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Allocentrism and Alterities. Ultra-Short World History of the Genre of the Travelogue

Michael Harbsmeier

Travel reports

Travelogues can be defined as a type of text that occurs in a wide variety of forms in all cultures – mostly, of course, as oral performance, but in a surprising number of cases also in written form. When a traveller returns home, when they return after a longer absence, when they return from a journey or a stay in a foreign country, then they may not only, but often have to report about their absence, stay, and experiences in the foreign country, about their journey. In anthropological terminology, the travel report can be described as the ritual by which the returnee reintegrates into the community to which they have temporarily not belonged and from which they have temporarily been separated. The travelogue allows the traveller to belong to the community again. Or more precisely in Victor Turner's words: one can describe the liminal phase in which the traveller is still absent, but at the same time is already back home, as a travelogue. In other words, the travelogue is the transition from the state of absence and non-belonging to the state of regained belonging and presence.

We owe the realisation that the travelogue, as a ritual, follows a certain textual course at all times in all cultures and societies to the Russian linguist and literary scholar Nikolai Troubetzkoy, who in his analysis of the Old Russian travelogue of Afanasy Nikitin, published in 1926, was the first to distinguish between the dynamic-narrative and the static-descriptive sections of the text (Troubetzkoy

1982; Harbsmeier 1982, 1997a). This makes it possible to compare the most diverse travelogues with each other. Usually, the dynamic-narrative passages accumulate at the beginning and end of the report, i.e. where the text is concerned with the outward and return journey, whereas the static-descriptive passages accumulate in the middle, where stays give rise to and provide opportunities for impressions, observations, experiences, and adventures that are reflected in the static-descriptive text sections. Accordingly, the dynamic-narrative itinerary is interrupted by a series of static-descriptive accounts and renderings which, on a general anthropological level, can perhaps best be characterised as experiences of alterity.

Although Troubetzkoy himself probably did not have such far-reaching comparative intentions, the concept of experiences of otherness or states of otherness subsumes everything that the travelogue, so to speak, brings home from the journey: the strange customs and traditions of the savages and barbarians visited, for example, or the ecstasy in which the pilgrim felt transported in the face of the holy places, or just the sight of the rivers, mountains, ravines or landscapes the traveller saw himself facing, or even the buildings, bridges, tools, vehicles, and equipment, with whose strangeness and superiority the traveller amazes his readers or listeners through his report, or the more or less exotic goods and products which they have acquired on commercial journeys and taken home: all of this can take the place of the

static-descriptive highlights of the report, framed by the dynamic-narrative course of the journey in the form of description and narration.

Thus defined, the experiences of alterity in the travelogue correspond very precisely to the objects and items that Bruno Latour defined as ›immutable mobiles‹: the preparations and mementoes, the souvenirs and curiosities, the pictures and photographs, and also the natural-historical and ethnographic objects that make travel appear as a form of science: all this can be understood as the material equivalent of the static-descriptive passages of the travelogue.

By no means always, but very often, the traveller brings home more than just the report of his or her experiences of alterity. Be they spoils of war or just a keepsake, be they a precious work of art or just a souvenir, be they a photograph for the family evening or a splendid piece for the museum, be they large or small, cheap or expensive: the sheer range of objects brought home gives an idea of how varied and diverse the experiences of otherness contained in the travel report, which will be the subject of the following, can be.

Alterities

While the commonalities of the afterlife journeys of a shaman and the holiday travels of a tourist may be of general anthropological interest, those travelogues are of particular historical interest which bear witness to experiences of alterity in and with other, foreign, unfamiliar, and unknown ways of life, cultures, societies, traditions or civilisations. The earliest and clearest examples of such written documentation of experiences of otherness come from the encounters of sedentary travel reporters with nomadic tribes, as recently described by Siep Stuurman in his large-scale study *The Invention of Humanity. Equality and Cultural Difference in World History* based on the ›travelogues‹ of Herodotus, Sima Quian and elsewhere also based on Tacitus as an ›anthropological‹ or rather, perhaps,

an ethnographic turn (Stuurman 2017). While experiences of alterity may in anthropological generality be described as universal, the travelogues that may be defined as ›ethnographic‹ can only come about when the traveller has been exposed to a social and cultural reality, a different world, experienced as ›foreign‹ and ›different‹.

From a conceptual-historical perspective, the travelogues that are ethnographic in this general sense can be recognized by the use of asymmetrical counter-concepts, such as when Herodotus, Sima Quian or Tacitus speak of ›barbarians‹ and barbarian tribes and peoples, or when later travellers report of ›pagans‹ and ›savages‹, ›superstitious‹ people or even ›brutes‹. In all these cases, they do indeed distance themselves from the respective ›others‹, but at the same time the very minimum of empathy is presupposed which makes this distancing possible in the first place and then demands it. Thus, they could potentially put themselves in the position of the respective ›others‹ and, at the moment of the experience of alterity, the traveller is actually identifying themselves (or, respectively, the traveller is forced to identify themselves) with the other. For this reason, the necessity arises in the static-descriptive text passages to seek proximity in order to distance oneself or, conversely, to distance oneself in order to be able to get close. And it is precisely this contradiction that ultimately explains the performativity of the travelogue as a ritual.

Impressive examples of the dramatic character of this contradictoriness, which is otherwise found in milder forms in most travelogues, can also be found among the travelogues from the early modern era of Europe and the so-called Age of Discovery. Only a few of these are mentioned here, mainly because they illustrate the role of travelogues as rituals of returning home in a particularly vivid way.

Originally, the descriptions of the journeys of the Greenlandic *angakkuq* to the devil's grandmother in the depths of the sea gave me the idea to consider all

travelogues in equal terms. I realized that not only the trance journey of the shaman, who, accompanied by singing and drum rolls, reports not after but during his journey, how he brings the mistress of the sea animals to release them again, only to return from the depths with a tremendous blow and groan afterwards. In the same way, the description by the Danish missionary Hans Egede of this very ritual can be understood as a ritual act as well. Like later eye-witnesses of the shaman's journey, Egede attempted in his 1742 German edition of *Des alten Grönlandes neue Perlustration oder Naturell-Historie* (The Old Greenland's New Perlustration or Natural History) to put himself in the shoes of the *angakkuq* and his audience, while at the same time distancing himself from them in the most definite way. Just as the *angakkuq*, according to Egede, almost loses his mind in the face of the devil-mother, Egede himself portrays the shaman's journey as a journey which he claims to have observed, but which in reality could not have taken place at all because the shaman does not report on his journey when he returns home, but while it is in progress (Harbsmeier 1992).

Our next example, Hans Stadens' *Wahrhaftig Historia und beschreibung eyner Landtschafft der Wilden / Nacketen / Grimigen Menschfresser Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelegen* of 1557, can already be recognized by the title as static-descriptive, but owes its fame and spectacular success to the dramatic, dynamic-narrative story of hostage-taking, nine-month imprisonment and finally salvation from the violence of the cannibals and return home. Overwhelmed and traumatised by his experiences, Staden first reported his adventures orally. His reintegration into the society of his homeland was only possible because Johannes Dryander, Professor of Cosmography and Medicine at the University of Marburg, took on his role as editor and helped him to write and then print his travel report, which was thus emphatically divided into a first dynamic-narrative and a second, smaller,

but all the more systematic static-descriptive section (Harbsmeier 1994, 2008).

Many other German travellers of the early modern era were also helped by editors and other authorities to reintegrate themselves into society in such a way that they have been recognized as authors of travelogues neatly divided into static-descriptive and dynamic-narrative sections. In this way, more or less dramatic and traumatising experiences of alterity could be domesticated and transformed into a kind of cultural reintegration capital. Thus, around the middle of the 17th century, the scholar Adam Olearius succeeded in a masterly manner, as accoucheur and editor of a whole series of travelogues, in helping the returnees to achieve social recognition and reintegration. Jürgen Andersen, for example, had to undergo several oral interrogations before Olearius, on the basis of a comparison of the oral version of the travel report, which he had secretly recorded, with the written version of the report, which Andersen himself had written, came to the conclusion that the report should be printed (Harbsmeier 1994).

A myriad of additional, though perhaps less vivid, examples of the travel report as a more or less successful reintegration ritual could easily be identified, not only in German but also in most other European languages, especially in the early modern period, the golden age of printed travel reports. Elsewhere and at other times, it was less often possible to link static-descriptive passages so closely with dynamic-narrative ones and to keep them in a kind of dialectical balance. From a world-historical point of view, the normal case is just the other way round, when there is not much else left of the, perhaps originally oral, travel report in the text and in the travel description than the static-descriptive passages robbed of their dynamic-narrative integration, i.e. for example descriptions of the ›immutable mobiles‹ brought home by the traveller: the tribute gifts that the Chinese envoy, returning from his mission to the barbarians,

presents to his ruler over the Middle Kingdom, the list of temples and sanctuaries in India from which the Buddhist pilgrim brings home holy scriptures, dead or living spoils brought home from the campaign, conquered or captured while on campaign, the news of foreign parts of the world collected and compiled by geographers or cosmographers, the *ethnographica* brought home by missionaries, or souvenirs brought by tourists. All of these can be contained in travel reports, in travel descriptions and countless other genres or, for example, in curiosity cabinets and museums, but they can also lead an independent existence.

Only in exceptional cases, therefore, do travel reports in the narrower sense represent a majority among travelogues in the broader sense, which have existed and exist in the most diverse forms in apparently all traditions, cultures or civilisations based on writing. The question therefore arises as to why it was precisely in the so-called Age of Discoveries and Voyages of Discovery that there was such a flowering, especially in Europe. It would distract us from the topic at hand to treat this question in sufficient detail, so it must suffice here to point out the extent and nature of the experiences of alterity to which European travellers in particular have been exposed and were thought to have been exposed since the late Middle Ages.

Allocentrism

In a comparative global history of travelogues as a genre, the late medieval pilgrimages to Jerusalem in the Holy Land are of particular importance, if only because here for the first time we are talking about a whole series of written reports that are very similar to and imitate each other, but which were nevertheless put down on paper by the respective travellers themselves. This is not because these travellers were following an official order or even a command, but on the contrary, they were trying to bear witness to their experiences on their own initiative. In this way one could and had to report on one's own visit to the

biblically attested holy places under the foreign rule of the unbelievers (Sommerfeld 1924; Huschenbett 1985; Hippler 1987).

The reports of the Jerusalem pilgrims of the 14th and 15th century not only represent the earliest series of travel reports recognizable as homecoming rituals in their combination of static-descriptive with dynamically narrative passages, but are above all characterised by allocentrism, which brings to bear and repeatedly allows a centre located in the distance and under foreign rule to be seen as a travel destination and a space of travel and alterity. Other pilgrimage destinations in Europe, China, India, Japan or the Islamic world were also far away, however mostly not beyond but within the boundaries of the language area, sphere of power and influence, and territory to which pilgrims also belong and feel affiliated. And it is precisely this allocentrism that may explain why so many of the late medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem became travel reporters. This still applies even if the reports were written before or without any intention of returning. It is not only the shaman who reports on his journey while still travelling, but also many other travellers have, so to speak, anticipated their return home through the letters they were able to send to those remaining in their homeland. And, for example, many Jewish travellers of the Middle Ages told their fellow believers who had remained in the diaspora about the distant destination of their journeys to the Holy Land or to the tribes of Israel, which they thought had been lost, but which they had now rediscovered, in order to persuade them to continue their journey.

Allocentrism, then, also characterises the countless European travelogues of the first centuries that followed, which are almost exclusively about journeys to new or also to long-known worlds, which lie beyond the political, linguistic, cultural, religious, and denominational borders of the travellers' own worlds. And in this allocentrism, the European travel

descriptions of the early modern era differ very clearly from the traditions of travel descriptions in China, Japan, the Indo-Persian or Arab world, which also flourished in those very centuries (Strassberg 1994; Eggert 2004; Nenzi 2008; Alam/Subrahmanyam 2007; Elger 2011). Usually, these travel descriptions are not so much about journeys outside a world of their own, but rather about journeys within a different and foreign world (Harbsmeier 1985).

On the one hand, to summarise our previous observations, travelogues can be seen as discursive elements that are possible and permissible everywhere and at all times, as anthropological constants. On the other hand, however, it has been shown that, at least in written form, they can and have become a serially reproduced literary genre only under very specific, greenhouse-like conditions, under the pressure of multiple and mass experiences of alterity in the narrower, ethnographic sense. Historically speaking, the genre of travel reporting began with the late medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem, only to develop in the following century, especially in Europe, as an almost universally spread ritual of homecoming. Specifically, in a Europe fragmented and divided by rival powers and denominations, and in a Europe that is at the same time allocentrically fixed on the rest of the world, travelogues and travel descriptions experienced a golden age.

From this historical perspective, the genre of the travelogue may appear to be an almost exclusively European achievement and an exclusively European instrument of power. But a closer look reveals that, conversely, even if only in isolated cases, but therefore all the more interestingly for us today, it has come to pass that non-European visitors, on the occasion of their return home from Europe, in their travelogues about Europe and the Europeans held forth and wondered just as much as the Europeans did about them – ›marvelous possessions‹ existed on both sides. In Europe itself, the auto-ethnographic potential of this reversal in the genre of the *Lettres Persanes* was

then only exhausted in the course of the 18th century, without any particular attention being paid to the actually existing visitors to Europe (Weisshaupt 1979; Roscini 1992).

Temporalisations

So far, in our comparative analysis of travelogues as rituals of homecoming, we have assumed that the experiences of cultural, social, and societal alterity have primarily been understood as spatial differences and have been described, narrated, and depicted accordingly in the static-descriptive passages. However, if we now turn to the late 18th and especially to the 20th and 21st centuries, it becomes apparent in an increasing number of cases that travellers, in their descriptions, deal with states and conditions that they experience in the context of their spatial mobility, but which, conversely, they describe primarily as past or future conditions and states. The late medieval pilgrims, already, were not only concerned with their suffering and their interactions with the Ottomans, Saracens, Turks, and other local ›unbelievers‹, but especially also with the places and sites of the events of salvation of prehistoric and past times, as witnessed in the Bible.

Since the late Middle Ages, both Christian pilgrims and antiquarian humanists have followed the traces of past times and epochs and have often reported on them after their return home. But only since the Age of Enlightenment, since John Locke's ›in the beginning all the world was America‹, since the stage theories of human history, and since the transformations of the ideas of progress, development, and history into *Kollektivsingulare*, a new mode of interpretation emerged. In the context of journeys, it became possible on a broader basis to represent conditions and circumstances experienced as ›other‹ primarily as ›premature‹ or ›postmature‹, as conditions and circumstances already overcome by development at home, or as conditions and circumstances worth copying and catching up with. Since then, travelogues have not only been able

to establish and at the same time overcome spatial distances and intervals with their static-descriptive passages, but also to transform them into temporal distances and intervals, into developmental disparities and non-simultaneities (Harbsmeier 2020a).

The turning point of temporalisation, which Reinhart Koselleck and, after him, François Hartog described as the end of *historia magistra vitae* and the divergence of the space of experience and of the horizon of expectation (Hartog 2003), is reflected in the development of travelogues precisely the other way round, as an increasing coincidence of expectations of alterity in the past or future with the experiences of the traveller in a foreign country. The religious, cultural, and social conditions and circumstances that were previously strictly separated from one another and described by travellers as other can now be presented as a continuum through history, development, and progress. The neat separation of the dynamic-narrative and static-descriptive passages of the travelogue and their dialectical tensions is softened and undermined by the fact that the travelogues of the 19th and 20th centuries can only be interpreted as homecoming rituals to a limited extent.

It would be going too far to try to present in due detail the far-reaching consequences of this temporalisation that we will call the allochronism characteristic of travel reporting in the 19th and 20th centuries, which in a way replaces and continues allocentrism. Here, a reference to François Hartog's analyses of the travelogues of Volney, Chateaubriand and Tocqueville (2003) must suffice to make clear how 19th-century European travellers were able to present and understand the New World as different in the temporal sense, as non-simultaneity.

The allochronism of travel reporting in the late 18th, 19th and 20th centuries has two consequences: on the one hand, the associated loss of authority and legitimacy of the traveller, who can now not

only be accused of lying and exaggeration as has always been the case, but who is now subject to an insurmountable and restrictive sense of location in general, is compensated for by the dramatically increasing number of scientific disciplines and literary genres colonising travel reports as unreliable but still indispensable suppliers. Reworked into literature, the homecomer turns back home in novels, satire and other genres. As a supplier, the traveller provides the natural-historical and historical disciplines with data, information, objects and preparations, which the researchers in their ›centers of calculation‹ avail themselves of, expressing greater or lesser gratitude, but mostly without showing any signs of recognition. Thus, for literature and science, travel and expedition reports continue to play an indispensable role, but as rituals of returning home from happy or traumatising, enriching or death-threatening experiences of otherness, they are considered marginal and are validated only in exceptional cases in their own right.

On the other hand, and this can be noted as a success in the global history of the genre, the allocentric travelogue, under the sign of allochronism, completely loses its seemingly deep-rooted and exclusive ties to its European home, to spread most consequentially since the second half of the 19th century to literally all corners of the world: Whether from China or India, Japan or Persia, the Ottoman Empire or the Maghreb, or even from Greenland and Africa (Chen 2001; Sun 1997; Sen 2005; Burton 1998; Miyoshi 1979; Cobbing 1998; Beasley 1995; Sohrabi 2012; Agai/Conermann 2013; Agai/Pataki 2010; Saffar 1992; Harbsmeier 1995, 1997b, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2017, 2019), innumerable travellers embark to visit 19th-century Europe, and sometimes, to visit each other. They report on their travels in diaries, memoirs and travelogues, and thus provide themselves and their readers with a globalised understanding of themselves and others.

Translated from the German by Frederic Ponten.