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Fussell, Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars

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Paul Fussell. *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*. New York and Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1980. viii, 246 pp. \$15.00

“Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience.” But this familiar sentence issued on the riptide of Renaissance exploration that rendered travel and its differing benefits to young and old both possible and distinctive. Now, according to Paul Fussell, in the rip-off of post-World War II tourism, Lord Verulam’s words have become a veritable elegy mocking the impossibility either of education or of experience through the Seven Sheratons from China to Peru, in the hands of the Universal Mickey Mouse, on United look-, feel-, and smell-alikes to destinations in what we call — with an irony of which we may not be wholly aware — *terminals*.

If travel is now defunct, no less so, unfortunately, would appear to be its historical descriptive mode of record stemming from Goldsmith, Boswell-Johnson, and Sterne, through Hazlitt and Stevenson, to Robert Byron, Norman Douglas, Graham Greene, D. H. Lawrence, and Evelyn Waugh. That mode, of course, is the familiar essay, spuriously judged to be only a black sheep against generically- ‘purer’ poetry and fiction, but which, in its disguise of the travel book of *l’entre deux guerres*, expanded into a (short-) living species of modern literature. Congruent with and essential to the purposes of its creators, the essay (or travel book) is, rather, our repository of displaced forms and myths — amorphous, detached, interlarded; free of preordained, preconceived patterns to develop and alter at its shapers’ wills; now terse, now lavish; with or without a precise beginning, middle, and end; lyrical, epic, or dramatic; as fable, lecture, letter, monologue, dialogue, “happening,” or cinematic stream-of-consciousness script.

To travel (and the essay-travel book) it is that Fussell says goodbye, paradoxically, in the twenty-one “essays” of *Abroad*. Like a Cubistic collage or montage, the book’s pieces may be viewed discretely or in any order one wishes (and one hopes that more than a few of them will appear alongside their eloquent kin by Eiseley, Forster, Mailer, and Orwell in future composition anthologies); but, of course, grasped in the order in which Fussell has compellingly arranged them — from the initial “Frozen Oranges” to the ominously-titled “The End” — the total effect is more than that of any of its separate parts. With Randall Jarrell, Fussell shares those talents that Helen Vendler has described of writing, “in almost every account, an implicit sus-

pense story” and of seeing “books constantly as stories about human beings.” In addition, Fussell conceives naturally in metaphor so that a figure at the book’s beginning explodes into full, if eerie, flower at the end. Just so, for example, the innocent “sun” and “oranges” of Wilfred Owen — “His head was golden like the oranges / That catch their brightness from Las Palmas sun” — prefigure the all-too-real oranges that freeze in the sunless, rat-ridden, excremental sloughs of World War I trenches; then sprout into the voluptuous heliophilia of D. H. Lawrence; and finally flourish as the “emblem of alarm, the Rising Sun of the expanding Japanese empire” of the 1930s when peace gave way to war — after which event travel would degenerate into tourism (and travel books into guides), fruity concentrates wouldn’t be “just for breakfast anymore” but would taste better than the “real thing,” Ports of Call would become our Glubbdubdribs, and “clipping” upon the high seas would not even be a souvenir to those who now jet cabined in air or toss on contemporary Oasis waterbeds.

Fussell recalls Jarrell in one final respect: so comprehensively has his “soul memorized world after world,” so elegantly has he lamented our plummet from elegance, that one is dubious even as one murmurs, “Even so!” For, so long as one scholar-artist can continue to extrapolate the realer than real significance of passports, of our desperately clutching our “Made in Taiwan” ’s, or of one’s sticking his arm down an Asiatic toilet to retrieve a wallet; so long as he can reveal literature for the jack-in-the-box world it shockingly is; so long as he can illustrate the cross-fertilization between the seemingly disparate disciplines of the arts and sciences; so long as he can — as Bacon admonished — “prick in some flowers of that he hath learned abroad into the customs of his own country”; so long as he can ‘narrate’ with breathtaking, graceful gusto — in impetuous ellipses; dashes of sentence fragments; suspended clauses; tongue-in-cheek, paragraph-length parenthetical asides — we may indeed believe in a “memory yarn,” and in the velocities of the moment, scan far out a kind of landscape and “Go a Journey,” in more senses than one.

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