

On The Language of Travel and Migration

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About three years ago, as a member of the audience, I put a question to a panel on travel writing at the Sydney Writer's Festival. I asked why was it that, despite the massive migration from poor to rich countries over the last fifty years, so little travel writing by newcomers can be found in bookshops in the English-speaking world? Simon Winchester, the British war correspondent, was on the panel and volunteered an answer. Europeans, he said, were far more interested in the world outside their borders than other cultures. He went on to praise European adventurers and contrast their qualities with the narrow-mindedness of imperial China. I am not sure why he chose imperial China of all places, given that his unqualified statement appeared to span the entire planet and the whole six thousand years of human history. Anyway, I was rather surprised by this bluntly Euro-centrist view of the world. Winchester was revealing such a lack of knowledge of, and interest in, the old travel writing traditions of say the Indian or Arabic cultures, that his words in a sense carried their own refutation. Here was a European whose vocation was travel and writing. He does not shy away from making an over-sweeping public statement about the comparative attitude to travel of different cultures and yet he does not seem to have enough curiosity to check the travel writing traditions of other cultures. At stake of course is how we conceive of travel and who is considered to be a traveller. In other words, at stake is the identity politics of travel.

What is a traveller? Is the infant who crawls from the living room to the kitchen a traveller? Clearly, not. But why not. What about a commuter? Someone who travels a long distance everyday to get to work. The word 'commuter' comes with strings attached: there is 'home', 'work' and a certain geographical distance between them. The act of commuting implies a rigid and repetitive time-frame. You leave and return every day or every week. Compare this to 'tourist'. The word 'tourist' also assumes the existence of a home and a destination for tourism. Tourism comes from 'tours', with its circular connotations. Return is inevitable and tourists always return to the same, unchanged point of departure, which is called home. Beside, you can tell beforehand how long it would take you to go round a circle once. And indeed organized tours are advertised, first of all, by the amount of time they take.

A three-day tour of Rome or a one-week visit to Tasmania or Canberra in five minutes. There is less repetitiveness in tourism in comparison with commuting but no less predictability.

A traveller is a different proposition altogether. We all like to think of ourselves as travellers rather than mere tourists, even when we baulk at using the word because it may sound pretentious. Now a traveller is more interesting precisely because her displacement is more open-ended from a time point of view. A traveller does not know beforehand when she will be returning, even when her journey has a structure of some kind. And this chronic open-endedness leads inevitably to psychic open-endedness. We travel in order to discover a new world and to glimpse through that discovery new selves in ourselves. There is a definitely such an undercurrent in much travel writing. The longer we stay, the less we return, the more we change and the more different home is when we return. In fact, unlike commuters and tourists, travellers never return to the same home. Even when they return physically to their point of departure, they do not relate to it in the same way.

Take the Odyssey, that archetype of travel. It is of course significant that the Odyssey opens with Ulysses about to return home. It does not start at the chronological beginning, as one would have expected, that is when Ulysses leaves home on his way to fight the Trojans. What is it that makes Ulysses a traveller? It is not his adventures or the strange creatures and foreign lands that he encounters. It is his inability to control the conditions and timing of his return, that is the *unpredictability* of his journey. Without this unpredictability, without the postponement of return, his travels would remain external, physical and would not change him, nor change the way he relates to his home. Every travel journey is an open-ended search for home, for another home, for a better home; and the inability to return, no matter how temporary, is a necessary condition of the myth of travel.

But if home is an intrinsic part and a defining element of all travels, departure is also present in the very notion of home. A home that does not allow us to depart is not a home, it is a prison. A prison precludes the possibility of leaving. That is the whole purpose of a prison. And it is because you cannot leave it that you cannot belong to it even when you spend many years in there. In other words, the ability to depart is a necessary condition of belonging.

Another form of displacement which complicates the simple relationship between departing and returning, between belonging and leaving, is migration. Migrants become migrants precisely because they postpone indefinitely the possibility of returning, even when they wish to return and dream of returning. Migration is also a quest for home away from home, and in that sense is not very different from travel.

In fact, if you take the time to think about the words—traveller, tourist, migrant, expatriate, immigrant, émigré—you will find that the differences between them are enlightening. All of these words evoke forms of departure and implied forms of return, which impart an identity on the subject. You can be any one of those by going from one place to another. But what is it that makes you one rather than the other?

It is hard to be an émigré unless you are an exile from Russia or Central Europe living in Paris and it helps if you've written five novels along the way. We expect an immigrant to perform at least five years of menial jobs before she can make a better life for herself. If you are an Australian living in Darussalam, you would not be called a migrant, you would be called an expatriate and the word would have connotations of tax-free windfalls rather than the misery associated with immigration. If you are from PNG and living in Australia, on the other hand, you are called a migrant, no matter how much money you're making. At best, you're a migrant "success" story. Underlying all of these differences between travel words—words which structure the world for us—is a central assumption about where home is, whether we will return home and whether home is a place to which it is worth returning.

Émigré, emigrant and expatriate all imply, to some degree, an affluent form of departure, where the luxury of return is always present as a possibility. The e prefix sees to this. It defines the journey with respect to the point of departure. Home is too valuable to be forgotten. Compare this with immigrant or migrant where destination is fore-grounded, or at least, home is not worth mentioning. The problem is of course that our experiences rarely fit with any of these moulds. One's home is always worth returning to and always worth leaving. What I am trying to say is that these categories are less distinct than we like to think. Every traveller is a migrant looking for a better life elsewhere and subsistence is often an issue to travellers. Likewise, every migrant is a traveller, lured by the journey itself, even when looking for a better life in the West. I am not trying to over-romanticise migrants. Much of migrant literature has plenty of romantic self-aggrandisement. What I am trying to say is that these categories are less distinct than we like to think and blurring those distinctions affects the way we see ourselves.

That travellers write about their journeys and migrants don't has to do with the conditions of travel, most importantly the ability to return, both physically and spiritually. Writing itself is a form of return, a form of reclamation of home, not usually available to migrants. Every travel writer is implicitly saying to his folks back home: "look, although I have travelled far and wide and long, I still belong to you. I am still one of you. This is what I saw on my travels, not as an alien but as one of you." It is the lack of return that makes travel writing

difficult for a migrant—lack of return implying a breakdown of language. And breakdown of language happens at more than one level: there is the mismatch between the migrant's mother tongue and the language of his host country but there is also a breakdown of familiarity which language is often ill-prepared to convey and describe. Paradoxically it is the lack of return and the breakdown of language that makes the migrant's journey an interesting travel story, one that is worth listening to.

In fact, the most radical form of travel has got to be the one which, not just postpones indefinitely the possibility of returning but precludes it right from the beginning. Death *is* such a form of departure. The desperate man walking towards a bridge with the intention of jumping, is a radical traveller because he has given up return entirely. Suicide is, in a way, an extreme form of language breakdown—the desire, will or ability to communicate with others dies prior to physical death. Given this, you might want to stick to tourism, after all. I can see that I have cheered you up and might stop on this very bright note.