5 ‘Among the Believers’

The journey embarked on, away from the familiar and into the universe’s otherness, always contains elements that are problematic. In the hope of new vistas the traveller moves, while dreading as he approaches them their unknown features. He seeks ‘exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions’, yet knows that if he encounters such divergences they will overpower him. He must therefore find some method of surpassing and surviving the journey: he seeks to assimilate the most easily available model he has of a city before arriving in it, a model that will be his point of reference as he travels, and his talisman against confusion and contamination. Often if he is profoundly frightened or irretrievably biased (as early European travellers to the Orient were) he will see nothing but his own construct or his compatriots’ creation in the places that he passes through. Yet this is the extreme case, and more often, the predisposition of the traveller is more elusive to trace as we can appreciate in contemporary travel literature.

The journey’s narrative, that soliloquizing the author engages in which an audience overhears, is peculiar in that it remains circular. It moves away from the self, yet returns more deeply into it the further the narrator moves into the unknown. It portrays the traveller more faithfully than it records the travels. It leads the reader back, unintentionally perhaps and despite itself, to the emblematic Ithaca that originally provided the desire to move away from it, as it would ultimately provide the need to return.

Italo Calvino’s Marco Polo, who enthrals with his narrative a sedentary Kublai Khan desiring details of his vast dominions, realises that the more

one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journey, and he came to know
Europe's Myths of Orient

the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home . . .

The listening Khan, after having heard the Venetian wanderer describe to him inumerable cities, spelled out the circularity of the narrative when he said:

‘There is still one of which you never speak.’

Marco Polo bowed his head.

‘Venice,’ the Khan said.

Marco smiled. ‘What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?’

For Venice is implicit in the description of all other cities; it is not merely a place, but a method of comparison, an education, a system of belief, a literature and a mythology. The original city forms the traveller, provides him with his vision, predicts his reactions and produces his narrative. It guards him against dissipation (for in dissipation lies danger – Gulliver becomes a travesty when overpowered by the voyage; it unhinges his mind, making him prefer horses to humans) but it limits his ability to see.

In the course of reading travel narrative we have observed how certain images, once codified in language, become static and final. We have remarked how travellers depended on each other’s testimony in forging their narrative: the place became the place they had read about, the natives functioned as the traveller imagined they would do. It was a reductive method, but in critical times of political crises (during the Crusades, for instance) it served its narrator well.

To start this examination of contemporary travel narrative, it would be instructive to study the writings of a traveller who forms a link between the nineteenth-century narrator and his twentieth-century counterpart. This is Wilfrid Thesiger, whose book, Arabian Sands, continues in the tradition of Burton, Doughty and Lawrence. It is interesting to note that he was appreciated by his country exactly within that tradition: for his labours, he was awarded the ‘Burton Memorial Medal’ from the Royal Asiatic Society, and the ‘Lawrence of Arabia Medal’ from the Royal Central Asian Society.

Thesiger introduces his work with the claim that he had not