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The Garden of Forking Paths: Paratexts in Travel Literature

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In his influential study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987; trans. 2001), structuralist Gérard Genette provides a delineation of those territories of the book – titles, forewords, epigraphs and footnotes – that mediate between reader and text, which he labels ‘paratexts’. Paratexts are ubiquitous in travel writing: from the ‘The Epistle Dedicatorie’ beginning Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages* (1582) to the self-consciously literary epigraphs in Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* (1978) and glossaries, headlines, indexes, marginal comments, text-boxes and timelines that decorate the latest *Lonely Planet* guides. In his topography of the printed text, Genette voyages across a wide range of literary examples, primarily nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature, but also central works of the Western canon such as St Augustine’s *Confessions* (397–8) and Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays* (1570–1592), writings by modern literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, and even films like John Huston’s *Prizzi’s Honour* (1985). Yet, despite brief asides on such well-known works as Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) and André Gide’s *Travels in the Congo* [*Voyage au Congo*] (1927), Genette does not engage in a sustained examination of paratexts in travel literature.

In this essay, I seek to establish what the investigation of paratexts can reveal to us about the process of writing travel and vice versa. Genette’s virtual omission of travel writing is a frequent oversight among critics and theorists. One reason for such neglect may be that many features he claims are distinctive to the paratext in literature are already central elements of the travel genre, such as direct addresses to the reader, the incorporation of factual information and the use of authorial biographies. Nonetheless, as I will show, paratextual practices in supposedly more ‘literary’ genres evolved in dialogue with those in travel writing.

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At the same time, they are often deployed to assert the literary merits of a specific example of the genre. Genette’s omission prompts a series of important questions about the relationship between the textual structure of travel books, the persona of their authors and the places from which they are writing. What role have paratexts played in the construction of authorial identities in travel writing? How have the paratextual conventions of writing travel altered over time, and what is the significance of these changes? How is digital technology altering this space? In what ways might decisions about textual structure inhere or contest geopolitical conflicts, stereotypes and/or power relationships? What is the relationship between the journey(s) recounted in a book, and the reader’s own voyage within or across it? What kind of textual and political space is a work of travel literature? Of course, an article of this size can only sketch preliminary answers to these questions, with the aim of stimulating further scholarly investigation. Crucially, in the vivid and unusual metaphors that pepper *Paratexts*, Genette persistently characterises the paratext as a geographical space: ‘a threshold’, a ‘vestibule’, an ‘undefined zone’, an ‘edge’. As I will suggest, approaching a text as a spatial entity also raises new political and geo-critical questions for the interpreter. Moreover, while insisting upon the belief that the paratext is subordinate to the ‘main’ text, Genette likens the reader’s journey through the paratext to an anthropological investigation, asserting flippantly that: ‘[o]ne cannot travel within the paratext without encountering this belief or, in a way, without assuming it as one of the elements of the situation, as an ethnologist does with an indigenous theory’.¹ Such a comparison suggests an affinity between our own attempts to define the territory of the paratext and mapping, raising the question of to what extent the scholarly investigation of the paratext could itself be said to represent a surreptitious form of textual imperialism.

The history of paratexts in travel writing is as long as the history of travel literature itself. It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a full taxonomy of all the different paratexts relevant to the genre, which would include covers, titles, the name of the author, prefaces, inscriptions, epigraphs, intertitles, footnotes, endnotes, ‘epitexts’ such as interviews, conversations, colloquia, correspondence, oral confidences and diaries; not to mention paratexts often present in travel writing which Genette overlooks, such as field-study notes, maps and charts. Instead, this essay suggests some key lines of inquiry, focusing on introductory material and annotation, since these paratexts provide central locations in which travel writers fashion and project an authorial identity and authenticate their descriptions of foreign places. In my