

Journeys around Maupassant: Destination and Designation in French Naturalist Fiction

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Academic writers are (or perhaps like to imagine themselves to be) more like travellers than tourists, energised by the prospect of *terra incognita* rather than relaxing in well-charted terrain. Yet one find oneself almost at a loss before the wealth of accounts and references which would figure as commonplaces in any comprehensive analysis of this topic. Travel, it seems, cannot only take us everywhere but also is everywhere. As Todorov warns us, ‘What is *not* a journey? As soon as one attributes an extended figurative meaning to the word - and one has never been able to refrain from doing so - the journey coincides with life, no more, no less. [...] Everything is a journey, but as a result this “everything” has no specific identity.’¹ Many of these figures are voiced in our stereotypes about the nineteenth century: for example, the collapsing of the dualism which Todorov calls the ‘opposition [...] between the spiritual and the material, between interior and exterior’ by Romantic notions of the inner voyage of the mind; the reinstatement of this opposition in the very privileging by Baudelaire and Huysmans of that inner voyage in its capacity to travel beyond the travel writer’s compass; fantasies of sex and power played out in the great European voyage of colonisation, to which the sexual adventurism associated with individuals such as Flaubert, Wilde and Gide adds a complex supplement; and the cultural impetus lent by the revolutions in modes of transport such as train, tram, bicycle and omnibus.

On a rather less grand scale we might also mention the literary fetishization of the local journey, which is transformed by social as well as scientific developments in the

nineteenth century and may take several forms: the drive in a cab through the managed parks of the city, the train journey out to the provinces, the day trip along the Seine or the Marne, or the Sunday in the country consecrated and desecrated in literary and pictorial visions of the *déjeuner sur l'herbe* (picnic lunch) scene. If the term 'local' needs a definition then it is to be found in the very failure of local journeys to live up to Todorov's definition of a travel narrative: 'A journey in France would not result in a "travel narrative". [...] Such narratives [...] lack the feeling of alterity in relation to the people (and the lands) described.'² Perhaps, though, a genuine sense of that alterity to which Todorov refers was still possible or locatable in late nineteenth-century France in a way that it is not today.

The very charm of alterity may produce a cynicism about the feasibility of travel accounts in general, as Maupassant suggests in his short story of 1882 *En voyage* ('On a Trip', not to be confused with the short story of the same name which appeared on exactly the same date a year later). This story, which is akin to a 'simple news item'³, tells of a young tutor who dies along with one of his pupils who has fallen into a well. But such narrative banality is presented as a test to this particular travel writer who, as we learn in the story's opening frame, is sending love letters back to his beloved from his travels which, as his 'dear friend' requests, do *not* interiorize and personalise the descriptive and anecdotal potential of travel:

You have asked me to write to you often and in particular to tell you of the things that I have seen. [...] You think that with a landscape painted in a few lines and a little story told in a few sentences, the true character of a country can be given, making it alive, visible and dramatic. I shall try to fulfil your wishes. Hence I shall

send you letters from time to time where I shall talk neither of you nor me, but only of the horizon and of the men who move about there.⁴

The presumed intimacy of these lovers sets into particularly acute relief the difficulty in seducing any reader who is not party to these events. Neither in a sense, however, is the narrator who in turn is merely relaying a story he has been told at the very spot where these deaths occurred. What Maupassant suggests is that it is the context of the telling rather than the events themselves which are most significant, and yet his own stories are so effective at an anecdotal level and often so brief in their descriptive expressiveness, in accordance with the generic demands of short fiction:

I don't know whether my emotions should be attributed to the dramatic way in which this thing was told to me, to the mountain scene, or to the contrast between on the one hand the joy of the sun and flowers and on the other this black and deadly hole, but my heart was wrenched and all my nerves were shaken by this narrative which might not appear to you to be so terribly poignant as you read it in your room without seeing the setting for this drama.⁵

However, perhaps these very doubts exhibit a naïve phenomenology of presence. In *Bel-Ami* it is not the ex-soldier Georges Duroy who writes *Les Mémoires d'un chasseur d'Afrique* (Memoirs of an African Hunter) but his future wife Madeleine Forestier, which may confirm our suspicion that travel writing is more a matter of writing than of travel. For at

the most banal level, travel writing dramatises the challenge to imaginative writing to take the reader where they have not been, to bring to life both signs and signposts.

So our need for caution in using notions of travel is considerable, and yet as ever we are in critical terms both condemned and liberated to play through the figures of a century where

travel is a metaphor that [...] became an ontological discourse central to the relations between Self and Other, between different forms of alterity, between nationalisms, women, races, and classes. [...] Whether travel is a metaphor of exile, mobility, difference, modernity, or hybridity, it suggests the particular ways in which knowledge of a Self, society and nation was, and is, within European and North American culture, to be understood and obtained.⁶

This ideological self-awareness is a way of dealing with what we could term Todorov's temptation, the temptation of a metaphoricity which in literary analysis can almost conflate the journey of writing and the writing of journeys. Indeed, perhaps this self-awareness is the best that we can hope for.

To refer to fictionalised journeys rather than travel writing as such is not to read without a sense of the infiltration which existed between the two in the nineteenth century and which cultural analysis can uncover. Zola's *L'Assommoir* offers a prime example of the 'foreignness' to be found at the heart of a geographically and socially segregated city. This version of Paris beyond the tourist trail offered for contemporary readers a defamiliarization so effective that the *langue du peuple* it transcribes was experienced by many critics as

virtually a foreign language. When the characters from the Goutte-d'Or district do venture onto the tourist trail after the wedding of Coupeau and Gervaise, Madinier leads (or rather misleads) the wedding guests to the Vendôme column which offers views towards the Panthéon, Notre-Dame and the Tour Saint-Jacques. The full irony of this ill-conceived city tour only becomes clear if we look at an edition from the Second Empire of Karl Baedeker's guide to Paris (and therefore prior to the pulling down of the column attributed to Gustave Courbet which took place on 16 May 1871 just days before the entry of the Versailles troops into Paris). For Baedeker warns that

the column may be ascended by means of a dark staircase (open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.). The custodian (fee 50 cent.) provides the visitor with a lantern. The view from the summit is, however, inferior to those from the Tour St. Jacques, Notre-Dame, the Panthéon and the Arc de l'Etoile.⁷

So, far from being offered an emblematic fantasy of panoramic authority, Madinier's guests are led to a point from which they can only gaze longingly at other landmarks where a genuinely panoramic view would be possible.

Even more ironically, the very role of the guide offers a metaphor of how a Realist or Naturalist narrator leads his reader around a certain novelistic universe. As Roland Barthes suggests, the verb which best describes the activities of such a narrator (or such a guide) is *désigner*, the tourists' verb par excellence, namely 'to point'. Such a masterful role bears comparison with those texts (guidebooks such as Baedeker's) which offer a reader a comprehensive social and cultural map by which he or she may follow a particular *parcours*.

Both these literary narratives and guidebooks (particularly in the series format made famous by publishers such as Baedeker and Murray) share that epistemological fantasy of total knowledge which we find in the encyclopaedic projects of Larousse, Littré, Zola and the rest. As the narrator of *Notes d'un voyageur* ('A Traveller's Notes') points out when he plans to take a balloon ride over Nice: 'When you visit, you must visit everything.'⁸ It says much of Maupassant's suspicion of this kind of Zolaesque panorama that the trip proves to be a catastrophe as the balloon cannot even take off!

The referential function of the guidebook in which details and prescriptions point to places and things we might visit is undercut by a Decadent aesthetic in which it is words and their connotations (and thus yet more images) which are themselves the purveyors of pleasure. As des Esseintes says in what is perhaps *the* anti-travel narrative of the *fin de siècle*, *A Rebours*, when his plan to visit London is aborted in the English-style restaurant he finds in Paris, 'Why move when one can travel so magnificently in a chair?'⁹ This is why it is important not to conflate Decadent evocations of exoticism with travel narratives of a less disingenuous kind. For in Realist and Naturalist accounts, this fetishization of maps (and other sign systems) is represented as a form of delirium, firstly, the delirium of desire, as Emma Bovary's finger famously follows itineraries around Paris on the map she buys, though she can only envy Léon as he plans to move to the capital. When her greyhound disappears, Lheureux comforts her with tales of dogs returning home, one making it all the way from Constantinople to Paris. The discomfort of irony is that Emma cannot even get there from Yonville. In the Comices agricoles scene the aptly named Lieuvain uses the image of the nation as a body to map out the growing freedom of travel: 'If [...] I cast a glance over the current situation in our fine country, what do I see? [...] New means of communication

everywhere, like so many new arteries in the body of the State, are establishing new links; [...] at last France can breathe!...'10 Emma can only compete with this liberation of the public (and by implication male) citizen by looking for a particular type of 'rapport nouveau' to free her from the stultifying constriction which means that she will not actually be able to travel to the Paris of her dreams. This is one reason why she is so disappointed not to have a son. For Emma imagines how, by breaking the mimesis of the reproduction of the mother in the figure of her daughter, she might have escaped from what we might term the tyranny of metaphor, which cuts her off from the desirous realm of male adventure in the public sphere.

In another sense too map reading seems to be close to madness. At the end of chapter 5 of Hennique's *L'Accident de Monsieur Hébert* (Monsieur Hébert's Accident) the adulteress Gabrielle visits a friend after learning to her horror that her husband, Hébert, and her lover, Ventujol, were at school together. When she arrives at the home of one of Jancourt's cousins in order to establish an alibi, she finds that one colonel Thuilier is already there. Injured in 1870 and referred to as 'the madman', he explains how he plans to destroy Germany. The madness of desire is replaced here by madness alone, for the colonel exclaims, 'I would take a pair of scissors [...] and eliminate Prussia and its allies from all the maps of Europe.'¹¹ According to the mimetic code, madness might thus be defined as a state in which the world of signs usurps the real world, and this is the position in which *revanchiste* France finds itself, as the semiotics of the map displace geographical reality within Thuilier's delirious imagination.

It could of course be argued that the notion of travel offers a useful way of thinking about the ways in which language maps. One of the most emblematic of novelistic journeys is that which takes the hero of the French *Bildungsroman* to Paris, and in this as in so much

else, Zola's tale of a bourgeois Don Giovanni, *Pot-Bouille* (Pot Luck), offers an ironic gloss on the literary model. For on the first page Octave makes his way to Paris only to be taken by his driver to the wrong address, the passage Choiseul instead of the rue de Choiseul where his tale unfolds. So travel and arrival are, at least for the *parvenu*, a matter of vectorisation and linguistic address. Failing as much as he succeeds as a Don Giovanni, Octave will fulfil his Lacanian destiny and consistently miss his aim only to achieve his goal. The fact that we might find it almost impossible to resist the metaphorical potential of travel is particularly ironic in that metaphor itself is, as its etymology suggests, a matter of change, pursuit and displacement in which 'a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object, different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable'.¹² But as Warren and Wellek observe, metaphor is not just a way of travelling to some 'improper' place, as critics are wont to say, or of making a name scandalous, but also a way of staying close by the thing which we cannot resist naming and renaming over and over again. In their terms, 'we metaphorise also what we love, what we want to linger over, and contemplate.' This too should be borne in mind when we recall that travel narratives (and travels in narrative) are so often journeys of desire, usually of a transgressive variety.

In fact the emotions of fear and uneasiness characterise much of the travel in nineteenth-century fiction, not least because of the tense interplay of private and public scenarios which protagonists experience in trains and coaches, in other words where they travel in a carriage. Precisely because someone is driving you in these modes of transport, it is possible to have blinds lowered or curtains drawn, and this makes the carriage a potentially *louche* location (infamously for Emma and Léon of course). László Tarr's history of the carriage portrays that *louche* quality of what he calls one of 'the most evocative

symbols of the nineteenth century'¹³, the *fiacre* or hired cab which can be contrasted with privately-owned and owner-driven *cabriolets*. The *fiacre* embodied what we might call the urban *imprévu*, the unexpected or implausible element which mimetic plots both need and need to master, offering to those who hail it down the aura of a distinctly low-life plot. In Tarr's words, 'The cracking joints of the old boxes cautioned the prospective passenger from afar against availing himself of this means of transport, and the unanalysable suspicious smell that struck him on opening the door of such a vehicle only added to his doubts.'

Notwithstanding the heavily tinted glass of certain limousines, the modern automobile may be an individual form of transport but it does not usually offer such privacy because, as its name suggests, we drive ourselves and therefore need to be able to see out of the window! Hence the opening line of Christian Gailly's recent novel, *Les Évadés* (The Escapees), 'Hardly anything much ever happens in a car. In fact nothing ever happens and this is quite right. Cars are there to make a link between what has happened and what will be transacted. In a sense nothing is more novelistic.'¹⁴

Even within the carriage, however, the private arena is often not quite private enough, hence the embarrassment (as well as the titillating danger) of that set sex scene on the honeymoon journey, which is reworked in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* when Georges takes his new wife, Madeleine, on the train to Rouen to meet his parents. We see far more of this conjugal coupling than we do of the adulterous coupling of Emma and Léon in the *fiacre*. Following a civil ceremony they take the 18.30 out of the Gare Saint-Lazare, only to be confronted suddenly with the enforced intimacy of the carriage. Georges tries to break the ice, but the experienced widow warns him that 'kissing in a carriage is pointless'.¹⁵ With the train rising and swaying as it speeds along in this innuendo-laden scene, the reader should

realise that Georges's problem in seduction is one of timing and rhythm: 'Georges was still holding her hand, wondering and worrying quite how he would reach the caressing stage. [...] He feared that she would think him stupid, too shy or too brutal, too slow or too quick.' He wonders to himself, 'I am stupid. I should go quicker than this.' In spite of her warning against the prematurely harvested pleasures of 'le blé en herbe' (or wheat in the blade...), Madeleine finally yields to her husband's desires: 'There was a very long kiss, silent and deep, then a sudden movement, a mad embrace, a brief breathless struggle, and a violent, clumsy mating. Then they remained in each other's arms, both a little disappointed, yet tired and gentle.' They spend the rest of the journey 'happy to feel so close, in the growing expectation of a more intimate and free embrace', and it is only after their first night together in a hotel in Rouen that he can awake with the joyful enthusiasm of a happy man who has just found a treasure trove, and his wife is permitted a confident and satisfied smile.

Attempts to domesticate the space of the carriage are also problematic, as the narrator of Maupassant's *Notes d'un voyageur* complains: 'I know of nothing more common, vulgar, unseemly and poorly bought up than eating in a carriage where there are other travellers.'¹⁶ Though the space is public, we are tempted to try and make it private, but the fantasy of mobile comforts will not quite hold. Overestimating (or ignoring) the extent of privacy leads to Denise's embarrassment in the *fiacres* taken both to and from the Gare de Vincennes in chapter 5 of Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), firstly when Pauline offers her lover 'a big kiss on the lips' and then when Denise is amazed to learn that Pauline will be spending the night with her lover rather than returning to the dormitory above the department store.¹⁷ The narrator reminds us in that opening boat trip in *L'Education sentimentale* (*Sentimental Education*) that 'people were used to dressing

shabbily on trips',¹⁸ at odds no doubt with the proletarian desire to wear one's Sunday best which we see when Zola's Pauline dresses up in her 'revenge on the working week' to take the heroine Denise on the train to Joinville.¹⁹ Finally, it would be possible to view the history of twentieth-century innovations in travel and its advertising in terms of an effort to calm the nineteenth-century bourgeois imagination about the dangers of travel. In a yet further stage in modern alternative tourism, though, people now exercise the luxury of doing without luxury, because, in Bruce Chatwin's words, 'luxury hampers mobility'.²⁰

NOTES

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Journey and its Narratives', in *Transports: Travel, Pleasure, and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*, ed. by Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996), pp.287-296 (pp.287, 288).

² Ibid., p.293.

³ Guy de Maupassant, *En voyage*(1882), in his *Contes et nouvelles*, 2 vols., ed. by L. Forestier (Paris, Gallimard, 1974), I, p.431. This and all subsequent translations from French are my own.

⁴ Ibid., p.431: 'Vous m'avez demandé de vous écrire souvent et de vous raconter surtout des choses que j'aurai vues. [...] Avec un paysage brossé en quelques lignes, et une petite histoire dite en quelques phrases, on peut donner, croyez-vous, le vrai caractère d'un pays, le faire vivant, visible, dramatique. J'essayerai, selon votre désir. Je vous enverrai donc, de temps en temps, des lettres où je ne parlerai ni de vous ni de moi, mais seulement de l'horizon et des hommes qui s'y meuvent.'

⁵ Ibid., p.433: ‘Je ne sais s’il faut attribuer mon émotion à la manière dramatique dont la chose me fut dite, au décor des montagnes, au contraste de cette joie du soleil et des fleurs avec le trou noir et meurtrier, mais j’eus le coeur tordu, tous les nerfs secoués par ce récit qui, peut-être, ne vous paraîtra point si terriblement poignant en le lisant dans votre chambre sans avoir sous les yeux le paysage du drame.’

⁶ Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (London, Leicester University Press, 1996; first published by Duke University Press), p.4.

⁷ K. Baedeker, *Paris, including Routes from London to Paris and from Paris to the Rhine and Switzerland* (Coblenz, Karl Baedeker, 1865), pp.37-38.

⁸ Guy de Maupassant, *Notes d’un voyageur*, in his *Contes et nouvelles*, I, p.1176: ‘il faut, quand on visite, visiter tout.’

⁹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A Rebours*, ed. M.Fumaroli (Paris, Gallimard (Folio), 1977), p.254 : ‘A quoi bon bouger, quand on peut voyager si magnifiquement sur une chaise?’

¹⁰ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. by C.Gothot-Mersch (Paris, Classiques Garnier, 1971), p.146: ‘Si [...] je reporte mes yeux sur la situation actuelle de notre belle patrie : qu’y vois-je? [...] Partout des voies nouvelles de communication, comme autant d’artères nouvelles dans le corps de l’État, y établissent des rapports nouveaux; [...] enfin la France respire!...’

¹¹ Léon Hennique, *L’Accident de Monsieur Hébert* (Paris, Charpentier, 1884), p.106: ‘Je prendrais une paire de ciseaux [...] et j’éliminerais la Prusse et ses alliés de toutes les cartes d’Europe.’

- ¹². René Warren and Austin Wellek, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p.197.
- ¹³. László Tarr, *The History of the Carriage*, trans. E. Hoch (London, Vision, 1969), pp.287, 288.
- ¹⁴. Christian Gailly, *Les Évadés* (Paris, Minuit, 1997), p.9: 'Il se passe rarement grand-chose dans une voiture. A vrai dire jamais rien et c'est très bien. Les voitures sont là pour faire le lien entre ce qui s'est passé et ce qui va se faire passer. En un sens rien n'est plus romanesque.'
- ¹⁵. Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* in *Romans*, ed. L.Forestier (Paris, Gallimard, 1987), pp.349-354: 'Les baisers en wagon ne valent rien'; 'Il tenait toujours sa main, se demandant avec inquiétude par quelle transition il arriverait aux caresses. [...] Il avait peur de lui sembler niais, trop timide ou trop brutal, trop lent ou trop prompt'; 'Je suis stupide. Je devrais aller plus vite que ça'; 'Ce fut un très long baiser, muet et profond, puis un sursaut, une brusque et folle étreinte, une courte lutte essoufflée, un accouplement violent et maladroit. Puis ils restèrent aux bras l'un de l'autre, un peu déçus tous deux, las et tendres encore.'
- ¹⁶. *Notes d'un voyageur*, p.1174: 'Je ne sais rien de plus commun, de plus grossier, de plus inconvenant, de plus mal appris que de manger dans un wagon où se trouvent d'autres voyageurs.'
- ¹⁷. Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des dames* in vol. III of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5 vols., ed. H.Mitterand (Paris, Gallimard, 1960-67), pp.522 ('un gros baiser sur les lèvres'), 531.
- ¹⁸. Gustave Flaubert, *L'Education sentimentale*, ed. C.Gothot-Mersch (Paris, GF Flammarion, 1985), p.50: 'on avait coutume alors de se vêtir sordidement en voyage'.

¹⁹. *Au Bonheur des dames*, p.522: 'revanche de la semaine'.

²⁰. Bruce Chatwin, *Anatomy of Restlessness* (London, Picador, 1996), p.88.