Paul Theroux’s *The Kingdom by the Sea* (1983) and Jonathan Raban’s *Coasting* (1986) are both records of journeys around Britain. Theroux set out to travel by foot, train and bus around the entire British coastline, starting in a westerly direction, while Raban planned to circumnavigate the country in his boat, *Gosfield Maid*, after sailing eastwards from Fowey in Cornwall. By coincidence they began their journeys within a few days of each other, just as Britain was going to war with Argentina over the Falklands, and the bulk of their respective narratives focuses on the period April–May–June, 1982. Theroux and Raban’s common goal is to achieve an understanding of the British people and their way of life – thus encompassing the country metaphorically while circling it literally – and ultimately to create and communicate a national mythology.

In time span and purpose, then, *The Kingdom by the Sea* and *Coasting* have a good deal in common with the Falklands speeches of Margaret Thatcher and her political supporters and the reporting and editorials of the pro-Government media. Also like the Thatcherite forces, which unfolding events inevitably make their major reference point, Theroux and Raban recognize that the appropriate vehicle for the communication of a national mythology is the quest narrative. From this point on, though, Theroux and Raban deviate from the Thatcherite model since, as postmodernists, they are unwilling to grant absolute authority to any interpretive framework, including the archetypal. Thus, beginning with a demonstration of the arbitrary nature of their own and, by implication, Thatcher’s mythic structures, Theroux and Raban become engaged in thoroughgoing deconstructions...
of the mainstream Falklands myth that finally clear the way for the development of alternative national stories. Viewed from the postmodern perspective adopted by Theroux and Raban these stories are, of course, no less provisional than Thatcher's. Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, they acquire a degree of credibility and hence authority from their authors' willingness to lay bare the rhetorical underpinnings of any truth claims that they might make. As a result, both *The Kingdom by the Sea* and *Coasting* are able to mount serious challenges to the official Falklands myth.

**POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES**

Theroux first reveals an intention to milk the mythic potential of his journey when he compares himself to 'the prince in the old story, who ... disguises himself in old clothes and ... hikes the muddy roads, talking to everyone and looking closely at things, to find out what his kingdom is really like' (Theroux, p. 8).\(^1\) Theroux’s insistence that a journey begun on May Day will develop according to the logic of a fairy world still kept alive in many English villages by the choice of a May Queen (p. 9) further prepares the way for mythic understandings of the people and creatures he meets, the adventures in which he becomes involved and the places he visits.

Armed with a fortune teller’s prediction that he will ‘survive’ (p. 23) whatever trials might be awaiting him, Theroux encounters a variety of mythic figures in the course of his travels, including ‘sea monsters’ (54), the ‘ghosts of Henry James, Paul Verlaine, Tess Darbeyfield, Mary Shelley’ (p. 95), ‘goblins’ (p. 124), and a ‘wicked witch’ (243). Dracula lurks on the cliffs at Whitby (p. 385) and Theroux suspects the ‘robust, rosy-cheeked’ Mrs Chandler, who looks like ‘she [feeds] off [her husband] at night’ (pp. 156–7), of vampirism. Even the Devil’s son puts in an appearance during a television lounge viewing of *The Omen* (pp. 165–6). Several of Theroux’s adventures involve landladies who are mysteriously seductive and attempt to divert this latter-day Sir Gawain from his quest: ‘“Why don’t you stay tonight.” She meant it and seemed eager, and then I was not sure what she was offering’ (p. 158).

Equally charged with mythic associations are Theroux’s repeated