



American Travel Poetry: A Critical Study

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Abstract

This paper explores American Travel Literature broadly, with a specific focus on poetry. It provides an overview of the evolution of this genre and emphasizes the significance of spatiality, including concepts of space and place, within its framework. Travel Literature is a well-established literary genre that includes a variety of literary genres as well as humorous and serious styles ranging from the documentary to the evocative. A. Pausanias released his *Description of Greece* (1886), derived from his observations. It serves as the earliest example of travel poetry. Travel writing fills the gap between fact and fiction, highlighting cultural divides and the shifting aspirations and concerns of both the traveler and the reading public. It looks at several different solutions to the issues that domestic and foreign landscapes provide. Poetry is the best form of contemporary cross-national transit. Poetry is the imaginative enactment of geographic movement. For this, poetry is other than any form of literature suited to travel. Travel poets play a function in the dissemination of poetry. Many migrants and expatriates changed poetry during the early twentieth century like T. S. Eliot, Elizabeth Bishop, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Place and space play an important role in travel poetry since poets rely on the physical and imaginary places. This leaves a tangible effect on the very core of their poetic works. For poets who travel, the place becomes of spatial significance that gives meaning to their travels and the reality they experience.

Keywords: travel literature, travel poetry, place, space, traveler poets



شعر الرحلات الأمريكي: دراسة نقدية

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المستخلص :

تستكشف هذه الدراسة أدب الرحلات الأمريكي على نطاق واسع، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الشعر. إذ تقدم لمحة عامة عن تطور هذا النوع ويؤكد على أهمية المكانية، بما في ذلك مفهومي المكاني والمكان. أدب الرحلات هو نوع أدبي راسخ يتضمن مجموعة متنوعة من الأنواع الأدبية بالإضافة إلى الأساليب الفكاهية والجادة التي تتراوح من الأفلام الوثائقية إلى المثيرة للذكريات. أصدر بوسانياس كتابه وصف اليونان (١٨٨٦)، المستمد من ملاحظاته. إذ يعتبر بمثابة مثال مبكر لهذا النوع. تملأ كتابة الرحلات الفجوة بين الحقيقة والخيال، وتسلط الضوء على الانقسامات الثقافية والتطلعات والاهتمامات المتغيرة لكل من المسافرين وجمهور القراء. كما إنه يبحث في العديد من الحلول المختلفة للقضايا التي توفرها المناظر الطبيعية المحلية والأجنبية. فالشعر هو أفضل شكل من أشكال العبور المعاصر عبر الحدود الوطنية. الشعر هو التطبيق الخيالي للحركة الجغرافية. ولهذا فإن الشعر يختلف عن أي شكل من أشكال الأدب المناسب للرحلات. يلعب شعراء الرحلات دورًا في نشر الشعر. إذ قام العديد من المهاجرين والمغتربين بتغيير الشعر خلال أوائل القرن العشرين مثل تي اس إليوت وإليزابيث بيشوب ونعومي شهاب ناي. المكان والمكانية مهمان في شعر الرحلة لأن الشعراء يعتمدون على الأماكن المادية والخيالية. وهذا يترك أثراً ملموساً في جوهر أعمالهم الشعرية. بالنسبة للشعراء الذين يسافرون، يصبح المكان ذو أهمية مكانية تعطي معنى لرحلاتهم والواقع الذي يعيشونه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ادب الرحلات، شعر الرحلات، المكان، المكانية، شعراء الرحلات

1. Introduction

Travel literature was not born in a particular region or a specific century. So many travel writers are widely known before William Dampier (1697-), and Daniel Defoe (1724-1726), like Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Varthema, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, and the Sherley brothers, who are all in the East, and Cabeza de Vaca (1555), Hans Stade (1557), John Smith (1608-), and a hundred others, who are all in the New World, and Jan Nieuwhof, whose books on South America and China in the 1660s and 1670s were significant, illustrated, and translated into many languages. Native Americans did not create any of what would be considered as “literature”, instead, their tales and poems were passed down orally (Bendixen, 2009). As a result, American history dates back to the time of colonialism. John Smith is recognized as the first American writer. He was a colonist and adventurer. In 1607, he assisted in the establishment of Jamestown. His *A True Relation of Virginia* is the earliest English-language American novel. It depicts the difficulties associated with colonizing the area (Casey, 2002).

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been commonly known as the “Silver Age of Travel and Travel Literature” (Adams, 1978, p.490) by numerous contemporaries. In this period, various individuals, including explorers, merchants, soldiers, scientists, missionaries, and Grand Tourers, set out on global voyages. They diligently recorded their encounters through different means, such as letters, journals, and other writings, either to fulfill their responsibilities to their superiors or purely for their pleasure. (Adams, 1978). During various periods, John Winthrop (1588 –1649) served as the governor and played a crucial role in shaping the colony’s government and religious institutions in New England. His presence was essential in establishing and developing New England and the American way of life in the 17th century. Scholars persist in analyzing and citing his writings and guidance in American history, specifically his religious influence on the early American communities such as *“The Journal of John Winthrop”* (1630-1649). This book is a collection of Winthrop's private diary entries, offering a glimpse into his mindset, encounters, and reflections as a prominent figure in the nascent American settlements.

In the early eighteenth century, Travel reports showed how colonists’ experiences and understandings of the globe grew. Military, political, and economic concerns are reflected in war narratives like William Pepperrell’s, and scientific literature like Mark Catesby’s which celebrates the natural environment. The older integration of religion and action expressed in the image of life as a trip is found primarily in Quaker travelogues from the eighteenth century (Pankake, 1975).

During the late period of the eighteenth century, more and longer writings about military, scientific, and religious journeys explain the interaction between the traveler and the reading populace with the world. Religiously consistent sensational accounts of shipwreck survivors excite rather than educate the people. Military records and scientific reports, such as those by John Winthrop and Edward Bancroft, recreate the experience in general scientific or political terms rather than in terms of religion. The battle documents, summarized in Ethan Allen's *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (1807), started to define the American identity (Pankake, 1975).

American travelers possessing greater literacy and intellect began to infuse their accounts with Romantic ideals, akin to Joseph Hawkins (?-1823), an American congressman who lauded the authenticity of a simpler African society. By 1800, the American traveler had transformed into a tourist, with reports of their travels often documented in extensive volumes that examined the novelty and value of exotic experiences. Samuel Stearns (1741–1810), an American astronomer, author, and publisher, traveled for pleasure and enlightenment. He provided guidance to new guests on financial matters and local attractions. In the eighteenth, travel literature was not classified as a specific literary genre. Instead, travel discourses influenced various genres and writings with diverse audiences and purposes. While certain early travel literature bear similarities to contemporary travel narratives, most of it emerged within the framework of various other concerns such as religious and political matters. For transatlantic readers who are interested in establishing the frontier, charting America was occasionally used in travel writing, particularly in the years following the British victory over France in the Seven Years War (1756–63). Alternately, the religious nomad embarked on a journey that encompassed traversing both spiritual and natural landscapes simultaneously (Bendixen, 2009).

As explorers ventured into uncharted territories and encountered diverse cultures, authors and editors diligently documented their experiences, catering to the growing print market at home. Traveling has always required much documentation. The maps utilize a symbol key for rocks, rivers, hills, and trees, which were meant to be documented on a parchment card and readily accessible at all times (Bendixen, 2009). According to Hannerz (2002):

There is now a world culture, but we had better make sure we understand what this means: not a replication of uniformity but an organization of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as a development of cultures without a clear anchorage to any one territory (p.102).

Travel Literature is a hybrid genre that borders on and combines characteristics of other text forms such as novels, poetry, reports, memoirs, tracts, legends, letters, diaries, or essays, and can thus be difficult to differentiate from them (Ette, 2003). Few contemporary books that heavily draw upon travel literature as a source of information focus on the Western world. S.E. Morison's works, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (1971) and *The Southern Voyages* (1974), are about his travels in a bias way. Travel is inextricably related to the formation of American identity. This link underpins popular depictions of America as a land of immigrants and restless people. Travel is used to carry out difficult ideological and cultural tasks. It both reveals and contains inter- and intra-cultural inconsistencies. It produces American selves and landscapes. Furthermore, it captivates readers by immersing them in various personas and settings using specific rhetorical and genre techniques. By creating and presenting its subject matter, American travel literature influences individual and national identities. Famous writers have written travel novels to establish their literary skills or become popular figures. (Bendixen, 2009).

Travel literature evolved into a flexible framework for balancing numerous interests, each of which is essential to nation-building and administration in and of itself: commercial, spiritual, scientific, sociopolitical, and, literary. Nonetheless, American travel literature reveals genre and cultural divisions, existing between fictional contemplation and factual documentation, ethnography and personal memoir, and romanticism and science. This dynamic genre reflects evolving cultural demands and concerns. The distinction between travel writing and fiction can be blurry, with fact and fiction coexisting within individual works. Travel books can serve as autobiographical expressions or prioritize the depiction of nature and society. Travel literature often overlaps with history, scientific observation, sociology, and political analysis.

As a type of literature, Travel Literature emerged only in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, despite the methodological differences in studies, in works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), as well as Paul Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Travel Between the Wars* (1980). Many scholars were influenced by Said's work that "travel books are to be taken seriously" to comprehend the Episteme of a specific civilization at a given time," (Thouroude, 2009, p.387), and Fussell's work inspired many others to treat travel books as sources of information. "Literary phenomena" (Fussell, 1980, p.20) represent an essential difficulty in travel writing.

However, despite travel literature encompasses a wide range of genres, Jan Borm (2012) argues that the travel book should be regarded as a distinct form of literature and thus can be defined as:

any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates almost always in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that author, narrator, and principal character are but one or identical (p.1).

Modern and postmodern travel literature are more self-reflexive and experimental than older works. Therefore, intertextual, fictional, and metafictional components sometimes take precedence over depictions of extra-textual reality (Blanton, 2002). Numerous European and North American narratives of travel impose a similar metropolitan 'North Atlantic' dimension (Schroder, 2011), over the people and places they depict, such as the social explorer or the colonizers' contributions, in their pursuit of authentic experiences. They define Caribbean and Latin American countries and rural North America as places of strange, inferior socio-cultural alterity (Blanton, 2002).

"Is the Travel Book Dead?" questioned Kingsley Amis in 1955. He didn't realize that while he was writing, pupils like Morris Bishop understood the importance of travel literature and that great writers like Elizabeth Bishop would become famous in it (Adams, 1978).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Related Works

In his essay, "Traveling Poetry", Jahan Ramazani discusses traveling poetry by exploring how poetry transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, emphasizing its ability to convey movement and connection across different contexts. Ramazani points out that poets like Hughes and Bishop explore themes of sameness-in-difference, using their work to forge connections across diverse cultural landscapes. He emphasizes that poetry travels physically through printed forms and digital media and enacts imaginative geographic movement. This is illustrated through examples from poets like Pound, who conjures other poems from memory while confined, showcasing poetry's mnemonic structure and its ability to evoke distant places and experiences.

3. The Analytical Part: American Travel Poetry

The travel poetry delivers a full coverage of intellectual, imaginative, and cultural traveling influence upon the readers. According to Philip Gould (2003), a British political consultant, eighteenth-century British American travel poetry was not apparent. Rather, travel narratives prevailed in all genres and texts that covered a diverse range of audiences and objectives. Travel poetry has undergone a transformative evolution, adopting a versatile framework that harmonizes various vital aspects crucial for nation-building and governance. These encompass spiritual, literary, and sociopolitical

dimensions. Nonetheless, despite this unifying purpose, American travel poetry exposes cultural fault lines. It occupies a space that lies between the realm of objective reporting and the realm of imaginative storytelling, between the realm of individual recollection and the realm of cultural observation. It reveals a great deal about the evolving cultural aspirations and concerns of both the explorer and the American audience. Thus, the boundary between travel writings and literature is very hazy and many poems should be taken into account like Elizabeth Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502," and Naomi Shihab Nye's poems. In this respect, fact and fiction are going to be mingled in the poets' literary works as well. For this, travel poetry can be autobiographical subordinating the inner self to a wider focus on the society and nature in a particular location. (Bendixen, 2009, p.3) According to Sidonie Smith (2001), in her book *In Moving Lives: 20th-Century Women's Travel Writing*, "If the mode of moving a body through space affects the traveler who moves through space as that body, then the mode of motion informs the meaning that the traveler sends back home in narration" (p.6).

The travel poetry of early New World Settlers was stylized as either sarcastic or optimistic. In other words, the poetic form was suited to satire, pastoralism, and other methods of depicting human and physical environments. These diverse lyrical objectives are exemplified by Richard Lewis' "A Journey from Patapsco to Annapolis, April 4, 1730" (1732) and Ebenezer Cooke's "The Sot-Weed Factor; or, a Voyage to Maryland" (1708). Both poets were prominent characters in colonial American writings and politics, and their poems demonstrate the complexities of the term "travel". Lewis announced himself to be the poet laureate of Maryland. His poem emphasizes the transnational backdrop for travel. It depicts the English emigrant's experience with colonial conditions as a farce that is half burlesque and half picaresque. The speaker shows his cultural and social scorn for the comparably primitive living in colonial Maryland is likely to have hit a humorous chord with a wide range of readers (Bendixen, 2009). The great wars, such as the Seven Years' War where England established its political power over North America, was a major context for American travel poetry in the eighteenth century. Prominent examples are William Smith's "An Account of Bouquet's Expedition Against the Ohio Indians" (1765), and Major Robert Rogers' "Journals and his Concise Account of North America" (1765). Other poems took the memoir form such as Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina Florida, and the Baham Islands* (1731-1747). Oliver Goldsmith's "The Traveller" (1764), seeks to critically evaluate the virtues and flaws of the countries and locations it explores, including how weather and other environmental aspects interact alongside or opposing social institutions and habits. (Lonsdale, 1969)

The eighteenth century hardly posited the phenomenal appeal of travel poetry. It was rather the age of the novel than poetry. Thus, the travel account was explicitly emphasized in fictional works such as that of Richardson, Addison, Defoe, Fielding, and Johnson. Even though, there are some works about traveling as William Cowper's "The Task" (1785) where he describes the enjoyment of being a traveler (Batten, 1978). In this period, a group of painters known as the Picturesque Movement appeared. Those artists portray the agricultural and wild surroundings and the people living there, like the gypsies and beggars. The same interest about rustic places appeared in the poetry of that age. This led to accumulation of the travel books in the modern age, such as *The Grand Tour* which affected people deeply. Modern travel poets also gave a big eye to the places while traveling, but their outlook is different from those artists. (Birmingham, 1986) They are much more influenced by this movement than Transcendentalism.

The Picturesque movement in art and literature emerged during the 18th century and was initiated by painters like Nicolas Poussin, and Claude Lorraine. These artists influenced writers of the 18th century by presenting their unique perspectives on natural landscapes. Their approach aimed to make scenes appear unfamiliar and intriguing, with a preference for wild and remote settings. Consequently, gardens were designed to look natural and untamed, ruins were constructed to evoke fascination, and the wild elements of nature and gardening were highly regarded. This Picturesque style can be observed in the early 18th-century poetry of poets such as Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, William Mason, Richard Payne Knight, and William Gilpin, who wrote three essays on the topic of Picturesque beauty and travel. Uvedale Price's essay "On the Picturesque" in 1794 was also a significant contribution. The Picturesque movement had an impact on Gothic novelists like Walter Scott, who incorporated Picturesque scenes into their novels. This movement represented a shift in the artistic and literary appreciation of untamed and rugged aspects of nature (Marshall, 2002).

A travel poem chronicles a journey, or the means of travel, to some specific natural or cultural area. The complicated involvement of the imagination in the production of poetry's traveling places, however, contributes to poet's intellectual and affective purchase on readers. Poets can change the rhythm, meter, and structure of lines in ways that replicate the flows and disturbances of travel (Cook, 2007).

The eighteenth century has some of the best travel poetry that is imbued with dwelling in local places, such as Andrew Marvell's 'Bermudas' (1653). In the Nineteenth century, Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'Odyssey' remarkably proved less acceptable as a celebration of homeward travel than as a larger representation of the restlessness of travel and as an inspiration for following travel poems. Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1833) determination that he 'cannot

rest from travel' is the major thing that drives him. (p.615, l. 6) Constantine Cavafy's 'Ithaka' (1894) is all about prolonging the journey: 'Do not hurry the journey at all. / Better if it lasts many years.' (Cavafy, 2020)

Travel was a way of life for nineteenth-century poets, whether as tourists, emigrants, or exiles, as Kipling was later in the century. Kipling set the standard for an entire generation of British involvement with the broader world, beginning with his 'Barrack-Room Ballads' (1890). Some of the nineteenth-century travel poetry is satirical as the supreme achievement of Arthur Hugh Clough, 'Amours de Voyage' (1858). It is formed epistolary style that evokes eighteenth-century origins. In the poem's opening, he announces that Rome is 'rubbishy' and wishes that 'the old Goths had made a cleaner sweep of it'. (Withers, 2019).

Even though only a small part of Mark Twain's recorded travel covers the Middle East, *The Innocents Abroad* plays a vital part in providing Ottoman Palestine to the American imagination. Herman Melville also used his experience in the sea as a source for his travel writings, besides Richard Henry Dana who utilized his experience as a sailor to introduce the Americans to the California coast by traveling back and forth from Boston to California (Bendixen, 2009).

These writings enabled American writers to establish their presence by constructing a literary "Other" through travel, granting them the freedom to write from a standpoint of literary and cultural authority. Consequently, America could shed its inferior, developing nation label and transfer this demeaning status onto foreign communities. Collectively, these writings offer a concise chronological survey of the influential role travel literature plays in reflecting and shaping American culture.

The literature of America has had a profound impact on its history. Initially, America consisted of various colonies scattered along the eastern seaboard of the North American continent for approximately 150 years. Following a successful rebellion against the motherland, America established itself as the United States of America. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, America expanded its territories, stretching from the Gulf of Mexico in the south to the 49th parallel in the north, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the west (Luebering, 2023).

By the twentieth century, poetry continues to travel, but on more disturbed, fragmented travels experimenting with new conceptions of geography, time, and poetic form. W. H. Auden's *Letters from Iceland* (1937) and Louis MacNeice, a collection of poetry, prose, images, and even charts and tables, presents, as Stacy Burton (2014) defines it, "a diffuse heteroglossia to the authoritative voice on which the travel narrative usually depends." (p.65)

One of the greatest and most significant attempts to reinvent how poetry may express what it means to travel across space and time is William Carlos Williams used his 1924 travel to Europe as inspiration for his fantasy travel '*A Voyage to Paganry*' (1928), in which a doctor from New Jersey travels to Vienna to attend a medical seminar and develop his sensual and lyrical sensibilities (Withers, 2019).

Modern travel poets avoid becoming lost in their travels by writing about how their senses are enhanced and how they interact with their surroundings. The locations are places where abstract concepts such as culture and history appear in a complex process molded by the modern ways of living. They want to create poetry that is regionally sensitive, culturally relevant, and based on the present, real circumstances of experience by participating in this process. As in the case of Ezra Pound, his identity as a traveling poet is intricately tied to his position as a literary modernist. He aimed to depart from conventional poetic styles and draw inspiration from a wide range of cultures and literary heritages. Living abroad in Europe and interactions with fellow writers and artists significantly shaped his poetry and his influence on modern literature (Bendixen, 2009).

Place and space, or spatiality, are two major parts of travel poetry. According to Lawrence Buell (2005), Professor of American Literature, space "denotes a real form in the abstract, whether literal territory or metaphorical, implying locational specificity of some sort without any particular effect." (p.145) He also defines place as "Space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness. Placeness, then, is co-constituted environmentally, socially, and phenomenologically through acts of perception." (p.147). Space is any region that is unconnected to societies and experiences, whereas experiences generate place. Physical borders that denote a state or a government also define a place. While space is everywhere, infinite, and unconnected to any one nation. In contemporary American poetry, spatiality is crucial in showing the writers' psychological attitudes and reflecting them to their readers (Buell, 2005).

Modern travel poets construct their geographical backdrops holistically, concealing themselves within the narrative. As the poem unfolds, they gradually disassemble the setting, highlighting the significance of seemingly insignificant places. The reader's connection with the poet intensifies with each reading, creating a sense of companionship. In contrast, romantic and transcendentalist poets adopt a different approach. They commence their exploration by focusing on the fundamental elements of the scene, gradually transcending to a state where the poet becomes imperceptible, encompassing everything within themselves. Modern travel poets are not idealists like transcendentalists and romantic poets. Nature becomes a progression for

travel poets. Travel poets focus on “referentiality” rather than the expanding scene (Costello, 2003).

4. Conclusion

American travel poetry has a rich and diverse past, and it keeps evolving as poets find inspiration in the world's constant change and their travels. It serves as a vehicle for readers to vicariously experience the world via the poet's eyes and words as they travel through the varied landscapes and cultures of the United States and beyond. Nevertheless, for modern travel poets, spatiality encompasses not just the physical world, but also the imaginary one. It becomes a vehicle for the poet to communicate his concerns and the various psychological states he experiences. Modern travel poetry teaches individuals about their role in the world and encourages them to learn how to protect it. Poetry serves as a sanctuary from the complexities of modern society, characterized by expanding urban environments, significant immigration, rampant capitalism, and pervasive political corruption. Additionally, it acts as a counter-response to the realist and naturalist movements that portray life in its unembellished form.

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