Travel Narrative and Imperialist Vision

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Hand in hand with the Industrial Revolution, the late eighteenth century brought a newly intensified period of European exploration, commercial penetration, imperial expansion, and colonization all over the planet. In the main, as we all learned in school, the expansion was a search for markets and raw materials, the two fuels needed by European capitalist economies whose productive capacity, and whose ability to produce surpluses, was rapidly increasing. This period of expansion is one in which we still find ourselves, albeit at a much later stage. All corners of the planet are now integrated to some degree into a global capitalist economic system, while that system itself confronts crises undreamt of two hundred years ago. In the beginning, this burst of expansion in the late eighteenth century was mainly British—Captain Cook's first voyage was in 1768, the same year that James Bruce began his search for the source of the Nile—but the French under Napoleon were not far behind. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was on board with the Monroe Doctrine, while every major nation in Europe was participating in the notorious scramble for Africa.

A few sections of this essay are revised from my works of 1986 and 1992 cited in the bibliography.
This process of capitalist expansion was (and still is) witnessed in thousands upon thousands of travel books. Travel literature played an extremely important role in the production of consciousness and the making of ideology in connection with the expansionist enterprise. Of particular interest is its role in producing what is now fashionably called alterity, the process by which certain peoples and places get constituted as an Other positioned in varying ways with respect to a normative European self, and made knowable only, or almost only, through those positionings. Quite often these travel books were written by direct emissaries and purveyors of European expansion: explorers, traders, settlers, missionaries, engineers, surveyors, soldiers, diplomats, and so forth. Sometimes they were written by people whose involvement was more marginal or oblique, like naturalists, game hunters, thrill-seekers, or the wives of those explorers, traders, diplomats, and so forth. Sometimes they were written by people who were vehement opponents of the expansion, or even fugitives from it. It is thus in a very rich and varied sense that travel literature has been the place where, as Daniel Defert says, "Europe took consciousness of itself, wrote about itself and read about itself more and more as the basis ('principe') of a planetary process and not as a region of the world" (Defert 26).

I propose to document a shift in the discourse of European travel narratives sometime during the first half of the nineteenth century, making accounts from the turn of the century (1790-1830) very different from those written sixty years later. I will be focusing mainly on British accounts of African exploration, but will make some reference to other materials as well. In the case of Africa, the two periods I am talking about correspond to the two major thrusts of British exploration, first the exploration of the Niger River by Bruce, Park, Clapperton, Lander, Oldfield, and others (few of whom survived to write at all). This first thrust, conducted mainly under the auspices of the Africa Association (founded in 1788), was so unsuccessful that exploration was virtually suspended until after 1850, when a whole series of envoys—Livingstone, Burton, Speke, Grant, Baker, Stanley, Du Chaillu, and others—successfully
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crisscrossed the interior of the continent, and documented its major geographical features. This second period, the “opening up of Africa,” is by far the best known.

As with all exploration, the accomplishments of these travelers were constituted dually by the combination of travel and of travel writing. The opening up of Africa necessarily consisted not just of certain Europeans and North Americans journeying to certain geographical locations, but also and crucially of those Europeans and North Americans producing discourse about their journeyings, to be disseminated in Europe and North America. Put another way, the opening up of Africa to Europe was also the opening up of Europe to Africa, the process by which names like Burton, Speke, Grant, Gondokoro, Ujiji, Unyamwezi, and Matabele became household words. With exploration, and a great many other kinds of travel as well, the journey and the writing about it are inseparable projects—they presuppose each other and create each other’s significance. If you don’t survive to tell the tale, you might as well never have gone, unless of course someone else survives to bring back your diary. Likewise, journey and account mutually determine each other’s shape—what you say in the book has everything to do with what you experienced on your trip, but what you experience on your trip has everything to do with the book you are planning to write. For instance, African exploration was typically organized around the quest for specific, definable “prizes” like the source of the Nile. At least in part the project took this form because exploration books could then have the form of classic quests, in which the hero is finding and bringing home a treasure. As a rule, in the classic quest the hero is simply recovering for the community a missing treasure that rightfully belongs to it but was lost—an idea that fit well with European imperial designs. Indeed, the epic model of achievement might be said to have exerted equal influence on the shapes of the explorers’ journeys and the shapes of their accounts. This paradigm, already firmly instilled in the consciousness of every European who had ever heard a fairy tale, legitimizes exploration in a culturally and ideological powerful way, and lends it an air of reality that it might not otherwise have.
For of course the European "discoverer" doesn't really bring home anything at all, only the claim to having seen something with European eyes.

The discursive shift in travel narrative that I propose to discuss is easily introduced by a pair of sample passages. Of the two texts quoted below, the first is from a very famous turn of the century travel book, Mungo Park's "Travels in the Interior of Africa," which appeared in 1802. The second is from David Livingstone's "Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi," which appeared in 1866. Both passages are representative of the discourse of their respective books, and were chosen because they are in no way exceptional. First the Park text (italics mine):

About a mile from this place, I heard a loud and confused noise somewhere to the right of my course, and in a short time was happy to find it was the croaking of frogs, which was heavenly music to my ears. I followed the sound, and at daybreak arrived at some shallow muddy pools, so full of frogs that it was difficult to discern the water. The noise they made frightened my horse, and I was obliged to keep them quiet by beating the water with a branch until he had drank. Having quenched my thirst, I ascended a tree, and the morning being calm, I soon perceived the smoke of the watering place which I had passed in the night; and observed another pillar of smoke east-south-east, distant twelve or fourteen miles. Towards this I directed my route. (163)

Notice in this passage how everything is anchored in the narrator-protagonist, in his immediate sensory experience, his judgment, agency, and desires (examples are italicized). Notice too how the relevance of everything that is said lies in its immediate bearing on the narrator and his journey. Now contrast the Livingstone passage (italics mine):

Ten or fifteen miles north of Morambala stands the dome-shaped mountain of Makanda of Chi-kanda; several others, with granitic-looking peaks, stretch away to the north, and form the eastern boundary of the valley; another range, but of metamorphic rocks, commencing opposite Senna bounds the valley on the west. After steaming
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through a portion of this marsh, we came to a broad belt of palm and
other trees, crossing the fine plain on the right bank. Marks of large
game were abundant. Elephants had been feeding on the palm nuts,
which have a pleasant fruity taste, and are used as food by man. Two
pythons were observed coiled together among the branches of a large
tree, and were both shot. The larger of the two, a female, was ten feet
long. They are harmless, and said to be good eating. (102)

Here everything is described without reference to a situated ob-
server (the italics show some of the ways this was done). The
perceptual process by which someone observed some signs and
deduced that elephants had been feeding on the palm nuts is not
alluded to; neither is the experience by which it was ascertained
that palm nuts have a pleasant fruity taste. We will never know who
observed the two pythons, who shot them, who measured them
and ascertained their sex, who said they were good eating, and
who found that out by experience. Syntactically, observations and
claims are given as detached facts rather than anchored in a
speaker by such devices as verbs of perception or mental process.
Things happen without happening to anybody or being brought
about by anybody. The pronoun I is about as welcome as a case of
dropsy. In contrast with Park, only a fraction of the information
Livingstone asserts bears immediately upon the participants and
their journey. Here the specifics of the journey mainly function as a
pretext for introducing information whose origin and relevance
apparently lie elsewhere. The actual elephants and pythons en-
countered, for instance, are used as pegs on which to hang general
information about palm nuts and pythons. The landscape is simply
there (described mostly in compass terms which are not deictic to
the speaker) with no bearing on the travelers. At the risk of
oversimplifying, one could sum up the difference by saying that
here everything is conveyed as information, while in the Park text
everything is conveyed as experience.

These characteristics hold not only for Park's and Livingstone's
writings, but for much of the production of their contemporaries.
Throughout Park's text, and those of many of his contemporaries,
the specific episodes and adventures of the journey are the main
things to be made known to the home audience. Consequently these are often dramatized at great length, producing texts that sound very novelistic to modern readers. In the mid-century texts, there is very little narrative elaboration or dramatization. The vocabulary of the emotions is also virtually dispensed with, as is the convention of elaborating one's emotive responses to important events or sights. The autobiographical is minimized; writers either abandon or, in Livingstone's case, complain about the opening sketch of the author's life which is conventionally found in earlier texts, often at great length. Clearly two different kinds of authority are at work—for Park, subjectivity and perspectivism are the anchors of textual authority; for Livingstone, impersonal knowledge is what counts. At the same time, Livingstone is obviously not trying to speak the language of science. His text is full of judgments, evaluations, and opinions, and it is unquestionably narrative, not descriptive.

I have pointed out that in Livingstone's writing, the relevance of what is said does not lie in its connection with the immediate interests of the traveler himself. As it turns out, what does make all this detached and detachable information relevant is the imperial agenda itself, an agenda that he alludes to constantly in his narrative, and elaborates on at length in his preface:

This account is written in the earnest hope that it may contribute to that information which will cause the great and fertile continent of Africa to be no longer kept wantonly sealed, but made available as a scene of European enterprise, and will enable its people to take a place among the nations of the earth, thus securing the happiness and prosperity of tribes now sunk in barbarism or debased by slavery, and, above all, I cherish the hope that it may lead to the introduction of the blessings of the Gospel. (2)

Notice that the term information appears here as the object of the enterprise, the thing to be acquired and brought home. The information has power: it will cause Africa to become the scene of European enterprise. It is an intense orientation toward the future that led the mid-century explorers to value information (rather
than experience) in their discourse. They had a sense of participating in the beginning of a long-term planetary (to use Defert's term) process, which was ultimately going to transform every corner of the world. And they were right.

Mungo Park, by contrast, never alludes to the commercial project in his narrative proper. His preface, however, is as explicit about it as is Livingstone's. Perhaps more so, for Park makes no attempt to link commercial expansion with any interests other than the specific financial ambitions of himself and his backers. Here is what he says in his preface about his objectives and aspirations:

If I should perish in my journey, I was willing that my hopes and expectations should perish with me; and if I should succeed in rendering the geography of Africa more familiar to my countrymen, and in opening to their ambition and industry new sources of wealth, and new channels of commerce, I knew that I was in the hands of men of honour, who would not fail to bestow that remuneration which my successful services should appear to them to merit. (ix)

Again notice how everything is anchored in specific persons and in the immediate interests of the present. The forces at work are not abstractions like “information” or “European enterprise,” but rather the ambition and industry of the specific persons (“men of honour”) who belong to the Africa Association. The sense of a global transformative project is absent, and probably for this reason there is also no attempt to construe any hypothetical benefits for the Africans. The notion of a benevolent civilizing mission comes into play later, one suspects, when there is a full-fledged imperial mission that needs mystifying. So it was with the Spaniards in America three hundred years before, and so it is today, in White House pronouncements where “democracy” and “freedom” replace “prosperity” and “salvation” as the goods equated with imperial intervention.

And if the Spanish imperial enterprise in the 1500s emerged from the energies and appetites of a newly consolidated Spain, so the nineteenth-century enterprise is the project of the newly consolidated European nation states who are in the process of
forming that polity Livingstone refers to as "the nations of the earth." One of the great historical watersheds that separates David Livingstone and Mungo Park is the rise of the modern state. This watershed determines in part that what for Park is an immediate, personal enterprise is for Livingstone a long-term planetary process.

I have underscored Livingstone’s use of the term “information” in his preface, as an unwitting metacomment on his own discourse. There is another such term in that excerpt, namely scene. While Park talks about sources of wealth and channels of commerce (rivers form an apt source of terminology for him), Livingstone talks about Africa as the future scene of European enterprise (see quotation above). Mid-nineteenth-century travel accounts contain an enormous amount of landscape description, which is likewise shaped by the expansionist project that so impinges on the consciousness of these writers.

Three different modes of landscape description can be distinguished in these writings. The first, which I call the development mode, is illustrated by the first Livingstone text quoted above. The two characteristics that typify the development mode are, first, that it seeks a panoramic, totalizing sweep, and second, that it combines everyday visual vocabulary with specialized—in this case geological—vocabulary that encodes the region’s development potential. The language is mildly aesthetic at times—Livingstone speaks of a fine meadow, for instance. The criteria for these aesthetic judgments is also the future use potential of the place. There are enormous amounts of this kind of development-oriented landscape description in the travel literature of mid-century, be it about Africa or any other place being “opened up” to European eyes (as Latin America was, for instance, after its independence in 1820). This discourse did not originate with the explorers of mid-century, but it has great prominence in their writings.

The second landscape convention is in the picturesque mode, in which nature is portrayed as a garden replete with flowers and trees of all colors, among which myriads of insects, butterflies, and hummingbirds busily flit. I am being only partly sarcastic here. This conventional garden scene, which recurs innumerable times
on the pages of African travel books, invariably includes the flowers, the butterflies, the hummingbirds, and the verb flit. Here is an example from a stunningly nondescript account by naturalist J. Leyland called *Adventures in the Far Interior of South Africa* (1866):

On this route, and in many other parts of the Colony, the scenery was most enchanting and picturesque; the hills and mountains were adorned in wild profusion with flowers of various hues, and often of the most brilliant and gaudy colours, filling the air with their delicious perfume. Most conspicuous were the geraniums, growing three and four feet high. When the flowers were most abundant, the various kinds of Sun-birds [hummingbirds] and Fly-catchers were seen, and thousands of butterflies flitting hither and thither, distinguished by an endless variety of colours. (72)

Sometimes explicitly, though usually not, these garden scenes embody a privatized domestic fantasy of a *locus amoenus* in which to settle one's family. People familiar with children's literature will find a more recent version of such a scene in the first volume of the Babar books, where Babar, recently returned from his civilizing experience in Europe, selects just such a place on which to found the new city of the elephants.

The third landscape convention, in the mode of the sublime, is the panorama seen from a promontory, a convention familiar to us from the prospect poetry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This convention is frequently used to textualize arrivals at major geographical discoveries or landmarks, such as Burton's discovery of Lake Tanganyika, or James Grant's arrival at the Victoria Nyanza. I have elsewhere called this the monarch-of-all-I-survey convention ("Conventions"; *Imperial Eyes*), because so often in exploration literature these prospect scenes encode a relation of dominance of the seer over the seen. Often they include a prophetic vision of the future European domination of the region. For instance, in his description of arriving at Lake Victoria Nyanza, Grant literally sketches in such a prophetic vision (italics mine):

The now famous Victoria Nyanza, when seen for the first time, expanding in all its majesty, excited our wonder and admiration.
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Even the listless Wanyamuezi came to have a look at its waters, stretching over ninety degrees of the horizon. The Seedees were in raptures with it, fancying themselves looking upon the ocean which surrounds their island home of Zanzibar, and I made a sketch, dotting it with imaginary steamers and ships riding at anchor in the bay. On its shores are beautiful bays, made by wooded tongues of low land . . . (196)

All three types of landscape description have at least one thing in common. All three, the development description, the garden description, and the promontory description, largely eliminate current inhabitants from the environment. There are gardens but no gardener, meadows but no one tilling them, forests but no one hunting in them, resources but no one already using them. Landscapes are described as more or less virgin territory, not as human environments with histories, already inhabited from time immemorial by populations organized into societies, empires, and above all economies. No trace is registered of vast indigenous trade networks, often already linked up with Europe, even in regions that explorers were coming to for the first time. These were the societies, networks, and economies that Europeans were going to dismantle in order to establish their own hegemony, and which they did dismantle, in the end by the most brutal kinds of mass destruction, murder, and coercion. It is no accident that in the thrilling, heady period of exploration, the potential human complications were so often painted out of the future “scene of European enterprise.” But in hindsight, one cannot help seeing in these depopulated verbal landscapes of the travel books the ideological preparation for the real depopulation that was to come.

And there is perhaps another sort of depersonalization to be noted here, as Wlad Godzich has pointed out (personal communication). It is surely not a coincidence that the emissaries of the modern state most often position themselves as an invisible and passive eye looking out over a space, a conduit for information rather than a mediating agent. The reader is by their side, looking with them and not at them. These are not subjects who act in the name of the state—the state will act through them.
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There are several points of contrast here with earlier travel and exploration writings. In 1790, a travel writer pausing on a promontory was less likely to describe the sight itself than an emotive response to the sight. For example, when James Bruce in the 1780s describes looking down on one of the great cataracts of the Nile, what he ends up talking about is himself:

It was a most magnificent sight, that ages, added to the greatest length of human life, would not efface or eradicate from my memory; it struck me with a kind of stupor, and a total oblivion of where I was, and of every other sublunary concern. . . . I was awakened from one of the most profound reveries that ever I fell into, by Mahomet and by my friend Drink, who now put to me a thousand impertinent questions. It was after this I measured the fall and believe, within a few feet, it was the height I have mentioned; but I confess I could at no time in my life less promise upon precision; my reflection was suspended, or subdued; and while in sight of the fall, I think I was under a temporary alienation of mind; it seemed to me as if one element had broke loose from, and become superior to, all laws of subordination . . . (162)

The currency in which the sight is given textual value here is not its visual properties (as it would be for later writers), but the response experienced by the seer. Once again, as with Mungo Park, we have a sentimental discourse, stringently anchored in the subjectivity of the speaker-protagonist, a discourse in which experience rather than information is the principal matter to be conveyed. Notice further that the experience Bruce undergoes here is not one of domination or conquest; if anything, the landscape possesses him, rather than the reverse. Nor does he see a prophetic, civilizing vision—on the contrary, the landscape seems to be out of control, not under control. Moreover, Bruce represents himself as out of control, announcing limitations to his authority (notably his authority to gather information!). This is the kind of thing the mid-century writers almost never do. Their discourse minimizes reference to its speaking subject, and leaves little possibility for expressing limits to the speaker's authority.
In the earlier, experiential narratives, like those of Bruce and Mungo Park, there is little in the way of landscape and nature description of any kind. This is also true of novels of the period, such as those of Chateaubriand. What predominates overwhelmingly is human and diplomatic drama. The “scenes of European enterprise” in these earlier accounts are dramatic scenes in which the traveler is an actor with a role. The narrative proceeds not by passage through a constantly changing ecology, but by passage from one human encounter to the next—meetings with local chiefs, robbers, benefactors, queens, slaves. These experiential, sentimental texts (other examples include Richard Lander and Gaspard Mollien in Africa, and such figures as John Stedman, John Davie, and John Mawe in South America) are adventure stories, tales of a thousand woes, full of captivities, holdups, narrow escapes and, above all, oh so delicate negotiations with local leaders for the permission and protection without which travel would mean certain death for the outsider. They are full of high melodrama and high comedy, the non-European other often seen as outlandish, bizarre, hilarious, or horrifying, the European self as pathetic, silly, or roguish.

As I mentioned earlier, these late eighteenth-century experiential texts strike the literary critic as extremely novelistic. Mungo Park is the picture of the sentimental hero, Richard Lander a pure picaresque rogue. John Stedman in his Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1790) builds his account around a (true) love story between himself and a mulatto slave, told in tear-jerking fashion worthy of Richardson’s Pamela. As I have argued elsewhere, however (“Conventions”), it is not that these travel writers are imitating or borrowing from the novel. At this juncture, travel literature and the novel must be seen as sharing a common narrative discourse that is dramatic, experiential, and sentimental. Neither genre can legitimately be seen as the originator or proprietor of this discourse.

In the experiential accounts, both European interlopers and local inhabitants get individualized as characters, and what gets elaborated textually are the idiosyncracies and particularities of persons
and occasions. Consider for instance Mungo Park’s rendition of one of his many encounters with a local king. Notice again the hero’s portrayal of himself as vulnerable, inept, limited in power and understanding, innocently at the mercy of things, as Bruce was at the cataract:

We reached at length the king’s tent, where we found a great number of people, men and women, assembled. Ali was sitting upon a black leather cushion, clipping a few hairs from his upper lip; a female attendant holding up a looking-glass before him. He appeared to be an old man, of the Arab cast, with a long white beard; and he had a sullen and indignant aspect. He surveyed me with attention and inquired of the Moors if I could speak Arabic; being answered in the negative he appeared much surprised, and continued silent. The surrounding attendants and especially the ladies, were abundantly more inquisitive; they asked a thousand questions, inspected every part of my apparel, searched my pockets and obliged me to unbutton my waistcoat, and display the whiteness of my skin; they even counted my toes and fingers, as if they doubted whether I was in truth a human being. (234)

This kind of scene is found all through late eighteenth-century travel narrative. Needless to say, such encounters with local leaders and inhabitants are just as frequent and essential to later travelers, but these encounters are seldom dramatized or elaborated in their accounts. Instead, what acquires prominence as a means of representing local inhabitants is the discourse of tribal features, in which the Other is described collectively as an inventory of traits and customs which exist abstracted from particular persons and experiences. In the passage from James Bruce (1790) quoted above, Bruce refers to his native companions by name and represents himself in dialogue with them. In the excerpt from James Grant (1864), on the other hand, Grant refers to his native companions by tribal labels—the Wanyamuezi, the Seedees—and characterizes them in terms of tribal characteristics and responses. Often, as in Richard Burton’s classic Lake Regions of Central Africa (1861), local inhabitants are removed altogether from the journey narrative and
are discussed in separate chapters on the “geography and ethnology” of the region. It is the discourse of “social science,” just beginning to consolidate itself in the mid-nineteenth century. Whatever the explanatory power of this discourse, there can be no doubt about its potential for reifying, dehumanizing, and distancing those whom it is used to characterize. You can’t talk to a set of tribal features (though you might be able to organize them into a work force). By abstracting traits away from organized social and material life, this discourse verbally dismantles human societies. As with the kinds of nature description I mentioned above, it pulls people out of the landscape.

It would be incorrect to say that this discourse of tribal features is absent from earlier travel accounts. It is not. But it is counterbalanced there by the particularizing, experiential narrative. For instance, when Mungo Park offers some “general observations on the character and disposition of the Mandingoes,” his point of departure is the specifics of his own interaction with them. He says, for example, “Perhaps the most prominent defect in their character was the insurmountable propensity which the reader must have observed . . . to steal from me the few effects I was possessed of” (239). This account is anchored differently from, say, Richard Burton’s description of the Wanyamuezi, which begins “They are usually of a dark sepia brown, rarely coloured like diluted India ink . . . the effluvium from their skin especially after exercise or excitement, marks their connection with the Negro. The hair curls crisply . . .” (II: 20).

There is a risk in this discussion of falling into a simple good guys/bad guys story. One does not want to say that the late eighteenth-century sentimental travelers were somehow less imperialist than their successors at mid-century. If I have been constructing what looks like a moral tale, my objective has been not to idealize the earlier accounts, but to use them to make available to us aspects of the later ones. The difference is in the way the imperial enterprise is encoded in the travel narrative. In the mid-century writers, the tendency toward depersonalization and dehumanization, the projection toward a future global transformation, the
positioning of the traveler as an invisible, passive observer, are all characteristic of imperialist vision under the modern nation-state. In the sentimental travelers, the expansionist enterprise is encoded largely in what Daniel Defert calls the language of universal diplomacy of pre-nineteenth-century Europe, a pan-continental code in which power relations are understood through courtly ritual and etiquette. As James Clifford has observed (personal communication), part of the appeal of these sentimental accounts today lies in the fact that this dramatic, diplomatic mode allows for dialogue, for power and personhood on both sides, in contrast with the reifying discourses of racism that were to follow. That sense of dialogue in turn lets Europeans think they won fair and square. Though it reads non-European peoples entirely in terms of European social hierarchy and mores, the discourse of diplomatic drama at least concedes their humanity and even allows them a little “class.” (One recalls the similar treatment of the Aztec court in the accounts of the conquest of Mexico three hundred years earlier.) Indeed, one of the ways the experiential accounts mystify the imperialist enterprise is by portraying the European travelers as less powerful, less clever, less ruthless than their opponents. Who can keep in mind that such hapless boobies as Mungo Park, always getting robbed, imprisoned, lost in the desert, poked at by ladies, or paralyzed by reveries, are the advancemen of European domination? Yet the appeal of these boobies today lies not just in their innocence, but also in their power of individual action. They do things, they don’t just stand there looking or complaining. They are not circumscribed and immobilized in webs of social and ideological control.

Defert says that this courtly, diplomatic code disappeared with the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth century, and it becomes almost completely superseded in travel narrative by the mid-nineteenth-century conventions I have been discussing. But in the turn of the century texts the courtly code was already under attack, as indeed it was in Europe itself. For the traveler-heroes of the sentimental travel accounts are members not of European courtly aristocracies, but of the rising bourgeoisie who were in the process of replacing the aristocracy as the dominant class. (A
The ideological struggle between court-based aristocracy and rising bourgeoisie has been examined at some length by Norbert Elias in his belatedly recognized masterpiece, The History of Manners. As this struggle developed in the late eighteenth century, it took quite different shapes in different countries (Elias in particular contrasts France and Germany). But in general the European bourgeoisies developed ideologies of their own in opposition to courtly values; these ideologies were in some cases absorbed into courtly life to a degree (as in France, Elias argues) while in others they and their bearers were rigidly excluded (as in Germany). In any case, Elias sees romanticism as an oppositional ideology, expressive of the bourgeoisie's sense that its interests, values, and lifeways were opposed to those of the court. Romanticism's stress on feelings stands in opposition to courtly values of reason over passion; its focus on individual, intrinsic self-worth and personal achievement stand in opposition to courtly emphases on lineage and externals like dress and manners; its chastity, naturalness, and simplicity in opposition to courtly unnaturals and decadence.

One thing late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century travel accounts do is dramatize this bourgeois struggle for hegemony on a displaced plane (plain?). In the courts of Arab and African kings and chieftains, the hapless, sincere, and passionate bourgeois emissary confronts the horrors of courtly decadence and immorality. Time and time again, these guileless arrivistes are robbed, imprisoned, left to die, only to be helped in the last instance either by Providence or by the spontaneous generosity of an invariably female slave. Time and time again, the court is satirized, ridiculed, or made an object of utter disgust. Consider, for instance, James Bruce's dehumanizing description of his work as court physician to the harem of one Ethiopian sultan:

I must confess, however, that calling these the fair sex is not preserving a precision in terms. I was admitted into a large square apartment, very ill-lit, in which were about fifty women, all perfectly black, without any covering but a very narrow piece of cotton rag about their waists. While I was musing whether or not these all might
be queens, or whether there was any queen among them, one of them took me by the hand and led me rudely enough into another apartment. . . . I shall not entertain the reader with the multitude of their complaints; being a lady's physician, discretion and silence are my first duties. It is sufficient to say, that there was not one part of their whole bodies, inside and outside, in which some of them had not ailments. . . . Another night I was obliged to attend them, and gave the queens, and two or three of the great ladies, vomits. I will spare my reader the recital of so nauseous a scene. The ipecacuanha had great effect, and warm water was drunk very copiously. The patients were numerous, and the floor of the room received all the evacuations. It was most prodigiously hot, and the horrid, black figures, moaning and groaning with sickness all around me, gave me, I think, some slight idea of the punishment in the world below. (234–35)

Unquestionably, part of the ideological force of these sentimental travel books lay in their representation of European class struggle in a way so dramatic and so congenial to the interests of their bourgeois readerships. And one can see the ideological force of representing capitalism's expansionist enterprise in the image of the class struggle at home, lending it a kind of glory and legitimacy (and a thrilling pathos), while mystifying its actual power and direction. By mid-nineteenth century, however, the struggle between courts and bourgeoisies was largely over. Both courtly idiom and the oppositional bourgeois idiom it conditioned had disappeared. Travelers were by this time entirely caught up in extending bourgeois hegemony under the aegis of the state and under the ideology of the civilizing mission, in whose name we have seen them gathering information and musing into the future from cliff tops.

But here the risk of another oversimplification must be acknowledged. For these generalized discourses I have been talking about never came even close to prevailing absolutely. We know that dominant ideologies only rarely appear in pure form, and that human subjects are not monolithic. While travel literature is certainly a place where imperialist ideologies get created, it is equally certainly a place where such ideologies get questioned, especially
from the realm of particularized and concrete sensual experience. In fact, travel literature is a particularly prominent instance of what discourse analysts like to call polyphony, because it is a genre that has never been consigned to professionals or specialists. Even today, it remains a place to which nonspecialist lay voices—an incredible variety of them—have access. You don’t have to be a professional writer to write a travel book. Similar to call-in radio, travel literature is ultimately best seen as a genre not in the sense of a set of conventions, but in the sense of a discursive space which, like a street corner, is continually crisscrossed by all manner of people.

To further complicate the picture I have been drawing, I will end with a couple of mid-nineteenth-century travel texts which do not adopt the detached and dehumanized code of the civilizing mission, and which in fact disrupt it. The first is Paul Du Chaillu’s *Explorations in Equatorial Africa* (1861), and the second is Henry Morton Stanley’s famed *How I Found Livingstone* (1872). Both were extremely popular books in their time, and both were much vilified by authorities and the British explorer elite. It is not a coincidence that both writers were naturalized Americans, though that is not why I picked them.

In Du Chaillu’s book, all the characteristics of both historical periods I have mentioned coexist, producing a hugely contradictory, chaotic, and colorful text, a good deal of which, it turns out, was his pure invention. Like the writers of the 1790s, Du Chaillu describes his emotional states and constantly dramatizes encounters with local inhabitants. Yet he does not play the vulnerable sentimental hero, but the Great White Father revered by the natives. Among his favorite scenes to dramatize is not the courtly encounter, but native “atrocities” like ritual killings, witchcraft, trials by poison, and so on. Modern racism is present in his rhetoric. And like mid-century writers, Du Chaillu goes on obsessively about the need and potential for capitalist development, constantly fantasizes about Africa’s “civilized” future, and uses all the kinds of landscape description I mentioned earlier. But one often finds Du Chaillu playing conventions against each other, as
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he does in the passage that follows. This starts out as one of the view-from-the-promontory scenes I mentioned earlier:

From this elevation about 5000 feet above the ocean level, I enjoyed an unobstructed view as far as the eye could reach. The hills we had surmounted the day before lay quietly at our feet, seeming mere molehills. On all sides stretched the immense virgin forests, with here and there a sheen of a watercourse. And far away on the east loomed the blue tops of the farthest range of the Sierra del Crystal, the goal of my desires. (23)

The relation of dominance over the terrain is clear here—the hills are now lying in quiet ("virginal") submission to the interloper. As with the Grant sketch quoted earlier, Du Chaillu's view now turns into a vision of a utopian future when the imperial mission will have done its work (it's a particularly American vision, too):

The murmur of the rapids below filled my ears, and as I strained my eyes towards those distant mountains which I hoped to reach, I began to think how this wilderness would look if only the light of Christian civilization could once be fairly introduced among the black children of Africa. I dreamed of forests giving way to plantations of coffee, cotton, spices, of peaceful negroes going to their contented daily tasks; of farming and manufactures, of churches and schools . . . (23)

It is obvious why this vision makes contemporary readers uncomfortable. But apparently it was intended to make Du Chaillu's contemporaries uncomfortable too, for this grand vision gets interrupted by a concrete experience, quite a dramatic one at that:

and luckily, raising my eyes heavenward at this stage of my thoughts, saw pendent from the branch of a tree beneath which I was sitting an immense serpent, evidently preparing to gobble up this dreaming intruder on his domains. My dreams of future civilization vanished in a moment. Luckily my gun lay at hand. (23)

Obviously this serpent came here directly from the Garden of Eden, and has appeared to tell the reader among other things that the cozy pastoral-plantation fantasy is forbidden fruit which will lead eventually to expulsion from the garden. In the face of this intru-
sion of immediate experience, Du Chaillu abandons his role as ob-
server and becomes an agent, and what he does is grab the most fund-
damental real tool of the civilizing mission, his gun. Du Chaillu is
unquestionably invoking the conventions of his contemporaries in or-
der to ironize them, and his means are very reminiscent of the earlier
dramatic and experiential travel texts. One of the messages implied is,
"Let's not always pretend that this pastoral fantasy is really what we
are going to produce here"—as an American in 1860 might well know.

A much more direct challenge to the discourse of the civilizing
mission came a decade later from the prolific Henry Stanley, author
of In Darkest Africa. I believe Stanley can be credited with single-
handedly breaking up the mid-nineteenth-century British mode of
travel writing, and founding quite consciously a new generation
both of explorers and of exploration literature. He does this in part
by incessantly challenging the mid-century writers on their own
roots. Over and over in his first blockbuster, How I Found
Livingstone (1872) he indicts his predecessors, Burton, Speke, Grant,
and others, for failing to provide him with INFORMATION that
was accurate and useful to him. And he challenges them on
sentimental grounds, for being detached and cold, for failing to see
that negroes experience the same passions white men do. (This,
archaically enough, is his criterion for seeing them as fully human.)
Stanley describes landscapes, then breaks frame to ask, "Reader,
why am I doing this?—Ah, yes, it is because you and I are looking at
this place for opportunities" (italics mine). In his preface, he explicit-
ly displaces the informational discourse by announcing that he
has "used the personal pronoun first person singular, 'I,'" oftener,
perhaps than real modesty would admit. But it must be remain-
ered that I am writing a narrative of my own adventures and
travels, and that until I meet Livingstone, I presume the greatest
interest is attached to myself, my marches, my troubles, my thoughts,
and my impressions" (xxii). This is obviously a presumption that
Mungo Park and the others shared two generations earlier, with the
difference that they did not have to make it explicit. Stanley
explicitly ridicules his predecessors' posture of emotional restraint,
and repeatedly depicts himself unable or unwilling to adopt it.
But above all, Stanley portrays a whole, unflattering side of European travel experience in Africa which his predecessors unquestionably shared but which they did not write about: its violence. Over and over again, almost obsessively, Stanley portrays himself beating his servants and bearers, horsewhipping them, putting them in chains, all manner of brutalities—often, he admits, with no justification other than his own irritability. He shows himself abusing his European companions, plundering indigenous communities for food, running roughshod over peoples’ territory and customs and making up for it in violence, suppressing rebellion after rebellion among his party without the slightest ear for grievances. Stanley, in short, does a journalistic exposé on himself, and by implication on his decorous mentors. Small wonder he—an illegitimate working-class orphan emigrant who never even got his name till he was eighteen—was hated so by the Royal Society Fellows even as the attention of the world was focused on him.

Of particular interest here is the way Stanley, in forging a new discourse, combines elements of the older, sentimental one (he even uses “thou” in his rendering of dialogues with local leaders) with elements of the new muckraking journalism (his first books were, of course, written for the *New York Herald*). It is also important to note that, as with Du Chaillu, Stanley’s critique is a “domesticated” one, in the sense that the challenge occurs within the overall imperialist enterprise. In fact one could argue that, while doubtless alienating some sectors of the home public from that enterprise, the effect of Stanley’s exposé on others might have been simply a sense of relief and empowerment at finally knowing what has really been going on under all that detachment and decorum. As my colleague James Clifford puts it, if you want to give people a sense of power, you have to make them feel they are seeing behind the scenes. Who would know this better than Stanley the newspaperman?

In any case, that it was a domesticated critique is eerily borne out by Stanley’s subsequent career. For of course it was he who, as the agent of King Leopold of Belgium, stood at the forefront of the infamous Scramble for Africa, the orgy of plunder, forced labor,
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mass imprisonment, and genocide which in the years between 1890 and World War I devastated Central Africa on the same scale that Central and South America were devastated by the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century. In the Congo alone—Stanley's particular field of endeavor—the loss of life in this period is conservatively estimated at between 10 and 20 million people. Small wonder that at the end of the nineteenth century, the conventional view from the promontory gets replaced by a new trope, the terrifying jungle-at-night scene where Europeans find themselves immobilized and terrorized in a landscape they cannot see. Small wonder that the climax of those terrifying nights is their recognition that the source of the terror and evil is not Africa, but themselves.

Bibliography

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