The travellee's eye: reading European travel writing, 1750-1850

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How did Europeans read and respond to foreign travel writing about their societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? The importance of the genre in shaping its readers' views of the world is often assumed. The problem, as usual with the history of reading, is one of evidence for travel writing's wider influence. As one scholar has memorably phrased it: 'reading is not eating'. Consuming books is not the same as consuming food: we cannot assume that travellers' perceptions were shared by those who read their accounts. This hasn't prevented conclusions being drawn about the importance of the genre for a home readership's knowledge about the world, and ideas about their place in it, for instance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, where travel writing is credited both with fostering free thinking and with confirming a smug ethnocentricity. ii Evidence for direct influence is, however, scant, even where travel writing's place in reading patterns can be mapped. iii Travel writing of the same period is also attributed key significance in other European societies, where the 'gaze of the other', apprehended through foreign accounts, is credited with shaping collective identities and national ideologies. Here, self-differentiation was supposedly spurred by the alterity attributed to these societies by travellers from Europe's North-West, while the vernacular reiteration of tropes of backwardness or inferiority is taken as evidence of the internalization of travellers' characterizations. iv However, ambivalent or self-stigmatizing national discourses are one thing; attributing them directly to foreign travel writing and a hegemonic Western gaze is another. Here too, the links are usually inferred rather than demonstrated.

Asking precisely how readers received foreign accounts about their societies, and how they reacted to the depictions they found there, is worth pursuing beyond these issues of knowledge and self-knowledge. Such a project goes a long way towards fulfilling the transnational potential offered by travel writing studies – by opening to scrutiny intercultural circuits of communication, influence and interaction, so often viewed from only one perspective, that of the western European traveller. Doing this means following the challenge Mary Louise Pratt laid down more than two decades ago, of paying attention to the 'travellee' (her slightly awkward coinage describing those people who were travelled *to*), and tracing the

ways that such people presented themselves in dialogue with metropolitan representations.

Her work envisioned such exchanges as taking place on a global scale. However, reducing the field of analysis to Europe has advantages, helping to 'provincialize Europe' in the sense not just of decentring it but also disaggregating it. Europe has its own symbolic geographies, its own cultural gradients and hierarchies, with scholars assigning travel writing a key role in creating and maintaining these. With its proliferation of travel accounts, accompanied by the accelerating circulation of print across Europe, the century between 1750 and 1850 offers a fruitful setting for an examination of the travellee-reader. Here I go beyond material from England and France, looking to those countries in Europe's East, South and North that are more often treated in modern scholarship as destinations. While most travellers wrote for domestic readerships, educated readers across Europe had access to works printed in Europe's capitals and Europe's major languages – and were curious about what was being written about their country. How was such travel writing perceived by travellees, and what happened when they responded?

This essay assesses the sources for studying travellees as readers of travelogues, and sketches some characteristic responses, as well as some of the changes these undergo, with an eye to the wider socio-cultural consequences. But let me start first with questions that relate specifically to the genre of travel writing, when read by a travellee. If we begin, as Robert Darnton has suggested all readings do, with the rhetorical protocols inscribed within the text, vi we can speculate about the possible responses prompted by travel writing's formal characteristics. Any first-person travel account invites the reader to accompany the traveller and gaze through his or her eyes. But reading foreign travel accounts of one's own society means finding oneself simultaneously displayed as the *object* of the narrator's description and analysis. The readers I describe here found themselves doubly written into these texts: first as projected readers being invited to share the narrator's position (and opinions) as he surveyed a country, and second, recognizing themselves as the objects of his gaze. (I use the male pronoun deliberately, not just because the majority of travel writers in this period were men, but since the closest analogy to the travellee-reader is that of a woman looking at paintings of female nudes, where the depiction implies and invites a male gaze.)vii Was the travelleereader to comply with the narrator's assumption of a shared point of view and a shared distance from the world described? Or would such a reader resist this invitation and insist on reading the travel account in relation to a different set of experiences and sense of self?

Where are we to look for sources? Reactions to foreign accounts may sometimes be glimpsed in comments recorded by subsequent travellers, who note the locals' views on earlier travel accounts. These readers sometimes seem astonishingly well informed, despite their apparent physical and linguistic distance from the traveller's implied audience at home. In 1836 John Paget was surprised by a woman in Pest who complained: 'A book, I see, has just been published in England in which all the ladies of Hungary are spoken of as ignorant and uneducated!' This was Michael Quin's *Steam Voyage down the Danube*, published in London that same year. But such comments record travellees' views only in a highly mediated form. They usually serve to establish the narrator's superiority by contrast (indeed, Paget followed this passage with his own critique of other British travellers, underlining his own more scrupulous research).^{viii}

Private records commenting directly on travel books – travellees' reading diaries, letters, marginalia – are as scarce for this type of reading as they are in general. Published sources, however, are relatively plentiful. From the mid-eighteenth century, it is possible to trace a lively audience of travellee-readers who express their opinions in print. These responses can take the form of published reviews, whether in the local press or in the pages of the great review journals, which occasionally commissioned reviewers who could assess a traveller's credibility from within the culture in question. ix *Translations* into a local vernacular offer another insight into travellee responses to specific texts, sometimes made explicit in an editor's preface or translator's annotations.^x 'Translation' is sometimes too simple a term to capture the complexity of cross-cultural reading and commentary, however: how is one to categorize Introduccion á la historia natural y á la geografía física de España (Madrid, 1775), a travel account by the Irish naturalist William Bowles originally published in Spanish, then republished in 1782 with introductory letters by the Spanish diplomat Don José Nicolás de Azara critically assessing accounts by a variety of *other* travellers, particularly Henry Swinburne (and then translated again into Italian under Azara's sponsorship)? A still richer array of materials can be found in the travel polemics published by exasperated travellees in response to specific provocations, often printed as separate works and addressed to a Europe-wide audience. This is a genre that appears as early as the sixteenth century, often explicitly citing the wide circulation afforded travellers' calumnies by print. When, for instance, Bishop Gudbrandur Thorláksson commissioned a defence of Iceland against foreign libel in 1593, his greatest ire was directed not at the author of a scurrilous German travel poem about Iceland but instead at the printer who published it 'thrice and four times over',

thus subjecting his homeland 'to shameful and everlasting ignominie'.xi The same exasperation with foreign misrepresentations prompted a sub-genre, the travellee's *counter-travelogue*: following the same route as that described by a foreign predecessor, but with radically different conclusions. This so far uncodified genre could vary from open polemic against a specific predecessor to a tacit rebuttal of clichéd journeys, and was particularly useful in marshalling local knowledge against an outsider's claims.

The precise form taken by a travellee's response depends on the context, not just with respect to local literary traditions and print culture, but also the degree of connection to the wider European intellectual and political sphere. Eighteenth-century reactions to foreign depictions published by diaspora Greeks, for instance, are far more plentiful and varied than those by other Balkan Christians under Ottoman rule. Some countries, such as Italy or Spain, had long experience of interaction with foreign observers, in exchanges that highlighted political, economic, religious or cultural difference and, from the seventeenth century, declining power and prestige. xii Here, responses to travel accounts were a part of much wider debates, with the terms set by pre-existing controversies. Thus, for example, in Spain, a heated set of polemics over travel accounts in the 1780s took place against the background of Montesquieu's treatment of Spain in the Persian Letters (1721) and, more immediately, Masson de Morvilliers' statement in the Encyclopédie méthodique (1783) that Spain had contributed nothing to European civilization. In this case, individual travelogues tended to be treated as emblematic of foreign discourses on Spain in general, and 'viajeros franceses' ['French travellers'] eventually became a catch-all object of patriotic resentment. xiii Elsewhere responses were more episodic and focused on specific travellers and their claims, while still being shaped by the wider context. Thus Catherine the Great rebutted Abbé Chappe d'Auteroche's Voyage en Sibérie (1768) in a line-by-line Antidote, ou examen du mauvais livre (1770) as part of her drive to control the Russian image in Europe; or the Highland minister Donald M'Nichol blasted Johnson's ignorance of the Gaelic literary tradition in his Remarks on Dr Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides (1779) against a background of English Scotophobia in the 1760s and 1770s. xiv Some responses were distinctly idiosyncratic – Dublin's reception of Richard Twiss's *Tour in Ireland* (1776) included not just published satires but also chamber pots with a portrait of the author on the bottom and a verse: 'Let everyone piss / On lying Dick Twiss'.xv How a work was read and responded to was shaped by other considerations than (in)accuracy alone.

For whom were these readings intended? The implied audience for translations and other responses published in a vernacular is clearly a domestic one. But other examples are more ambiguous: travellees' reviews, polemics and counter-travelogues were frequently published in languages of wider international circulation – Latin, French, German, English, Italian. Such texts directly addressed a cosmopolitan readership, but it should not be forgotten that this audience also included educated compatriots as well as foreigners. Finally, these readings actively solicited responses, whether from the original travellers or from others. And they received them. Prolonged exchanges, drawing in a host of others, reveal the highly complex communicative fields within which travel writers and readers operated.^{xvi} The salient divisions were not always cultural or national: social position, religion, political ideology or scholarly predilections could all come into play. Any analysis of the phenomenon needs to take into account both textual and contextual parameters: from reading protocols, genre conventions and literary traditions to scientific theory, social hierarchies or geopolitics.

Taking all this into account, is it possible to look beyond the contingent content of travellees' readings and responses and trace any general patterns in this period?

Reading foreign travelogues, whether against or with the grain of travel writing's rhetorical protocols, meant grappling with any gap between the perspective of the narrator and that of the travellee-reader. From the perspective of one's own society, judging a foreign traveller's portrayal usually meant assessing how far the author got things right or wrong. The eighteenth and nineteenth-century 'objective' travel account actively solicited a response in terms of its accuracy – and who was better placed to judge this than an insider? Travellees were predictably exercised by travellers' factual mistakes and had no difficulty pinpointing reasons for error. The usual diagnoses included superficial acquaintance with the place described; ignorance of the language; lack of access to any but a limited social circle; gullibility and the failure to verify hearsay empirically; and unwarranted generalization from individual cases. Larger differences in interpretation – representing an entire society as barbarous and un-European, for instance – could be attributed to the accumulation of factual errors, or prejudice towards the travellee's homeland or confession. But even ostensibly flattering depictions could grate – as when travellers from Europe's most industrialized and socially stratified regions praised less developed areas as retaining 'the innocence and natural liberty of the pastoral centuries' or for being 'picturesque' or 'romantic'. xvii Here the travellees' accusation was of double standards: what such travellers aestheticized abroad would be viewed at home as poverty or disorder. Not all differences could be resolved so neatly,

however, and travellee readings prompted important arguments over the causes and explanations of human diversity: were these to be found in climate, political institutions, or psycho-physical traits? Travellees regularly challenged a newly determinist eighteenth-century ethnology with the arguments of historical contingency, cultural relativism and Enlightenment moral universalism. xviii

Increasingly indignant travellee reactions may have been prompted by the changing character of travel reports in the eighteenth century: away from encyclopaedic description or classical reflections to a thematic preoccupation with the 'manners and customs' of foreign lands, and from compilation towards methods based on personal observation and comparison. xix But what if the point of the narrative lay elsewhere than in a factual, objective depiction of a foreign society – in the emotional response of the narrator to experience, for example? Or if the travelogue was only ostensibly about the journey and its setting, and instead was shaped by other ends: political allegory, or the parody of a genre? What was the effect on a reader trying to reconcile the perspectives of narrator and travellee? Laurence Sterne's Sentimental Journey (1768) inspired travellers across Europe to imitate its subjective, playful manner, but travellees who found themselves the butt of modish wit were less amused. Fleuriot de Langle's Voyage de Figaro en Espagne (1784) infuriated its Spanish readers almost as much with its sarcastic paradoxes and flippant tone as its inaccuracy and impiety. Their anger was not deflected by Fleuriot's appeal to the example of Sterne and his claim that: 'This is not a Journey to Spain that you read, it is the author's own journey, as its title declares; it is about himself, all about himself; you will find more here than Spain'. xx Fleuriot's satire may have been an indirect criticism of French political institutions and social structure, as the Count of Aranda pointed out in his denunciation, but it was nonetheless made at Spain's expense. xxi This newly personal, sometimes facetious, strain in travel writing, combined with an increasingly determinist view of human diversity, may help account for the extraordinary outburst of travellee polemics across Europe between the 1760s and 1780s. The Romantic narrative of travel and self-discovery posed similar problems for travellee-readers who found themselves reduced to 'local colour'. A patriotic Greek reader of Chateaubriand's paradigmatically subjective and allegorical Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem (1811) objected vigorously to this 'poem in prose' depicting modern Greece as moribund and incapable of reviving its past glory. His counter-travelogue pedantically listed each instance of the Frenchman's 'daring insolence, plagiarism and shameless lies'.xxii In return the Greek Avramiotti was mocked for having failed to understand that Chateaubriand's genius lay

precisely in his imagination and artifice. *xxiii* 'Does it work on its own (literary) terms?' might be a more appropriate question in response to such works than 'is it accurate?' but this might reasonably be accompanied by questions such as those raised by this Greek reader: 'is it well-intentioned?' and 'what are the consequences?' Reading travel writing with an insider's eye highlighted issues of ethics and power that could seem unimportant from a distance.

On the other hand, consenting to share the narrator's vision and identifying with the traveller, as demanded by the travelogue's reading protocols, meant viewing oneself and one's society from outside. It was all very well if the traveller's opinions could be aligned with the reader's own view of his or her society, whether positive or negative. This does not necessarily mean that such readers passively internalized foreign views. Travellee elites actively instrumentalized foreign accounts for their own domestic purposes. 'This is how they see us' could be a powerful spur to shame or to pride, whether or not the observations were accepted as correct. The Spanish ilustrado Antonio Ponz, for instance, vigorously rebutted the errors of foreign travellers in the 1780s, but nonetheless interpreted their criticism as a 'most efficacious alarm to make us take account'. XXIV Yet the question 'is this really how they see us?' could remain troubling. An anonymous Romanian translator of the sections of Thomas Thornton's *Present State of Turkey* (1807) dealing with Moldavia and Wallachia bitterly lamented the way his country had been slandered abroad. Foreign travellers 'have written down all the sordid facts in order to defame us. And what is most surprising, most upsetting, and most lamentable is that of all these bad things, not one is a lie, instead it is all true'. But revealing to his compatriots 'in what abomination, in what disrepute, and in what dishonour, and in what position [they are held], such a good-for-nothing nation, somnolent, uncouth, stamped with apathy, lazy, indolent and ruled only by pride, arrogance, and extravagance without end and without limit', was not only a call to action but also a bitter selfindictment.xxv Seeing oneself through other eyes was a means of critical self-knowledge for projects of modernization – though at the cost of accepting standards set elsewhere.

How does looking through the travellee's eye help us assess travel writing's role in the construction and maintenance of Europe's cultural hierarchies? Ideally, the answer would draw on a Europe-wide map of the distribution, frequency and character of travellee responses over several centuries, but the bibliographical resources required are scarce and scattered. A necessarily incomplete survey of travellee polemics and counter-travelogues published between 1750 and 1800 does highlight Europe's geographical and political peripheries, with notable counterblasts published by travellees from Iceland, Ireland,

Scotland, Russia, Poland, Wallachia, Dalmatia, Greece, Italy and Spain. xxvi France and England are conspicuous by their absence, though this may be an illusion produced by the period selected. English reactions against French travellers had already been voiced earlier, with respect to Samuel Sorbière's *Relation d'un voyage en Angleterre* (1664). Not only were his views rebutted in England, but his name became a byword for the superficial and ill-informed foreign critic after a satire of trifling travel accounts was published under his name in 1698, and Voltaire cited him as a counter-model in his own remarks on travel writing in 1727. xxvii A later account by the Swiss Béat Louis de Muralt, *Lettres sur les Anglois et les François* (1725; 1728), comparing English common sense favourably to French wit and challenging the supremacy of French literature, provoked long-lasting reverberations in France despite predictable jeers at 'Swiss philosophy'. xxviii Still, it is remarkable that the new style of travel writing in the later eighteenth century prompted so little cross-cultural response from these societies. Even Smollett's irascible *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) elicited little more than a collective Gallic shrug, with the French reviewers less inclined to outrage than to ironic concern for Smollett's health. xxix

However, a map outlining a complacent France and England facing down an indignant European periphery would be misleading in other ways. For one thing, travellee indignation was widely distributed. Near neighbours and rivals rather than a hegemonic 'centre' (or even foreigners in general) were the usual targets: travellee polemicists from Spain and Italy directed their ire at France and England, but Icelanders were more concerned about German publications, Dalmatians about Italian observers, and the anonymous Romanian translator cited earlier listed English, German, Hungarian and Russian writers among the slanderers of his nation. Infuriated travellees could find themselves the object of others' fury in turn: Italians, so often figured as backward and inferior by travellers from the North, projected these qualities onto their own others, in the Italian South or farther abroad, to an angry response. Giuseppe Baretti, despite castigating English Grand Tourists for their ill-founded views of Italy, was himself denounced for his generalizations about Portugal – having failed to heed his own warnings about 'fashionable characterisers of modern nations'. XXX And polemics did not always divide into neat traveller/travellee camps: Baretti was lectured by an Italian resident in Portugal, while elsewhere Poles defended Sicilians, and Dalmatians differed among themselves over the views of Italian travellers. xxxi The divisions of Europe revealed by these controversies did not map onto a conventional cultural gradient. Furthermore, the image of a beleaguered cultural periphery is belied by the self-confident

responses of these travellees, who take for granted their access to a European Republic of Letters and their ability to contribute to debates over the character of Europe's peoples.

But how successful were their efforts? Some rebuttals extracted corrections from the original travellers or later writers, but this was unusual. Other ripostes simply advertised their opponents' works. As Aranda noted, 'a commentary rarely amuses. [...] The truth, when it is neither pleasant nor piquant, is too ordinary for most readers'. The Spanish diplomat succeeded in having the impudent French Figaro's account burnt in Paris but, as its author had anticipated, 'the public loves burnt books', and this simply made it more marketable. Every responses circulated as widely as the texts they attacked; where they were cited and recirculated, they were adapted for other purposes, not necessarily the authors' own.

A similarly impressionistic sketch-map from the half-century after 1800 suggests an evolution in travellees' responses. Direct polemics and counter-travelogues addressed to an international court of opinion still appeared, but less frequently. (Notable examples come from Russia, in reaction to the account by the Marquis de Custine, and Greece, against Chateaubriand.) Instead, travellees found less confrontational ways of challenging foreign disparagement. Fictional counter-travelogues appear, quietly refuting stereotyped images (e.g. José Blanco White's Letters from Spain, 1822). xxxiii Other efforts at self-defence hid behind citations of other foreign travellers as more authoritative proxies. This was the technique followed by Ugo Foscolo in his attack on 'Classical tours' of Italy, and by Greek editors defending modern Greece from the caustic wit of the French author Edmond About. For Italy, Maurizio Isabella has interpreted this early nineteenth-century engagement with travellers' views as evidence of independent ideological struggle rather than passive assimilation. xxxiv True enough, but in a longer perspective these side-long, deferential approaches contrast with the markedly more self-confident confrontations of the eighteenth century, and not only in Italy. Reasons may have included the changes in the character of travel writing cited above, and perhaps the declining prestige of polemic, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that such tactics were also the result of frustration, particularly in countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece with long experience of fruitless attempts to contest foreign opinion. The inadvertent consequence of such an approach, however, was to bolster the cultural authority of external arbiters.

The increasing number of vernacular reactions addressed to compatriots rather than to a wider European audience had the same effect, whether travellers' views were cited for the

purposes of nationalist self-affirmation or self-critique. The importance attributed to the opinions of travellers from Europe's self-proclaimed centres was what made them useful to local elites in the first place; repeating them at home, however instrumentally, reinforced their authority. Even if foreign views were denounced as wrong or malicious, they were still accorded a crucial significance. This may help explain how travellers' opinions imposed themselves on the self-understanding of local inhabitants over the long term, and how a response to the traveller's gaze seems to set the very categories of identity in some societies. *Reading* foreign travel accounts was not the only way in which 'the gaze of the other' could exert influence.

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