

“The Past Is a Foreign Country”: History as Representation in the Writings of William Dalrymple

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ABSTRACT

The work of William Dalrymple reflects a series of transformations, from straightforward travel writing, through more complex and profound encounters with the places and people of various Eastern nations, in particular India, to what most recently might best be described as narrative history. While such depth would be out of place in tourist discourse, some of it – the historical dimension in particular – is unusual even for travel writing. Despite the increasing specialization, however, Dalrymple’s approach has if anything become less elitist in nature; he has even been known to offer his services providing guest lectures on Indian history to select tour parties. His choice of history as his preferred method of representation in theory allows his chosen cultures to represent themselves. In practice, however, it tends to result in a reduced emphasis on the other, and the figure of the first-person narrator, ostensibly relegated to the background, proves to be more resilient than anticipated. Possibly the main theme of Dalrymple’s work as a whole is his own cultural development, from callow travel writer to culturally sensitive historical commentator.

Keywords: history, India, tourism, travel writing, William Dalrymple.

1. INTRODUCTION: TOURISM, TRAVEL WRITING AND BEYOND

William Dalrymple is a writer and historian who was born in Scotland in 1965, and brought up on the shores of the Firth of Forth. He attended boarding school at Ampleforth College and university at Cambridge, a background which would qualify him as privileged by most educational

standards. Immediately before and during his university years he began travelling, and after graduating commenced his career as a writer, including a stint working in journalism as a foreign correspondent. In total he is the author of seven books of narrative¹, all of which deal in some way with the area extending from the Middle East to Central and Southern Asia, with a particular focus on India, where he and his family have resided since 2004.

Attempts to classify his work tend, logically enough, to revolve around travel writing, a genre which itself has long had associations of elitism. Such associations emerge especially clearly when travel writing is seen in opposition to tourist discourse. There are, of course, many similarities between the two genres. Both are textual products of the same phenomenon, namely travel, in the sense of the movement of persons, or a person, from their nation of birth or residence, to another not their own. In both cases, too, the subject is identical: the target country, albeit viewed from different perspectives, and the result may be similar, in the sense that one effect of travel writing may be further travel, by domestic readers to regions unfamiliar to them until the point of their reading.

Despite the similarities, however, the distinction between travel and tourism is now so entrenched that many parties are at pains to maintain it. And while travel in the broad sense is characteristic of all human experience, in all ages and situations, and though it was tourism which to begin with had aristocratic connotations, these days it is travellers who have acquired special status compared to tourists, and have to distinguish themselves from the masses in order to attain it (Boorstin [1961] 1992). According to this opposition, while the tourist consumes a pre-packaged experience, finding mere confirmation of what was expected beforehand, and remains largely untouched in the process, the traveller has to make efforts which in some cases might be described as heroic, or indeed foolish, in order to encounter the 'real' host nation or culture, and emerges changed as a result. The search for authenticity, in the sense of a personal encounter with foreign reality (Lowney 2009, 38), is anathema to tourists as Boorstin describes them (Boorstin [1961] 1992, 106), who desire the 'pseudo-event' of a package tour rather than the 'real' event of proper travel.

¹ *The Age of Kali* (Dalrymple 1998) is a collection of largely journalistic essays about India, entirely different in nature and scope from, say, the biographies contained in *Nine Lives* (Dalrymple 2009b). Despite the importance of journalism in Dalrymple's development, and despite the difficulties involved in distinguishing journalism from other genres such as travel writing, my focus here is on these seven works of narrative (thus including *Nine Lives* but excluding *The Age of Kali*, along with Dalrymple's other journalistic writings, edited volumes, documentaries and other multi-media work).

Clearly this is a simplification, not least because some tourists search for authenticity as much as travellers do (MacCannell [1976] 1999, 94; cf. Lee 2012, 208). It is also based on the assumption, which itself has only become current fairly recently, that authenticity per se is desirable in ethical terms, not just in the sense of being true to oneself (Trilling 1972; Taylor 1992; Lowney 2009), but also, and more importantly for our purposes, in terms of engaging in genuine encounter with other cultures. In the same way that the traveller holds special status compared to the tourist, however, so too does travel writing compared to the supposedly more direct messages of tourist discourse. The more complex formal organization and consciously literary manner of travel writing set it apart from other textual products that might deal with even the same nation or culture. For this reason in particular the travel writer also tends to enjoy privileged status, in cultural terms at least, compared to the author of tourist discourse.

It is fair to say that William Dalrymple began his career as a travel writer, and that around half of his authored books would fall within most conventional definitions of travel writing (definitions which themselves are, of course, highly contested). There have, however, been numerous transformations in his work over the years. The representations of Eastern nations and cultures found in his books go into far greater depth than would be expected or appropriate in tourist discourse, certainly; but his later work in particular goes to levels, especially historical, which are unusual even for travel writing. In these works the relationship between geography and history is inverted to such a degree that the temporal dimension comes to take priority over the spatial. If this is travel writing, in some ways it is more like time travel than the kind of nomadic wanderings invoked by Bruce Chatwin (cf. Chatwin 1997). It is the past which, in L.P. Hartley's much-quoted dictum, comes to serve as the foreign country (Hartley [1953] 2004, 1), more than the foreign country itself.

Such historical depth would appear to make Dalrymple's work even more elitist in its appeal. Indeed, the encounters which Dalrymple's work narrates with cultures not native to him, and their histories, are perhaps as close as it is possible to get to the 'authentic' experience of the 'real' host countries to which 'real' travellers ostensibly aspire. Unlike many travel writers, however (Paul Theroux possibly foremost among them²), Dalrymple is not dismissive of tourism. On the contrary, he has even been known to offer his services to tour parties, providing guest lectures on

² See, for example, Theroux (1995) 1996, 1: "People here in Western civilization say that tourists are no different from apes, but on the Rock of Gibraltar, one of the Pillars of Hercules, I saw both tourists and apes together, and I learned to tell them apart".

Indian history³. Somehow he manages to straddle both high- and low-brow, right- and left-wing, and increasingly, since moving to India permanently, East and West as well. The purpose of this article is to chart some of the transformations in his writing, and to track the developments in his representation of Eastern cultures in the process.

2. WILLIAM DALRYMPLE AS TRAVEL WRITER: “IN XANADU”

Dalrymple's first book, *In Xanadu* (1989), is an account of a journey made during a long vacation while still an undergraduate at Cambridge. He was twenty-two when he wrote it, and as he himself notes in an interview with Tim Youngs published more than fifteen years later, it is very much a “young man's book” (Youngs 2005, 38). It describes a journey made in the footsteps of Marco Polo, from Jerusalem to Xanadu, in the company of two successive female travelling companions known to him from university circles. The former, Laura Wade-Gery, is now Executive Director of Multi-Channel Operations at Marks & Spencer; the latter, Louisa, by the time of the journey was an already ex-girlfriend. It was, as Dalrymple says variously in the interview, a “lark”, a “student journey”, “very different from the rest of my books”, “a very early book”, and “a much funnier book than the others” (ibid., 38, 40). At one point in the narrative he is even sufficiently relaxed not to mind identifying himself as a tourist. When accosted by a policeman in Iran and asked who he is and what he is doing there, Dalrymple replies that he is a tourist, remembering “from experience of Cambridge debauches that much the best way to deal with angry policemen is to smile innocently and say as little as possible” (Dalrymple 1989, 140).

At the same time, however, there is no mistaking the work's elitism, in literary, cultural and social terms. The book is consciously modelled on the British travel writing tradition of the 1930s. The name of Patrick Leigh Fermor has been mentioned in this connection, though Dalrymple himself tends to refer to Robert Byron and his *The Road to Oxiana* ([1937] 2007), to the point of suggesting that *In Xanadu* is “basically a pastiche of his work” (Youngs 2005, 39)⁴. The fact that *In Xanadu* was so influenced

³ Cf. <http://www.coxandkings.co.uk/telegraph> [03/04/2015].

⁴ Patrick Leigh Fermor is one of the most famous names in English-language travel writing, celebrated in particular for the account of his ‘great trudge’ from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople in the 1930s, only written up and published definitively – the

by the travel writing of the 1930s means that the attitudes it assimilates were already fifty years out of date when it was written (*ibid.*, 40), itself now a quarter of a century ago. It may be true, he would write later, that “the attitudes of today’s travel writers are hardly those of the Brideshead generation” (Dalrymple 2009a), but he himself is unlikely to dispute that the attitudes of *In Xanadu* to some degree coincide with those of that same generation. Aside from other considerations, the journey itself was in part funded by Trinity College Cambridge; and Wade-Gery’s family connections at various stages prove vital in opening apparently locked bureaucratic doors.

The terms of reference for the narrator’s comparisons are invariably British: the hanging valley of Hunza “looked that morning a little like the Scots Borders in February” (Dalrymple 1989, 215); travelling on a Turkish train is described as being emphatically not like the equivalent experience in India, for its “empty carriages reminded me of the dowdy, unloved look of run-down hotel lounges in the Scottish Highlands” (*ibid.*, 109); the Turks again “looked like Geordies. They wore Tweed jackets, shirts with large collars, fine-clipped moustaches and on their heads dirty tweed flat caps” (*ibid.*, 63). The crusader castles are disappointing for the visitor familiar with “the Marcher castles of Edward the First or the keeps of the Scots Borders” (*ibid.*, 43); and the Ummayyad mosque in Aleppo, like the one in Damascus, has an “open-court plan, like a Cambridge college” (*ibid.*, 52).

The presentation of the peoples and cultures he and his travelling companions meet is similarly skewed towards the domestic audience. The Turks in particular fare badly, and not just with reference to their attire. At best they are described as “curious, kind and slightly earnest”, or “very sensitive about their country”; at worst as downright “boring”, the unattractiveness of the women in particular identified as “the reason for the Turks’ easy drift out of heterosexuality” (*ibid.*, 71). Dalrymple has since distanced himself from the prejudice inherent in such statements, describing *In Xanadu* as “a book which in part makes my hair stand on end”, and its author as “an obnoxious creep” (Youngs 2005, 41, 40). But the ‘funny foreigner’ trope is an important part of *In Xanadu*, and represents

first two volumes at any rate (Leigh Fermor [1977] 2004a and [1986] 2004b) – in the 1970s and 1980s (the final volume was left unfinished when he died, and the manuscript edited and published only last year; cf. Leigh Fermor 2014). Robert Byron’s *The Road to Oxiana*, meanwhile (Byron [1937] 2007), the account of his journey to Persia and Afghanistan in 1933–34, is widely regarded as one of the greatest of all pre-war English-language travel books.

a significant part of its appeal to readers. To remain with the Turks, the inclusion of a misspelt, ungrammatical “Ingliz Menuyu” with its unwitting double entendres (“Then, for pudding, I ravished some virgin lips”, Dalrymple 1989, 71) provides easy laughs for a domestic audience at the expense of another nation’s inhabitants⁵.

3. PLACE WRITING: DELHI, “CITY OF DJINNS”

In their different ways, tourism and travel both promote encounters with other nations and cultures based on movement which are to some degree therefore marked by transience. Encounters of this kind may challenge or confirm perceptions, but will ultimately tend to be defined or circumscribed in nature. The same limits apply to travel writing as a genre, limits to which Dalrymple himself has referred on more than one occasion. In discussing the crisis in travel writing in the early years of the new millennium, he notes that the shift in climate from enthusiasm to boredom came about “after several hundred sub-Therouxes ha[d] written rambling accounts of every conceivable rail, road or river journey between Kamchatka and Tasmania” (Dalrymple 2009a). More succinctly, he has commented that if one has nothing new to say, “it is much better to shut up than to carry on repeating the same things!” (Youngs 2005, 51).

One response to such limits has been what is increasingly referred to as ‘place writing’, a sub-genre of travel writing which seeks to innovate by being about staying put rather than moving. The opposite of Chatwin’s restlessness alluded to above, it is the writing of those who have never left their native environment, who have returned to it following a prolonged absence, or who have travelled and discovered a new environment and chosen to settle there. Some writing of this kind goes alongside, and has developed in conjunction with, phenomena such as deep-mapping or literary cartography. Michael Cronin has referred to it as “vertical” travel writing (Cronin 2000, 19), and authors such as Robert Macfarlane, to name but one, have in recent years narrated their interactions with particular

⁵ Susan Bassnett has discussed the use of pidgin English as a way of decoding (or encoding) translation within travel writing; a device which she describes as “patronizing in the extreme” (Bassnett 1998, 34). In her discussion she refers also to *In Xanadu* (ibid., 35–36) in connection with the issue of authenticity in travel writing, arguing that the representations require, and when successful result in, collusion between author and reader: “We collude with the idea that travellers can talk to anyone, anywhere in the world and record their conversations in the form of direct speech” (ibid., 36).

natural environments⁶. Dalrymple himself has advocated the concept of place as a solution to the conundrum posed by the limits of conventional travel writing. “An informed observer roots and immerses himself in one place, committing time to getting to know a place and its language”, he has written (Dalrymple 2009a); and again, “many of the most interesting travel books are by individuals who have made extended stays in places, getting to know them intimately” (ibidem).

A variant of place writing, and one which is in many ways more applicable to Dalrymple’s own work, is what he refers to as ‘city writing’, the focus in this case being more on the urban than the natural environment. Here the related phenomenon would be psychogeography, a term usually associated with Iain Sinclair’s *London Orbital* (Sinclair [2002] 2003) which has spawned so many imitators. One recent work on India which references Sinclair is Sam Miller’s *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* (2009), in which the author sets out on a spiral-shaped walking tour around the city starting from Connaught Place. Dalrymple’s own Delhi, as represented in *City of Djinns* (1993), has little to do with deep-mapping, literary cartography or psychogeography, but it does share a spiralling structure with Miller’s work. The “year in Delhi” mentioned in Dalrymple’s sub-title is, he admits, “notional”, representing a compressed version of what was in fact “about four years” (Youngs 2005, 41, 42), in which he “spiral[s] down into the history of Delhi” (ibid., 42), each chapter taking the reader “back a stage”.

There are many episodes that could be mentioned to illustrate the way in which geography and history inter-relate in this work. One might be Dalrymple’s narration of a visit to the Red Fort in the company of local Sufi and scholar Dr Jaffery (Dalrymple 1993, 217 ff.). The episode begins with the confident assertion that

[t]he Red Fort is to Delhi what the Colosseum is to Rome or the Acropolis is to Athens: it is the single most famous monument in the city. (ibid., 217)

followed by a description of the monument in geographical and visual terms

Viewed from the end of Chandni Chowk, the sight is superb: a great ruibarb-red curtain wall pierced by a pair of magnificent gates and fortified by a

⁶ Robert Macfarlane, like Dalrymple, is a Cambridge-educated travel writer, but unlike Dalrymple has kept one foot in the academic camp while at the same time publishing for a wider audience, as Fellow of English at Emmanuel College (Cambridge University). Macfarlane is perhaps best known for *The Old Ways* (Macfarlane [2012] 2013), the third and final book in a loose trilogy of works about landscape and the imagination.

ripple of projecting bastions, each one topped with a helmet-shaped *chattri*. (ibidem)

Soon, however, the description reverts to historical sources, in this case Dr Jaffery's leather-bound copy of François Bernier's *Travels* which Dalrymple has brought with him and to which he now turns, in order

[t]o flesh out the red sandstone skeleton – to recreate within the cusped ribs of the cadaver the durbars of Shah Jehan. (ibid., 219)

City of Djinns is certainly more culturally sensitive than *In Xanadu*, doubtless the result of the greater maturity on the author's part. In the conversation referred to several times already, Youngs mentions the difference in tone between the reference to "the Turks' easy drift out of heterosexuality" in the earlier book, and "the very sensitive and detailed interviews with the eunuchs and the transvestites" in the latter (Youngs 2005, 41). Yet the 'funny foreigner' paradigm is still very much present in *City of Djinns*, in the form of memorable characters such as the Dalrymples' landlady Mrs Puri and her husband, or the taxi driver Balvinder Singh, compared to "Essex Man" (Dalrymple 1993, 17) and described in later years by Dalrymple as "an utterly fabulous character" (Youngs 2005, 43). In this context, language once again offers an easy source of humour: from Balvinder Singh's English, which is gerund-heavy but light on main verbs ("Delhi ladies very good. Having breasts like mangoes"; "This Mr Postman very good man", Dalrymple 1993, 17; 208), to the now customary double entendres ("International Backside Taxis", which for the remainder of the book becomes abbreviated to "International Backside"), the *mali* at the postman's daughter's wedding who has "a unique way of turning simple English words into Hindi or Urdu equivalents" (Dalrymple 1993, 208), and an entire excursus (ibid., 73-75) on the English spoken by Indians ("Hinglish"), which, like American English, "has developed its own grammatical rules, its own syntax and its own vocabulary".

There is, however, greater sympathy in evidence, not least because Dalrymple and his wife make an effort to learn Hindi. At the postman's daughter's wedding once again, the Dalrymples meet Mr Bhajan Lal, the *Pradban* or head of the village, whose English, we are informed by the narrator, "was even less fluent than my Hindi", hence the conversation between them takes place "ungrammatically, in his tongue" (ibid., 209). This brief episode certainly casts the British non-native speakers in the best possible light. Dalrymple does not fail to mention the fact that his language-learning attempts generally receive a positive reaction from native speakers, "if only because people were so surprised to hear any non-

Indian speak even the most stumbling version of it” (ibidem); and includes an English transcription of Mr Lal’s praise for their efforts, which is once again heavy in continuous tenses (“Sahib! You are speaking Hindi!”), and features a disproportionate amount of rhetorical exaggeration which sounds ridiculous in English and is clearly intended for comic purposes (“Truly this is day among days”; “In Delhi! Heaven be praised”; etc.; ibidem). But the overall impression is far more sympathetic; and while the relationship between narration and reality is never a straightforward one, even in travel writing, this gesture towards cultural integration on the Dalrymples’ part does seem to correspond to what is known of their experience. In an interview published in *The Telegraph* a couple of years after the family moved permanently to Mehrauli, the writer compared his own language-learning with that of his eldest daughter, aged eleven at the time, commenting that she was still behind him on the vocabulary front “but otherwise she’s way ahead of me” (Dalrymple 2006b), thereby revealing how much progress he had made in his own language learning. Such progress was obviously vital in the archival research he carried out on the “virtually unused Persian and Urdu documents relating to Delhi in 1857, known as the Mutiny Papers” (Dalrymple 2006a, 11) which forms the basis for *The Last Mughal*, a book which allows “1857 Delhi to be seen for the first time from a properly Indian perspective, and not just from the British sources through which to date it has usually been viewed” (ibidem).

4. LIFE WRITING: “NINE LIVES”

Another alternative to the alleged crisis in travel writing is for the writer to train their eye on the people they meet rather than the places they visit. There may be few places left in the world that remain undocumented, and little factual information that a basic internet search cannot reveal, but what makes the difference as far as much travel writing is concerned is no longer the difficulty of the journey itself so much as the intensity of the gazing. Dalrymple too has made similar points, and the intensity of the gaze as he sees it comes to be directed more towards the lives of his characters than to the spaces they inhabit: “If nineteenth-century travel writing was about place – about filling in the blanks of the map and describing remote places that few had seen – the best twenty-first-century travel writing is almost always about people: exploring the extraordinary diversity that still exists beneath the veneer of globalization” (Dalrymple 2009a).

The choice of life writing as an alternative to the straightforward journey paradigm or to place writing offers an interesting step forward in the representation of the other, particularly in cases where the people being represented have historically been marginalized in social or political terms. Tim Youngs again makes this point in connection with Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain* (Dalrymple [1997] 1998), a book which in many ways is a conventional travelogue, in which the author follows in the footsteps of John Moschos, but also draws attention to the situation of Christian minorities in the Middle East. Youngs refers to Dalrymple "wanting to let people speak for themselves", and mentions how, with reference to the Palestinians, the author clearly "felt a responsibility to give a voice to the voiceless" (Youngs 2005, 55). The discussion, a far-reaching one which embraces issues such as truthfulness in representation, seems to reflect a distinction on Dalrymple's part between more and less serious subjects ("With Bill Bryson, I don't think you terribly mind if one of those conversations isn't quite how it actually happened", *ibid.*, 38), the serious ones obviously requiring the more scrupulous skills honed, among other things, in his time as a journalist ("If you are reporting genocides and the moving of peoples you simply cannot make things up, you cannot put words into someone's mouth", *ibid.*, 58).

The portrayal of character is a constant throughout Dalrymple's work, from the caricatures of Laura Wade-Gery⁷ and Mr Balvinder Singh to the more serious historical biographies of Bahadur Shah Zafar II and Shah Shuja ul-Mulk in *The Last Mughal* and *Return of a King* respectively. There is, however, a definite turn towards life writing in his work, which may be traced to the publication of *Nine Lives* in 2009. This shift in emphasis results in a change in literary form, with a movement away from the first-person narrative of the travelogue to something closer to reportage, in which much of the time the characters are apparently allowed to speak for themselves. Dalrymple's original intention for the work, he asserts in the introduction (Dalrymple 2009b, xiv⁸), was to write an "Indian equivalent" of his book on the monks and monasteries of the Middle East. However, "the people I met there were so extraordinary, and their own voices so strong", that he decided the literary form fashionable in travel writing in

⁷ As recently as last year Dalrymple referred to Wade-Gery on Twitter as "the terrifying Laura of *In Xanadu*" (@DalrympleWill, post dated July 1, 2014); while in an article published in *The Telegraph* some eight years previously ("City Profile: Tesco's internet explorer", October 29, 2006), Wade-Gery herself is quoted as suggesting that Dalrymple as a young author may have "employed a certain degree of artistic licence" in his depiction of her.

⁸ Much of the same material is also found, once again almost verbatim, in Dalrymple 2009a.

the late 1980s when *In Xanadu* was published – which “tended to highlight the narrator: his adventures were the subject; the people he met were sometimes reduced to objects in the background” – was no longer appropriate. Instead, the form adopted in *Nine Lives* seeks “to invert this, and keep the narrator firmly in the shadows, so bringing the lives of the people I have met to the fore and placing their stories firmly centre stage” (ibid., xv). The result is a mixture of narratorial framing, reported speech, and first-person narrative in quotation, with some differences between the three registers certainly, but nothing like the gulf between the suave and at times sarcastic voice of the narrator on the one hand and the linguistic inadequacies of the “funny foreigners” on the other found in some of the previous works.

The story of Mohan Bhopa, a Rajasthani goatherd described by the author (or his sub-editor) as “Homer in India”⁹, is an interesting example in this respect, not least because the gap in expressive terms between narrator and character ought to be massive. On the one hand, we have the illiterate singer of a popular Rajasthani epic, delivered in Mewari, with whom Dalrymple travels to hear him perform in his home village; on the other, a narrator who is at pains to point out that he first came to hear about the phenomenon of oral Indian epics while staying at a fort outside Jodhpur where Bruce Chatwin had written *The Songlines* (ibid., 85) and where he himself, “in a desperate bid for inspiration” (Dalrymple 1993, “Acknowledgements”¹⁰), had gone to start work on the manuscript of *City of Djinns*; and who intrudes into the narrative with an erudite excursus on the pioneering research carried out by Milman Parry and Albert Lord on the origins of Greek epic poetry. The differences in register should also theoretically be compounded by linguistic issues. It is likely that Mohan and his wife Batasi, as well as most of the other characters given a voice in the story, were non-English speakers. Dalrymple too confesses that the first time he heard Mohan recite his epic poem, he asks another guest, “who understood Mewari”, to check Mohan’s rendition against a version transcribed by a Cambridge academic (Dalrymple 2009b, 97), suggesting his knowledge of the dialect is, or at least was, limited¹¹.

⁹ A previous version of the story was published under the title “Homer in India” in *The New Yorker* (November 20, 2006); and at one point in the book version of the story Dalrymple refers to the *bhopas* (shamans or bards) as “my Rajasthani Homers” (Dalrymple 2009b, 88).

¹⁰ Cf. Youngs 2005, 39. Interestingly, the website of Rohet Garh (which is now basically a luxury hotel: <http://rohetgarh.com/about-us/> [03/04/2015]) refers to both Chatwin and Dalrymple in its own publicity.

¹¹ In the acknowledgements at the end of the introduction (Dalrymple 2009b, xvii), the author notes that the interviews reported in his book “took place in eight different

The centrepiece of the story is a section of around five pages (out of a total of just over twenty; Dalrymple 2009b, 100-105) which, apart from an early interjection (“said Mohan”), is reported entirely in the singer’s own words. For the most part Mohan’s speech is simple but elegant, and contains no more local terms than the narrator’s does. But the narratorial presence is clear from a couple of instances where English explanations for such terms are included. On one occasion the dialectal term is inserted parenthetically after the transliteration, when Mohan states that “not everyone born to this family has the heart – the *birtho* – or the head to remember the epic and to do this work”; on another, the term itself is followed by the English explanation (“I was the youngest of four brothers and as a child this left me free to do what I wanted: to play *gindi* – village hockey – or to take my father’s herd of goats out to graze”, *ibid.*, 101). Neither instance is especially significant in its own right, save for the fact that they indicate the narrator’s hand at work behind the presentation of Mohan’s voice “in his own words”.

The reported speech, meanwhile, contains a large number of phrases such as “said Mohan”, “he said”, “Mohan explained to me”, and so forth, creating a kind of anaphoric effect which in some ways is reminiscent of the oral tradition being described. The most distinctive voice, however, remains that of the narrator, who is more present than his stated aim to remain “in the shadows” would suggest. The main narrative is the journey which Dalrymple makes with Mohan and his wife to their village of Pabusar. This is disrupted chronologically by at least two different time horizons: the account of the author’s residence at Rohet Garh “twenty years previously” (*ibid.*, 85), and that of his first meeting with Mohan which took place “in 2004” (*ibid.*, 81), around “five years” ago (*ibid.*, 80, 99). Indeed, it is not immediately obvious where one historical episode ends and the other begins. These three narratological levels are further disrupted by the various, more or less learned interludes such as the one introducing Parry’s and Lord’s work. The story begins, moreover, with the figure of the narrator driving the illiterate singer and his wife around (although this relationship is soon reversed, with Mohan taking on the role of guide and interpreter, pointing out “features invisible to the untutored eye of an outsider”, *ibid.*, 80); and Dalrymple’s role in publicizing their activities is mentioned on more than one occasion (*ibid.*, 80, 81, 111).

This position of implicit cultural superiority is reflected in the slightly more complex mode of expression, with reference in particular to the

languages, and in each case I owe a huge debt to those who accompanied me on the trips and helped me talk to my subjects”.

adjectivalization in some of the more descriptive passages. The landscape near Pabusar is “a white, sun-leached expanse of dry desert plains, spiky acacia bushes and wind-blown camel thorn”; in the mornings at Rohet Garh, “light would stream into the bedroom through cusped arches, and reflections from the lake would ripple across the ceiling beams”; and as Dalrymple sits with Mohan outside his house on the morning after the first night of his performance, the bright sun is described as having “given way to massing cumulus, and a strange grey light played over the desert and the village” (ibid., 78, 86, 100). “Sun-leached”, “cusped arches” and “massing cumulus” are all phrases which the narrator is unlikely to have put into Mohan’s mouth, directly or indirectly. This is not to suggest that Dalrymple has anything other than profound respect and admiration for his subjects. Indeed, the relatively contained differences between voices and registers in this story are themselves evidence of the distance that has been travelled from the “Ingliz Menuyu” and “International Backside” of the earlier works. Differences, however, there still are.

5. NARRATIVE HISTORY: “WHITE MUGHALS”, “THE LAST MUGHAL”, “RETURN OF A KING”

I have said that the shift towards life writing in Dalrymple’s work may be traced to the publication of *Nine Lives*; and in one sense the historical turn in his writing could similarly be traced to the publication of *White Mughals* in 2002. This, however, is too simplistic a reading, for none of these turns and developments – place writing, life writing, narrative history – are mutually exclusive, and all aspects overlap and interweave in his work, each coming to the fore at different times. In *City of Djinns*, for example, the historical dimension is presented as a consequence of the geographical, but is no less an important part of the work for this reason. As he describes it (Youngs 2005, 42), the approach Dalrymple followed in adding the historical parts was closer to subtraction than addition, being “like removing the layers of an onion to get to the heart of it”. *The Last Mughal*, by contrast, would initially appear to be most easily categorized as either life writing or narrative history, or possibly both. Yet in the introduction the author states clearly that

[a]lthough Bahadur Shah II, the last Mughal, is a central figure in this book, it is not a biography of Zafar so much as a portrait of the Delhi he personified, a narrative of the last days of the Mughal capital and its final destruction in the catastrophe of 1857. (Dalrymple 2006a, 6)

suggesting that in his intention at any rate, it was conceived as a work of place writing.

In this sense the closest counterpart to *The Last Mughal* would be *City of Djinns*, not the other two narrative history volumes, and there is indeed substantial continuity between the two works. This is especially marked in a series of passages quoted almost verbatim. For instance, the barracks erected by the British within the Red Fort, described in *City of Djinns* as “some of the most crushingly ugly buildings ever thrown up by the British Empire” (Dalrymple 1993, 222), are in both works compared to Wormwood Scrubs (ibidem; Dalrymple 2006a, 7); and the description of the way in which “the Fort’s current proprietors, the Archaeological Survey of India, have lovingly continued the work of decay initiated by the British” in the latter (ibid., 8) differs only from that in the former by the inclusion of the phrase “of course” in the opening sentence (“The barracks should *of course* have been torn down years ago”; italics mine). William Fraser, a Scottish Orientalist and civil servant who was to become Commissioner of the Delhi Territory during the reign of Bahadur Shah Zafar, and who, “as chance would have it” (Dalrymple 1993, 99; cf. 2006a, 9: “as it turned out”), was “a forebear and kinsman” (“distant cousin”) of Dalrymple’s wife Olivia, is one of “a series of sympathetic and slightly” (“notably”) eccentric Scotsmen (“figures”) who came to adopt Indian customs and became the main subject of *White Mughals*. In all three books – *City of Djinns*, *White Mughals* and *The Last Mughal* (Dalrymple 1993, 107; 2002, 42; 2006a, 9) – the author quotes the opinions of Lady Maria Nugent¹² expressing her disapproval of Fraser and his ilk for being “as much Hindoos as Christians” or on account of their “thick Rajput beard” (“immense whiskers”¹³), and for their refusal to eat beef or pork, inclination to take multiple wives and general tendency to “go native”. The narrator’s sympathy for such figures is countered by the distaste he expresses for characters such as Sir Charles Metcalfe, described as “fastidious” (Dalrymple 2006a, 49; 1993, 138), whose daughter Emily is quoted on the subject of his distaste at watching women eat cheese, and his conviction that, “if the fair sex insisted on eating oranges or mangoes, they should at least do so in the privacy of their own bathrooms” (ibidem; the wording is identical in both texts), as well as his tendency to pinch the ears of his native servants when dissatisfied with their performance.

¹² By the time of *The Last Mughal* Nugent has had the adjective “formidable” added to her description; an involuntary echo (perhaps) of Dalrymple’s initial description of Laura Wade-Gery as being “renowned as a formidable lady” (Dalrymple 1989, 12).

¹³ On this occasion the words are Nugent’s own.

The representation of history in Dalrymple's trilogy also displays continuity with the approaches seen in previous works. As often as not he begins works and chapters *in medias res*, and ends them with what might be described as "cliff-hangers". With respect to the former, the action of all three works starts with specific historical events and precise dating: *White Mughals* with two as yet unidentified figures, on 7 November 1801, being "discreetly admitted to the gardens of Government House in Madras"; *The Last Mughal* with a reference to the marriage procession of Prince Jawan Bakht, which "left the Lahore Gate of the Red Fort at 2 a.m. on the hot summer night of 2 April 1852"; and *Return of a King* with the arresting and initially unexplained statement that "The year 1809 opened auspiciously for Shah Shuja ul-Mulk" (Dalrymple 2002, 3; 2006a, 27; 2013a, 1)¹⁴. With respect to the latter, in the most recent work in particular we find various chapters with proleptic endings, a simple enough technique which serves to encourage the reader to keep turning the pages. For instance, the third chapter ends with the words, "This was the return of a king" (Dalrymple 2013a, 143); the fourth chapter ends with, "But for all the complaints, Shah Shuja was happy. Finally he was home" (ibid., 197); and the fifth, referring to Dost Mohammad's son Akbar Khan, "He would soon prove a potent new centre of resistance, and far more violent, ruthless and effective than his father had ever been" (ibid., 254)¹⁵. The disjunction thus instituted between the chronological flow of historical time and its presentation (or representation) in the writing is not at all dissimilar to the temporal disruptions witnessed in both *City of Djinns* and Mohan's story, and in one sense is their natural consequence.

Dalrymple's presentation of history is possibly more complex than the historiography itself, which is largely archival. What makes his research original is the fact that his sources are unpublished, either because they have been undiscovered or have not yet been translated. Sometimes his discoveries, as presented in the narrative at least, appear implausibly fortuitous: the discovery of William Fraser's letters at the Highland home of one of his wife's relatives where he had been staying (Dalrymple 1993, 102), for example, or the discovery of the Mutiny Papers at the National Archives in Delhi, which he describes as being "as strange and exciting –

¹⁴ This technique is in no way confined to the works of narrative history, either; the essay which Dalrymple recently wrote for the Brookings Institute begins with the sentence: "At six o' clock in the morning of February 26, 2010, Major Mitali Madhumita was awakened by the ringing of her mobile phone" (Dalrymple 2013b).

¹⁵ Interestingly enough, both chapters five and six then begin with the same precise historical dating described above.

and indeed as unlikely – as going to Paris and discovering, unused on the shelves of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the entire records of the French Revolution” (Dalrymple 2006a, 14). This archival research constitutes the foundation on which Dalrymple’s interpretations rest. Accordingly, when Pankaj Mishra suggested that Dalrymple had exaggerated the extent of the “White Mughal” phenomenon, and accused him of writing “feel-good history”, Dalrymple’s response was to refer to the vast collection of Bengali wills kept in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, which formed one of the main sources of research for his book (Mishra 2005 and 2006; Dalrymple 2005a).

As Dalrymple’s writing has shifted towards history, however, at the same time it has tended to devote less space to representation of the other. His earliest work and his travel writing in particular, we have noted, served to introduce foreign realities to a domestic readership. His historical writing, by contrast, focuses more on international relations, showing how East and West have interacted successfully and unsuccessfully over the centuries, with a view to promoting those attitudes, stances and policies which have facilitated harmonious coexistence, and counteracting those which assume that a clash of civilizations is inevitable. With the exception of an essay published in *The New York Review of Books* in 2005 (Dalrymple 2005b), which is largely an overview, the author mostly sidesteps the political debate in Indian historiography between Hindu nationalist and non-Hindu readings. Instead, his emphasis is on those historical representatives of his own nation who engaged in cultural syncretism and hybridization, who in other words “went native”, resulting in mixed marriages and the birth of mixed-race children, including some of his own ancestors (and those of his wife, as we have seen)¹⁶.

It is this advocacy of tolerance, interaction and cross-fertilization between civilizations which forms the basis of the growing “moral imperative” of his writings (Youngs 2005, 46). The transformation from aristocratic, humorous and self-deprecating traveller to impassioned prophet of harmonious international and intercultural relations is perhaps most apparent in Dalrymple’s latest book, *Return of a King* (Dalrymple 2013a), which sees him move away from matters of strictly Indian history, or British-Indian relations, to tell the story of the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1839–42. The historical dimension once again sets Dalrymple’s approach apart from mainstream British writing on Afghanistan. Corinne Fowler, in her account of travel writing, journalism and British ideas on Afghanistan,

¹⁶ Dalrymple describes on p. XLVII of *White Mughals* how he himself “was the product of a similar interracial liaison from this period”, and “thus had Indian blood” in his veins.

explains some of the main stereotypes, such as wildness and lawlessness (Fowler 2007, 57-63), or the medievalization of Afghanistan in Western representations, whereby “[t]ravel writers routinely relocate Afghanistan’s contemporary scenes and settings to three distinctive historical eras: the invasion of Alexander the Great, the invasion of Genghis Khan and [...] Europe’s medieval past (and sometimes to all three in the space of a paragraph)” (ibid., 64). Dalrymple has said that “Afghanistan may be one of the poorest countries in the world, but it has produced a surprisingly rich seam of literature, ranging from its own traditions of poetry and epic, through great works of memoir and some of the greatest travel books ever written”, as well as, more recently, “a clutch of exceptional works of non-fiction about the Taliban era and the current disastrous war”; and clearly his work is intended to hold its own in such company rather than merely replicate lazy stereotypes, such as were found even in his first book (“Never sleep with an Afghan. They snore, and rise indecently early”, Dalrymple 1989, 215).

Dalrymple’s own family implication is again evident: we are informed towards the end of the book that one of the main sources referred to in it, Colin Mackenzie, a sufficiently important character to merit his own entry in the “*Dramatis personae*” which introduces this like the other two history books (Dalrymple 2013a, xxiv-xxv), at one point described as “dashing moustachioed” and “renowned as the most handsome young officer in the Indian army” (ibid., 268), is revealed to be in fact Dalrymple’s “great-great-uncle” (ibid., 485). And once more the work is based on archival research, much of it from new sources, “in Britain [h]undreds of tattered letters and blood-stained diaries belonging to the British participants in the war have appeared from trunks in Home Counties attics over the last few years” (ibid., 494), Delhi, Lahore, and in particular “the astonishingly rich seam of Afghan sources for the period that turned up in Kabul” (ibid., 496), with the customary stroke of fortune whereby, through befriending a young Afghan scholar while working in the Afghan National Archives, who took him to see a second-hand book dealer one lunchtime, “in less than an hour” Dalrymple manages “to acquire eight previously unused contemporary Persian-language sources for the First Afghan War” (ibidem).

The reading of history advocated by this work, though, is uncomplicatedly circular: the past is to be read, according to Dalrymple, as a simple allegory of the present, its lessons to be learnt in order to prevent the same mistakes from being repeated. He writes, for instance, of “striking parallels between the twenty-first-century occupation of Afghanistan and that of 1839-42”, and of “real continuity in the impact of political geography on the evolution of both conflicts” (ibid., 482). As he himself notes, the idea

of writing a history of Britain's first failed attempt at controlling Afghanistan came to him in 2006, when the latest Western invasion of the country was beginning to turn sour, because, he realized, "[h]istory was beginning to repeat itself" (ibid., 489). The parallels between historical precedent and current experience are spelt out even more clearly in the essay he delivered to the Brookings Institute on relations between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2013, on which he subsequently briefed the White House personally (Dalrymple 2013b).

6. CONCLUSION

Thus another circle is completed, with Dalrymple's own transformation from urbane but callow traveller to US foreign policy advisor. This transformation is mirrored by the change in his narrative technique. Dalrymple, as he himself has said, has sought increasingly to move away from the first-person narrator as the main protagonist of his works. This choice, indeed, has been one of the main factors in his progression from travel and place writing to life writing and ultimately narrative history. The shift towards ostensibly more objective forms of writing, allied to the discovery of what we might term a sense of mission in seeking to advocate peaceful and harmonious interaction between East and West, have combined to help Dalrymple not to overindulge in the kinds of elitism which have tended to characterize so much English-language travel writing (including his own to begin with). It is this moral imperative which accounts for his appeal to, and success with, the mass market, and explains why his services as guest lecturer should be in demand from tour companies looking to entertain their customers by educating them.

At the same time, however, possibly the main theme to emerge from Dalrymple's work considered as a whole is precisely his own progression towards cultural literacy. In this sense we may say that he himself is the main protagonist of his writings, and that despite everything, the first-person narrative form proves to be even more resilient than might have been anticipated. It is the subjectivities of Dalrymple's work, then, rather than its objectivities, which may provide the most profitable line of enquiry for future research in this area.

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