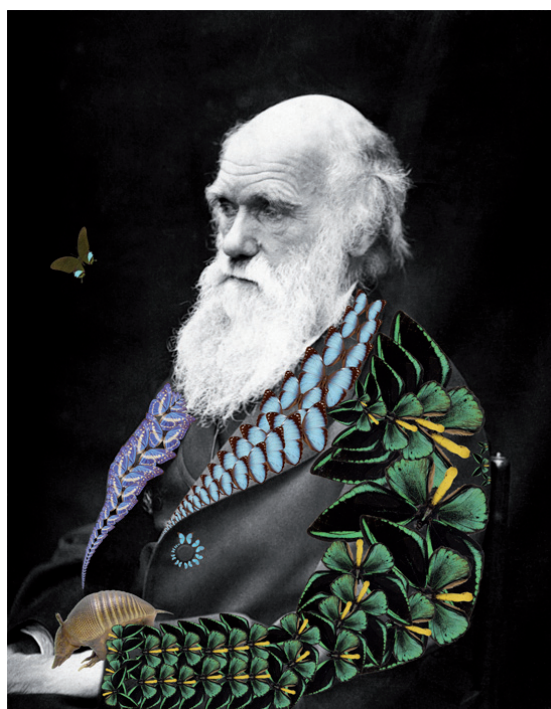


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DARWIN'S *VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE* AS SCIENTIFIC TRAVEL WRITING: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF A GENRE

In a recent review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Richard Lewontin lamented that the vast majority of books on Darwin which have been published as part of the on-going celebrations still follow, with few exceptions, the Suetonian ideal of history-as-biography. He bemoans the failure to privilege a wider contextual approach and to engage with “the history of evolutionary thought before Darwin” and/or with “the socioeconomic milieu” in which he and his contemporaries worked (Lewontin, 2009: 19).

Far be it from me, an amateur in the field of evolutionary theory, coming as I do from literary and cultural studies, to attempt to redress that balance. My more modest intention in this paper is simply to read Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* in the wider context of English travel writing, and to place the author in an evolutionary line stretching from the Renaissance to the present day in terms of one of travel writing's more distinguished and influential subgenres: the scientific travel book.

The story will have to be told briefly and succinctly, leaving aside the many ramifications and subspecies, mutations and adaptations to changing external conditions. Some links will have to be completely missed, but the telling will, I hope, provide a ‘view from elsewhere’ in a gathering predominantly made up of historians and social scientists.

The origins of scientific travel writing can be traced back to the Discoveries and to the new epistemologies required by the opening up of a whole new world to European scrutiny and appropriation. The written accounts of explorers, buccaneers and adventurers took the shape of travel narratives where the marvellous and the factual vied with each other for supremacy and the fantastic and the outlandish happily coexisted with the most detailed and thorough descriptions of the material reality of these new lands. This (to us) odd mixture both defines the early form of the genre and provides the impetus for its evolution. The outcome of the struggle was entirely predictable: the need to validate the strange tales of amazons and men with no heads placed individual experience and observation at the centre of knowledge and redefined truth as an empirical process legitimized by sensory perception.

In this sense, questions about the rhetorical construction and presentation of texts became fundamental and a new discourse based on the eye-witness account and on a systematic recording of external detail changed the make-up of the travel tale forever. Diaries and journals provided the immediacy and authenticity the form required. Literary devices such as voice and point of view, as well as narrative strategies like plot structure and temporal organization had to be developed to substantiate the

incredible, and to make it believable to a European audience. In the absence of other material evidence or as a complement to it, the authority of the written account came to be of paramount importance as a guarantor of the truth of the tale. Ultimately, the marvellous and the monstrous had to go, displaced by the necessity of mapping a true geography, because only the real can be subdued, conquered and colonized.

This new episteme (centred on curiosity, observation and empirical proof) opened up the possibility for the creation of modern observational science, and travel writing both benefited from and contributed to a new cultural environment which strongly relied on the invention of a language to describe the visible. In the next few centuries, travel books would be instrumental in the creation of an inventory of the world and in the development of what Mary Louise Pratt has called the Enlightenment's "planetary consciousness" (Pratt, 1992: 5), which underlies the imperial project. As Europeans first charted the outline of continents and then penetrated their interior, the discourse of travel helped in the necessary mediation between Europe and its Others; that process of translating the foreign into the familiar and of transforming the amorphous, unruly and chaotic into something intelligible and meaningful by means of the structuring power of discourse.

By the time Darwin set sail on the *Beagle*, he had a long line of ancestors behind him, from Hakluyt and Dampier to Humboldt, Cook and Mungo Park, some of whom he explicitly acknowledges in his text. He also benefited from the expansionist drive of English imperial power and the increased sophistication of its methods and practices. In the words of Eric J. Leed, "old forms of travel were redesigned [...] as scientific expeditions, mobile structures of intellectual labor designed for the accumulation of information" (Leed, 1991: 178). Or, if you prefer Stephen Greenblatt's formulation, Europeans possessed a "mobile technology of power" (Greenblatt, 1991: 9) comprising war ships, navigational instruments, attack dogs, lethal weapons and (let us not forget) writing – the means to preserve and reproduce whatever knowledge was being systematically and deliberately compiled. A network of diplomatic, business or personal connections also provided the English traveller with effective logistic support, which literally spanned the five continents dominated by an Empire where the sun never set. Travel had become a highly specialized professional activity, clearly geared towards the formation of the imperial archive and the creation of a global, comprehensive and unified system of knowledge.

By this time, the conventions of scientific travel writing were well established: a first-person narrative of a journey, undertaken with the purpose of gathering knowledge about the natural world (as part of a scientific expedition or as a lone adventure), alternating between the personal account of the protagonist's progression through foreign lands and the description of landscapes, people, plants and animals he/she encounters in his/her travels. Darwin also inherited a wide reading public composed not only of fellow scientists but also and predominantly of curious amateur naturalists, enthusiastic armchair travellers and avid readers of adventure stories – in short, the traditional audience of the travel book. In an age when science still shared a common language with the arts and the humanities, scientific travel writing was more than a mere sub-product of the discourse of science; rather, it was part and parcel of the process of production and dissemination of knowledge in the metropolitan centre. To this large educated audience, an audience equally interested in both the

personal adventure and the intellectual debate, the idea that travel and knowledge are inextricably linked was nothing new. For centuries English culture had been revering heroic venturers who travelled in great danger and discomfort to far away lands just to bring back news of a different world.

The *Voyage of the Beagle* stands squarely in this English tradition, and Darwin's text undoubtedly evolved from it. But at the same time, it also includes elements from adjacent forms of travel writing and related types of traveller. The family resemblances are there, with the philosophical traveller in his search for the origins of civilization and civility; with the pilgrim seeking the sacred place, now located in the secular realm of the natural world; with the young upper-class gentleman going on his Grand Tour to polish his education by means of a *peregrinatio academica* through the recognized centres where learning was available to the inquiring mind; with the Romantic picturesque traveller, designing new ways of looking at scenery and fashioning a vocabulary to read all the elements that compose a landscape. Darwin's text can even claim a family connection with the famous (or should we say, infamous) stereotype of the 'Englishman abroad' – that arrogant, self-serving figure, as impervious to the sensibilities of the native cultures around him as he is to the weather.

And from scientific travel writing itself, Darwin inherited the structural contradictions and paradoxes of a hybrid genre, poised between the subjective and the objective; between narration and description; between the recognition of difference and the need to familiarize and domesticate; between an essential condition of mobility and flux, and the stasis and fixity required by a normalizing conceptual framework. Among all the other subspecies of an essentially mongrel genre, scientific travel writing is perhaps the one which is fraught with the deepest contradictions. To say that 'scientific travel writing' is, by its very nature, an oxymoron, may not be too much of an exaggeration. The balance it aims for is at best precarious, trying to reach an equilibrium between the centrality of the 'I' whose personal fortunes and misfortunes are the focus of the traveller's tale, and the effacement demanded by an epistemology which posits a radical disjunction between subject and object, privileging the materiality of the latter over the immaterial and elusive character of the former.

The *Voyage of the Beagle* is infused with these contrary impulses which pull the text in two directions at once. As one would expect, the contradictions battle it out (for the most part) in the character of the narrator, who inevitably holds centre stage in the genre of the travel narrative. He is, we feel, a shy, inexperienced, self-effacing figure, often out of his depth in the company of *gauchos* or the landed proprietors of *estancias*, almost apologetic for bringing in the personal and subjective as if they were unwelcome distractions from the more serious purpose of the enterprise. He only comes into his own, self-confident *persona* when observing the behaviour of the octopus or the changing habitat of the agouti or the difference in size of finches' beaks. He is, in fact, rehearsing the well-known trope of the anti-hero engaged in an 'anti-conquest', "[c]laiming no [...] imperial articulations of conquest" (Pratt, 1992: 38-39), merely observing, changing nothing – an innocent, disengaged traveller passing through the world and respectfully treating it as an autonomous, independent object.

When the traveller leaves, the world will carry on being what it is – or, perhaps more accurately, the world will continue to be engaged in a *process of becoming*. Change, and the mechanisms of change, is what this is all about, after all. Darwin's

contribution inserted a temporal dimension in a previously static view of Nature. The paradigm was shifting from the rigidity of taxonomies and classificatory systems to more fluid preoccupations with temporal and historical change. It is tempting to say that the journey on the *Beagle* helped Darwin to make the imaginative leap towards evolutionary theory, not only in terms of the scientific data he gathered on the trip, but because the essential nature of ‘the journey’ (mobility through space and progression through time) provided him with the conceptual model he needed to think through the dynamic links between discrete, separate elements and to envisage a universe where everything is perpetually in motion. After all, as Ashton Nichols reminds us, “All scientific thinking relies on metaphors, analogies and other forms of figurative comparison” (Ashton, 2004: 19), and the metaphor of the journey is certainly one of the most permanent, pervasive and universal ways in which we give meaning to our earthly existence and shape to our passage through the world.

Darwin’s journey might be said to reproduce, in fact, the archetypal journey from innocence to experience both in personal and professional terms. Travel, he claims, will build the character of the traveller and “teach him good-humoured patience, freedom from selfishness, the habit of acting for himself” (Darwin, 1989: 377) just as much – we can now say, with the benefit of hindsight – as it will turn him from an amateur naturalist into a professional scientist. Like the traveller (and the travel writer), the naturalist is a subject moving through the materiality of an objective reality: both are equally engaged in a process of inscription and appropriation; both have to deal with the strains of turning difference into familiarity, and with the difficulties involved in the assimilation of alterity and otherness; both need to devise a vocabulary and a language to make the meaningless speak in a recognizable voice; both will bring back evidence in the form of trophies or souvenirs to substantiate their tale; both want to be welcomed as heroes after having successfully been tested to their physical, psychological and mental limits. Some would say – quite correctly – that both are also complicit in a rhetoric of acquisition, the desire to possess, if not literally at least symbolically, the world around them. But both know that the world will always resist total appropriation and will continue to lend itself to further journeys of discovery.

I see the *Voyage of the Beagle* as one among many travel books, an exemplary text of a particular moment in the history of the genre, when 19th century self-confidence mapped new spaces of knowledge and power, and the British imperial gaze roamed the earth looking for origins and explanations or beginnings and conclusions that would legitimize the civilization they had created. But this, of course, is only part of the story.

And clearly the Victorian age did not mark the final evolutionary stage of scientific travel writing – it has not become extinct. It has managed to survive in the very adverse external conditions of a postmodern world of mass tourism and mass information, a world which has been systematically and thoroughly studied, labelled, catalogued, photographed, documented and filmed. How can scientific travel writers like John Hatt, Benedict Arnold or Redmond O’Hanlon compete with the visual exuberance of a David Attenborough? They do, and quite successfully, judging by the record sales of their books and the high reputation they enjoy. The new generation of writers can no longer experience the same wonder and excitement of discovery, nor are they engaged in the quest for a Grand Narrative which will bring all the unruly diversity of Nature into one single, unified plot line. In their journeys, they travel

through the pages of Humboldt, Wallace or Darwin as much as through the jungles of Borneo or the tropical forests of the Amazon. Reality is no longer unmediated, a blank slate on which you can imprint your vision. A layered writing, a palimpsest of meanings is all that they can claim to offer. But they are happy to keep alive and augment the legacy, and for them Darwin will always be a distinguished ancestor, albeit of a different species.

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