that quest, sometimes known as 'the belly of the whale' or as 'the passage into the realm of night.'

Having thrown down the above gauntlet, with these various disclaimers and pre-emptive assertions (there are more to follow) and, choosing to depart on this unorthodox journey of investigation from some probably inadvisable position with no guarantee of arriving at the correct Town Hall, it is now time to embark upon this heuristic - that is, 'serving to find out' - travelling of the text as journey and the journey as text. We (readers-writers) depart in hope that, as Pascal said, 'The last thing one discovers when writing a book is what ought to have come first.'