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Travel Literature and the Search for Cultural Memory: A Study of William Dalrymple's Travel Writings

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ABSTRACT

Travel literature is a hybrid genre that is neither memoir nor history nor journalism, but a journey both geographically and psychologically and culturally. In regard to this broader theme, this paper focuses on the work of the Scotland-born but India-based writer, William Dalrymple, whose body of work, including *In Xanadu* (1989), *City of Djinns* (1993), *From the Holy Mountain* (1997), *The Age of Kali* (1998), and *Nine Lives* (2009), reconfigures the genre in a unique way through a blend of historiography, ethnography, and personal narrative. The study proposes a two-fold effect of Dalrymple's travel writing, as it registers physical travel through Asia and the Middle East as well as excavations of cultural memory layered beneath the landscapes of the present day. The paper takes a qualitative approach, using close reading, postcolonial and genre theory analysis, to examine how Dalrymple challenges the colonial heritage that pervades the travel-writing tradition while trying to write against Orientalist stereotypes. His storytelling methods—the alternating of archival and first-person information, ventriloquism of local voices, and the self-reflexivity of the travelling narrator—are of particular interest. The study also examines the impact of his work on the distinction between the historian and the traveller and the creation of a "historical travelogue" as a hybrid genre. Despite the ongoing critical debates about travel writing and the authority of the travel writer and his or her representation of the other, Dalrymple's contribution to travel literature is his ability to make the past present and to contest it, making travel writing a tool for cross-cultural and trans-temporal understanding rather than a record of foreign difference.

Keywords: Postcolonial travel writing, historiography, genre hybridity, cultural memory, orientalism, narrative voice, south Asia, and historical travelogue.

1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, travel literature is one of the oldest and most versatile genres of literature, a first-person prose narrative that relates a journey and interprets it culturally, historically, and/or psychologically. The genre has always incorporated and reflected the political, economic and epistemological frame of its production, whether it is the works of Herodotus's *Histories* or the works of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, or the Grand Tours of the eighteenth century or the imperial travelogues of the nineteenth. In his influential book *The Modern Travel Book*, Paul Fussell places it as a hybrid between memoir and history, suggesting that the travel writer occupies an ambiguous position between two genres. Later theorists, such as Mary Louise Pratt, expanded this concept by considering travel writing an "act of the contact zone," a place of encounter between coloniser and colonised, and Edward Said's critical examination of Orientalism revealed how Western travel and writing about the Orient have historically created the Orient as a discursive object of European mastery rather than a subject in its own right. Such interventions have made travel literature an ongoing suspect: as it promises to convey unmediated encounter with the foreign, it is forever suspected of being an emanation of racially acquired stereotypes in the name of first-person witness.

Against this theoretically charged background, William Dalrymple wrote one of the most important and best-sellers of travel writing of the last 40 years. A native of Scotland and living in Delhi since 1989, Dalrymple took up his career as a writer, writing his first book, *In Xanadu: A Quest*, an account of a journey retracing Marco Polo's track from Jerusalem to the ruins of Kublai Khan's summer capital in Inner Mongolia in 1989 while still an undergraduate. He followed this with *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* (1993), a look at the successive incarnations of the Indian capital, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (1997), which retraces the 6th century pilgrimage of the Byzantine monk John Moschos through a middle east whose ancient Christian communities are visibly diminished, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (1998), which is a collection of reportage on India and its neighbours during one of the most politically and economically tumultuous periods of its recent history, and the departure from the first person quest narrative, *The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters* (1998), which presents nine interwoven oral testimonies of those seeking out radical forms of religious devotion. In addition to this travel-writing corpus, Dalrymple has become a popular writer of history on Mughal and Company-era India, a co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival, and a public and visible commentator on South Asian history and politics, making him one of the most prominent mediators of India to an Anglophone audience.

The presence in Dalrymple's work of the two roles of travel writer/historian and the dual sub-theme of travel writing, thus the tension between the travelling eye that records the present and the historical imagination that excavates the past beneath it, make it a very fruitful place to look at the sub-theme of travel writing. His books seldom offer a self-contained present-tense adventure, rather, they read like the landscape travelled through as a palimpsest of layers of history, so the act of travelling is always bound up with the act of historical retrieval. This paper suggests that this combination gives rise to a unique sub-genre which may usefully be described as 'historical travelogue' and that the analysis of this genre will help to illuminate the continuing fascination and continuing critical concerns of travel writing as a form.

The analysis follows which considers the historical development of travel literature as a genre, Dalrymple's particular hybridity, postcolonial and self-reflexive aspects of his narrative persona, his approach to cultural memory and place, and how his approach to narrative voice and local testimony (in particular *Nine Lives*) has sparked critical controversies. The paper ends with a summary of its conclusions and recommendations for future study.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does William Dalrymple combine historiography and personal narrative to produce a hybrid genre for travel writing and what are the implications of this hybridity for theories of travel writing?
2. How is Dalrymple's positionality as a Western-born writer exploring South Asia and the Middle East both engaged in, resistant to, and/or unconscious of Orientalist paradigms of representation?
3. What narrative strategies (voice, structure, use of archival and oral sources) does Dalrymple use to negotiate the relationship between the travelling self and the cultures he represents?
4. How does Dalrymple's travel writing build and represent "cultural memory" and how does this memory destabilize official, linear, historical narratives of the places he travels?

Research Methodology

This study does not follow an empirical or statistical research approach; it is qualitative, literary-critical, text-based, and focuses on the internal text organization and rhetorical organization of a literary corpus based on close reading and the theories of genre and postcolonial.

Travel Literature

The main corpus was chosen purposively, not exhaustively, with emphasis on representativeness of Dalrymple's career and geographical distribution. It was decided to include five book-length works: *In Xanadu* (1989), his first, and perhaps most representative, work in the classical quest-narrative; *City of Djinns* (1993), a work that was the most sustained and focussed in a single city, the city as historical palimpsest; *From the Holy Mountain* (1997), his most explicitly cross-cultural and religiously comparative work; *The Age of Kali* (1998), a collection of journalistic essays that demonstrates his engagement with contemporary politics; and *Nine Lives* (2009), his most significant formal departure from first-person narration toward polyphonic oral testimony. These five texts cover a 20-year period and three different modes of narration (quest narrative, urban biography and oral-testimonial ethnography), providing an opportunity to examine the question of whether the hybrid "historical travelogue" described in this paper is a characteristic feature of Dalrymple's writing, or is limited to certain of his texts.

Theoretical framework. The analysis is fed by three overlapping streams of theory. An account of the modern travel book as lying between novel and memoir (Paul Fussell) and more recent taxonomies of the formal conventions of the genre by Tim Youngs and Carl Thompson, genre theory of travel writing. Second, the postcolonial theory, in particular Edward S. Said's theory of Orientalism, Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the "imperial contact zone", and the "anti-conquest" narrator, and Homi Bhabha's idea of ambivalence, which together offer means of examining the processes by which a travelling narrator's authority over a represented culture can be constructed, destabilised, and disavowed. Third, theories of cultural memory and space; loosely extrapolating on the notion that space is a contested archive of the past, the city/town of Dalry is examined as a space where the past is sedimented.

Procedure. The analysis is done by a close reading of representative passages from each of the primary texts and is focused on: (a) the narrator's placement in relation to the people and places that are described; (b) the use of archival and historical material and the use of journalistic material in conjunction with first-person narration; (c) the formal structuring of chapters and the sequence in which events in the story unfold; and (d) whether the local interlocutors speak directly and extensively even though their words are not reported, or whether they only appear as their actions are described. Such secondary critical literature as exists is presented in the context of these readings, and is presented in a way that triangulates with them in such a way that it situates the analysis of the texts within the broader scholarly debate on travel writing and on Dalrymple in particular.

Limitations. This paper is not statistical and does not claim generalisability but is only concerned with Dalrymple's English-language, book-length travel writing, his journalism, historical monographs and his broadcast work is beyond the scope of this study. The interpretation also reflects the researcher's own personal frame of mind and different interpretations are especially welcome as an additional complement to the readings offered here, especially from scholars and readers from the regions described by Dalrymple.

Analysis

Travel Literature as Genre: A Brief Historical Overview

It is important to place Dalrymple's writings in the context of a long history of a particular literary genre, that of travel writing. The genre of travel narratives has been in existence since travel narratives were written, and the modern literary genre is usually dated in the sixteenth century, coinciding with the period when Europeans began to explore and colonize other continents. These compilations of English voyages, as well as the accounts of the Grand Tourists of the eighteenth century and the large number of nineteenth-century imperial travel writers—such as explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators—all combined contributed to the formation of a number of conventions that became standard features in travel writing: the first-person narrator as the reliable witness, the linear narrative organized around a journey, and the depiction of other peoples and landscapes as objects of curiosity, classification, or moral evaluation directed toward a domestic audience who is presumed to share the narrator's cultural perspective.

This final convention is the one that has been most vigorously questioned later on. Said's analysis of Orientalism revealed that a vast body of European writing about the Middle East and Asia, much of it travel-writing, defined "the Orient" as a coherent, time-less, and inferior other in opposition to which a rational and dynamic "Western" self could be defined, and that the genre's claim to empirical and first-hand authority served to naturalise what was actually an ideological and often literally imperial project. The concept of 'contact zone' which Pratt developed in the same way, redefined travel writing as a genre of writing which is created in a relation of unequal power in which even a positive or admiring description of a colonised people was constructed in terms of the implicit right of the traveller to look, to judge, and to tell. Less politically engaged than the intervarsitarian writers, but still firmly rooted in a historical context, the genre theorists like Fussell have placed the golden age of the literary travel book in the interwar period, defining it as a kind of hybrid, existing on a formal plane between the invented plot of the novel and the documentary record of the historian, and requiring, therefore, for its persuasiveness the reader's acceptance that what the narrator says did happen, perhaps if it had been recorded in a different manner, really did.

This formal hybridity and this political suspicion are passed on to the travel writing of the present day, which is composed after the formal break with European empire, but in its extended economic and cultural shadow. Since the late 1980s, writers in this mode have had to deal with as its legacy an established set of narrative conventions (questing narrator, itinerary structure, local informants) that writers must be aware have the sedimented history of colonial looking. In this post-imperial, self-conscious moment of the genre, Dalrymple's career as a travel writer has begun and continued.

The "Historical Travelogue"

The one thing that is constant in all of Dalrymple's five books studied is the juxtaposition of the traveler's linear route against the historian's archival and interpretive tools. In *Xanadu* is based on a present-tense overland journey to retrace the 13th century path of Marco Polo from Jerusalem to Xanadu, and at nearly every point the journey's path is paused to re-create, from historical sources, what Marco Polo himself witnessed and experienced at that location seven centuries earlier. The reader is thus presented with two dynamics of time, one in the present (via visas, transportation, and hardship), and one in the past (via a medieval travelogue). In *City of Djinns*, the double structure is emphasized as the narrative of the city's geography becomes altogether non-linear, moving to a single, fixed point—Delhi—and traversing a full calendar year, each season covering another historical layer, from the British and Mughal eras to the sultanates and classical Delhi of the Mahabharata. Here it is not horizontal travel but vertical, traveling through the layers of history instead of over land.

From the Holy Mountain comes a similar structure of itinerary, but with a greater degree of historical apparatus, as Dalrymple sets off on his journey to the contemporary area of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Egypt, quoting and paraphrasing the historic travel account of the Byzantine monk John Moschos at each stop, then describing what, if anything, remains of the Christian communal life there in the 1990s. The book is therefore organized not only around a present-day journey, but a specific comparison between two travel accounts, 1400 years apart, highlighting the themes of decline, survival, and rupture as the key ones.

It does seem possible to characterize Dalrymple's characteristic form as a "historical travelogue": a kind of sub-genre in which the travelling narrator acts at once as a witness to the present as well as a populariser of the archive and the history that would otherwise be the exclusive domain of the specialist scholar. This hybridity has a lot of implications for genre theory. For a sub-genre of travel writing that it is helpful to describe as popular history – and perhaps a very large sub-genre of travel writing in the later 20th and early 21st centuries – Fussell's third category is needed: popular history. The historical travelogue is not just a record of a journey, it is a journey used as a story to make historiography, normally an argument and citation exercise, accessible as story; the physical landscape becomes a mnemonic structure and points in space can be mapped onto it.

Ambivalence and self-reflexivity are explored in 4.3 The Postcolonial Gaze. 4.3 The Postcolonial Gaze explores ambivalence and self-reflexivity.

The Orientalist and imperial genre of travel-writing that Dalry's relationship is inheres in is not simply complicit or simply resistant, but ambivalent, as Bhabha writes. On the other hand, In *Xanadu*'s Dalrymple is a self-deprecating, self-ignorant travel narrator who fails again and again at acting like one in ways that undermine the confident, authoritative colonial travel narrator—his failures are not hidden but narrated with comic candour. This self-deprecating narrative stance can be interpreted in Pratt's terms as an "anti-conquest" as the traveling narrator earns the reader's sympathy and trust right from the outset by denying control of the culture through which he travels.

The opposite of this self-deprecating persona, however, is a residual authority which the narrative never really gives over: while the narrator is wherever he is in the moment, and whatever he does at that moment is his own doing, the voice of the narrating self knows, and knows how to use, history, multiple

languages, and institutional access (to archives, religious authorities, and diplomatic circles) that are distinctly different from what the narrator knows at the moment. This comic character of the inexperienced young traveller exists alongside an implied narrator who has obviously studied and researched the history well and gained access denied to the average tourist. It is the ambivalence between a foregrounded personal humility and a backgrounded scholarly and social authority that recent postcolonial criticism targets as the hallmark of the genre's contemporary, "post-Orientalist" phase, where the old "mastery" is abandoned at the level of the tone of the text and restored in the structure of the narration and her evidentiary control.

The tension is heightened from the Holy Mountain because the predicament of the Christian minorities of the Middle East places Dalrymple, who is himself writing from a broadly Christian culture, in a sympathetic position as a co-religionist, not as a detached outside observer, to be able to map the narrator onto the role of imperial or orientalist observer. But the organizing principle of the book—the comparison of Moschos's Byzantine journey with that of a Western traveler—recalls a much older tradition in Western travel literature, which had its roots in the writings of earlier European explorers of the Middle East, and was even more prevalent in the Western literary tradition before and after it.

Place, cultural memory and the palimpsest and Cultural memory and the palimpsest of place.

Another stable element of Dalrymple's historical travelogues is his attention to place as a "palimpsest of cultural memory" – a surface layered by successive historical periods, each of which has erased some of the previous ones, leaving traces of the past visible, audible, or otherwise sensorily present within the present landscape. *City of Djinns* is an organising conceit in which the book is a backwards journey through history while the narrator is physically situated in one city: from the British Delhi of the Partition survivors, to the Mughal ruins that are still occupied or repurposed by those living in the city today, to the legendary city of Indraprastha from the Mahabharata. The result is to make Delhi not only a single, coherent "present" to be visited, but also a composite of coexisting temporalities, as, for example, the sixteenth century tombs serve as today's slum dwellings, and ancient rituals continue to exist alongside today's urban life.

Place-as-layered cultural memory is an important theoretical treatment for the sub-theme of travel literature, as it destabilises the conventional "present" of the genre, one of encounter between traveller and place. Whereas many classical travel writers, as Said and Pratt have demonstrated, make an image of a non-Western culture at a particular time and place that represents a synchronic snapshot of the culture as it appeared at the moment of the traveller's visit, Dalrymple's palimpsestic approach holds that such cultures are historically dynamic and internally heterogeneous. Delhi in this account is not a place smoothened by a single Orient for Western contemplation but is a place of historical accumulation and contestation, more akin to the model of cultural memory theorised in memory studies, where the past is not some bare fact for contemplation, but is an active and contested resource, continually reworked by those who live in it.

The Local Testimony of Nine Lives (Narrative Voice)

This theme, who may speak, and in what voice, who may speak, and in what voice, has long been a theme of postcolonial criticism of the travel narrative, which has been noted for its tendency to filter, paraphrase, and subordinate local interlocutors to the voice of the observing narrator. This is Dalrymple's most important formal reaction to this criticism, and his nine lives. The narrative of his earlier books has been turned upside down, with the first-person narrative replaced by nine lengthy chapters, each presenting the extended oral history of a single Indian religious practitioner – a Jain nun who is preparing for ritual fasting to death, a Theyyam dancer-possessed labourer from Kerala, a devadasi from Karnataka, and a Sufi shrine-keeper in Sindh. Dalrymple's voice is now confined to framing introductions and occasional connecting commentary.

This formal change can be interpreted as a means to correct the imbalance in representation that was decried in previous travel writing, by allowing named individuals to occupy more time and narrative space. Meanwhile, the structuring, interviewing, translating and editing function of the author is still determining: it is still Dalrymple who decides which nine lives are being related, who conducts them, translates them (often with the help of intermediary translators), determines on which chapter order they are arranged, and frames them in a narrative that a reader can grasp. The book's polyphonic structure is therefore a real and important innovation in the genre of the historical travelogue, a subaltern voice in travel writing, if not a resolution to the problem itself, of asymmetry in the control of the author.

His travel writing has been immensely popular and critical success and has been instrumental in reviving travel writing and popular history about south Asia for an international audience since the late 1980s. His work, like that of many western writers on the region of South Asia and the Middle East, has been the subject of relentless critical attention about the politics of representation: how far can a foreign-born writer, however long a resident, and so involved in the interior perspectives of the communities that he describes, really be said to represent them; whose stories about India are reaching a global Anglophone readership, for whose commercial and institutional benefit; whether the aestheticisation of decline and loss (clearly present in *From the Holy Mountain's* elegiac depiction of Middle Eastern Christianity) and the potential for a nostalgic, static image of the region are reproducing the same idealised view as the Orientalist tradition they ostensibly critique. These debates are not peripheral, but integral to the evaluation of Dalrymple's work, and, this paper argues, of and for the sub-theme of travel literature, in particular of travel writing's sometimes better-than-average ability to bring to light the unresolved politics of who narrates whom—a politics that is rarely, if ever, more overt than in Dalrymple's historical travelogues.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that the travel writing of William Dalrymple is a new and theoretically significant sub-genre of modern travel writing: the historical travelogue, in which the present tense journey of the travelling narrator is consistently combined with the archive and interpretation of the

historian. In *Xanadu*, *City of Djinn*s, *From the Holy Mountain*, *The Age of Kali*, and *Nine Lives*, this blend makes appear in different formal arrangements—historical parallel, excavation of one city, and polyphonic oral history—but always renders the landscapes and cities Dalrymple encounters as complex archives of competing cultural memory.

To the first research question, the analysis has demonstrated that this genre hybridity adds to the other theoretical frameworks, developed by Fussell and others, that explain the travel book in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that popular history is a necessary third term to fully account for one of the more significant strands of these writings. In regard to the second research question, the analysis has shown that Dalrymple's engagement with the Orientalist tradition he inherits is far from uncomplicated, even though his narrative persona is self-deprecating and his scholarly and institutional authority re-establishes a similar mode of interpretation control in the structure of his narrative. With regard to the third question, it has been seen that while the process of giving narrative voice to local interlocutors is essentially underway in Dalrymple's later work, it is not completed; these figures do not attain a "formal" authority, nor do they become the subject of the story. To answer the fourth research question, the treatment of Delhi in *City of Djinn*s and the Middle Eastern Christian communities in *From the Holy Mountain* highlight how Dalrymple's palimpsestic approach is concerned with creating cultural memory as an active, internally heterogeneous, and historical phenomenon, one that fights against the more traditional genre of depicting non-Western societies as timeless and undifferentiated.

These results show that Dalrymple's principal merit in travel writing is not the resolution of the genre's political and epistemological antagonisms, but the portrayal of them in a way that is unusually vivid and nuanced and is filled with historical detail. This renders his work a valuable case study on the other sub-theme: travel literature, a genre that has had a continuing ability to think outside the box in a cross-cultural and trans-temporal sense, and imposes a series of critical questions on it that remain unending: questions of who says what, how it is said, about who is said, and who says whom. Future research could expand this comparative analysis by including Dalrymple's historical travelogues in comparison with the works of other travel writers of his time, writing about regions other than where Dalrymple writes, as well as incorporate reception study methods to investigate readers' own responses to Dalrymple's work, which is an important addition to the analysis provided here.

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