





BOOK REVIEW

5 **La Pluralité des mondes: Le récit de voyage de 1945 à nos jours**, by Guillaume Thouroude, Paris, Presses Universitaires Paris-Sorbonne, 2017, 300 pp., €23 (paperback), ISBN 979-10-231-0505-6

10 The vast chronological period covered in *La Pluralité des mondes* could easily mislead the reader into thinking that they are about to open – yet another – textbook on travel writing. Instead, this work offers an insightful, at times confrontational, analysis of the evolution of French “factual pieces of travel writing” (“récits factuels de voyage”) since 1945 to the present day.¹ Such an ambitious aim calls for an ambitious corpus: 25 primary texts are examined in just under 300 pages, including travelogues written by canonical authors (Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, Beauvoir, Butor, Barthes, Bouvier), best-selling authors or explorers (Tesson, Marquis, Telmon), as well as contemporary French and francophone authors (Rolin, Potoski, Laferrière). In a distinct “note on corpus” (14–16), Thouroude justifies the minority of women and non-European francophone writers in his corpus by the “lack of existing travelogues written by these categories of people in the examined period” (14). He adds, in a concluding remark, that

20  ambition of this corpus is not to represent an exhaustive sample of the sociological and ideological spectrum of postwar France, but to try and theorise the survival and the transformations of a literary genre that was left for dead at the Liberation. (16)

25 The unequivocal way in which Thouroude addresses the sociological and ideological aspects of his selection of texts comes across as a little dismissive of important ideological questions that remain at stake. Thouroude’s straightforward approach plays most to his strength, however, when he addresses radical questions about travel writing in a direct, clear, and lucid way  in regards to the use of travel writing (9), the relevance of postcolonial studies in examining migrant literature (221), or the future of French travel writing (235), for instance. Thouroude explores these vital questions, on which travel writing studies have stumbled over more than once, with an impressive sharpness.

30 The work is structured in seven chapters. The introduction and the first chapter entitled “Towards generic autonomy: travel writing as a mode, as a genre, as forms” lays out the theoretical framework guiding the forthcoming textual analysis. Of particular interest in this section is the distinction drawn between the French “récits de voyage” and “littérature de voyage”, which are both distinct from the English “travel writing” (29–33). The exploration of travel writing as a “minor literature” (25–26) as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, which disrupts the generic structures of literature from the inside, is also compelling and worth exploring further. The following chapters unfold chronologically and take the readers through an exploration of successive milestones of the evolution of French travel writing. Thouroude presents each decade through a careful textual analysis of a handful of primary texts. The micro-literary analysis that Thouroude provides of such a vast range of texts is very often illuminating, and draws on contemporary philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Virilio), French literary theory (Genette, Combe, Schaeffer, Compagnon) and recent developments in French travel writing studies (Forsdick, Debaene, Ridon, Berty, Cogez, Stafford, Urbain, and others). In doing so, he manages to link individual, literary trajectories together with complex theoretical, ideological, and historical questions in a seemingly effortless way.

45 His second chapter on Sartre, Beauvoir, and Lévi-Strauss is, in this sense, particularly useful, as it reinstates the immediate postwar area (which had often been overlooked by the critique in

French travel writing), as a discreet, yet deeply transformative period for the genre of travel writing. "The time of experimentations", ~~which constitutes~~ the third chapter, focuses on the 1960s and 1970s in France. It examines a few textual experimentations (including Réda's and Pérec's) before focusing on the importance of *Mobile* by Butor, which plays a major role in pushing formal and conceptual boundaries traditionally associated with travel writing. Reading Butor naturally leads to reading Roland Barthes, who wrote a piece on *Mobile* himself, and it is no wonder that Thouroude finishes this chapter with (too brief) an analysis of Barthes's *L'Empire des signes*. The fourth chapter, dedicated to the 1980s, fairly deflates the critical importance given to the episode of the "écriture voyageuse" movement in the evolution of travel writing. It also questions the paradoxical critical reception of its tutelary figure, Nicolas Bouvier, and examines possible tensions between classicism, modernity and post-modernity within Bouvier's work through a very careful and convincing analysis of *L'Usage du Monde* and *Le Poisson-Scorpion*. The fifth chapter will be of particular interest for any researcher looking into the question of time, space, and memory, as it examines links between suburban spaces, sites of memory ("lieux de mémoire" as coined by the historian Pierre Nora in 1984), and travel in the work of the French prolific writer Jean Rolin. Finally, the last chapter sketches the trajectory of French travel writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Through the exploration of TV documentaries, alongside literary texts, Thouroude expresses a pessimistic view on the future of travel writing. His harsh criticism of texts by Tesson, in particular, is justified by a solid scrutiny of narratives that too often discard the vital role of travel writing in pushing boundaries of the conception of others, borders, space and time, to wallow in a complacent celebration of the self, characterised by neo-colonialist accents.


If the author finds exceptions to this backward-looking trajectory, in texts by Potoski, for instance, it would have been helpful to consider the innovative role of the digital age in experimental contemporary travel writing, the influence of investigative journalism in hybrid forms of literature, or the influence of non-Francophone travel writing on global questions such as migration. These questions could indeed provide a potential source of consolation for worried academics and readers who despair about the gloomy future of travel writing.

Overall, Thouroude does a fine job of sketching the long-haul trajectories followed by modern and contemporary French travel writing, where the understanding of this evolution had often remained at a pointillist state. While his conclusion on travel emphasises the importance of speed (be it nil, slow, or fast) in the making of in-between spaces that allow for travel to exist, Thouroude also insists on the discreet yet vital movement that animates the transitional spaces between two authors, and explores these in-between critical spaces that have pre-viously been overlooked. Through this pleasantly metadiscursive aspect of his work, he reminds us that to investigate, and to write, is also to travel.

Note

1. All translations from the French are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

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