

Chapter 3, pp. 88-92: travel and romanticism

[The book was intended primarily for academic readers.]

As these examples suggest, memories of romantic relationships are frequently entwined with memories of romantic places. If romance blossoms more freely in the past, it also tends to flourish abroad rather than at home. The lure of memory is comparable to – and often combined with – the lure of the exotic.

No part of the world demonstrates the appeal of this fusion more powerfully than the Mediterranean. For Mr Pinfold, as for many of his generation, it was ‘that splendid enclosure which held all the world’s history and half the happiest memories of his own life; of work and rest and battle, of aesthetic adventure, and of young love’ [GP 100]. It is to this romantic region that Scott-King looks for escape from the austerities of post-war Britain:

Hot oil and garlic and spilled wine; luminous pinnacles above a dusky wall; fireworks at night, fountains at noonday... the shepherd’s pipe on the scented hillside – all that travel agent ever sought to put in a folder, fumed in Scott-King’s mind that drab morning. [WS 203]

These are familiar images in Waugh; they have the fragrance of a world set apart from the harsh ordinances of life as it is lived in those northern countries beyond the reach of the sun. Dreams of the south merge with a nostalgia that calls us back to the paradisaical landscape from which we were originally exiled. It is the romantic consummation. But this in itself can be a problem; the images that seethe in Scott-King’s mind are overtaxed; they have already edged too far towards the travel agent’s folder. It is, in an extreme form, the problem

that Waugh had indicated by calling his first travel book *Labels*; the images of the Mediterranean are too well-thumbed to be taken up without self-consciousness; as the property of every travel agent, their charm has inevitably been debased. The call of the Mediterranean persists, but only because it is also the call of 'all the world's history'.

After *Labels* there were to be no more travel books with a Mediterranean setting. In the Preface to *When the Going was Good* Waugh explains how he and others of his generation had set out for more distant places:

These were the years when Mr Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert, Mr Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron – vital today, as of old, in our memories; all his exuberant zest in the opportunities of our time now, alas! tragically and untimely quenched – to the ruins of Persia. We turned our backs on civilization. Had we known, we might have lingered with 'Palinurus'; had we known that all that seeming-solid, patiently built, gorgeously ornamented structure of Western life was to melt overnight like an ice-castle, leaving only a puddle of mud; had we known man was even then leaving his post. Instead, we set off on our various stern roads; I to the Tropics and the Arctic, with the belief that barbarism was a dodo to be stalked with a pinch of salt. The route of *Remote People* was easy going; the *Ninety-Two Days* were more arduous. We have most of us marched and made camp since then, gone hungry and thirsty, lived where pistols are flourished and fired. At that time it seemed an ordeal, an initiation to manhood. [WGG 8]

The tone is an interesting mixture of the elegiac and the swashbuckling. It is hard to resist the suspicion that, like Walter Shandy's reaction to the death of his elder son, Waugh's rhetoric about the death of Robert Byron and the collapse of a civilization has quite out-distanced the emotion that gave rise to it. We do not have to know that Waugh in reality harboured a strong dislike for Robert Byron; the highly wrought phrases are in themselves a clear enough

indication that the writer's attention has been fully claimed by the pleasure of assimilating what has happened to the traditional language of epitaph and elegy. Whatever emotion there might have been is absorbed in verbal gesture. Waugh's response has an archaic luxuriance that marks the passage as a deliberate concession to his romanticism.

The bracing rhythm of the penultimate sentence ('marched and made camp' etc.) offers us a sparse, idealized vision of the military life. It has nothing to do with the long years of frustration and boredom recorded in *Sword of Honour*. Marching and making camp — *viginta milibus passuum confectis, castra posuerunt*; Waugh advances in the shadow of Caesar's legions. And the pistols that were flourished and fired — these, surely, cannot have been regulation weapons; one might flourish a pistol when storming redoubts or boarding Spanish ships, but hardly when being shuttled between depots and training camps in the series of futile military displacements that are the recurrent business of the war trilogy. And yet the passage is appropriate to its context, for in spite of Waugh's studied poise in the accounts he gives of his journeyings, his attitude to travel never quite lost the ardent romanticism that these sentences proclaim. Tony Last's view of himself as an explorer is half-apologetic, but his words betray an obvious relish when he talks to Thérèse de Vitry of Indian trails and untravelled country, of cutting through the bush and making woodskin canoes, of arriving, finally, under the walls of the city like the Vikings at Byzantium. His tone is that of Atwater, fantasizing about the joys of exploration in *Work Suspended*:

Think of paddling your canoe upstream in undiscovered country, with strings of orchids overhead and parrots in the trees and great butterflies, and native servants, and hanging your hammock in the open at night and starting off in the morning with no one to worry you, living on fish and fruit — that's life... [WS 184]

Atwater and Last are doing for the life of the explorer what Waugh was doing for the life of the soldier; their words present the same grandly simplified outline, with the same

preference for romantic tradition over observed reality. In both cases the fictional characters are being mocked; their illusions are precisely the ones that Waugh had gone out of his way to discredit at the end of *Ninety-Two Days*. But although he treats them with irony, he quite clearly retains a degree of sympathy with them. The flaming colours of the tropical landscape, its dizzying profusion, its strange outcrops of humanity – these aspects of the exotic could not fail to excite an imagination that craved escape from the monotony of routine. And Waugh admits as much in the opening pages of *Ninety-Two Days*. Writing of the ‘fascination in distant and barbarous places’, he explains that ‘It is there that I find the experiences vivid enough to demand translation into literary form.’ [92D 13] The decisive word is ‘vivid’: ‘the dark clouds opened above him; the gutters and wet leaves sparkled in sunlight and a vast, iridescent fan of colour, arc beyond arc of splendour, spread across the heavens’ [S 125]. This is the end of the rainy season in Ishmaelia, a characteristically dramatic reversion from storm to sunshine. One could as well have quoted descriptions of sunrise over Matodi or an abrupt thunderstorm in Debra Dowa. What stimulates Waugh’s imagination are the extremes (‘I to the Tropics and the Arctic’); in the vibrating life of the African landscape he finds the same elements that attract him to the vivid extremes of African politics.

Atwater’s words are parody, but they mention nothing that cannot be matched from Waugh’s own account of his journey in South America. What Atwater leaves out and what Waugh puts in are the other features of the explorer’s life – insects, illness, fatigue, hunger, danger. It is because Waugh puts them in that his travel books strike so many readers as essays in disenchantment; he seems to be trampling the Atwater brand of romanticism underfoot. The Africa in *Remote People* is a continent of nightmare; the very title of *Ninety-Two Days* sounds, as the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer pointed out, like a penal sentence of three months. But then Atwater’s is not the only kind of romanticism. It corresponds, one might say, to the ‘Etna at sunset’ variety. There is also that more austere kind which can sustain itself with the mosquito bites as well as with the sunsets. We might

note that in the passage quoted above Waugh includes 'gone hungry and thirsty' in his outline of the soldier's life without in any way detracting from its romanticism. To go hungry and thirsty is a proper requirement of a soldier; the image would be tarnished by ease rather than by hardship. In a similar way there are forms of hardship appropriate to the life of an explorer which only the shallowest romanticism could fail to take account of. 'The difficulty (and of course the charm) of Abyssinia is the inaccessibility of the interior,' says Waugh in *Remote People*; and the parenthesis is significant.

There is no necessary correspondence between the appeal of travel or warfare or exploration and the enjoyment they offer. To have been there at the hot gates or knee deep in the salt marsh would be a claim to romance stronger than most. The impulse is not a hedonistic one; it may be no more than a poison in the blood, a lurking discontent, responsive to a particular kind of stimulus. Even as he sits down to rehearse the ninety-two days of discomfort, danger and fatigue, Waugh notes that 'falling leaves in the autumnal sunshine remind me that it will soon be time to start out again somewhere else' [92D 14].

For the explorer, hardship is a measure of the authenticity of his exploration; and this is why it belongs in the picture. The role of traveller is less demanding; discomfort is inevitable, but for him what takes the place of the explorer's hardship is the murky underside of travel which the brochures leave out: the pimps and whores and swindlers, the rank flowers of boredom, the frustrations of bureaucracy, the dissolute hotels and evil-smelling streets. Everyone comes on deck for the sunrise, visits the pyramids, admires Gibraltar; what distinguishes a certain type of traveller is the curiosity that draws him to the *quartiers louches* — less for what they offer than for what they suggest.