
WRITING ON TRAVEL: NEW VOYAGES, NEW THINKING

Thomas L. Burkdall, Occidental College

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

"Voyage, travel and change of place impart vigor." – Seneca the Younger

Following Seneca's advice, I draw upon travel literature to invigorate my sophomore writing course. Travel literature presents fruitful material for examining abstract concepts through an activity in which most students have participated, but few have critically interrogated. Students consider the various purposes of travel—from the recreational and the religious to the reinvention of the self—as well as the perspectives of both the travelers themselves and the inhabitants of the places they visit. It offers the opportunity to examine and assess both Oriental and Occidental viewpoints, those of the "other" and the colonizer, the "undiscovered country" and the post-colonial land, the visitors from the industrialized world and the residents of less developed regions. Through these travel narratives and critical readings, students explore complex geo-political and cultural concerns from the viewpoints of multiple authors, honing their writing skills along the way.

The Writing and Rhetoric Department of Occidental College, a small liberal arts institution offers WRD 201—The Art of Essay Writing: a one semester writing course delivered face-to-face. Students generally take this class when: 1) they have not satisfied the first-year writing requirement through an assessment of their writing in their first-year seminars, 2) they believe they need more guidance to succeed in college-level writing, and/or 3) they wish to meet a requirement for admission to a professional school. This variety of students calls for an accessible and popular topic to write upon in order to appeal to a wide range of interests and abilities. My approach to the readings is primarily through direct analysis and discussion of the selections assigned and the student writings about them; the instruction on writing occurs through the examination of student drafts and via peer review workshops—both in small groups and the class as a whole—and individual consultations.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO WRITING

The course may be adapted to either two or three class meetings a week. The great variety of travel literature available makes this topic easily adaptable to any instructor's geographical, historical, or critical interest, as well as to student abilities and institutional standards. I have designed and developed the class so that the difficulty of the papers increases in step with the complexity of the readings. I require students to analyze the subject matter using the same critical and theoretical lenses employed throughout our humanities and social science curriculum.

Students, of course, may need to be reminded of the power of writing. As one newspaper editor explains:

When you're writing something, there's this magical thing that happens where your words are going into someone else's brain. And so whenever we're putting words on paper in any form, you need to be thinking about who's going to be reading that and how are they going to take it? It does matter.

—Michael Merschel, *Dallas Morning News*

Through an examination of a varied sampling of authors one can see how writing works (and occasionally how it does not), which leads to an appreciation of these qualities in the students' own work. It is vital to examine how writers not only achieve, but also how they sometimes miss, their objectives.

To teach this essential academic activity, I have adapted Paul Valery's epigraph about poetry to all writing: it "is never finished—only abandoned." Initially all students share a draft of each with a small peer group for advice and, in the course of the semester, I require all of them to present at least one paper to the class as a whole for their questions and suggestions. Next, I comment upon and offer a preliminary grade to all students, using a rubric derived by consensus that we have all discussed, adapted, and weighted early in the course (see Week 2 below). The rubric establishes grade ranges for argument, development of evidence, organization, along with grammar and other conventions. Only at the end of the semester do I assign final grades to each paper, urging students to consult not only with their classmates and me, but also with the student tutors and the faculty consultants in our Writing Center. All of these factors not only emphasize the process of writing, but also allow for substantial and frequent revision.

THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF TRAVEL: A SELECTIVE REVIEW

Travel may be said to broaden the mind. Yet Mark Twain, in his extensive tales of travel, presents his own prejudices while simultaneously claiming that travel will slay them. In his oft-quoted—and frequently truncated—advice: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime" (*Innocents Abroad*). The contradiction between his declaration of principles and his own ironically parochial descriptions of his destinations lays both at the heart of his satirical humor and serves as a crux for this course.

The course begins with a formative anthropological work, Victor and Edith Turner's *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, the introductory chapter and appendix of which develop a working definition of pilgrimage. The first paper assignment asks students both to explain the term and apply it to one example from a wide range of narratives—from journeys to Dolly Parton's Tennessee theme park and spiritual visits to Graceland, to escapes from a conventional life, to a Hollywood version of Sicily, and an ashram in India—in order to determine what constitutes a pilgrimage and what may not meet the criteria. Most recently, I have been fortunate enough to have a colleague speak of her pilgrimage to Tule Lake, California, where her Japanese ancestors were imprisoned during the Second World War. Her family's experience and her moving testimonial of her journey have become a popular choice for student work.

Moving from the individual and the spiritual to the collective and the political, I next ask students to consider relations between groups. How does a writer from one country or region interact with the inhabitants of a land visited? Using a selection from Edward Said's *Orientalism* and discussions of the "Other," I have students examine this topic in light of such texts as letters by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of the English ambassador to Turkey in the early eighteenth century, Twain's missives from

Europe and the Levant, Charles Darwin's account of his trek through South America en route to the Galapagos Islands, Dickens' visit to Washington, DC, and Elizabeth Gilbert's sojourns in Asia. Other possible selections for this unit include William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, Emily Raboteau's *Searching For Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora*, or Ma Jian's *Red Dust: A Path Through China*.

Travel is often regarded as a positive element in Western education—tracing its benefits to the European Grand Tour and the *Wanderjahr* (the year of travel after college, prior to beginning one's career)—while vacations are now considered essential perquisites in the developed world. Both David Foster Wallace and Jamaica Kincaid question these and other commonplaces, critiquing the cruise industry and the tropical beach vacation, respectively. In this section of the course, students write a comparison/contrast paper evaluating the claims of Wallace and Kincaid or a previous reading and one of these works.

In the next unit we consider visual images, which have figured largely in travel books since the initial publication of modern European guidebooks in the 1830's. With the introduction of mass-market photography, travel and photographs have become nearly inseparable. Selections from Peter Osborne's *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture*, a post-modern meditation on the topic, offer a valuable, if challenging, perspective upon these issues. A highlight of this unit is a visit to our library's Special Collections & College Archives to examine early guidebooks (from publishers such as Murray and Baedeker), illustrations, and photographs—including a stereographic world "tour"—postcards, posters, and travel ephemera. The final research paper asks students to examine a small number of images of the same sight and discuss its history, significance, and/or cultural value. This final assignment allows for a world of choices and analyses.

The sequence of assignments demands more advanced readings as the semester proceeds. While the Turners' treatment of pilgrimage introduces new terms such as liminality and *communitas* to most students, its anthropological approach is straightforward. The post-colonial writing of Said requires more critical acumen and explanation, with its historical and literary references and its dialectic approach. The paper responding to Wallace and/or Kincaid calls for a careful reading of two complex prose stylists, and the selection on travel photography for the final paper relies on a post-modern approach to the phenomena, introducing students to claims about discourse and the perspective of the post-structural turn. All of these prepare students for the kind of academic inquiry most will be required to perform in their upper-division courses at the college.

WORKS CITED

"Dallas Morning News' Editor Explains The Art Of Out-Of-Office Replies." *NPR*, NPR, 5 Aug. 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/05/488881240/dallas-morning-news-editor-explains-the-art-of-out-of-office-replies>.

Least, Heat Moon William. *Blue Highways*. Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

Ma, Jian. *Red Dust: a Path through China*. Anchor, 2002.

Raboteau, Emily. *Searching for Zion: the Quest for Home in the African Diaspora*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013.

SYLLABUS: WRITING ON TRAVEL: NEW VOYAGES, NEW THINKING

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will explore the power of the journey as told through the narratives of a wide range of travelers, from eighteenth and nineteenth century voyagers, such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mark Twain, to modern-day globe trotters like Sarah Vowell and David Sedaris. Be it on the "Grand Tour" of the past or with a post-modern tourist as our guide, we will consider a variety of selections from this genre. Along the way, we will move from the individual and the spiritual to the collective and the political, analyzing the impact on, and of, the traveler through a critical lens. If you plan to study abroad or even visit parts of your own city you have never seen before, a study of travel writing will make you a more sensitive visitor and a more careful observer.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Within the College's Five Learning Goals appears a list of key intellectual skills, the third being "critical reading, writing, and thinking"—all of which will be sharpened by our work this semester. Our goals in this course are to improve your abilities in both critical analysis and the expression of your ideas. These may include, but are certainly not limited to, logic, grammar, knowledge and application of the rhetorical canons (invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory), as well as revision for audience, focus, coherence, and diction. You each arrive at this class with different experiences and habits of mind; our goal is to improve upon them, so that you may frame, form and polish your ideas into the product you intend.

READINGS:

Selections from Fussell, Paul, Editor. *The Norton Book of Travel*. Norton, 1987.

Darwin, Charles. "From *The Voyage of the Beagle*." 346-62.

Dickens, Charles. "From *American Notes*." 309-19

Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. "Letters." 133-51.

Twain, Mark. "From *The Innocents Abroad*." 380-416.

SELECTED READINGS:

From: Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Penguin, 1988. 3-19; 23-37; 77-81.

From: Morales, Helen. *Pilgrimage to Dollywood: A Country Music Road Trip through Tennessee*. U Chicago P. 2014. 3-46; 119-46.

From: Osborne, Peter. *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture*. Manchester UP, 2000. 70-120.

Rosenbaum, Ron. "Among the Believers." *The New York Times*. 24 September 1995, Sunday, Late Edition—Final, p. 50.

From: Turner, Victor and Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Columbia UP, 1978. 6-20; 30-39; 252-55.

From: Vowell, Sarah. "Take the Cannoli" and "Species-on-Species Abuse" *Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World*. Simon and Schuster, 2000. 55-64; 108-23.

Wallace, David Foster. "Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise" *Harper's Magazine*, Jan. 1996. 33-56.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

PORTFOLIO OF PAPERS

75% (3 BEST @20% AND 1 @15%)

You will draft and write four papers. I will review them and provide you with preliminary grades and offer suggestions for revision. At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio of the final polished papers from which I will determine the majority of your final grade, as indicated above.

EDITING, PARTICIPATION & PRESENTATIONS

25%

According to E. B. White, "The best writing is rewriting." In order to rewrite well, we need to become better editors. Your work as an editor of others' prose is essential to the community of writers we are forming in this course. Your ability to edit your own work and that of others will improve your writing. I will observe your participation and engagement with members of your editing group(s) and may ask them for feedback regarding your performance. Attending office hours and conferences in which we review your papers may also figure into this evaluation.

A note about reading: careful and critical reading leads to good writing. I assign a significant amount of reading in this course, for as Stephen King writes, "Constant reading will pull you into a place (a mind-set if you like the phrase) where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness." But it is not enough to simply finish the pages; for this class, I ask you to read with careful observation. David Foster Wallace instructs us not only to read widely, but also to pay "attention to the way the sentences are put together, the clauses are joined, the way the sentences go to make up a paragraph."

Our texts will also serve as the basis for the papers I assign and our class discussions. If you are engaged with the material, you will have an opinion. If you express it, I will know that you are interested. Taking the opportunity to contribute respectfully to our discussions is essential to the success of our course and will be rewarded. Furthermore, if you do not attend class, you cannot contribute.

PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS:

WEEK 1 T: INTRODUCTIONS; SYLLABUS REVIEW.

TH: In-class Writing Sample.

TOPIC: Travel frequently includes visiting notable sites including memorials, amusement parks and historical recreations. One location in Georgia features all three. After reading [What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America's Largest Confederate Memorial?](#), please discuss whether you believe the memorial itself should be removed and why.

WEEK 2

T: NORMING & RUBRIC GENERATION: using published student samples, we discuss the important features of papers, identify categories of evaluation (e.g., the quality and effectiveness of argument, evidence, organization, along with grammar and conventions), and decide on their relative weight in assessment and grades.

UNIT 1: MAKING PILGRIMAGES

PAPER #1: Pilgrimage—Analysis with Definitions

At some level, I suppose, all travel is a pilgrimage to someone, something, or somewhere. But what distinguishes a pilgrimage from other travel? Many of the readings may or may not be considered texts about/of pilgrimage. Using any one section of Gilbert's memoir (*Eat or Pray or Love*), or one of the other readings, argue whether the traveler/s is/are on a pilgrimage or not, and in the process, explain what constitutes this type of journey, making use of the Turner reading or Bruce Feiler's criteria on the Sacred Journeys companion website to his documentary on pilgrimages

(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/sacredjourneys/content/pilgrimage/>).

TH: NORMING & RUBRIC GENERATION, continued; Turner, Victor and Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Introduction and Appendix A.

WEEK 3

T: PILGRIM AS WITNESS

Guest Speaker: Julie Kimiko-Santos, "Pilgrimage to Tule Lake."

TH: SALVATION THROUGH COUNTRY MUSIC

Selections from Morales, Helen. *Pilgrimage to Dollywood: A Country Music Road Trip through Tennessee*. Rosenbaum, Ron. "Among the Believers." *The New York Times*.

WEEK 4

GURUS AND GANGSTERS: Searching for Self.

T: Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia*.

TH: Selections from Vowell, Sarah. "Take the Cannoli." *Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World*. Invention & Thesis.

WEEK 5

T: MODEL DRAFT WORKSHOP; Said, Edward. *Orientalism*.

Th: DRAFT WORKSHOP PAPER #1.

UNIT #2: INTERACTING WITH "OTHERS"

PAPER # 2: Orientalism, the Other, and Travelling

In a 3-5 page thesis-driven essay, please apply the concepts of Orientalism or the Other to one of the texts we have read this semester. You should ground your observations in concepts selected from the introduction of Said's *Orientalism*, [this summary of his book](#), and/or [the Other](#), a broader application of Said's ideas. Explore how the narrator relates to the other—Asian or not—in the observations he or she makes and the conclusions drawn. How does the perspective of the Orientalist regarding individuals as Others influence the travel narrative or the lessons drawn from it? In other words, what are the narrator's evaluations of those he/she sees and how are they affected by his/her preconceptions or perspectives?

WEEK 6

T: THE OTHER IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. "Letters."

TH: CYNICS ON TOUR.

Dickens, Charles "From *American Notes*"; Twain, Mark "From *The Innocents Abroad*."

WEEK 7

T: WRITING INTRODUCTIONS.

Darwin, Charles, "From *The Voyage of the Beagle*."

TH: COMPOSING CONCLUSIONS; Intro & Thesis Workshop.

WEEK 8

T: DRAFT WORKSHOP PAPER #2.

TH: KODAK AND OTHER MOMENTS.

Selections from Osborne, Peter. *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel, and Visual Culture*.

UNIT #3: COMPARING APPROACHES TO TRAVEL

PAPER #3: Comparison/Contrast Analysis

Both David Foster Wallace and Jamaica Kincaid offer critiques of types of travelling: cruising on a megaship and visiting a tropical paradise, respectively. Using one or both of these pieces, please draft, revise, and proofread a 3-5 page, thesis-driven, analytical comparison/contrast essay. The following possible topics may offer you inspiration; you could compare and/or contrast:

--the critique of Wallace and Kincaid, considering the validity of one or the other (or the validity of one to a particular group and the other to a different cohort);

--the effectiveness of Wallace and Kincaid in delivering their messages; in other words which works better and why;

--the narratives of Wallace or Kincaid to another traveler's tale we have read this semester. Is *Pilgrimage to Dollywood* "unbearably sad," too? Does Twain see Europe and the Near East more clearly than Kincaid's unnamed audience? Are the Elvis pilgrims similar to the cruise liner passengers?

--the satire of Twain and/or Dickens with that of Wallace. How are they different/similar in their mocking? To what end?

--the attitude of Montagu, Vowell, or Gilbert towards the folks they meet on their travels to that of Kincaid or Wallace. How has travel changed over time or due to different cultural or personal perspectives?

WEEK 9

T: SHARKS, SHIPS, AND SHOTGUNS.

Wallace, David Foster. "Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise."

TH: WHOSE TROPICAL PARADISE?

Selections from Kincaid, Jamaica, *A Small Place*.

Week 10

T: SPECIAL COLLECTIONS VISIT: The librarians show students visual representations of travel from the Middle Ages through the 21st century—prints,

atlases, travel guides, postcards and other ephemera to inspire students for Paper #4.

TH: COMPARISON/CONTRAST DISCUSSION AND SAMPLE.

WEEK 11

T: DRAFT WORKSHOP PAPER #3.

UNIT #4: TRAVELLING AND THE IMAGE

PAPER #4: The Research Paper—Tourism and Photography

When the sight's connotations are fully absorbed into the cultural [sic] and language of a society [,] it becomes capable of generating significant cultural energy as the virtuous object, as a location of the spatial dramaturgy of a national or cultural identity, a relay in an international system of cultural values. The sight has become a magnet drawing to itself those who wish to experience them embodied in material form.

--Peter D. Osborne, *Travelling Light*, 83-4

In the third section of his book, Osborne offers readings of three important types of images and photographs associated with tourists: iconic sights, beaches, and paradises. Using 3 specific images of one of these (e.g.: the Eiffel Tower, the Forbidden City, the Sphinx, Waikiki, Copacabana, Fiji, Tahiti, or Cozumel), explain its cultural energy, the dramaturgy of its identity, and/or its cultural value. By offering and interpreting 3 images from 3 distinct time periods, you will be able to discuss the history and importance of these sights, as well as explain their significance as a regional or national sight/site. The 10 page, thesis-driven essay that you produce about this icon or prototypical image should be one informed by some historical and cultural research and observations (actual or virtual) attesting to both the accuracy and/or limits of the view, icon, or locations to the region, nation, and its population.

TH: BRAINSTORMING FINAL PAPER.

WEEK 12

T & TH: Individual conferences with professor on revisions for Final Portfolio.

WEEK 13

T & TH: Presentations of the research paper in progress; peer comments & feedback solicited.

WEEK 14

T & TH: Revision workshops involving Final Portfolio.

FINALS WEEK

Students submit Final Portfolio containing all three final, polished revisions of earlier papers and the final draft of the last paper.