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The scent of things: Travel and the traces of the past

Abstract:

Encounters with the historical and contemporary materiality of travel may occur objectively and/or imaginatively, as the traveller moves by air, land or water, passes streets, squares, buildings, enters rooms, museums, palaces, crosses bridges, mountains, canyons. Even other people can present as material entities, encapsulating the shock of difference, the flesh and odours of lived reality, the impossibility of possession. However prepared for a journey by reading, thinking, and research, in the end, for the writer as traveller, it is the act of travel while writing itself which becomes the heuristic enterprise, the experiment which leads to a solution, an understanding or a new question that may never be definitively solved. This discussion explores the representability of travel writing as material engagement and as a creative endeavour of scholarly inquiry. The presentation will take the form of a framed auto/narrative which follows a sequence of journeys undertaken by the author, in reverse order that speak to questions of authenticity and illusion across space and time.

Biographical note:

Stephanie Green is Program Director for the Graduate Certificate in Creative and Professional Writing at Griffith University. She has published creative writing in journals such as *TEXT Journal, Axon* and *Griffith Review*, and in various anthologies and collections. Her academic research encompasses studies in creative writing, biography, literature and screen culture. She contributes to the International Prose Poetry Project and has a collection with Recent Work Press appearing in Sept 2019 entitled *Breathing in Stormy Seasons*.

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As a starting point for this piece, I have chosen to (mis)appropriate an aim of creative writing research articulated by Adrian Miles, with reference to Carter: which is not to invent a new kind of writing,

> but to enlarge or expand the range of what 'counts' as academic knowledge through the recognition and validation of the materialities of writing as a mode of doing and making … humanities research. (Miles 2008: 3)

Miles applies his aim to a consideration of hypertextual writing, as one of several contexts where research is able to slide from an activity that is prior to, or somehow anterior to, the act of writing, and into the very fabric of research in itself', demonstrating 'the multifaceted, porous and heuristic nature of knowledge' (2008: 3). In my case, however, I will use travel writing, as a way of attempting to show how, for the writer as traveller, the seemingly 'anterior' experience of travel is, in fact, central to the process and outcomes of cultural inquiry through narrative production.

Encounters with the historical and contemporary materiality of travel may occur objectively and/or imaginatively, as the traveller moves by air, land or water, passes streets, squares, buildings, enters rooms, museums, palaces, crosses bridges, mountains, canyons. Even other people can present as material entities, encapsulating the shock of difference, the flesh and odours of lived reality, the impossibility of possession. Walter Benjamin writes of his 'first great disappointment' when visiting Peacock Island in Berlin as a child, where he has been 'told that I should find peacock feathers on the grass' only to see that there were no loose feathers waiting for him to collect, only grass, peacocks, and earth (Benjamin 2007 [1978]: 57). So we travel, in search of something to hold, to take away, something that, after all, is never really ours, even if we pay for it in some way, even if we have no qualms of making commodity from experience. Whether we find or fail to find the objects of our desires, the travel writer can always make something out of words, putting the pieces of experience together in a particular way, through objects, images, colours and faces that speak of something else, whether disappointment or realisation or presentiment. I am thinking, for instance, of the slippage between palpability and apprehension in the moment described by Martin Edmonds as he stood before a shop window on an Amsterdam street in the fading evening light (2004: 2-4). On display behind the glass was a human skull, which for Edmonds 'produced a curious and unsettling illusion: my own face reflected in the glass over the bones of the skull, like a premonition of my death' (2004: 3). In a similar way, for Benjamin, writing of the missing peacock feathers, somehow more vivid in their absence, was a way of invoking the sharp condition of loss, for a forgotten world, perhaps for childhood itself and its possibilities.

> My reproachful dismay as I scoured the turf so vainly was not directed against the peacocks that I saw strutting up and down, but, rather, against the soil of the island itself, which was a peacock island yet bore no peacock earth. Had I found the feather I craved in the grass, I should have felt as if I were expected and welcome at this spot. Now the island seemed to have broken a promise. (2007 [1978]: 57)

Benjamin here makes something from nothing, the absence of peacock feathers which nevertheless invokes their elusive materiality – their dark green, gold, and blue, the hard yellow-white quill, the soft slender lightness, so frail only the mind can touch it – yet so tangible it can be caught on the updraft of words spinning the feathers, the peacocks and Pfaueninsel itself, with its whimsical constructed ruins, into one strange thread of existence from the memory of a small childhood disappointment.

Reflecting on the experiential process of memoir, perhaps we can say that travel writing is always, at once, both the apprehension of momentarity and the encapsulation of memory. It is always, in some sense, an account of what we can never prepare for and what always eludes us as we traverse. However prepared for a journey by reading, thinking, and research, in the end, for the writer as traveller, it is the act of travelling while writing – indeed of writing while travelling – which becomes the heuristic enterprise, the experiment which leads to a solution, an understanding or a new question that may be – or may never be – definitively solved. This essay thus proceeds as a way of exploring the representability of travel writing as material engagement and as a creative endeavour of scholarly inquiry. What follows will take the form of a framed auto/narrative which refers to a sequence of journeys, in reverse order, that I hope will speak to such questions of materiality, authenticity, and illusion across space and time.

Riga

Two pairs of shoes at the end of day. One bigger than the other. Both are sole-worn, street-soiled, sour-scented from weeks of warm weather sight-seeing. Ian puts them as far out of sniff range as possible, in the tiny hall near the door. Sweet air. We have arrived. The sky is thick with rain. Soon we will go out into the square, weaving through narrow streets and weekend beer-drinkers, admiring the high tapered doors, the friezes and wrought cats on spires.

Our apartment is in the old centre, on the fourth floor of an apartment building next to an empty church, a couple of blocks from the main square. There are two high windows and if you stand on a chair, you can see the synagogue. There is Wi-Fi, the ubiquitous flat screen television, and a ‘queen’ sized bed tucked away in a curtained alcove. The bed looks romantic behind its filmy white veil, although I will have to swallow my claustrophobia to sleep there. Even so, we are happy to arrive. Latvia is the last of the northern European cities on our route. Of all, it is the easiest of our arrivals. By contrast, days earlier, it had taken us eight hours to reach Tallinn, held up at the Russian-Estonian border by a succession of routine checks and inspections that stretched the patience of everyone on board the train.

For two days we lean into corners and raise our cameras to capture the beautiful, crumbling flourishes of another age. Round windows punctuating an oval balconette. Caryatids magnificent in servitude. A profusion of decorative fruit and flowers. Small animals captured and frozen in time. On the last day, Ian sleeps in snatches, softly disturbed by the late afternoon sun. We have feasted our eyes on the glorious forms of plaster and stone in four

cities. Another day and we stand by the wide river slipping past us, with its new bridges and monuments splayed, stark blue grey, cloud-blurred, reaching in silver strands to the hailing world. Ian brings out his camera and I turn away, but I am caught looking back at his face, cheeks red and wrinkled above a chiaroscuro beard and his eyes clear as early morning. Later, this image will be a reminder, sea-blue eyes framed against an overcast European sky.

Our friends say they will only travel to former USSR countries now. Everywhere else is spoiled. Venice is overwhelmed by crowds and cruise ships dwarfing the glorious skyline. Controversy about the destruction of the city from overuse and tourism pollution has made no difference. Florence is worn down by the feet of visitors. In the Uffizi you can't get close enough to the works of art to see them as groups of people cluster around. In Paris, visiting the Louvre requires a careful advance campaign. London is wildly over priced and the underground is a nightmare in summer. Even Prague is wildly congested. In Krakow, though, the tourist season is still confined to the summer months. Budapest is full of energy and not too crowded in the off-season. Slovakia is relatively free of tourists and surprisingly intriguing. Bulgaria and Georgia are still affordable. So they say, yet more come every summer. The consumption of place abounds and reforms the idea of place itself as a kind of servitude to the tourist industry.

To write about place, in a way, is to remake it. Travel writing presumably rests on the real, yet that reality is, of necessity, already past. Its appearance on the page recasts a lived experience that might be regarded differently by every traveller. So travel writing is also, of necessity, invention and reinvention, and it can reflect encounters with place, people, and self.

Leaving Leningrad

We had started out from St Petersburg in the last shadows of the night, dragging our bags around puddles, through pools of laser light from the clubs where the bouncers still lingered outside doors, tired and hopeful, so nervous and so ready with their fists and their thighs. There were no buses or trams at that early hour so we walked the full distance along Nevsky Prospekt, over the curving canal bridges, red onion towers in the distance, past the exhausted girls wandering crookedly in each other's arms and the brooding boys in black leather keeping their distance and the drunks calling out for a cigarette we did not have to give. Sometimes we paused or called to each other as we admired the shape of a door or counted elegant window frames as we went by. We stared at the sky cracking first light through clouds as far as the river's curve, and the twisting shine from the dying street lamps on the smoky, wet iron railings.

I will always think of this place as three cities. A conundrum of past and present. Petrograd, testament to the grand design of Queen Catherine the Great and her fantastic enlightenment excess. Leningrad, with its dusty 1917 revolutions, so romantic from this distance of time and space. And now, again, Petrograd, the city of contradictions, a tangle of bureaucracy and enterprise, a rough poverty that occupies the ruined Edwardian avenues, and power, rougher

still, inhabiting shiny new edifices most of us can never enter. The elegance of the past studded with so many global corporate consumer icons I won't name. In reality, St Petersburg is many cities rolled into one.

The night before we had slept only a few restless hours before our long early morning march, but finally, at the end of the avenue, we saw the flat roof of the station, dark behind the mist of rain and the nineteenth-century pilasters. We went in together up the steps and passed the security people to find a smoky waiting area ranged on one side by American chain restaurants and, on the other, souvenir shops not yet open for business. At last the platform number showed on the board and we could walk past the guard to where fourteen smoke-infused carriages stretched out on a narrow long station platform. The brown-haired conductor looked at us carefully, neat in her uniform, checking that we were travelling together, making a note of our different names. Inside the train, stained rows of carriage seats were scuffed by sixty years of daily use. Torn head papers, heavy seats with no arms or fold-down tables. A dragged-out roll of striped cotton toilet towelling already greying from the feet of passengers on a rainy autumn morning, covered a worn wool carpet, once a new promise of softness in hard times. The square heavy seats and pull-down windows linked me more with the Australian country train journeys taken in my childhood, than the plush, modern train that took us from Helsinki to St Petersburg.

No luxury now, only bare duration, stiff axles, and scraping metal grind. The passengers shared no first language. We nodded acknowledgements to one another before turning back to our phones, but there was a quiet warmth among us. The sky had cleared. We had nothing to do but try to relax and wait out the eight hours it takes to arrive.

Once the train has departed, the conductor covers her uniform with a pink overall and softens her severity with a kind gesture and lipsticked smile. She is Russian and I wonder where she has her home; going backwards and forwards every day for these two eight-hour train trips that could – with more trust between nations – take less than six hours. Does she live in some apartment in the city or is this train itself a kind of home? She has a small office near the carriage door where she does her work, checking the passenger lists, marking off their destinations, preparing the small tray of things she has for sale: tea glasses, post cards, snow domes. I make a list of phrases to describe her: hound-eyes, gentle-pink, severely theatrical.

To write about this is to invoke a traveller's tale of the seeming past. A journey without the ubiquity and distraction of corporate technology – unlike the plusher trains and bus coaches that traverse Europe, there are no PA announcements, no Wi-Fi, no movies, and no catering to speak of, no advertisements to aggravate. The journey is what we make of it in our dreams as we sleep and stare at the disappearing villages, the pine and beech plantations, the green plains with crops cut away to prepare for the next season.

The windows of our carriage are covered with white gauze café curtains, an oddly feminine touch in this worn old beast of a train. I wonder if it is her doing or a standard accoutrement. I had filled my thermos with black tea before leaving our rented St Petersburg apartment, but I discover an electric samovar in an alcove beside her office, which, although it looks to be fifty years old by its stained, shadowy workings, provides boiling water for the carriage.

This entertains me, watching other passengers make the wavering trek up and down the aisle to fill a mug with hot water for tea or dried packet soup, or to visit the bathroom – shabby with age but kept clean and stocked with toilet paper by our conductor.

When the border crossing finally comes, words mean little. Faces are careful. Not one eye makes a sideways glance. First the Russian border guards, then passport control and customs. The train moves forward a hundred metres or so. Then, the Russian police make their way through the carriage, before the train can ease forward again. With fourteen carriages it is a slow process and nobody is in a rush. They have their jobs and they do them sincerely.

Across the border, in Estonia, the whole process is repeated again. This time a curly-tailed dog runs down the aisle, sniffing its way gently towards us, raising and lowering its little paws. Nothing here, nothing there to worry at, nothing yet. We sigh quietly to each other after each interval, weary of the old train nudging forward in painful increments. The Russian guard's questions and answers are mumbles to us. The Scandinavians slump against the window and speak only a word or two in English. The Frenchwoman shows her papers; her husband is the Estonian sitting at the opposite window. The dog runs on.

In our seats we stretch out – middle-aged Australian tourists, uninteresting to dogs and even border guards. Only the young Malaysian couple next to us, with their clumpy backpacks, are sitting upright in their seats. They are questioned in English at each check point. Six officers, six sets of questions. Where are you going? Why are you here? What is in that bag? My clothes, says the girl, just my clothes. She is controlled, bland, but you can also feel her increasing affront. The boy stays calm. He shows by his face that he has nothing to hide. The customs officer asks the girl to open the bag. The little dog puts its paws on the seat arm and twitches its smart nose into the bag. Nothing interesting there.

Finally, after this dull halting creep, the train speeds up again. We leave the industrial borderland sidings for Estonian pasture and forests. Stepping down from the train in Tallinn, we smile to see so many families bring flowers to meet the train, yellow sunflowers from the market folded together, three pale pink roses tied with string, a bag of geraniums clinging to their earthy roots, like the ones we grew at home, so pink you could kiss them, then press your lips to a window to leave a glamorous mark. We have nobody to bring us flowers here. I draw a child-like flower in a corner of my notebook to remember.

This is the tenth trip Ian and I have made since we began travelling together over a decade ago. We have been in Italy several times, but also Spain, where we turned up our hot faces to the fine cooling spray of the Seville cafés. In Turkey, we clambered over barren pointed rocks to find waterfalls and ancient cave villages. In Egypt, the 2011 uprising held us in uncertain thrall. After each trip, I always wonder if it will be our last. I feel we have contributed too much to the wasting of the world with our curious greed for knowledge, for strange sights and adventures.

Travel stained

My earliest journeys were ways to avoid writing but more importantly they were ways to avoid myself. I might as well admit it now. I kept journals of a kind – little notebooks that are still stacked in a cupboard filled with lists, fragmentary observations, short emotional outbursts, character descriptions of people I met along the way. These scant writings in my notebook amounted to nothing in themselves, but maybe, maybe they were the preparation in draft work that I would later use to build the stories and poems that I wrote. I wrote most days as I travelled but always briefly – in a café, under a bridge during a rainstorm, at night by a hostel fire.

In the mid-1980s I mostly travelled alone. Through then familiar countries – England, France, and Greece – to the less well-trodden in those days: Portugal and Hungary. There were places I could not then afford to visit on the meagre strength of my savings, like Romania, where tourism was highly regulated. When I tried to stay in one place for more than a few days, something would always stop me – a kind of restlessness that still plagues me sometimes.

In the Netherlands, I stayed for six weeks with an Australian friend, a musician. She and her son took me cycling along canals through drifts of snow and to eat apple cake in pubs where cats watched the cold outside from carpeted window ledges.

In Italy, I lingered for weeks, from spring into summer, thinking I might stay and teach English, but I never did. I roamed by bus, local train, and on foot through small towns in Tuscany and Umbria. I worked my way through the museums and monuments of Rome. I spent my evenings with people I met in hostels, or friends of friends, drinking wine and eating the simple Roman food, bruschetta rubbed over with a clove of garlic and drizzled with olive oil, salads of fresh mozzarella cheese, sliced between leaves of basil and tomato, pasta with crushed tomato or zucchini and parmesan cheese.

On those journeys people rarely took advantage of my naivete. Only once, as I travelled on foot over sunny green hills in early summer, just outside a village between San Gimignano and Siena, did I run into trouble when a boy on a motorini with a long white face rode around me in circles. He offered me a ride, asked me to go with him for a coffee. I said ‘No’ a dozen times and swore in Italian. It made no difference. Maybe it never does. I walked. He rode. The circles grew smaller. He asked for more. No one passed us on the road. No one saw me. He wanted me to go to his ‘cave’ and beat him while he pleasured himself. It became obvious, I had no choice. The noise of the motorini quietened.

He lived in one room, with a single iron-frame bed, a ceramic laundry sink with one cold water tap to wash himself and a small wooden table with one chair. On the table was a cut loaf turned down, a dry yellow cheese on a chipped majolica plate, and a half-drunk bottle of wine. Underneath his shoulder-padded jacket, he wore a stained white cotton apron that covered his jeans down to his knees. He threw the jacket and apron on the bed and whispered fantasies in his husky lisping voice, a melange of Italian and English, night-time dreams that belonged to him alone.

I felt nothing, but I did as he asked, once shouting fiercely. This excited him, although he begged me to be quiet in case the neighbour heard. I watched his white face in the mirror, the black eyes hollowed out, like a mask. He never touched my body, only kissed me on the cheeks in the formal fashion as we parted at 3am. The words in my notebook described that kiss as a dry scratch – his bearded jaw against my pale cheek. He offered me the wine to drink and his bed to rest on while he went to work for the local baker. He promised to bring me a fresh loaf and to see me off at the bus station, but I was gone by the time he returned.

That morning I arrived in Siena, wrapped in a state of pale confusion. I was disorientated by lack of sleep and a feeling of strangeness or self-loathing that I had somehow let myself be caught. I washed my face in a café toilet in the old centre and ate a wedge of panforte with two bittersweet espressos in quick succession, to wake myself. I wondered then how he could have known. What darkness in myself had I revealed, that he somehow recognised? Some willingness to go along with a game I only wanted to escape.

I had been to Siena once before and climbed the exquisite town hall tower to stare out at the pointed trees and scalloped hills. I would do so again but not that day. That morning, I wandered away from the Piazza del Campo like an exhausted ghost, losing myself high up among the steep cobbled lanes, admiring the elegant pointed facades and assemblages of terracotta rooves. Hours later, I stumbled down again to the piazza facades and the sawdust traces of a horse race that should have ended with modernity, lingering on as nostalgia for a grandeur that belongs to a time and place that only the troubadours remember. As my day passed, as the sun's angle changed, I became almost myself again – urban, knowing, careful. In Siena, I could almost leave behind that other being, the young traveller who could stumble so easily into uncertainty, the one who would bend to adventure in quest of regret. What else could I make of it – some kind of aporia in my story of self, whereby what once made sense no longer could?

Contradictions

As Watson expresses it, narratives 'enable us to make sense of our lives', but are also 'an insoluble contradiction', allowing chaos 'through a conflictual movement' of continuity and conflict that undermines our attempts to make sense of the lived experience by 'reading backwards' (2008: 334-335). More applicable perhaps is the idea of the 'V-effekt', a strategy of narrative defamiliarisation or alienation in Brechtian theatre, where empathy is somewhat distanced and where the formal effects of artifice are shown (Byford 2002: 39). The purpose of the technique is not to numb the audience but to bring about a contradiction that allows the audience to see things differently, to 'reveal possibility' and engage cognition in order to provoke or inspire social comment and change action (Brooker 2006: 218).

In this context, then, the events of a journey in which one makes oneself vulnerable as a young woman are not in themselves meaningful because of the emotion or psychic conflict they invoke. Rather, the events point to an ordinary social experience that for most women is commonplace and even public, yet at once covert, shameful, and secret. I felt, then, that

something in me had drawn the white-faced boy to me, that my own invisible darkness was visible to him. This shame is socially instilled, but it is also a kind of magical thinking. A false assumption of guilt and powerlessness that can draw all of us into servitude. Logic is no enemy of imagination, but it takes the surprise of defamiliarisation to make us look, think and even act differently. Brecht says:

> The V-effect consists in turning the object of which we are to be made aware, to which our attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking, unexpected … the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness. (Brecht 2018: 221)

Remember, I have said that my refusal made no difference. What happened, happened anyway. There was no black magic, no darkness shining secretly within me. I was a young woman travelling alone. I was out of place. I was fair game to a lonely boy on a bike. In the circumstances, one might say, I was lucky. As a writer, I was doubly lucky, because here, dragged out of a part of myself I momentarily thought I had lost, was a story to tell.

It was not an unfamiliar feeling. Only a couple of years earlier I had lost everything and found everything at the same time. In a town that smelled of burnt chocolate, on the platform of an old-fashioned train station, I had parted company with another boy. Each of us had come to that journey full of shared excitement and hope. In that small town, in fact long before we arrived there together, we realised our ways were different. On that day, each of us were broken-hearted yet longing for freedom. But troubles never come alone. The next morning, I turned away from my backpack and when I looked around it was gone. Somebody had stolen my burden and I would never see its contents again. It was then, on the stone steps of that station, in the empty train carriage, in the cold room where I slept late that night after shared stories with wine and strangers, that I began to write.

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