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Title of essay: What Am I Still Doing Here? Travel, Travel Writing, and Old Age

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What Am I Still Doing Here?

Travel, Travel Writing, and Old Age

Wanderlust, unlike other lusts, does not diminish with age. (Murphy 2015: vii)

What Am I Doing Here (1989) was the last book that Bruce Chatwin, widely credited with breathing new life into the moribund genre of travel writing with his 1977 book on Patagonia, completed in his lifetime. It is a miscellaneous collection of stories, essays, and reviews which includes only one genuine travelogue (on trekking in Nepal). Its title, in which the interrogative form is curiously subverted by the lack of punctuation, nonetheless articulates a question that many travel writers put to themselves at some point in their lives or careers. It is a question that, it might be supposed, would occur more frequently the older a travel writer gets, whether because of declining physical health, waning interest in a genre that makes serious demands on body, time, and relationships, or a growing sense that one has seen as much of the world as one wants to – that one has lost that capacity to be “bored by nothing” that, Alain de Botton suggests, has fueled some of the best travel narratives (de Botton 2002: 117). Some travel writers do renounce the genre well before the end of their literary careers: Jonathan Raban, for example, has not published a travel book since *Passage to Juneau* (1999) because he feels that he “took the form as far as [he] could” in that work (Wozniak 2006). Nevertheless, there are notable modern travel writers who have carried on traveling and writing about their travels through their sixties and seventies; some even carry on into their eighties. This phenomenon of the older travel writer has received little or no critical attention (gender, race, sexuality, and nationality have provided

important analytical frames, but age is never mentioned), and is the focus of the present essay.

In the modern era, the association of travel – especially more ambitious or adventurous forms of travel – with youth has multiple roots. In the eighteenth century there were the Grand Tourists, “young men travelling with tutors for several years to Paris and Italy in order to finish their education” (Black 1992: 300). The Romantic period saw undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge setting off on long pedestrian tours as a cult of “radical walking” emerged in sympathy with the revolutionary spirit of the age (Jarvis 1997: 33-39). In more recent times a major social trend has been the rising popularity of gap year travel. The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, which tracked a large cohort of just under 16,000 young people from age 13/14 to age 19/20, found that 34% of gap year takers cited travelling as their main intended activity, with another 14% planning to work abroad (Crawford and Cribb 2012: 27). Low-budget, open-ended, independent travel frequently has the character of a rite of passage for young people, at least those for whom the idea of a “gap” between school and higher education has any relevance at all. Of course, it is well known that older people are also keen travelers, not least the current generation of retirees (the Boomers) which has time and financial resources to enjoy that earlier generations could only dream of. In the West, “senior tourism” is now “one of the biggest growth and most important markets in the tourism industry”, while the World Trade Organisation estimates that “by 2050 there will be more than 2 billion international travelers aged 60 and above” (Alén et al 2016: 304). Nevertheless, the tourist industry arguably operates with very limiting, indeed patronizing, assumptions about older travelers: one study of holidays marketed to elderly British consumers, for example, found that the advertising presumed general insecurity and a need for every care to be taken care of, a

preference for the company of one's (British) peers and age-appropriate entertainments, and the desirability of places where "foreignness" was subtly re-packaged as "a slightly more colorful and warmer version of home" (Chaney 1995: 220). Clearly this stereotype of the older traveler has nothing in common with the travel preferences and practices of the writers I am focusing on in this essay and of others like them – but the power of that stereotype may be partly responsible for the neglect of older travel writers in literary criticism to date.

There are three main research questions guiding the investigation that follows. Firstly, what motivates some travel writers to keep traveling well into their seventies & even eighties? Secondly, do such writers travel with different eyes and different preoccupations to younger writers, or indeed to their younger selves? Thirdly, how far and in what ways is the travel writing produced by older travelers inflected by a consciousness of passing time & personal mortality? There is a rich vein of literary criticism probing similar issues in relation to more mainstream genres: investigations of, for example, the late work of poets such as Wordsworth, Yeats, and Auden. There is no corresponding body of work on the "late travels" of our leading modern travel writers – or indeed travel writers of any period. At the very least, an enquiry of this kind should help redress the balance and counter any tendency towards institutional ageism within travel writing studies. Simone de Beauvoir claimed, provocatively, that "great age is not favorable to literary creation" and that "Many old men [*sic*] go on writing" because they are reluctant "to admit their decline" (Beauvoir 1972: 399). She suggested, bizarrely, that the least suitable form for the elderly writer is the novel, on the grounds that (here citing François Mauriac) "once we have reached the last chapter of our own history, all that is merely invented seems insignificant" (404). By this token, travel writing – a genre which, however hard to define, has a commitment to empirical truth,

consisting of “predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (Youngs 2013: 3) – should allow ageing writers to flourish, foregrounding as it does autobiographical realism and accurate social reportage over characters and stories that are essentially products of the imagination.

I shall pursue these questions by examining five travel books about journeys undertaken by writers in their seventies. Dervla Murphy’s *The Island that Dared* (2008) describes three trips to Cuba, in which she spent a total of six months in the country over a two year period and traveled mainly by bus and on foot. Paul Theroux’s *The Last Train to Zona Verde* (2013) is the story of his journey by public transport from Cape Town through Namibia into Angola, where he abandons what was originally planned as a much longer expedition up the west side of Africa, as far as Timbuktu. In *To a Mountain in Tibet* (2012), Colin Thubron undertakes a pilgrimage to the sacred Mt Kailas in the central Himalaya, beginning his trek in Nepal and joining a small group of fellow Britons at the Tibetan border to overcome Chinese suspicion of lone travelers. Jan Morris’s *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001), which she declares will be her last book, takes as its subject a city that has long held deep personal significance for the author. Finally, V. S. Naipaul’s *The Masque of Africa* (2010) is the narrative of seven months’ travelling in Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast & Gabon; Naipaul was 77 on completing his journey.

I shall consider firstly the question of motivation, and then look in more depth at the mentalities of the older traveler.

Motives

Unique personal circumstances inevitably play a part in motivating some older travelers, as well as in determining the precise character of their travels. For the first of her three sojourns in Cuba, Dervla Murphy took the opportunity (unlikely to be repeated) for a three-generational trip, travelling with her daughter, Rachel (her companion – from the age of five – on many earlier expeditions) and three granddaughters. Murphy writes lightly of this “experiment”, which does, however, create a highly unusual ambience for a modern travel book; when she returns to Cuba on her own she seems glad to be “back to normal”, without having to worry about minor issues such as “food supplies” or “being arrested” (Murphy 2008: 107), but the narrative arguably suffers a loss of vitality. Colin Thubron’s Tibetan pilgrimage had its origin in very different circumstances. It was prompted by the death of his mother – the last of his family, following the earlier deaths of his father and sister – which inspired in him the “need to leave a sign of their passage”; exactly why he has selected this particular journey, to “a mountain that is holy to others” (Thubron 2011b: 9-10), to perform his mysterious obeisance he is unable to say, but the desire to “make a change in the ordinary tenor of [his] life, to acknowledge that things have now changed” overcomes serious concerns about altitude sickness and his ability to complete the trek (Thubron 2011a).

By contrast with the familial context of Murphy’s travels and the obscure emotional and psychological needs underpinning Thubron’s, Naipaul begins *The Masque of Africa* by stating that he is returning to Uganda after a gap of forty-two years because he is “hoping to get started there on this book about the nature of African belief”, and “thought it would be better to ease myself into my subject in a country I knew or half knew” (Naipaul 2010: 1). This puts the emphasis quite narrowly on a professional writer’s requirements rather than on any deep-seated personal imperative. For Naipaul, there is always another book to write,

and putting his ageing body on the line for half a year in West Africa is just the “research” necessary to bring it to fruition. It is easy to suppose that in the latter stages of life, with time running out and their reputations secured, travel writers will make journeys driven more by unique personal considerations, in the manner of Murphy and Thubron, than by academic interests or a desire to fill a gap in one’s résumé; Naipaul is either exceptional, or abnormally honest, among his peers in making clear from the start that professional goals – fulfilling a brief, essentially – remain the fundamental matrix of his travels.

The opening to *The Masque of Africa*, in referencing the time Naipaul spent in Uganda as a much younger man, highlights a theme that does seem to be prominent in travel writing by older travelers, namely revisitation. The theme is renewed at many points in his African journey: in Ivory Coast, for example, he witnesses the daily feeding of crocodiles that inhabit a lake outside the royal palace in Yamoussoukro, just as he had done forty-two years before, but notes various signs of a ritual declining in significance along with diminishing reverence for the former president who had established it. Naipaul references Shelley’s “Ozymandias” as he gathers evidence of the deterioration of the country since the vainglorious Houphouët-Boigny’s demise, and this exemplifies his construction of a “before and after” travelling persona capable of both testifying to things as they were and reporting authoritatively on the altered world of the present. It is a stance that appeals to the older traveller. Paul Theroux, comparing his own motives with those of slum tourists on his return to South Africa, makes “looking for changes”, or contemplating “the processes of mutability” (he quotes here the Taoist philosopher Lieh Tzu), the underlying rationale of his journey (Theroux 2013: 50-51). His book makes the case that fulfillment lies not only in visiting new places but also in observing differences in places one has been before.

Revisitation can take on added poignancy if it is assumed that one is unlikely to return again:

Theroux acknowledges “a finality in my way of looking now, a gaze with more remembering in it”, although the main effect of this is not to encourage self-indulgent melancholy but to de-trivialize his experience and fuel a desire to be “scrupulously truthful” (80). Another part of the appeal of revisitation seems to be that observing outer changes provides a way of measuring, perhaps even coming to terms with, changes in the self. Morris’s book offers the clearest evidence of this congruence of inner and outer, a kind of comfort in shared mutability which I shall consider in more detail later in this essay.

Older travel writers show a tendency to put their latest journeys in the context of a lifetime of travel. There may be gaps to fill, or patterns to complete that incorporate more than a single trip. Theroux’s *Last Train to Zona Verde* bears a symmetrical relationship to his earlier *Dark Star Safari* (2003), in which he travelled overland from Cairo to Cape Town down the east side of Africa; with its mirror-image itinerary, his later African journey thus performs in life the kind of narrative arc that the author might seek to impose on a single trip when turning raw experience into structured narrative. Morris’s return to Trieste, a city she first saw “as a young soldier at the end of the Second World War” (Morris 2001: 3) and has visited many times since, for her final book completes a kind of circle, bringing to a conclusion the “allegory of limbo” (7) which entwines her life with the history of the city. For Murphy, it evidently means a lot that, having last trekked with her daughter in 1987 when she was barely an adult, she can travel with her again now, with roles reversed (that is, with Rachel as the effective “leader”), and find that they are still “on the same wavelength ... wanting to do the same sort of thing in the same sort of way” (Murphy 2008: 106). In a different mode, with the focus on people rather than place, this performs a loop or spiral just as Morris’s terminal visit to Trieste does. The desire to form or complete patterns in living and writing one’s travels seems to increase as the travel writer gets older: it is perhaps

a higher-minded, literary sublimation of the “bucket list” mentality that is common among retiring Boomers; it may also reflect a desire to impose order and meaning on the undifferentiated flux of experience, to shape the narrative of one’s career as a whole rather than of one episode or another within it.

The resilience and determination of the five travel writers I am studying, in what are often very challenging conditions, compels admiration (“why do you still do it?” might be the reader’s equivalent of the writer’s “what am I doing here?”). It is not that they are blessed with unusually good health or physical longevity of an order denied to ordinary men and women. In fact, evidence of physical decline is not hard to find in any of these texts. Thubron’s anxiety concerning his lungs has already been mentioned. Near the start of his journey, Theroux openly advertises his status of “aging traveler”, scrupulously taking his “morning pills”, and confesses to doubts (swiftly shaken off) over whether “someone else should be doing this, someone younger perhaps, hungrier, stronger, more desperate, crazier” (Theroux 2013: 14-15). Murphy contrasts her grandchildren’s delight in bounding down “an almost perpendicular path like so many goats” with her own extreme caution, “mindful of the friability of septuagenarian bones”; at one point, when no other transport is available, she allows herself to be “heaved” over the side of an open truck by “two strong men” (Murphy 2008: 57, 277). The *reductio ad absurdum* of this portrayal of the ageing traveler comes in the Gabonese forest in *The Masque of Africa*, when Naipaul, already tired from a morning excursion, cannot face a five hundred meter walk to the river on a trip to see some ancestral bones (“my nervy, frail legs began to give out”) and is asked to sit in a “heavily rusted” wheelbarrow in a last-ditch attempt to get him to the landing stage (Naipaul 2010: 262-263). The ostensible reason for all these travelers’ perseverance is that it is what they do, and they will do it for as long as they can: they travel in order to write, and

the imperative to write overrides all counterclaims of the failing body and all collateral damage to personal relationships and social responsibilities. If a travel writer such as Theroux is, as he suggests, “another sort of businessman, another sort of huckster” (Theroux 2013: 254), he is one that seems incapable of finding an easier way of making a living.

A different, perhaps more cynical, perspective on the older traveler might be drawn from social gerontology. The concept of the Third Age as theorized by Peter Laslett and others posits a post-retirement life stage characterized by personal fulfilment; this follows an economically productive Second Age of “independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and of saving” and precedes a grim final era of “dependence, decrepitude and death” (Laslett 1991: 4). Interestingly, Laslett suggests that in some cases, with writers and artists offering a particularly good example, the fulfilment of the Third Age may overlap or even replace the career- and family-oriented Second Age. He also argues that in the Third Age “subjective age” becomes as important as “chronological age”:

It lends a certain timelessness to that stage of life, in spite of, or perhaps to some extent because of, the fact that dying becomes so much more probable. It behooves us ... when we are in our sixties, seventies and eighties to be prepared to die, as our ancestors schooled themselves to be, and yet to continue with our plans for ourselves as if the future were entirely open-ended (153).

The older travel writers discussed in this essay certainly fit the mold of individuals for whom the Third Age of personal autonomy and self-fulfillment is largely synchronous with the Second Age of career-building and income generation. To some extent, they also continue to plan and make journeys as though the future were indeed “open-ended”. However, as I

shall show in the next section, their writing generally refuses to entertain delusions of timelessness and a sharp consciousness of personal mortality is rarely far from the surface.

Drawing on Laslett's work, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs have put a postmodern spin on the theory of the Third Age, emphasizing the active construction of post-work identities through patterns of consumption. They contend that few people voluntarily self-identify as old and that "it is impossible to imagine old age becoming a reference point that most adults would aspire to" ; as a consequence, "Most if not all lifestyle cultural practices are institutionalized 'anti-ageing' strategies" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 83). Among the components of this "staying young" strategy are a "lifestyle aesthetic" prioritizing "physical exercise, self-control and the disciplining of the body" (59-60) and the purchase of products that will prevent people being defined as grey consumers. While the travel writers I am discussing would doubtless treat with disdain the suggestion that they are consciously practicing any kind of "lifestyle", their way of life connects in some respects to Gilleard and Higgs's analysis: they are highly individualistic and self-willed, and resist dependence on, and as far as possible responsibility to, familial networks, local communities, and the State; by necessity, they do whatever they can to maintain physical health and fitness; and with the prestige of professional authorship and the commitment to travel of a kind – in terms of length and difficulty – more commonly associated with young people, they presumably have "the cultural capital to avoid getting locked into a generational ghetto increasingly distanced from the global 'youth' culture of the late twentieth [or twenty-first] century" (64). However much we might like to view literary figures as special cases, in the light of mainstream gerontology it might be argued that prolonged, challenging independent travel of the kind practiced by travel writers is an age-resisting strategy on a par with lifestyle choices related to clothing, diet, recreation, personal fitness regimes, and cosmetic surgery.

Mentalities

Moving from motives to mentalities, my reading of these five books by septuagenarian travel writers highlights four interrelated features of their narratives: the interlacing of their present travels with memories of earlier travels (not necessarily, as in the previous section, earlier travels in the same locality), or other memories of a deeply personal nature; a pervasive atmosphere of melancholy; in terms of object-orientation, a keen interest in mutability in all its forms – for example, in the treatment of the sick and elderly or the customs and rituals surrounding death in different societies; and an acute consciousness of passing time or the “ticking clock”. I do not wish to paint too grim a picture of these travel texts, which in other respects do not conform to stereotypes or readerly expectations. Any assumptions about the natural conservatism of old age are, for instance, firmly rebutted by Dervla Murphy, despite her occasional grumpy remarks about such trappings of modernity as mobile phones. She is a passionate and unrepentant advocate for Castro’s Cuba, constantly citing evidence of the Revolution’s social achievements in the face of longstanding economic and diplomatic sanctions by the USA, and even defending controversial policies such as locking up people who have tested positive for HIV: “while isolating many as yet in perfect health, it also provided them with the most favourable environment for maintaining good health while protecting their fellow citizens from infection” (Murphy 2008: 154). Travel writing is a “notoriously raffish open house”, according to Jonathan Raban’s much quoted definition (Raban 1987: 253), and there are certainly many elements in the mix in all five of these travel books. Nevertheless, the four traits I have identified do represent significant lines of convergence that one might relate to

the age of the authors concerned. Simon Cooke has distinguished travel writing from other kinds of life writing in that the former “rarely presents a cradle-to-grave (or rather, cradle-to-the-present) account”, focusing instead on “a portion of life” or “an excursion out of the life” (Cooke 2016: 19). These five travel books by older travelers narrate portions of lives that are much nearer the grave than the cradle, and this inescapable fact shapes and colors the stories that are told. Commenting on the popular trope of self-discovery in modern travel writing, Cooke observes that “the autobiographical experience of the journey itself is inextricable from the view it affords over the life as a whole” (20). When that view is of a long life that is plainly drawing to a close, moments of compelling insight are as likely to take the form of retrospective understanding or acceptance as they are to offer transformative potential for an unwritten future.

In what follows I shall first consider two of the four traits in isolation, with a particular focus in each case on one of the five writers, before examining in a little more detail the complex interweaving of themes in the books by Morris and Theroux.

According to Sam Snape, one popular ageist stereotype of old people is that of “people who look back wistfully at their past” (Snape 2004: 218). It is presumably the “wistful” aspect of this behavior that makes it a demeaning caricature, in that it implies that there is nothing in the present or future that can possibly compensate for experiences or relationships that belong irrevocably to the past. Older travelers, still committed to a lifestyle characterized by restless mobility and intellectual curiosity, clearly do not fit this stereotype, yet memories are nonetheless a significant component of the books I am studying. Sometimes this is linked to revisitation, as discussed above, but sometimes the memories are of travels in other places or are of a deeply personal nature and completely unconnected with travel. Colin Thubron’s journey, as already mentioned, has its origins in

his mother's death, which left him alone in the world. Unsurprisingly, memories of his parents and sister repeatedly interrupt the narrative present: he remembers, for example, "distracting" his mother with a tour of Java after his father's death and climbing the "temple mountain of Borobudur" (Thubron 2011b: 140), and he recalls painfully sorting through his parents' possessions after his mother's death, trying to decide what to keep and what to discard, effectively becoming "the guardian of their past, even its recreator" (55). It is a measure of Thubron's skill as a writer that these memories arise very naturally in the context of his present pilgrimage, but they also ensure that the reader never loses sight of the underlying rationale of the journey.

The memories that Dervla Murphy splices into her narrative are of a very different order. Given the familiar context of her first Cuban journey and her history of taking her daughter on her travels throughout the latter's childhood and teenage years, it comes as no surprise that she is regularly making associative links between past and present. On one occasion, with the five of them camping in the open on a beach, she has a flashback "to a tentless, full moon night on a mountain-top in Cameroon in 1987 (exactly half Rachel's lifetime ago, our last long trek together)"; she gazes down at her daughter, "wondering what the future held for her" and her (Murphy's) granddaughters (Murphy 2008: 60). The language is matter-of-fact and unsentimental, but the thoughts are plainly those of someone who knows she is likely to play little further part in her companions' future. On her later, unaccompanied trips to Cuba, her flashbacks still center on her daughter, as when she has a nasty moment walking across a crumbling cliff-face: "I remembered that potentially far more dangerous moment when terror immobilised me on a cliff-face high above the Indus river in the Karakoram while a six-year-old Rachel, unaware of my panic, trotted confidently ahead". She then immediately ponders the strange illogicality of panic, which

“cancels out one’s instinct of self-preservation, supposedly our strongest instinct” (244). Here again there is a noticeable determination to avoid getting sucked into self-indulgent nostalgia – in this case by intellectualizing her responses. Brief and dispassionately rendered as Murphy’s memories are, they seem the compromise formations of someone who cannot help thinking about the past but refuses to sacrifice one ounce of her formidable self-reliance – someone who has confessed that she was “elated” when her mother died (in that she no longer had to provide round-the-clock care for her) and insists that she never feels lonely: “I just love solitude” (Murphy 2014). Memories come thick and fast to Murphy, as to the other seventy-year-old travelers, but she seems an emotionally underwhelmed, almost unwilling recipient.

In line with her strong sympathies for Castroism, towards the end of her Cuban experience Murphy takes the opportunity to visit Ché Guevara’s mausoleum in Santa Clara. She finds a “shadowy cave-like chamber” in which flickers “An eternal flame, lit by Fidel on 17 October 1997”; she describes the atmosphere as “reverential – and powerful” and leaves “with a lump in my throat” (Murphy 2008: 333-334). This episode is an example of another trait shared by these older travelers’ writings: a preoccupation – in terms of the “exterior” journey – with places, customs, and beliefs associated with death. In Soweto, Naipaul visits the memorial to “a twelve-year-old schoolboy who, with nineteen others, had been shot dead in June 1976 during a protest in Soweto against the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in township schools”. This memorial, with its “standard metaphors” of “dry-walling and water slipping into a pool”, leads him to meditate on what survives of human actions and achievements: it has “already been vandalised more than once by local children” and Naipaul wonders “how much longer this memorial to real pain would last” (Naipaul 2010: 319-320). Whether there is an implicit contrast here between public,

architectural memorializing and the kind of immortality that the ageing Naipaul seeks through his writing is for individual readers to decide. The Ozymandias-like rumination on what survives has many parallels in Morris's book, for example her visit to the Miramar Castle near Trieste, built for the younger brother of a Habsburg emperor in the mid-nineteenth century, which has her thinking "poignantly of the passing of all empires, those seductive illusions of permanence" (Morris 2001: 27).

It is, however, Thubron's Himalayan trek that displays the most striking and unrelenting obsession with funeral rites and attitudes to death. He dwells on the contrast between the Tibetan belief in reincarnation and his own helpless attachment to Western concepts of selfhood: an abbot he questions is clearly "focused on spiritual continuance, while I am overborne by individual death" (Thubron 2011b: 45). A group of passing monks prompts further puzzlement at the mentality of a people who apparently feel no need for material possessions; he wonders "with a muffled pang what it would be in the West to step outside the chain of bequeathal and inheritance, as they do, until human artefacts mean nothing at all" (54). He describes in loving detail the procedures involved in sky burial, up to the point that he discovers two human arm bones left behind on a dissection platform and walks away with "a wrenching revulsion, and a shamed excitement at the forbidden" (153). Approaching Mount Kailas, on which eight people have died in the few days preceding his arrival, he reminds the reader that "Mountains in many cultures have been coterminous with death" (184); he has every reason to sympathize with this way of thinking, since his sister was "killed by an avalanche" at Grindelwald "at the age of twenty-one" (189). Thubron's relentless preoccupation with death is, of course, partially accounted for by his recent, personal experience of bereavement, as discussed in the previous section, but it forms such a prominent motif in the book that it seems obvious that it is also his own

mortality that is at stake in this intellectual monomania. Toward the end of his trek, back in Katmandu, he is still keen to interrogate monks about the nature of reincarnation, unable to embrace a mindset in which “nothing of the individual survives” (203). From one point of view, it is not surprising that ageing travelers should be so taken up with death: the journey of life is an ancient metaphor, and Christianity taught for centuries that life was a preparation for death and that an individual’s thoughts should turn increasingly to spiritual matters in the latter stages of the journey. From another, it does seem remarkable that writers who still show such intense curiosity about the world and are prepared to challenge themselves physically and mentally to explore it should also be quite so fixated on how those journeys – other people’s, in different cultural contexts – come to an end.

Thubron’s insistent brooding on death, cremation, bereavement and reincarnation determines his book’s dominant tone of “incommensurate sadness” – nowhere better encapsulated than when, at high altitude, he contemplates the night sky “dense with stars” and muses that the “orange ones are probably long dead, their light arriving in posthumous and detached rays out of nowhere, while others are being born invisibly in the dark” (155). In this deromanticized theatre of nature, the loneliness of the newly orphaned author is conveyed beautifully by the fact that his only companionship is with stars that died long ago, while the complementary cycle of creativity takes place unseen and offers no comfort. With the possible exception of Murphy’s travelogue, a similar profound melancholy characterizes all these books by older travelers. In Naipaul this often has to do with witnessing dramatic changes in places he has been to before: in Ivory Coast, for example, the hunting of elephants to extinction and the disappearance of the “great forest” in favor of subsistence agriculture or miserable settlements made of “concrete and tin” (Naipaul 2010: 210); in South Africa, the social degeneration of parts of post-apartheid Johannesburg, where

nervous white people had moved out and “Africans had moved in ... reducing great buildings and great highways to slum” – putting Naipaul in mind of “other places of dereliction and ruin I had seen”, such as “the wartime rubble of East Berlin kept as a monument in the communist days” (280-281). For Naipaul, change invariably seems to take the shape of, or be construed as, decline or decay; coupled with the gathering evidence of his failing health and physical limitations, this gives a melancholy feeling to the whole narrative against which the occasional contrary indications of hope and possibility find it difficult to make an impression.

It must be doubtful whether a more oppressively melancholy travel book than Jan Morris’s *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* has ever been written. This book, described by its author as a work “partly of civic impressionism” and “partly of introspection” (Morris 2001: 8), merits slightly more extended treatment in this essay. Its most striking formal characteristic is the consistent way in which Morris anthropomorphizes Trieste and then identifies with the personality she ascribes to it. The city’s faded grandeur evokes feelings of sadness that the ageing author embraces, its atmosphere of “lost consequence” resonating not just with “adolescent emotions of the past” but also with her “lifelong preoccupations” (4). Trieste, perched on a narrow strip of Italian land between the Adriatic Sea and Slovenia and once the most important port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is a place where Latin, Slavic, and Germanic cultures intermingle; it is, in Morris’s words, “ethnically ambivalent, historically confused”, and as such provides a natural imaginative home for someone who has always considered herself an outsider and describes her identity as more “complex and peculiar” than most (Morris 2001: 3; 2002). Morris did, of course, begin life as James Morris – a *Times* journalist who achieved literal and metaphorical eminence in breaking the news of the conquest of Everest in 1953, having himself ascended as far as Camp five – before

undergoing transition to become one of the earliest high-profile trans women. A divided, indeterminate city seems the ideal habitat for someone who has experienced such lack of clear definition within herself. Deepening the identification, Trieste, as Morris discusses in leisurely fashion in her book, is famously a “city made for exiles” (Morris 2001: 74) – Joyce, Stendhal, Rilke, and the nineteenth-century explorer and Orientalist, Richard Burton, to name just a few. For her part, Morris confesses to having thought of herself for many years as an “exile from normality” (186) – in her memoir, *Conundrum*, she even calls herself a “slow motion Jekyll and Hyde” during the transition (Morris 2002a: 92) – and this lifelong state of perceived outsiderdom is what gives her a sad affinity with the modern city of Trieste.

With regard to the post-imperial stagnation of Trieste, in a playful piece of anthropomorphism Morris compares the city to “a specialist in retirement” (that is, someone who had a highly specialized job, and has given up work):

He potters around the house. He tinkers with this hobby or that. He reads a little, watches television for half an hour, does a bit of gardening, determines once more that he really will read *Midnight's Children*, get to know Beethoven's late sonatas or try for a last time to get to grips with rock. But he knows that the real energy of his life, the fascination of his calling that has driven him with so much satisfaction for so many years, is never going to be resumed. (Morris 2001: 153)

Here, it would seem, is another point of identification between author and city: Morris has declared that this will be her last book, so this “specialist” in travel writing also faces a loss of function or *raison d'être*. The difference, of course, is that Trieste will survive in some form through the next century, but Morris will not (with hindsight, she has perhaps seen more of the new century than she anticipated): she speaks of the anachronism of prophecy.

The one note of optimism is that Trieste (or rather, Morris's "half-real, half-wishful" construction of the city) will continue to share its values of good humour, kindness, and empathy, continue to attract visitors and exiles who know they will not be judged on their race, faith, sex, or nationality, continue to offer a model of "true civility" (179-81).

Morris's conclusion works new variations on the age-old metaphor of the journey of life, as she writes of herself as an "exile from time":

The past is a foreign country, but so is old age, and as you enter it you feel you are entering unknown territory, leaving your own land behind ... This kind of exile can mean a new freedom, too, because most things don't matter as they used to. The way I look doesn't matter. The opinions I cherish are my business. The books I have written are no more than smudged graffiti on a wall, and I shall write no more of them.

Paradoxically, the feeling of being exiled from time by the ageing process generates a compensatory mental freedom, albeit at the cost of questioning the value of the books to which she has devoted a large part of her life. *Trieste* is almost suffocatingly aware of the passing of time – of transience as the essential condition of life – but Morris's final reflections take the edge off this grim reality. Instead of the classic post-Romantic trope of self-discovery through travel, the book offers a gentle passage to self-acceptance or self-transcendence.

Unlike Morris, Paul Theroux makes no grand valedictory gesture in *The Last Train to Zona Verde*; indeed, he ends the book with a hint toward his next expedition, which would result in *Deep South* (2015). However, *The Last Train*, like *Trieste*, is a travel narrative shaped and coloured by time and mortality. Death is an undercurrent throughout the book and is occasionally thrust into the foreground: three people whom Theroux gets to know

well during his travels die suddenly or in violent circumstances. He admits to a nagging fear at the start of his journey that he is “setting off to suffer and die”; he says that as a young man he “never entertained this idea of death in travel” but that now, like Webster in T. S. Eliot’s “Whispers of Immortality”, he is “much possessed by death” and “sees the skull beneath the skin” (Theroux 2013: 54-55). Clearly such anxieties might be felt by any older person, but they are experienced differently and perhaps more acutely in the context of open-ended, independent travel in challenging, inhospitable environments.

The “ticking clock” is a prominent motif in *The Last Train* and sounds most insistently toward the end of the book, as he reflects on his decision to truncate his journey and on what remains of his youthful enthusiasm to “get away at any cost”:

Time is a factor in travel, one of the most crucial, though it didn’t matter when I first started travelling as a youth, and later as a middle-aged man. I believed I had all the time in the world then ... Time means so much more to me now than it did. These days, keenly aware of wasted time, I hear the clock ticking more insistently. I hate the idea of travel as *déjà vu*. Show me something new, something different, something changed, something wonderful, something weird. There has to be revelation in spending long periods of time in travel, otherwise it is more waste.

(349-351)

Here Theroux touches on what seems an important factor for the older travel writer. The mental and emotional economy has to find a new balance and calculations of likely gain have to pass a higher threshold. Hence the renewed emphasis on novelty and difference: recording changes or “contemplating the processes of mutability” may justify revisitation, but mere sentimentality does not. When time starts to be appreciated as a finite resource, the travel writer insists on extracting more value from it.

If these stricter time management criteria are not met, travel writers find themselves asking the insidious question: what am I doing here? It is a question that Theroux asks repeatedly in the course of his journey, beginning in the early stages, in Namaqualand, when, “Way past retirement age and alone”, he is riding in a “parched climate” in a “desolate” landscape of “bald hills and scrub” (73). He asks it with increasing volume and urgency toward the abbreviated end of his journey in the backwaters of Angola. Early answers to the question focus on his commitment to physical experience:

I didn't want to be told about this, nor did I want to read about this at second hand. I didn't want to look at pictures or study it on a small computer screen. I didn't want to be lectured about it. I wanted to be travelling in the middle of it, and for it to be washing over me, as it was today. (73-74)

However, his resolve is increasingly tested as he continues his travels, especially after crossing into Angola and entering a countryside ravaged by war. When his bush taxi breaks down in a “nameless place” that is “no more than a roadside clearing” (224-225), the repeated importunities of a woman with an enamel bucket containing three fly-ridden pieces of chicken becomes the most arresting symbol of his growing disenchantment. Ultimately, the overwhelming question cannot be answered satisfactorily and after two and a half thousand miles of overland travel Theroux abandons his journey. He refuses to spend more time negotiating the “futureless, dystopian, world-gone-wrong, *Mad Max* Africa of child soldiers, street gangs, reeking slums, refuse heaps, utter despair, misplaced belief, new-age cargo cults, and bungled rescue attempts” (347), or, put more bluntly, staring up the “fundament” of modern West Africa. Theroux says that his decision has more to do with the fact that one African slum is much the same as another and that he has exhausted what he has to say about such “ugliness and misery” (343). He claims that it has “nothing to do

with my age” and that he is “not too old for this” (344-345), but it is obvious to the reader that age is a factor, even if this is interpreted only in terms of the imperative described above, of prioritizing new experience within a shrinking time horizon.

Conclusion

When starting this preliminary foray into the gerontological study of travel writing, it was my hope that time and personal mortality would not prove to be such major influences as they clearly are. Travel writers who continue to ply their trade into their seventies and beyond do so for a variety of reasons, but where they go, what they notice and choose to record, their frame of mind and the persona they project in their writing, are profoundly shaped by the knowledge that their travelling days may be numbered and that they themselves are inescapably part of the mutable world that they cannot help perceive around them. At the same time, their commitment to this physically punishing genre and willingness to defy what Thomas Cole, in his cultural history of ageing, calls “the tragic and ineradicable conflict between spirit and body” (Cole 1992: 237), compel respect, even admiration. In one of the odder moments in *The Last Train*, Theroux says that travelling into the unknown can “be like dying” (Theroux 2013: 12), mainly in the sense that you become something of a ghost to the loved ones that you have left behind. So much travel writing is built on the belief that travelling, whether as exploration, knowledge-gathering, self-realization or mere escapism, is a better way of living; the books by older travel writers I have studied in this essay suggest, by contrast, that travelling may be a better way of dying.

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