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Eighteenth Century Travelogues as Models for 'Rethinking Europe'

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Travelogues on expeditions in the 1760s to Tahiti and Yemen among other places are part of the early reshaping of Europe. They display the features of a historical threshold or 'Sattelzeit' between the classical and the modern world. But these travelogues also demonstrate another paradigmatic shift with important impact on the conditions for thinking of Europe in present day literary history. Some travelogues inaugurate in their rhetorical practice and anthropological content a problematic cultural relativism and aestheticism in relation to the world outside Europe. Other texts express doubts and contradictions, hesitating without being relativistic, focusing on cultural processes and concrete specifics rather than on essences, and adopting a pluridimensional perspective on the customs the traveller is confronted with. While the former track leads to the dead-end of reductive schematism of 19th century Orientalism, the latter may serve as a relevant model for rethinking Europe as part of a globalised world today. In what follows, the travel writing on Tahiti by James Cook, Bougainville and Diderot, Carsten Niebuhr's travelogue from his expedition to Yemen, Flaubert's *Voyage en Égypte*, and Gauguin's *NoaNoa*, are analysed.

Probably the obvious choice for a paper on the theme of travel writing and 'rethinking Europe' would be to treat the many works that both represent the genre's current boom and regard the idea of Europe either historically, sceptically or ironically. The conception of Europe is both reconstructed and deconstructed in Claudio Magris[1] and Peter Esterhazy's[2] books on the Donau, while the texts themselves erase the usual demarcation between fiction and faction and between essay, novel and autobiography. Similarly, W. G. Sebald's travel fictions[3] open up a new European vision and a new approach to prose. However, the material here is not new, but from the 18th century, and the journeys are not within Europe but outside its boundaries – first to Tahiti, then to the Yemen or Arabia Felix, as it was then called. They prefigure paradigmatically the European re-thinking of our time.

Tahiti

There was an abundance of literature following the European ‘discovery’ of Tahiti in 1767 and I will distinguish between an English and a French track. One of the tracks is Wallis and Cook’s diaries, rewritten by the ghost-writer Hawkesworth into a collected narrative.[4] The other track is Bougainville’s classic, doubting, fractured account[5] and the follow-up by Diderot.[6] The first track points towards the 19th century’s specialisation of the sciences, its cultural relativism and talk of aesthetics, often lumped together as ‘orientalism’. In contrast, the second track points to current ‘global theory’ and globalisation’s ‘anthropoetic tales’.

While Wallis’ and Cook’s diaries are held in a ‘natural naked prose’, Hawkesworth added so-called ‘sentiments’ and ‘observations’. An ‘everyday happening’ on Tahiti, where a very young girl is instructed in sex by older, more experienced sisters, becomes, in Hawkesworth’s almost Gothic re-writing, ‘rites of Venus’. Customs described by Cook in a ‘naked narrative’ receive literary and philosophical ‘embellishment’. An aesthetic veil is thus drawn over what then becomes a pornographic, scandalous display of Venus. The reader is titillated by the striptease, but in an aestheticised version, which at the same time sharpens and assimilates the contrasts between them and us, leading towards Orientalism and a problematic distinction between self-reliant, essentially different cultures.

Bougainville’s descriptions of Tahiti are very different. He too is fascinated by the Polynesian women, whose beauty can compete with most ‘Européennes’. A young girl allows her clothing to fall, so that she ‘appeared to our eyes as Venus let herself be seen by the Phrygian shepherds.’ Bougainville continues his description of Arcadian meadows where Ulysses’ bewitched heroes are met by an irresistible cult of Venus. ‘Everything breathes desire’, as he writes. In the next chapter, however, Bougainville interviews a Tahitian man, and the text adopts an ethnographic mode, shaped by the reports from within: actually, the natives are permanently at war, as in Europe; thieves are hanged from the trees, and so on. What appeared in the classic rhetoric to be an Arcadian unity, is unravelled as differences by the ethnographic text.

Diderot is so tempted by the unredeemed doubt he finds in Bougainville’s account that he writes a fictional addition in the form of dialogue, the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville.* Prevented by fog from going for a walk, A and B settle down to read and comment on Bougainville’s text.

‘What is it I see there, in the margin of the book,’ one of them asks. ‘Oh, it’s a note on the contrast between the natural, fertile Venus on Tahiti and the coquette, flirting and elegant Venus we meet in the salons of Paris’, replies the other (Diderot, p. 487). A and B develop the contrast between the natural Venus on Tahiti and a coquette European Venus, but also conceive the possibility of reconciling the two types. B says ‘When I see a shawl around the neck of a woman, both hiding and revealing her breast, I also see in it a secret path returning to the forest' (Diderot p. 488). So in her very coquettishness and flirtation the Parisian Venus unveils the promise of a possible return to her own previous natural state.

Bougainville's text is unique by containing at the same time a classic, utopian depiction of Tahiti as harmonious love-cult and an ethnographic description of internal social divisions and differences and, most surprisingly, without mediating the two descriptions. Diderot's fictive addition is unique in treating the first text in a form that allows a rational criticism of customs in Europe and on Tahiti, but without comparing the two societies as if they were essentially different cultures. Diderot's method is capable of both retaining the differences between them and us, as well as combining the differences in an open dialogic perspective. I will return to this perspective later.

The Orient

In the first edition of *Orientalism*, Edward Said treated the dichotomy between Europe and the Orient as if it were a specific ideological construction he could simply unmask. However, in a later postscript to the book, he admitted that this type of constructions and the dichotomies they entail can be found in all cultures. But the particular artistic, geo-political and ideological adaptation of this seemingly anthropological pattern is, of course, historically changeable. This also applies to Europe's relationship with the Orient during the first wave of Orientalism in the 19th century as well as today, when the Orient again appears self-contradictorily on the political agenda as both a political entity to be changed and as a fashionable cultural universe to be conserved, with water-pipe cafés and deluxe editions of Arabian erotic literature.

Edward Said's focus is on the staging of the Orient as a scientific object. In the first place, to him, the Orientalistic discourse does not describe a specific, geographically located culture, but produces the Orient as a joint conception. Secondly, the discourse is expressed as an all-pervading dichotomisation, turning the Orient into a closure, which is thus deprived of both history and life – regardless of the writer's position and possible good will.[7]

The critical reception of Said's book can fill up entire libraries, but I will content myself with a couple of points made by the anthropologist James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988).[8] Clifford points out that *Orientalism* should not primarily be understood as a criticism of imperialism or colonialism; on the contrary, the book's comprehensive geopolitical scope is an early example of a critical perspective made possible by globalisation. However, Clifford finds that Said himself is dichotomising, totalising and essentialising, and that Said, in spite of his declaration of constructivism, is naively realistic when he refers to 'the real Orient'. Moreover, Said bases his view of literature more on a conception of the work as an organic entity than on the text as discourse. Thus, Said has a tendency to transpose his organic conception of works to cover entire cultures, and thereby, Clifford concludes, is also guilty of cultural relativism in contrasting Europe and the Orient as closed cultures, incapable of mutual dialogue and change.

I think it is fair to say that although Said's work opened a perspective for 'rethinking orientalism', Clifford's criticism is still valid. Both can help us characterise possible fallacies as well as guidelines for 'rethinking Europe'. My argument in the following remarks on the Danish expedition to Yemen in 1761–1767, and especially on Carsten Niebuhr, is that in Niebuhr, as well as in Bougainville and Diderot, we can find a positive paradigm for approaching cultural difference and use this approach to rethink Europe.

Carsten Niebuhr's *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* 1–2 (1774–78) and 3 (1837, posthumous)[9] is a detailed description of the Danish expedition to Yemen (or Felix Arabia). Niebuhr, the expedition's cartographer and sole survivor, has become a hero of both Danish and German history. He was unique in his day in being able to avoid European arrogance and vanity. He met with people and landscapes everywhere on the long journey with the same straightforwardness and balanced good sense. For instance, when commenting on the Arabian reputation for being difficult, suspicious or dangerous, Niebuhr says:

> If an Arabian travelled through Europe, he would meet great difficulties with inn-keepers, postmasters, coachmen, and customs officers; he might even find as much occasion to complain of the greed of Europeans, as a European finds to complain of that of the Arabians. But he will be unjust if he describes all Europeans to his countrymen as uncivilised and greedy, simply because a few of them have treated him badly.
> One can even fearlessly speak with them of the Muslim religion, if only one expresses mildness and not contempt.

In the chapter on 'the Arabian's pastimes', the reader must be amazed at the seriousness and rich detail with which gymnastics, sports, board games, swings, and water-pipes are treated and illustrated with detailed sketches. Just as Niebuhr finds their taste in music horrible, they too find the music of the Europeans 'a wild, unpleasant screeching'. He also describes magnificent parties, where up to 50 of the city's most fashionable women, with their most beautiful girls and slaves hold 'home parties', changing dresses, jewellery and slippers up to 8–10 times in an evening and dancing for each other. Niebuhr writes that it quite often ended in jealousy and uproar, and points out that European men who complain that their wives spend too much on clothing can take comfort in the fact that their spouses are far surpassed by their Eastern sisters.

Niebuhr also describes contradictory situations of singing and dancing:

> even though we immediately found all the women hideous – their yellow-coloured hands and blood-red nails, the black or blue ornaments in their faces, on their arms and breasts, the huge rings on their feet, in their ears and noses, the amounts of pomade in their hair, that could be smelled at a great distance, etc. were not at all to our taste, and hardly any of them had a pleasant voice – we did find, when we did not see or hear better, that this one or that sang very well – even was quite beautiful; and at the end, we heard them as gladly as the best singers and dancers in Europe.

Exactly as in Stephen Greenblatt's description of Renaissance encounters with Tupinampa Indians,[10] we have reasons to wonder. The belly-dancers are first hideous, then beautiful – both the opposite of his concept of beauty, and paradoxically complying with it. But he does not generalise his experience to a contrast between two cultures' female ideals in general. In addition, Niebuhr carries the cartographer's method, which basically rests on a comparison between differing and independent viewpoints, over to his ethnography. Like Montaigne, he is able to take the other person's point of view, seeing the advantages of polygamy while rejecting this custom. Similarly, he can explain arranged marriages in a manner that is simultaneously open to several perspectives. First, they are no more frequent than they are in Europe. Moreover, arranged marriages are often also arranged in the sense of being *staged*, so that it is the man, more than the girl, who is 'conned'. Actually, the girl's father pays the money necessary for an honourable marriage contract to an impoverished suitor favoured by the girl, meaning, to her advantage, that the husband will remain faithful, since the contract commits him to repaying a large sum of money in case of divorce.

The comparisons he makes between European and Arabian customs are exemplary, in the first place because he not only has no qualms about expressing his criticism (for instance, 'the prophet Mohammed knows little about our natural surroundings'). But he also refrains from expressing wonder or disgust at the culture as such. In the second place, his comparisons appear as an unfinished, movable, interwoven pattern, left open to continued differentiation. In concluding 'The pastimes of the Arabs', he mentions marionette theatre and shadow plays, writing: 'In the marionette theatre, there is always a figure of fun, and this figure is always, without exception, a European'. In addition to his exact surveys of positions in the landscape, noted on his maps, and the painstaking, but constantly perspective-shifting description of customs, Niebuhr observes with a smile the condescending representations of Europeans when he registers the Arabian custom of dressing monkeys in European costumes.

Niebuhr is not a man of letters as Bougainville, nor is he a specialist. Niebuhr's perspective is not classicistic, but down to earth and rustic. He shares with Bougainville the confidence in unprejudiced common-sense and an open and honest dialogue as the most important tools of reason. But in his matter-of-factness he possesses an advantage compared to the classicistic, learned man of the world, in that he does not experience the relativity of the journey as a threat to a unified, harmoniously rounded world-view, whereas the European intellectual, with his balanced reason, finds himself at centre stage. Niebuhr never considers his interaction with the Arabians as an encounter between two clearly delimited, quasi-autonomous cultural universes, but as an ongoing exchange of information on the same level as information on itineraries, supplies and transportation. The daily routine is the same for him as for any other traveller in a caravan; he drinks the same coffee and smokes the same pipe, views the same night sky, but he is still a German-Danish upstart, ingenious but not sly, knowing without being learned. For the cartographer, information and behaviour is a way of orienting oneself in an open world.

Drawing maps and mapping customs both make use of the same multiperspectivistic practice that brings forth the beauty we all remember from looking at old maps with fascination and a feeling of marvel. Niebuhr is unable to penetrate *deeper* into the culture of Arabia, but at the same time his superficial and experiental method tells us why he can still represent a paradigm for the description of the world's localities, including Europe. He is thus an obvious subject for the old type of history writing that the philosopher Paul Ricoeur reminds us of, when he recommends hagiography as an ancient genre worth reviving.[11] In brief, Niebuhr's method gives us what Said and Clifford dreamed of, but could not accomplish.

Flaubert and Gauguin

Before I attempt to come up with a concluding perspective, I will briefly dwell on two other remarkable European travel descriptions from the 19th century – those of Flaubert and Gauguin.

Edward Said was extremely critical of Flaubert's *Voyage en Égypte*,[12] which he regarded as pure and simple orientalism, i.e. a stereotyped, reducing conception of Arabian culture, especially prominent in Flaubert's depiction of the courtesan Kuchiouk. I disagree. It is worth noting that Flaubert desists from writing a regular travelogue from his Egyptian adventure in the late 1840s as his companion Maxime du Camp did. The travel text is a bunch of notes, raw, lacking style and the 'mot juste'. The text was meant simply to encompass things in their 'stricte différence'. He describes the trip up and down the Nile in glimpses, focusing on everything that causes him endless sadness and boredom: the Englishmen they cruise by, the temples, and even the girls he has sex with. He prefers to sleep through the day on the boat, or smoke his pipe with his back to all the inscriptions on the pyramids; he views both new and old as a kind of foolish graffiti. On the other hand, he is fascinated by the colours, blue dogs, Kuchiouk's skin, the shifting weather and the shifting sands.

He makes note of it as the experience of meeting two forms of emptiness. He finds one kind of emptiness in the fact that everyone has already been there, that there is nothing new under the sun, only the repetition of clichés and stereotypes. The other form of emptiness he finds in the ability of the wind and the sand to erase all traces, so that for a few moments he has the feeling of being where no one has been before. He writes home to Louise Colet that he has found a formula for his literature.

Thus, *Voyage en Égypte*, precisely because of its simple, unembellished style becomes the foundation for Flaubert's career, but is itself hidden and repressed. Although unpublished, the presence of the travel book is felt in all the novels, in the shape of Flaubert's deconstructive criticism of orientalism and romanticism, and his never-ending war against everything that self-sufficiently presents itself as European 'culture'.

In Paul Gauguin's travel diary *NoaNoa*,[13] written during his stay on Tahiti around the year 1900, we find simplicity of a different type but just as challenging. The text seems so simple and self-explanatory that it has no need for the comments of a critic. But a closer reading shows *NoaNoa* to be an extremely complicated anthropological narrative, both describing the painter's 'rites de passage' and his rebirth as a native Maori, and at the same time encompassing the poetics of the paintings as well as a cosmology.

Although Gauguin presents the project as a clear-cut beginning and total rejection of everything European, he is clearly adding to his Europeanness. His description of the conversion to Maori is a very precise repetition of Bougainville and Diderot's play between the natural Venus and the elegant, coquette *Venus Galante*, and the 'retour secret vers la forêt' that A and B find in the margin. Nor is Gauguin's 'discovery' of a new path for nude art, free of shame, guilt, kitsch and pornography, the fruit of the innocent models alone, for Gauguin had brought along a rich collection of copies of European art, including such things as Manet's *Olympia*, on which he continued working in his tropical atelier. *NoaNoa*'s cosmology consists of a contradictory compilation of very different myths, but also creates a basis for overcoming the dualisms that Gauguin identifies as the cause of the decline of European culture, exactly by reinvesting it on new cultural conditions. And the way to overcome European dualisms is consistently found in the renunciation of the Christian idea of resurrection. Tahiti will one day perish, just as humans must die, but will not be resurrected: matter alone is everlasting.

This deep-felt attempt to launch a new beginning far from and against Europe is permeated by repetitions and copies of European art and also of tropes in the earliest accounts of European journeys to this place on Earth. In the here and now of gift-giving, and by renouncing the transcendental promises of the traditional dualisms, a certain innocence is quite exceptionally discovered, which however, is also a Europe displaced in time and space.

Rethinking Europe?

When we today discover texts like Flaubert's *Voyage en Ègypte*, and perhaps we are more fascinated by their beauty than by the novels, or when we are forced to recognise the anthropoetic project in Gauguin's *NoaNoa* in spite of obvious contradictions, I think it is part of a general tendency in contemporary literary culture. Flaubert and Gauguin both turned their backs on European culture, and each established a new beginning for modern art, but in emphatically different ways. Flaubert's criticism of European culture took the shape of a parodic rewriting of all books, which imprisoned him in the same library from which he so desperately tried to escape. If, however, we are prepared to recognise Gauguin's experiment as a new beginning, a kind of innocence, there is at the same time an opening for an unfamiliar kind of criticism of texts and culture. As a European intellectual, Flaubert was uncompromisingly negative in his criticism of modernity, with no belief in a constructive dialogue between various cultural viewpoints such as Diderot had displayed. Gauguin, on the other hand, unknowingly rediscovered it in his repetitions, that the road ahead is found in a road back, and this secret road is not *outside of*, but *in the middle of* Europe's flirty and coquette culture when transformed in a non-European setting.

I have attempted to point out some of the possibilities in a 'literary fieldwork' seeking dialogue and positive paradigms instead of negative criticism. We find methods in Bougainville's, Diderot's and Gauguin's texts that we can use in a modern analysis of literature on globalised terms. Niebuhr's perspectivism and ability to take other positions without losing himself stands out as a model to follow. Diderot's supplement is a bridging of what we now call cultural studies and textual analysis. They all paint multidirectional ways of reading and see differences in customs and societies as processes rather than essences.

Europeans did not begin to discover Europe, in the sense of recognising their European identity, until the beginning of the 18th century and the nature of European civilisation is often seen precisely in the mirror of the foreign. Cook, Bougainville, Diderot and Niebuhr see and speak of themselves as Europeans, not as Frenchmen, Englishmen or German-speaking Dane. The image of the European or a common European conception is established, so to speak, on the edges of Europe, but only as a brief mirroring or passing performance – for the political reality in Europe was far from living up to the cosmopolitan ideals of the Enlightenment. When someone like Niebuhr mentions the Arabian view of Europe, it often occurs in images showing Europe as a *scene* or an *arena*, on which a performance takes place: a play, a dance, a masquerade or a catwalk. When he also sees that Arabians often give Europeans a comic role in the marionette theatre or by dressing up apes, he holds up a mirror which in a glimpse shows Europe not as a unified political or geographical reality, but as a scene on which reversals and dialogues like those of A and B take place.

Today, it is clear that Europe is what experts in the history of ideas call an 'essentially contested concept'. The definition includes an acceptance of the fact that this is something we cannot agree on. For Herodotus too, Europe's geographical, political and cultural borders seem to contradict each other, just as the origin of the concept was, to put it mildly, ambiguous. But Herodotus was not a historian of idea or mentalities, but a practical man, who rounds off by saying 'But no more of this; we must use the names that have come into common use'. Bruno Latour,[14] among others, has argued that Europe never was a coherent, delimited geographical or cultural entity, nor did it colonise the rest of the world in great, continuous movements. Europe is better understood as an unstable and fragile network, whose centres, however, were capable of very effectively accumulating knowledge found on its peripheries. Travel narratives were what Latour calls mobiles in the pipelines of the network. They were rich in information, but were, like the entire network, extremely fragile objects, at any moment subject to change, as we have now seen.

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