

# Distant Episodes: A Briefing On Travels Mythic and Mundane

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Advances in technology, while improving the conditions and modes of travel, have not obviated its dangers or reduced the mythical content and potential of travel experience. The present essay attempts a provisional survey of foreign travel as a recurring motif in the history of consciousness and as a mythically redolent theme in literature, film, and other forms of expression. Critical exposition, however brief, will be devoted to travel episodes of American, European, and Asian origin. The approach of this study is primarily philosophical insofar as the sources for its guiding argument are to be found in the works of Hans Blumenberg and Lezek Kolakowski, philosophers of myth whose research is not as well known to the general academic community as is perhaps warranted by their rigor and cultural pertinence.

He did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveler. The difference is partly one of time, he would explain. Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another. —Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949)

## The Distinction between Travel and Tourism

The definition of “traveler” above, formulated by an American traveling in North Africa, is largely self-enobling, for it enables the expatriate named Port Moresby to distinguish himself from the tourists who have often embarrassed him in public with *petite bourgeois* and ethnocentric behavior on buses and ships throughout his numerous world travels. But his elitism will not protect him from a hazard of foreign voyages experienced by tourists and travelers alike, and from which he eventually perishes: food poisoning. Port’s definition of “tourist” is not unproblematic, for it fails to successfully classify the likes of Homer’s Odysseus, who wants to return home as soon as possible but takes twenty years to do so. If time is the sole criterion, Odysseus is a traveler. At the 1991 WTO Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics, “tourism” was defined as follows: “The activities of persons traveling to and staying in place outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes” (WTO 10). The specified length of time qualifies most of us as tourists, and would have disqualified Odysseus from being a tourist had it been extant almost three thousand years ago. But regardless of the time he spent at sea, Odysseus cannot be called a tourist for the simple reason that tourism did not exist in Homer’s world. The word “tourist” derives from the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century French word *tour*, associated with both *turning* and a *voyage*, and is thus a fairly modern coinage associated with the rise of the middle class and transportation technology. For the purpose of the present essay, which is a provisional (by no means comprehensive) briefing on travel writing accompanied by an analysis of the mythic content of travel and its dangers, it will suffice to avoid the distinction between tourism and travel, and mainly use grammatical variants of the word “travel” in the spirit of the main verb in the above WTO definition, “traveling” and its predicate string “outside their usual environment.”

## The Myth of the Obsolescence of Dangerous Travel

A recent editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* titled “if Odysseus Had GPS” vaunts the convenience of wireless technology, which, according to the author, makes travel safe and, therefore, adventure literature obsolete. If there had been cell phones in the time of Homer, argues Daniel Akst, the *Odyssey* would not have been written. “Literature’s loss, it seems, is humanity’s gain. Not a bad trade, I think.” With regard to the existence or possibility of adventurous travel in the modern era, there was already skepticism voiced by a newspaper editor in A. Conan Doyle’s novel *The Lost World* (1912): “I’m afraid the day for this sort of thing is rather past...The big blank spaces in the map are all being filled in, and there’s no room for romance anywhere” (Zweig 226). It is unclear whether the coincidence of these opinions being published in newspapers, one fictive and the other genuine, exposes something preemptory at the heart of the journalistic enterprise. In any case, they both overlook the fact that travel and its imagery continue to captivate, startle, and occasionally frighten us in a world replete with new technologies. Most obviously, they overlook the possibility of raw contingencies, such as interpersonal violence or the breakdown of a vehicle, to disrupt a planned itinerary and pitch it into chaos. An already clichéd incident in recent horror films is the

failed attempt to use a cell phone when danger strikes, due to poor signal or inoperable mechanism, ironically deflating the myth that technology protects us from danger. On a more general level, the remarks cited above fail to grasp the power of mythic thought and the popular imagination to imbue travel with exotic or minatory content from folklore, literature, and film. These influences are subtly interwoven with our perception of travel, subtending our expectations and responses. Even a low-budget film like *Wolf Creek* (2005) in which British campers are waylaid by a serial killer in the outback of Australia, demonstrates the densely mythical texture of travel experience. The rustic Good Samaritan who offers a helping hand, and who turns out to be the killer, poses as a sort of swarthy Crocodile Dundee to dupe the gullible campers. Here biblical parable dovetails with new, cinematically-generated myth to bring absolute calamity upon unsuspecting travelers. An abundance of such productions shows us that danger is an inescapable element of travel that human beings expect, unconsciously or otherwise, and cannot forget. In his book *Shipwreck with Spectator* Hans Blumenberg argues that we *desire* perilous travel. "This life is in fact kept going only by means of things than can also be fatal for it...The harbor is not an alternative to shipwreck; it is the state where the pleasures of life are foregone" (34-5).

### Perilous Voyages and the History of Consciousness

The explanation of our predilection for risky travel has less to do with the fact that we are thrill seekers than with the history of consciousness. As Paul Zweig points out, "The raw material of mythologies throughout the world seems largely to be made up of perilous journeys" (6). This observation, made in the context of an analysis of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, reminds us of a time when travel was synonymous with heroism because of prodigious challenges to be overcome. The retelling of such heroic travels led to myth. Furthermore, travel and its perils were often associated with *learning*. The university as we know it today was formed in the Middle Ages as an enclave for migrating students and teachers. "Far from home and undefended, they united for mutual protection and assistance, and this organization of foreign, or Transmontane, students was the beginning of the university" (Haskins 8). No one needs reminding that Aladdin's Lamp, the lost Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gnostic Gospels, and the black lunar monolith in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, were all treasures of secret knowledge that motivated perilous voyages. Literature retraces one of its earliest distant episodes for the sake of knowledge to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in about 2150 BC. Gilgamesh the hero leaves his homeland of Uruk to search for the secret of immortality in the land of Faraway. Centuries later, in A. Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, Professor Challenger goes on a voyage from England to the Amazon jungle where he gains access to a hidden prehistoric realm fraught with dinosaurs and danger. The many film versions of the novel, like those of the earlier novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) by Jules Verne, however uneven in quality, have conveyed the character type of the *traveling professor*.

It is to the dubious credit of these narratives and another film, famously starring "Indiana Jones," that the image of travel as perilous learning has been reanimated in the popular imagination, albeit mythically, with little actual relation to whatever concrete dangers confront the traveling scholar today. Once again the Great White Hunter (or Explorer) prevails against myriad adversities in Third World countries populated with racial stereotypes. Such cultural products remind us that travel has been historically linked not only to heroism and learning, but to violence. It is perhaps in riposte to such violence that Ray Bradbury wrote "The Sound of Thunder," first published in 1952. This story is arguably one of the first science fiction fables to anticipate ecotourism in the catastrophe precipitated by a time traveling hunter in a prehistoric landscape. By leaving a strictly defined path and accidentally stomping on a butterfly, the traveler from the year 2055 initiates an evolutionary chain-reaction that wreaks havoc, both linguistic and biochemical, on the future from which his hunting party comes.

It is, then, difficult to disentangle myth from historical fact when we discuss travel adventure. The *Odyssey* is often invoked as an example of a travel allegory with multiple dangers, whose episodes are admittedly fantastic but based on true events. The verisimilitude and scale of those events remains indefinite in the minds of many readers, who find it bothersome when reminded that the *Odyssey* is a work of poetry whose contents are fictional. As a result, the indefinite ratio between fact and myth is prolonged, inviting consistently distorted interpretations. The battle of Troy that we read of in the *Iliad*, and that is portrayed in epic scale with Brad Pitt as Achilles in the film *Troy* (2004), was likely a raid, not a war, and most certainly did not last ten years as is commonly assumed (Finley 46). A recent example is equally emphatic in its distortions. In his article on the mythic elements of the *Titanic* disaster, Stephen Cox relates a story first reported in *USA Today* on the September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center. Two women attempt to get to an elevator by pushing themselves in front of a man, who says to them, "This isn't the *Titanic*, ladies. It's not women and children first" (Cox 403). It is noteworthy that the speaker assumes that the details of the film *Titanic* (1997) or at least the *Titanic* legend are commonly understood. As Cox observes, the chivalry to which the man refers as being demonstrated on the *Titanic* is taken as fact, when the

historical record shows that “many people who secured seats in the *Titanic*’s lifeboats were anything but anxious to rescue the fellow travelers whom they could hear screaming for help in the icy water” (404).

### Travel and Adventure as Enabling Myths in Education

Given the mythic ambience of icons like the *Titanic* in the popular imagination, it seems we have come a long way since the 1880s when Nietzsche found myth in a state of exhaustion. He meant to restore *enabling* myth as antidote to the negative, life-denying myth of Christianity. When Nietzsche associates learning with the seafarer’s travels in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, he is seeking to reinvigorate its mythical charisma. “Live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas!” (228). The metaphor of knowledge-as-dangerous-travel conveys an unsettled, foundationless thinking that anticipates poststructuralism. The volcano is a symbol for the unpredictable outcome of violent affects that influence thought. The sea, as Blumenberg points out in his *Work on Myth*, “of all the realities of the Hellenic world, is the least integrated into the cosmos” (31). To venture seaward is to leave the precinct of Zeus for that of Poseidon, who, while he must submit to the will of Zeus, follows his own inclination when he is not being commanded or reprimanded. Nietzsche’s metaphor of the seafarer and oceanic imagery encourage thinkers to cross and test boundaries of power and scholarly pursuit, including genre and discipline. He did not have cinema or the novel writer’s craft to fully animate his myths, so his philosophic language, unfit for the theatrical range of effects he seeks to achieve, overreaches itself. Philosophy is proud that it jettisoned mythical expression, but it never replaced it with imaginative material that would engage an audience concretely. One can’t conceive of a philosophy that, as G. S. Kirk says of *Gilgamesh*, “makes a varied and enthralling narrative,” that has “an unmistakable aura of the mythical,” and that displays “an emotional exploration of the permanent meaning of life” (133). The steady decline of the study of philosophy today highlights its failure to captivate students, who prefer cinematic imagery and narrative forms over purely concept-based logical argumentation. Michel Serres, who teaches at Stanford, is one of the few contemporary philosophers who strives to transform his profession by verbal stylization and invention, employing hybrid genres from poetry to fable in his books. Most pertinent in the context of the present study is his *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (1997), which envisions education as a voyage out. “No learning can avoid the voyage. Under the supervision of a guide, education pushes one to the outside.... For there is no learning without exposure, often dangerous, to the other” (8).

It is noteworthy that J. K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, attempts to remythologize education by using the platform and genre of children’s literature to create an enchanting metaphor of *education-as-magic*. The motifs that consolidate this metaphor and which are integral to Rowling’s novels include travel, encounters with otherness, and choices which involve greater and lesser degrees of risk and/or conformity. Nietzsche, Serres and Rowling perceive the modern learning experience as coming at a stage in history characterized by the depletion of useful educational myths. J. K. Rowling, one can speculate, decided that the role model of Indiana Jones was not powerful enough to re-enchant the educational imagination of young people. Her narrative art has effectively depicted the multiple effects of an *institution* rather than one charismatic *individual*.

### Travel, Writing, and Cultural Discovery

Few among us here on the tropical island of Guam and in less far-flung places would argue that travel is not integral to learning. The discovery and transmission of knowledge and material goods has relied on travel and its transcription in documents official and unofficial since the beginning of recorded history. In this regard, travel writing preceded such relatively recent developments in literature as the novel. Early scholars and merchants were itinerant and far-ranging not only to supply their rulers with knowledge of foreign places and resources, who would then conduct wars and initiate trade routes, but to communicate their wisdom and experience to peers. Anyone who studies, however cursorily, the spread of Aristotle’s works from Africa and the Middle East via Muslim and Jewish translators to European centers of learning such as in Toledo or Sicily, will be stunned by the multicultural cooperation among Western Christians, Greeks, Jews, Arabs, Slavs, and Roman Catholics (Rubenstein 20).

It is noteworthy and a bit ironic that traveling scholars were not always the most reliable and self-disciplined recorders of events. A case in point comes close to home. One of the earliest and most comprehensive studies of Guam and Mariana Islands, planned by the French Academy of Sciences, was recorded not by scientists but by the naval officers under Captain de Freycinet, on the ship *L’Uranie*, in 1819. Previous travel experience with scholars had convinced Captain Freycinet “that a band of sea borne savants is likely to be troublesome,” and he thus assigned the writing tasks to his naval officers (de Freycinet xv). The ensuing manuscript was also indebted to a journal kept by Captain Freycinet’s wife, Rose. The remarkable publication that issued from this voyage, first received by the French Academy of sciences in 1821, appeared in English translation as *An Account of the Corvette L’Uraïne’s*

*Sojourn at the Mariana Islands, 1819*, in 2003, thanks in large part to the efforts of a number of individuals associated with the University of Guam's Micronesian Area Research Center (MARC).

The logistics of travel and its discoveries, dependent on nascent technologies, were for many centuries remarkably indirect, such that at times it was war—surely the most uncommon tool of the academic researcher—that led to unexpected findings. When Napoleon declared in 1798, “The road to London passes through Egypt,” he could hardly have foreseen that in the aftermath of his failed military strategy to weaken the British Empire by attacking Egypt, there would be an academic spin-off in the discovery of the Rosetta Stone and other artifacts by the scientists who had accompanied the French on their expedition. These findings inspired the British to further explore the region and “led to the subsequent recovery of *Gilgamesh* and the literatures of the several major ancient Near Eastern cultures now known to us” (Damrosch 302). The scientific outcomes of Napoleon's failed Egyptian campaign were reported in a best-selling travel account, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte pendant les campagnes du General Napoleon*, published in 1802.

As is clear from the brief allusions made above, the genre of travel writing is so vast that no attempt will be made to summarize it here. There is an excellent annotated bibliography of the scholarship of travel writing on a web site hosted by The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, supported by an NEH grant. (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/travelbibliography.html>). Some recent studies of more than passing interest include Mary W. Helms' ethnographic study of the global projection of power and ideology via travel and commerce (1982); P.J. Marshall and Glyndwyr Williams' study of the process by which travelers from Enlightenment Europe made citizens of foreign “unenlightened” countries feel inferior and hence prone to cultural envy and emulation (1982); Mary B. Campbell's account of the imperialist assumptions of medieval European travelers and their perceptions of exoticism and otherness (1988); Mary Louise Pratt's study of tacit colonialism and the types of “transculturation” associated with travel writing (1992); Chris Rojek and John Urry's account of reciprocal transformations in theory and understanding of foreign cultures that have occurred due to new modes of traveling and touring (1997); James Duncan and Derek Gregory's edited collection *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (1999), which studies the ways that travelers' imaginary expectations of a foreign culture both shape and are transformed by experiences of the “real” culture; and the edited volume of interdisciplinary studies by John Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (1999).

Although many of these works occur in the shadow of and repeat the critical gestures of Edward Said's *Orientalism* by describing the European use of travel to study, exploit, and colonize foreign lands eastward, there are several distinguished books that reverse this perspective, depicting the detailed impressions and encounters of Asian travelers heading west. Noteworthy in this context are Ross Dunn's *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (1986), and *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road*, by Sally H. Wriggins (1996).

### Travel, Myth, and National Identity in Asia

Memorable accounts of arduous foreign travel are less plentiful in the literatures of Asia than in the literatures representing the colonial powers of Europe, where intercontinental discovery was enabled by the technical development of full rigged ships from single-mast boats (Derry 203). In Asia, long distance domestic travel was a privilege in most cases of noble clans, motivated by the perceived exigency of subduing refractory tribes in remote districts. The linguist Nicholas Ostler has argued that the worldview of the ancient Chinese, which envisioned China as nine continents surrounded by four seas teeming with barbarians, inhibited interest in foreign travel while unifying the language and culture of the Chinese people. “The external threat of invasion kept the Chinese focused on what they had to lose...and so perversely maintained the cohesion of its spoken language” (169).

To be sure, individuals, such as journeying philosophers with limited resources, went on spiritual pilgrimages, earning their sustenance by lending a hand on farms and so on. Vast internal distances and rugged terrains made such domestic travel something like a foreign experience. Paul Zweig argues that there was a philosophical reason for certain Asian cultures to downplay or discourage the adventure of travel. He cites the longest literary work ever recorded, the Tibetan folk epic *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*, which appeared in about 1000 AD, as evidence that spiritual values trumped overt action, rendering travel superfluous. Rather than attack a monastery fortress directly, the hero, Gesar, is guided by a divine protector to rise above it. “The way there is long and dangerous. You will have to go through narrow canyons filled with tigers, lions, and worse than that, certain cannibal demons. In your body of flesh, you could never succeed in passing. So transform your divine steed into the king of vultures. If you mount on him, and steer a course through space higher than that of the birds, you'll be in India in a few seconds.” Zweig concludes: “Oriental traditions discourage adventure because they consider the vigorous individuality of the adventurer to be an illusion, a trick of the Maya” (8). Although Zweig generalizes from

too few samples, his assertion is confirmed in the literature of the Zen tradition, where enlightenment is about awakening, not about movement. “What demon caused you to become a mendicant, what demon made you go traveling?” This rebuke by Dhrtaka occurs in one of the classic works of the Japanese Zen tradition. “Thus the mind has no shape or form; even though it be seeing and hearing, discerning and knowing, ultimately it does not come or go, it is not moving or still” (Keizan 25-6).

In the case of Japan, several other factors contributed to the rarity of foreign travel, not least of which was cultural isolation until the arrival of Perry’s ships in 1853. Furthermore, poverty, compounded with the ideology of what came to be called *ie* (or “homebound”) society (Harootunian 81), and later, *furusato* (a feeling for one’s hometown or native place) kept people rooted, or instilled a desire to return home, and made lands elsewhere seem unattractive if not uncanny (Ivy 106). The traveling gods, *kishu ryuri*, of ancient folklore in Japan were a common motif of domestic travel literature. Homage had to be paid to gods if one sought to travel, or perils would ensue. These protective figures serve a similar role in many cultures (Campbell 69). The anti-hero of Japanese legend, Tamato Takeru, famous for his “road of trials” during the fourth century A.D. (not unlike the labors of Hercules, but Takeru was passionate about poetry), endangered his voyage when he upset the Deity of the Straits while crossing Tokyo Bay between Sagami and Kazusa (Morris 6). Other traditional themes associated with travel included literary and religious pilgrimages, visits to shrines and holy places, and so on. One of the most well regarded classical travel texts, Basho’s *Oku no hosomichi* (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*), which appeared in 1694, is a travel diary that records an extensive trip to the remote northern provinces of Honshu in 1689. It is noteworthy that Basho’s diary mixes narrative episodes with passages of Haiku, and contains allusions to Chinese poetic and historical texts (Kojin 21). This content reminds us that for many centuries in isolated regions of Asia and elsewhere, foreign travel meant the study of foreign literary and cultural materials in one’s native land, or *Peregrinatio in stabilitate*.

Many classical tales of travel in Japan, whose travelers could rely on the support of gods if invoked with the proper reverence, did not put identity at risk like travel does in modern and “godless” Japanese literature and film, where the experiences of otherness, betrayal, and metamorphosis are less founding myths than forces of demythologization. It is this “risk factor” that marks a radical change in travel literature following the Meiji period. It remains unclear exactly to what degree the influences behind such a change are from literature, due to the widespread reading of Russian and European novels and poetry by Japanese scholars and writers, or from concrete historical events and encounters. The best guess is that both were sizable factors. In any case, perilous travel is a founding event or set of circumstances in the development of modern Japanese literature. Several cases are exemplary. An obscure coming-of-age narrative based on travel is Natsume Soseki’s *The Miner* (*Kofu*, 1908). In this novel a young man on the verge of suicide flees Tokyo to wander in a rural prefecture, where he is recruited to work deep inside a mine. There a friendship with an older miner, fatalistic but wise, transforms the young man. Persuaded that the mine is not a place for a person of such promise, he leaves the mine in a likely return to his home, but forever marked by his travels and his encounters. A recurrent travel theme in Japanese literature is the disruptive, identity-threatening transposition of employment or family home caused either by government edict or personal choice. This theme is evident in Mori Ogai’s influential “Sansho the Steward” (*Sansho Dayu*), published in 1915. A father is banished by corrupt local authorities to a remote province, and his family, consisting of a mother and two children, is left to fend for itself, eventually traveling in search of the father, who we later learn is deceased. Taken hostage and separated by bandits, the mother is sold into slavery in one province, the children—sister and brother—in another. After many years of brutal subservience, the sister kills herself in a decoy maneuver that enables her brother to escape and subsequently track down his mother. In this tale, travel is both personal catastrophe and the condition for the possibility of family reunion.

A more recent Japanese novel about travel, also made into a film, is Mishima Yukio’s *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (*Gogo no Eiko*, 1963). In this novel the potentially destructive power of mythic self-understanding for the Japanese people is demonstrated. The events that unfold center around several young males, one of whose mother has an intimate relationship with a sea captain named Ryuji. From the start, a mythic aura envelops the seafarer, conjured by the boys who form a sort of cult of worship enthralled with the imagery of foreign travel and danger at sea. But when it becomes apparent that the captain and boy’s mother, Fusako, plan to get married, the respect and admiration of the cult turns to disappointment and rage. The boys can’t tolerate the domestication of their mythic seafarer, who will become a landlubber and seek work ashore. For them the conversion from hero to husband is heresy, a ruinous and intolerable fall from grace. Goaded by a particularly bitter and vengeful leader, the boys plot to poison the captain by spiking his tea during a seaside chat when he is retelling tales of nautical adventure. An interesting narrative twist, defusing blame, suggests the captain’s unconscious complicity in his own death. One suspects, however faintly, suicide is not entirely absent from this ceremonial sacrifice. Ryuji is from the start narcissistically spellbound by “ideas of glory and death,” “longing,” “melancholy,” and “other dark passions choking in the ocean’s swell” (Mishima 38). Ryuji perhaps feels guilt about abandoning his

vocation when the place of his chat with the boys affords him a view of the sea. “The sea made Ryuji feel that he had been away from it a long, long time. Fusako’s bedroom overlooked the harbor but he never went to the window any more” (174). As he shares tales of his voyages, there seems to be a moment when Ryuji almost discerns the cabal before the poison takes effect, but the cunning of the cult leader wins out. Whether blinded by guilt, self-loathing, or romanticism, the sea captain’s critical wariness (the “wily” faculty so indispensable to Odysseus) fails him and he continues to drink the tea.

The role of myth in Mishima’s novel is, to borrow G. S. Kirk’s terms, *ceremonial* and *narrative* in the storytelling event and sacrifice of the sea captain, but also serves a *functional* role throughout the novel, providing the boys with a heroic persona to respect at a time when leadership in Japan had fallen from grace after the calamitous end to the Pacific War (Kirk 282). These are the aspects of myth that make it integral to tradition and that establish it in a culture. But in Mishima’s novel cult status perverts the use of myth, for which there is no consensus in the wider culture, into a dysfunctional outcome, underscoring the decadence of post-war society. After the war, common sense no longer holds and the rules have changed: such is the main thesis of Sakaguchi Ango’s famous essay “Darakuron” (“On Decadence” 1946) of which Mishima was surely apprised. Mishima’s novel shows us that emperor worship, weakened and vilified after the war, emerges in isolated pockets of decadent, potentially deadly force within the mythically renascent collective unconscious of the new generation. More generally, it can be said that much of his writing seeks to grapple with the cultural and existential implications of what he perceived as the tragic demythologization (Bultmann’s *Entmythologisierung*), the stripping down to objective reality and sobering up, as it were, of Japanese sovereignty following the Pacific War (Bultmann 248). Reiner Schürman’s remark is apt in this context: “One cannot rid oneself of those sovereign referents as easily as one kicks a bad habit” (14).

#### Dangerous Travel and Shipwreck in Literature

In the West, the theme of dangerous travel returns on a regular basis in the history of literature. Hans Blumenberg’s study *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* argues that shipwreck has served as both a cliché and existential metaphor in the history of consciousness as reflected in literature and popular culture. Although our ancestors found travel to be dangerous, the ships they built eventually became comfortable platforms from which the hazards of travel could be witnessed from safety, affording vicarious pleasure. The rise of film and television telescoped this viewing experience to another level of spectatorship, so that now we can cozily watch the film “Titanic,” which was, until it sunk, a cozy and sumptuous viewing post to watch others less fortunate in distress at sea. The recent success of films such as “Castaway” (2000) and the television series “Lost” (2004-10) confirms the durability of the shipwreck metaphor. These narratives hark back to the predicament of Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe’s fictional autobiography of that name published in 1719, based on the marooning of Alexander Selkirk on an island off the coast of Chile. Other texts related to this genre can be enumerated profusely if one has the time. To name but a few, there was the rebuttal to Defoe’s ideology of shipwrecked individualism in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, fully titled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts* (1726); the fatal voyage of the whaling ship Pequod in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Paul Theroux’s tale of an American family naively fleeing suburbia for the reputedly idyllic but in fact hazardous living conditions of the Honduran jungle in *The Mosquito Coast* (1981). Melville’s earliest novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) were narratives of travel in the Pacific, based on his own youthful experiences at sea. Clever, crisply paced, and replete with “local color,” these novels were far more popular among Nineteenth-Century readers than Melville’s prolix, cosmic allegory, *Moby-Dick*, itself foreshadowed by a grimly fantastic novel published in 1838 by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Voyage of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Poe, like Melville, supplemented his foreign travel experiences by reading an abundance of travel literature and scientific accounts to stock his tales with credible geographic and cultural-historical content, to an excess bordering on plagiarism. The travel writings of both authors demonstrate the *mediated* perception of travel. As was suggested earlier, travel is often indistinguishable from the media and myths with which it is associated.

For Poe, especially, travel represented the chaotic exteriority that confronts and challenges the sovereignty of logical reason, the most reliable coping mechanism of his unstable but highly erudite characters. It can be argued that Poe, like Swift before him, contests the durability of the colonial individualist embodied in Robinson Crusoe, via the phantasmagoria that afflict the minds of shipwrecked, marooned, or storm-tossed characters in tales such as “Ms Found in a Bottle” (1831) and “A Descent into the Maelström” (1841). Those few tales of Poe that occur “outside” on fantastic voyages in the proximity of Indonesia, Norway, and Antarctica, depict characters who, imperiled by tumultuous storms, whirlpools, and ghost ships, seek refuge, ingress to interiors even more desperately than elsewhere in Poe’s fiction. In Poe’s body of work, either one nearly perishes from too little air and space, or too much of these. The deranging visions that result are as if from incipient panic attacks brought on by an inability to

disconfirm haunting and multifarious impressions. Characters lack common sense to confirm or disconfirm their perceptions. Racial stereotypes and instrumental thinking are deployed as coping mechanisms, but otherness remains resistant to processing and engulfs thought.

In modern literature, the narrative that perhaps most succinctly depicts the menaces encountered by scholars during foreign travel is the short story, "A Distant Episode," by the American expatriate writer, Paul Bowles, published in 1947. A professor of linguistics traveling in the Western Sahara is taken hostage by desert nomads, who tear out his tongue, attach tin cans and refuse to his body, and tow him across the desert as a sort of entertaining mascot until he escapes, albeit without his sanity. Later, Paul Bowles developed this story of cultural alienation, with many significant changes, into a disturbing novel about a married couple who cross the Sahara, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949). These tales in many ways epitomize the dangers that threaten naïve citizens of superpowers who suddenly become a minority among the people their own nation has historically subjugated and/or marginalized.

### To Travel or Not to Travel, That is the Question

The distressing foreign encounters depicted by Paul Bowles in literary fiction seem tame compared to contemporary cinematic accounts in which travelers in exotic places—mostly students—are brutally dismembered or murdered by local peoples in an ominous, predatory setting. These encounters are fetishized in popular films such as *Wolf Creek*, *Hostel* (2005), filmed in Slovakia, *Turistas*, which takes place in Brazil (2006), and *Hostel 2* (2007). It can be argued that such films extrapolate from classic horror films that involve domestic travel. This formidable list includes *Psycho* (1960), *Deliverance* (1972) and its most recent, less literary analogue *Wrong Turn* (2003). *Wrong Turn 2* (2007) is a parody of reality television survival shows. A group of actors and film crew making a show titled "Apocalypse: Ultimate Survivalist" are ambushed and besieged by mutant hillbillies in the forest of West Virginia. It remains to be seen whether such films, entering the so-called collective unconscious or social imagination, have had any significant impact on the travel plans of young and old. It is safe to argue that travel films with sinister content and graphic violence are more likely than classic literature to have a negative impact on tourism, perhaps inhibit students and scholars from setting out on foreign adventures. The Slovakian government, to cite one case, was appalled by the film *Hostel*, which it perceived as a "monstrosity that does not reflect reality." Not only did it wrongly depict locals speaking Czech instead of Slovak, but government officials were also convinced that "this film damages the image of our country" ("Slovakia").

Of a wider impact on travelers today than garish and spectacular horror films about travel would be the growth of the worldwide web and online learning. These technologies have surely increased the number of those who travel, due to discount reservation booking sites and search engines. Yet the very convenience and safety of having the world at one's finger tips has surely encouraged those who unknowingly dwell in the shadow of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670), avoiding trouble and learning all they need to know by staying quietly in their rooms--Pascal with his candle and books, today's scholars and students with their I-Pads and Blackberries. Pascal's remark, to be exact, was as follows: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room." To be fair to Pascal, it needs to be said that he wrote his famous apothegm not as an attack on travel, but in criticism of the tendency of many people to seek distraction—including travel-- out of a fear of being alone and a discomfort with the meditative silence conducive to study. Another renowned, reclusive writer who had all the knowledge he needed at his fingertips in a vast personal library was Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628). One wonders, tongue-in-cheek, whether the topic of Burton's encyclopedic compendium would have been a different human emotion had he gone *hither and yonder* as they said back then. Or, would he have written a book at all? He wrote about melancholy, he said, to avoid feeling melancholy, the origin of which he identified as "idleness." If idleness causes melancholy, then travel, as much as writing, might have been a powerfully preventative elixir.

### The Contemporary Relevance and Function of Travel and Myth

Perhaps travel today best serves the purpose of students, scholars, and tourists not so much to provide a basic reality test, that is, demythologization of our history textbooks and Hollywood films, but a more informed perspective to assess and understand the complex relation between myth and reality. One would hope students travel to Slovakia to distinguish Slovakian culture from its cinematic depiction in *Hostel*. This experience would clarify their own self-understanding in terms of the roles stereotypes and the media play in their interpretation of foreign cultures. Such understanding ensues from fairly mundane travel episodes. "Ah, so this is the *real* Japan," a disgruntled tourist says who, having read of splendid temples like Ryoanji and Kinkakuji, steps off the Shinkansen in Kyoto to urban congestion and the overhead blight of power lines and telephone cables. The *real* Japan? Well, yes

and no; not exactly. Keep going. The temples are but a taxi ride away, and they are indeed austere and majestic, with a mythical aura, especially—but not exclusively—if one knows their history and the literature associated with them. To wander quietly on the *tobi ishi* (stepping stones) among the colorful, richly textured mosses in the sacred gardens of Ryoanji is an experience not fully identified in logical, architectural, and botanical categories. Nor can such categories adequately represent the state of mind induced by meditating, or composing a poem, before the Zen rock garden and *karesansui* (dry landscape) at Ryoanji. Myth and reason do not exclude each other completely, Bruno Snell argues, and “no transition is ever fully completed” between them (224). This is both a hazard to human existence, if thought is uncritical, and a benefit if consciousness retains its critical faculty so as to distinguish enabling from disabling myth. In the case of the horrific situation depicted in *Wolf Creek*, the doomed campers are victimized by their own gullibility to the myth of the Good Samaritan fused with Crocodile Dundee.

Positive examples of mythical consciousness are more mundane and easily taken for granted. Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle are mythically *valued* as heroic hitters by a Little League baseball coach seeking to inspire his players and instill respect for the game and its tradition. It would be unproductive to demythologize these athletic titans by pointing out their alcoholism. In this regard Leszek Kolakowski says that “The universe of values is a mythical reality... Value is a myth; it is *transcends*” (26). When we value something in a way that transcends its empirical being, we are mythologizing it. The dream of the Enlightenment to extirpate myth ignored its rational function to organize the unknown when knowledge is lacking, or provide exemplars when living heroes are insufficiently charismatic. Without something like myth, we are exposed to the frightening “absolutism of reality” which myth pragmatically alleviates (Blumenberg 29). For example, the myth of self-reliance promulgated by Defoe and Emerson, which has percolated into uncountable stories and films, becomes functionally effective when a solo hiker is stranded on a mountain in winter, supporting her efforts at survival. “I can get out of here; I can do this *on my own*.” Conversely, the myth that “no man is an island” is likewise persuasive when one’s expertise is inadequate and help must be outsourced, as when a stubborn lawyer, failing for the third time to repair an electrical problem in his car, is coaxed by his spouse to take it to the mechanic at the dealership. “You can’t do this on your own. Get help for Pete’s sake.” These episodes, which hardly seem distant or unique, show the basic staying power of myth within cultures without a fantastic content of gods and heroes. We are speaking of a traditional truth, image, or rhythm in myriad narrative genres from song to film, with a tacit but compelling psychological content of often functional if not symbolic value.

### Conclusion

As conceived by the scholars and writers cited in these pages, the linked roles of travel and myth enable not only an enduring legacy of experiences and stories whose symbolically functional content is always being partly renewed and recycled in cultural evolutions, but also provide a fruitful inner relation or access to the analogical process by which thought seeks alternatives. Thought is not stranded by its literal domain, imprisoned in the empirical, but can take a real voyage *and/or* has alternatives of comparison and figuration—analogy, image, metaphor, myth. The postmodern insight that systems or grand narratives have lost their ideological hegemony anticipates the hermeneutically pragmatic role of myth today, which precludes arbitrariness on the one hand, and one-track thinking on the other. Even today foreign travel often requires interpretive pragmatism. Travel is an event in which otherness abruptly emerges, and myth has always been one among other discourses to make sense of otherness. All such modes of thought or discourses (including scientific rationality and archaic incantation) remain as latent strategies of coping and expression to be called out when the situation demands. In this regard Gilles Deleuze mentions the lost child who sings to herself in the forest, invoking “refrains” that mark a domain and conjure shelter where there seems none and have a calming effect “in the heart of chaos” (311). Likewise, travel myth seems to be a living resource or repertoire that provides consolatory or terrifying material for both creative and logical thought. If shipwrecked on an island with a GPS cell phone, it is still probably better for a traveler to have recourse to some myth of survival than none, at least as a backup to practical ingenuity, even if Crocodile Dundee comes to the rescue.

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