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Scope and Topics: The *Journal of Travel Literature Studies* is dedicated to advancing research in travel literature and its theoretical methodologies, encompassing a wide range of in-depth themes. These include, but are not limited to: the history of travel literature, travel narrative studies, pilgrimage writing, exploration literature, imperial and colonial travel texts, scientific expedition narratives, women's travel writing, autobiographical travel writing, cross-cultural travel experiences, spatial narratives and literary geography, landscape aesthetics and the picturesque, mobility studies, transportation technology and travel modernity, ecological travel writing, travel media in the digital age, diaspora literature, translation and cross-cultural communication of travel texts, as well as pedagogical explorations and disciplinary development in related fields. The journal promotes interdisciplinary perspectives and adheres to international academic standards. It does not operate with fixed thematic sections and welcomes scholarly contributions that engage with the above areas—or beyond. Furthermore, to reflect ongoing academic developments, the journal continuously accepts interviews with established scholars and academic book reviews in the field of travel literature studies. The writing style and formatting requirements for such contributions are consistent with those of standard academic articles.

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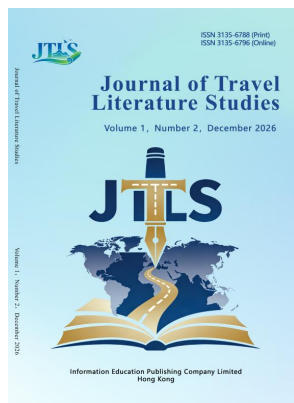
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Contents

- 1-18 **The Cartography of Prose: Inaugurating the Journal of Travel Literature Studies**
Junwu Tian
- 19-36 **Rites de Passage: Literary Critical Genealogy and Cross-Disciplinary Interpretations of Travel Literature**
Lijuan Huang and Tingcong Lin
- 37-54 **The Stochastic Traveler: Misreading and Mimesis in *Gulliver's Travels* and Artificial Intelligence Discourse**
Md Mozaffor Hossain
- 55-77 **Narrating the Republic: Al-Saffar's *Rihla*, Early Colonial Encounters and Shifting Power Structures in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean**
Abdelmoultalib Chrif Elidrissi
- 78-99 **Speed, Desire, and Collision: Automotive Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century American Literature**
Junping Zhang
- 100-123 **Mapping Maritime Travel: Portolan Charts and the Epistemic Shift in Medieval European Geography**
Sai Dong
- 124-149 **Urban Sketching in Kiyooka Takayuki's Travelogue "Dalian in Early Winter"**
Yu Qi
- 150-158 **East-Central European Travel Writing of the Romantic Period: From Theories of Travel to Embodied Experience**
Tomasz Ewertowski



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The Cartography of Prose: Inaugurating the Journal of Travel Literature Studies

Junwu Tian

Abstract: This essay chronicles the founding of the *Journal of Travel Literature Studies*, situating the event within the grand arc of travel writing from antiquity to the present. Traversing both Eastern and Western traditions—from the riverine chronicles of Sima Qian and the arduous pilgrimages of Xu Xike to the Mediterranean wanderings of Herodotus, the Silk Road marvels of Marco Polo, the vast Islamic odysseys of Ibn Battuta, and the scientific reckonings of Humboldt, the essay contends that travel is never mere locomotion. It is, rather, a profound cultural praxis: a cartography of the self, a negotiation of identity, and an uneasy yet indispensable encounter with the Other. Born of a field that has burgeoned in significance yet languishes in institutional neglect, this inaugural statement articulates the pressing need for a dedicated scholarly forum—one capable of bridging Chinese and global intellectual currents across literature, anthropology, and cultural studies. The *Journal of Travel Literature Studies* aspires not only to accommodate methodological diversity but

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to orchestrate it, fostering cross-epistemic dialogue and charting a new territory where the itinerant and the textual converge. In so doing, it seeks to establish itself as a compass for cutting-edge scholarship, orienting the field toward its next horizons.

Keywords: Travel Literature; Anthropology of Travel; Cross-Cultural Encounter; Journal Founding

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ALAS! Vast are heaven and earth, mighty are rivers and mountains. The traces of travel and sojourn have existed since antiquity. In ancient times of China, Yu the Great¹ dredged the nine rivers and traveled through the various states; wherever his footsteps fell, civilization was illuminated. Sima Qian² journeyed south to the Yangtze and Huai rivers, ascended Kuaiji Mountain, explored the Cave of Yu, gazed upon the Nine Doubtful Mountains, floated along the Yuan and Xiang rivers, crossed the Wen

¹ Yu the Great was a legendary ruler in ancient China, famed for taming the catastrophic floods of the Yellow River. Rather than merely building dams, he pioneered a system of dredging and channeling to guide water into the sea, a colossal task said to have taken thirteen years. This herculean effort earned him the mandate to found the Xia Dynasty, traditionally regarded as China’s first. Beyond his engineering prowess, Yu epitomizes selfless dedication; legends claim he passed his home three times without entering, prioritizing his people’s welfare. He remains a paragon of virtuous, effective leadership in Chinese culture.

² Sima Qian was a seminal Chinese historian of the Han Dynasty, widely revered as the “Father of Chinese historiography.” Born around 145 BCE, he endured the humiliation of castration to complete his life’s magnum opus, the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*. This monumental work spans over 2,000 years of Chinese history, establishing a foundational model for all subsequent dynastic histories. Unlike prior annalistic records, Sima Qian pioneered a more comprehensive, biographical format that included diverse social classes. His commitment to factual, unflinching narrative, combined with profound literary grace, established enduring standards for historical writing in East Asia.

and Si rivers in the north, and studied the legacy of Confucius in the Qi and Lu territories. Fan Zhongyan³, ascending the Yueyang Tower, beheld the vastness of Lake Dongting, where water and sky merged into one, and wind and moonlight stretched boundlessly. His ambition embraced all under heaven, and his feelings resonated through the ages. Xuan Zang⁴ journeyed west, crossing shifting sands and the Cong Mountains; over seventeen years, he visited over a hundred countries, returning to translate more than a thousand volumes of Buddhist scriptures. Over a period of more than thirty years, Xu Xiake journeyed across sixteen provinces, personally investigating and recording the topography, caverns, flora, and watercourses he encountered along the way. These examples are but a few among countless instances that attest to the pervasiveness of travel in ancient Chinese life. Far from being an exceptional pursuit reserved for the few, travel was a widespread cultural practice that permeated the intellectual traditions of successive dynasties. More significantly, these journeys were never mere physical displacements; they were, in essence, engines of knowledge production. Whether for historiographical inquiry, spiritual pilgrimage, geographical documentation, or ethical contemplation, travel served as a primary means through which Chinese scholars and thinkers generated, validated, and transmitted knowledge across generations. The journey across geographical space was inseparable from the journey of the mind, a process through which empirical observation was transformed into enduring intellectual achievement.

The Western tradition offers equally rich evidence of travel as a pervasive practice of knowledge acquisition and world-making, though the motivations and forms of

³ Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) was a prominent statesman and literary figure of China's Northern Song Dynasty. Renowned for his unwavering integrity, he rose to the position of chancellor and implemented sweeping reforms to curb corruption and revitalize the bureaucracy. As a scholar, he championed Confucian ideals, famously encapsulating his philosophy in the enduring maxim: "Be the first to bear the world's worries, and the last to enjoy its pleasures." This aphorism epitomizes his selfless dedication to public service.

⁴ Xuanzang (c. 602–664) was a renowned Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, and translator of the Tang Dynasty. Driven by a quest for unadulterated scriptures, he undertook a perilous 17-year overland journey from China to India, traversing treacherous deserts and mountains. Upon his return, he brought back over 600 Buddhist texts, which he meticulously translated into Chinese, profoundly enriching East Asian Buddhism. His detailed travelogue, the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, remains an invaluable historical and geographical resource. Xuanzang's extraordinary pilgrimage exemplifies profound spiritual dedication, scholarly rigor, and cross-cultural exchange, inspiring the classic novel *Journey to the West*.

inquiry differ in revealing ways. Herodotus⁵ of ancient Greece, setting out from Halicarnassus, sailed the Mediterranean, traversing Egypt, Babylon, Phoenicia, and the shores of the Black Sea. Wherever he went, he inquired about customs, recorded legends, and investigated history. His method was that of an inquirer (*historia* in Greek), and his subject was nothing less than the known world. His journey brings together many threads: the struggle between Greece and Persia, the varied terrain and traditions of the peoples he visited, and the tales and traditions he collected from local voices. Herodotus has been accused of gullibility for recording stories that stretch credibility. Yet this charge misreads his purpose: he was no mere chronicler of data, but a traveler who gave ear to the voices he encountered, a sojourner who sought to comprehend the world through the eyes of those who inhabited it. Over the course of his journeys across Europe, Asia, and Africa, Strabo⁶ observed landscapes and cities firsthand, questioned local inhabitants about their origins and customs, and assembled a comprehensive picture of the lands he visited. His travels were shaped by a conviction that such knowledge served a practical end, guiding statesmen and commanders in their governance and campaigns. His personal experience of so many regions gave his account a grounding in direct encounter, and his narrative reflects the sheer scale and variety of the world under Roman dominion.

Marco Polo traveled overland from Venice, through the Pamirs, to the capital of Kublai Khan. He spent seventeen years in the service of the Yuan court, voyaging widely through China and Southeast Asia. He returned to Europe with an intimate

⁵ Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE) was an ancient Greek historian, widely hailed as the “Father of History” for authoring *The Histories*. This seminal work chronicles the Greco-Persian Wars while weaving in extensive geographical, ethnographic, and cultural observations of the known world. Unlike purely annalistic chroniclers, Herodotus employed a systematic narrative of inquiry (*historia*), investigating causes and consequences through interviews and travel. However, his reliance on oral traditions and occasional embellishments earned him the lesser epithet “Father of Lies.” Despite such criticisms, his pioneering approach to recording human affairs established the foundational framework for Western historical writing and inquiry.

⁶ Strabo (c. 64 BCE – c. 24 CE) was a Greek geographer, philosopher, and historian from Amaseia in Pontus (modern Turkey). His monumental work, *Geographica*, is the only surviving comprehensive geographical treatise from antiquity. Spanning 17 volumes, it systematically describes the known world of the Roman Empire, blending topographical, cultural, historical, and political details. Drawing heavily from earlier sources like Eratosthenes and Poseidonius, Strabo emphasized the practical value of geography for statesmen and military leaders. While occasionally uncritical of his sources, his encyclopedic scope provides an invaluable, unparalleled window into the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern regions during the early Roman era.

knowledge of the East: its cities, its trade, its customs, its governance. Before Polo's journeys, Europeans possessed only vague and fragmentary notions of the lands beyond Islam; after his return, the reality of a great and prosperous civilization took shape in the European mind. His first-hand experience inspired subsequent generations of explorers, who sought to follow in his footsteps and reach the riches he had witnessed. Polo's travels proved that direct encounter could reshape a civilization's understanding of the world more powerfully than any second-hand report or philosophical conjecture. Ibn Battuta left Tangier for Mecca and never stopped moving. For forty-four years, he traveled throughout the Islamic world, reaching as far as China and personally experiencing the lands of over seventy countries. The scale of his journey rivals that of Xuan Zang in ambition and extent, a feat that earned him the title of the "greatest traveler of Islam." What distinguishes Ibn Battuta's travels is the sheer breadth of his observation. He did not merely pass through; he took note of landscapes and governance, but also of dress, cuisine, daily customs, and social life. His journeys produced a body of firsthand knowledge that spans the entire medieval Islamic world, from West Africa to Southeast Asia. He observed with a keen eye, engaged deeply with the societies he visited, and returned with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse peoples and cultures that composed the Dar al-Islam. His travels remain an unparalleled source of practical knowledge for anyone seeking to understand the world of his time.

Michel de Montaigne crossed the Alps to tour Italy, using his travels as an occasion for reflective inquiry. His observations of Italy, its customs, its architecture, and its people are always filtered through his own consciousness. The journey becomes a means of exploring the self; the encounter with the unfamiliar prompts questions about identity, belief, and human nature. Montaigne pioneered a new form of travel-based inquiry: the personal narrative that uses the journey as a mirror for the soul. His influence on subsequent travelers and thinkers, from James Boswell to contemporary practitioners of the genre, has been profound. Alexander von Humboldt sailed to South America, explored the Orinoco River, and climbed Mount Chimborazo. He viewed nature with a scientific eye and recorded his adventures in meticulous prose, bridging empirical science and humanistic reflection. His achievement was to demonstrate that

scientific observation and reflective expression are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. The journey itself functions not merely as a means of movement but as a mode of inquiry and knowledge production. His scientific training enabled him to observe, classify, and interpret unfamiliar phenomena, while direct encounters with the natural world transformed travel into a process of empirical investigation. Through firsthand observation and sustained engagement with the places and phenomena he encountered, travel became a means of generating, testing, and organizing knowledge. The result is a body of knowledge grounded in experience and observation, while remaining intellectually compelling. Charles Darwin circumnavigated the globe for five years aboard the *Beagle*, observing geology and biology along the way. His observations of geology, biology, and indigenous peoples across the globe provided the empirical evidence for his revolutionary ideas. Travel becomes a dynamic process of inquiry and knowledge production, grounded in direct observation, empirical investigation, and sustained engagement with unfamiliar environments. As Darwin encounters new landscapes, species, and human communities, travel provides not merely the physical setting for discovery but the experiential conditions through which observation is transformed into knowledge. The journey thus becomes an intellectual process in its own right: movement through unfamiliar spaces generates questions, tests assumptions, and enables the continual revision and reorganization of existing understandings. What emerges is not simply a record of discoveries, but a mode of knowledge production in which mobility, observation, comparison, and reflection are inseparably intertwined

“Writing and travel have always been intimately connected. The traveler’s tale is as old as fiction itself” (Humble and Youngs, 2002, p. 2). Travel is not merely the mechanical displacement of the body, it is an experience of dislocation and reorientation. When a traveler departs from home, he enters a realm of heightened perception, cultural dissonance, and existential questioning. The unfamiliar landscape, the strange custom, the encounter with the Other, all press upon the traveler’s consciousness with a force that cannot be ignored. Writing becomes the means by which the traveler transforms fleeting impressions into durable knowledge and

translates the foreign into the familiar for an audience that has not shared the journey. Travel writing occupies a unique position at the intersection of historiography, geography, ethnography, autobiography, and fiction, at once empirical and imaginative, documentary and poetic. This inherent hybridity makes it a particularly rich site for scholarly inquiry across literature, history, anthropology, and cultural studies.

The Chinese tradition offers enduring examples of this interdependence. Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, a foundational text of Chinese civilization, owes its intellectual breadth to his extensive travels across the Han Empire; by visiting historical sites and interviewing regional informants, he moved beyond official chronicles to produce a work that aims “to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family” (qtd. Watson, 1963, p. 66). Xuan Zang's *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* emerged from his seventeen-year pilgrimage to India, meticulously documenting the geography, customs, and religious practices of over a hundred countries, a text that remains invaluable for historians and geographers. Xu Xiake's *Travels*, compiled over more than thirty years, systematically recorded landscapes, caves, plants, and river sources with empirical precision, his vivid prose capturing both factual information and aesthetic wonder. Fan Zhongyan's “Notes on the Yueyang Tower,” though born of a single ascent, transformed a localized view into an ethical meditation that articulated the Confucian ideal: “Be the first to worry about the world's problems and last to enjoy its pleasures” (Fan, 2002, p. 21). The Western tradition is equally rich. Herodotus's nine-book *Histories*, revered as the foundation of Western historiography (Luce, 2002, p. 26), weaves together the Greco-Persian Wars with geographical and ethnographic observations, bringing the exotic within reach of his Greek audience. Strabo's seventeen-volume *Geography* systematically describes the known world of the Roman Empire, blending topographical, cultural, and political details. Marco Polo's *Travels* introduced Europeans to the wealth and vastness of the Orient, heralding the Age of Discovery and inspiring Columbus and Vasco da Gama. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, whose pages traverse over seventy lands of the Islamic world, stands as one of the most far-reaching travel accounts ever penned.

Montaigne's *Essays* pioneered the travelogue as personal reflection, using the journey as a mirror for the soul. Humboldt's *Cosmos* and *Personal Narrative* bridged science and literature, demonstrating that scientific observation and reflective expression are mutually reinforcing. Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* served as a foundation for the theory of evolution, combining scientific rigor with vivid narrative. These works, whether historical, geographical, scientific, or philosophical, share a common origin in travel, through which their authors transformed observation into enduring intellectual achievement.

Today, the world is changing at an unprecedented pace. Advances in transportation have dramatically transformed the scale, speed, and accessibility of human mobility. Railways crisscross continents, highways connect once-distant regions, ships ply the oceans with increasing efficiency, and airplanes traverse the skies, turning journeys that once took months or even years into experiences measurable in hours. A distance of ten thousand miles can, in some cases, be covered between dawn and dusk. The Earth seems increasingly to have become one interconnected space, while international travel has evolved from a privilege enjoyed by a relatively small elite into an increasingly common feature of modern life. As people move more frequently across national, cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, travel has become not merely an exceptional experience but an ordinary and pervasive form of human activity. This unprecedented expansion of mobility has, in turn, stimulated a remarkable flourishing of travel literature. Writers no longer confine themselves to conventional journeys of geographical discovery; instead, travel writing has expanded into an extraordinarily diverse field encompassing cultural encounters, urban exploration, ecological observation, pilgrimage, migration, exile, tourism, adventure, memory, and personal transformation. New subjects, perspectives, narrative forms, and modes of representation continue to emerge, making travel writing an increasingly heterogeneous and dynamic literary phenomenon. The proliferation of contemporary travel practices has thus provided an ever-expanding experiential foundation for literary creation, while the diversity of journeys has continually generated new possibilities for imagining places, encountering other cultures, and reflecting on the relationship between mobility,

identity, and knowledge. As is observed by Susan Bassnett “Travel writers today are producing texts for an age characterised by increasing interest in concepts of hybridity, an age in which theories of race and ethnicity, once used as means of dividing peoples, are starting to crumble under the pressure of the millions in movement around the world. Once the gaze of the traveller reflected the singularity of a dominant culture; today, the gaze is more likely to be multi-focal, reflecting the demise of a world-view that separated us from them” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 240).

Ironically, despite travel being one of humanity's most enduring and significant social practices, and despite travel literature constituting a substantial portion of literary history in both Eastern and Western traditions, the past and the present, the genre has long suffered from critical neglect. From the emergence of travel literature up until the 1970s, literary studies devoted to travel literature around the world remained remarkably scarce. The historical, geographical, religious, anthropological and other dimensions embedded in the vast body of travel writings had long been quietly appropriated by disciplines such as history, geography, religious studies, and anthropology, serving as invaluable nourishment for the development of these fields. This neglect, as Michael Kowalewski observes, stems largely from the “daunting heterogeneity” of the form—its tendency to “borrows freely from the memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and, most important, fiction” (1992, p. 7). Jonathan Raban puts it more caustically, describing travel literature as “notoriously raffish open house where very different genres are likely to end up in the same bed” (1997, p. 254), capable of accommodating everything from private diaries and essays to prose poems and polished conversation. Paul Smethurst suggests that “Travel writing studies might have continued as a marginal discipline, applied to a minor form of literature, if contemporary theory had not arrived to reinvigorate and revalue them” (2009, p. 3). John Culbert similarly observes that “The study of travel writing owes a great deal to ‘theory’ – the critical methodologies that emerged from the Frankfurt School, French structuralism, and the social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s” (2018, p. 343), while noting that theory itself has been reciprocally enriched by travel

writing's hybrid, wide-ranging perspectives on an increasingly fluid and interconnected world.

The institutional turn came in the 1980s, when an anti-traditional current swept through the humanities; as F.R. Leavis's "Great Tradition" gave way to counter-canonical strategies and new regionalisms, a vastly expanded corpus of texts came into critical view, and travel literature began its ascent from periphery to center. By the time the "theory" revolution had consolidated in the late 1980s, travel writing proved itself uniquely amenable to cross-cultural, postcolonial, gender, and globalization studies. "In social sciences such as Geography, Anthropology and Sociology, meanwhile, the recent interest in travel writing is partly a consequence of theoretical and methodological debates as to the forms of knowledge and enquiry most appropriate to each discipline" (Thompson, 2011, p. 3). The affinity with postcolonialism has been particularly close, as is observed by Claire Lindsay, "travel literature and postcolonial studies are recognized bedfellows, the first (a 'genre') a staple source for the second (a scholarly enterprise, if not a bordered discipline). Their relationship has been soldered by historical circumstances" (Lindsay, 2016, p.25). It may seem a stigma to acknowledge, but the historical entanglement between Western travel writing and colonialism is undeniable; the genre often served as an active accomplice and vanguard of colonial conquest. "The accounts of the Orient written by early Western adventurers directly stimulated the emergence of colonialism, because the East they depicted was filled with gold, jewels, spices, and silk—beneath those elegant words pulsed the desire for conquest and plunder" (Kong, 2017, p. 14). From *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1300) to Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of Guiana* (1599) to Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), travel narratives consistently exoticized China, Latin America, and Africa, constructing them as realms of fabulous wealth awaiting European appropriation. The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 marked a watershed. Said demonstrated that travel writers played a decisive role in shaping Orientalist discourse, as "The increasing influence of travel literature, imaginary utopias, moral voyages, and scientific reporting brought the Orient into sharper and more extended focus...But all such widening horizons had Europe firmly in the

privileged center, as main observer. . .even as Europe moved itself outwards, its sense of cultural strength was fortified. From travelers' tales, and not only from great institutions like various Indian companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured" (Said, 1978, p. 117). The accumulated observations of voyagers such as James Cook, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, and Michael Adanson, together with the reports of commercial agents in the Pacific, Jesuit missionaries in China and South America, and explorers like William Dampier, produced a substantial corpus of detailed accounts pertaining to non-European peoples, customs, landscapes, and politics. Collectively, all these works that expanded people's horizons firmly placed Europe at the privileged center, positioning it as the primary observer, institutionalizing the binary oppositions of center/periphery, self/other, and civilization/barbarism that would underpin colonial ideology.

With the advocacy of anthropology, literary genetics, and postcolonial cultural studies, travel literature studies finally coalesced as a distinct discipline in the late twentieth century and reached its zenith in the early twenty-first. The founding of *Studies in Travel Writing* by Tim Youngs in 1997 proved watershed: under his stewardship, annual international conferences materialized and a flourishing corpus of papers and monographs emerged, as Youngs nurtured an intellectual community across continents and disciplines, lending institutional gravitas to a field long relegated to the margins. As Carl Thompson observes,

Travel writing studies is a burgeoning field of academic enquiry. With many societies around the world confronting complex issues of globalization, cultural hybridization and the large-scale flow of populations both within and across national borders, scholars have been increasingly impelled to historicize and theorize these and related phenomena. The rise of a 'postcolonial' agenda and methodology across many disciplines has similarly directed scholarly attention to how knowledge of other regions and societies is acquired and circulated, and the different forms of interaction and exchange that can exist between cultures. These are concerns for which travel writing past and present is a vital resource and focus.

As a consequence, a genre once viewed dismissively in the academy has in recent decades received sustained scrutiny and investigation. Indeed, it is probably now impossible to study any branch of the humanities or social sciences without at some stage being required to utilize and reflect upon travel writing in one or other of its many guises. (2016, p. xvi)

Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs concur: “Travel has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, and the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has reached unprecedented levels. The academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome their previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously and have begun to produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated” (Hulme and Youngs, 2002, p. 1). Today, travel is not merely the physical movement of footprints; rather, as Tian Junwu argues, it is “a complex cultural practice through which human beings construct meaning, negotiate identities, and encounter the alterity of both the world and themselves” (Tian and Lin, 2026, pp. 17–36)—a process of cultural praxis, experiential formation, and meaning-making. From an anthropological standpoint, travel constitutes an encounter with the “Other” and a concomitant reshaping of the “Self.” Every departure is an attempt to step beyond familiar boundaries; every return carries a gaze irrevocably altered by the Other. The traveler’s encounter with the Other is always a mediated one, mediated by the traveler’s own cultural presuppositions, by the textual traditions that precede the journey, and by the power relations that structure the contact zone between self and other (Tian and Lin, 2026, pp. 18–39). Travel also serves as a crucial mechanism for cultural contact, identity fluidity, and the rewriting of place. It is precisely on the journey that one continually asks: Who am I? Where is home? Where does the heart find peace? These questions are at once ancient and fresh, personal and universal. The study of travel literature has risen on the strength of this flourishing of travel. Scholars from East and West bring their own subtle insights, investigating origins, analyzing forms, examining narratives, and discerning cultural implications. Travel literature is no longer merely a catch-all term for travelogues and

journey notes; it has become an independent and substantial field of inquiry, bearing humanity's curiosity about the world, its understanding of others, and its reflection upon the self.

However, on the broader international academic stage, while the study of travel literature has gradually consolidated its presence, marked by annual conferences that proceed without interruption, a steady stream of research articles, and the continual reappraisal of canonical works, the field is served by only one dedicated scholarly journal, *Studies in Travel Writing*. To be sure, at the height of the field's expansion, *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* was also launched in 2000 by Berghahn Books as a biannual, interdisciplinary forum meant to reflect the rich diversity of travel as both social practice and metaphor. Yet it ceased publication after Vol. 22, Issue 2 (Dec 2021), leaving *Studies in Travel Writing* as the sole specialist periodical of its kind still in circulation. This shift is noteworthy, as *Journeys* had been a key platform for scholarly dialogue across anthropology, history, and literary studies, and its absence may signal a narrowing of the dedicated publication venues in a field that had once seemed to be thriving.

Beyond its status as the sole surviving specialist periodical in the field, *Studies in Travel Writing* labors under a significant institutional handicap: it has yet to be indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) or the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI). This omission entails far more than a mere bibliographical lacuna; it carries concrete and far-reaching consequences for the journal's visibility, scholarly credibility, and long-term viability. First, the absence of indexing severely curtails the journal's discoverability within the major academic databases, rendering its contents less accessible to researchers who rely on citation indexes as their primary discovery tools. Consequently, even high-quality contributions to *Studies in Travel Writing* are less likely to be retrieved, read, and cited, which in turn depresses the journal's impact factor and perpetuates a cycle of marginalisation. This is particularly detrimental in an era when university promotion and tenure committees, as well as research evaluation exercises across many national systems, increasingly treat SSCI/A&HCI inclusion as a proxy for academic quality. Scholars may thus be dissuaded from submitting their best

work to the journal, fearing that publications there will carry insufficient institutional weight. Second, the field of travel writing studies finds itself caught in a peculiar paradox: scholarly production is abundant, and the diversity of topics, ranging from postcolonial and feminist readings to ecocritical and digital-humanities approaches, has never been richer. Yet this abundance is scattered across a disjointed landscape of monographs, edited collections, and generalist journals, with no stable, high-visibility periodical to serve as a central clearing-house. *Studies in Travel Writing*, despite its longevity and specialist focus, cannot fully fulfil this role without the gatekeeping recognition that indexing confers. The result is that scholarly exchange remains sporadic and uneven: researchers from different linguistic, national, and disciplinary traditions continue to operate within their own insulated orbits, their conversations intermittent and their cumulative efforts insufficiently synthesised. This fragmentation is especially acute in the absence of another dedicated platform that might bridge the Chinese-speaking academy and the wider Anglophone and European scholarly communities, a lacuna that is all the more regrettable given the growing global interest in travel narratives as vectors of cultural encounter and cross-cultural negotiation. Without an indexed, internationally visible venue, the field lacks the sustained, professionally rigorous forum necessary to supplant intellectual estrangement with genuine engagement, and to foster renewal through reciprocal illumination across civilisational traditions. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the establishment of a new, peer-reviewed, and preferably internationally indexed specialist journal. Only through such a recognized platform can the accumulated insights of disparate literary and cultural traditions be brought into sustained dialogue; only then can old learning and new knowledge be refined in concert, and can the achievements of Eastern and Western travel-writing scholarship be displayed upon a single, coherent stage, to the mutual enrichment of all participants in this vibrant and expanding field.

As a Chinese scholar, Professor Tian Junwu has long been engaged in the study of travel literature, a field to which he has devoted more than two decades of sustained inquiry. He has directed seven major research projects, among which the representative ones were Major Project of National Social Science Fund “A History of British Travel

Literature,” the Ministry of Education Key Project “A Study of Travel Narratives in 20th-century American Fiction,” and the Sino-American Fulbright Project “A Study of American Travel Literature.” His contributions to the international academy include over 100 SSCI, A&HCI and CSSCI-indexed articles, focusing on travel literature and its related areas. Reflecting on the trajectory of travel literature studies, Tian deems that the institutionalization of travel literature as a distinct field of inquiry has been a slow but steady process, one that requires not only the accumulation of individual research efforts but also the establishment of collective platforms for scholarly exchange and collaboration. His work testifies to a sustained engagement with the field, marked by considerable industry, a wide-ranging curiosity, careful attention to archival materials, and a habit of rigorous critical reflection. These qualities have earned him a growing readership and an increasingly visible place in the international conversation on travel literature. Sensitive to the field’s pressing need for a dedicated organ of exchange, he took the initiative to propose the founding of the *Journal of Travel Literature Studies*, a quarterly publication devoted to new work in travel literature, travel narrative, and travel anthropology. Articulating the guiding vision for the journal, Tian articulates that its guiding vision is to foster a space in which the methodological diversity of travel literature studies, ranging from formalist narratology and postcolonial critique to empirical archival research and theoretical speculation, might be brought into productive dialogue, thereby enabling the field to realize its full intellectual potential. Once established, the journal will not be constrained by narrow parochialisms, will draw no rigid distinctions between Chinese and Western traditions, and will favor neither the ancient nor the contemporary at the expense of the other. Its purview will encompass theory and empirical study, fresh reinterpretations of canonical works and incisive critiques of new publications, the written word and the visual image alike.

The establishment of this journal has received staunch support from scholars both in China and abroad. Figures such as Professor Wang Ning, Professor Nie Zhenzhao, Professor Charles Forsdick of Cambridge University, and Professor Galin Tihanov of Queen Mary University of London all believe that the rise of travel literature studies is relevant to cross-cultural understanding and the reconstruction of world literature. They

have expressed their approval and placed great hopes in the journal. Some have contributed congratulatory essays, some have agreed to submit their work, and some have recommended promising young scholars for editorial duties. They work together with one heart, never minding the toil. This atmosphere is deeply admirable and also proves that travel literature studies have coalesced into a significant academic force on a global scale. With the journal established, its aim is to integrate and connect the currents of Chinese and foreign scholarship, to link the domains of literature, anthropology, and cultural studies, and to promote the systematic and international development of travel literature research. It anticipates gathering high-level papers, each issue featuring cutting-edge topics, meticulously reviewed translations, academic debates, and book reviews, gradually becoming a major international academic hub, striving to gain its possible entry into the A&HCI index. This will allow Chinese scholars to make their voices heard more strongly in this field, and will enable scholars worldwide to more easily access Chinese travel writing and cultural experience.

Prospective contributors are invited to submit their manuscripts to the *Journal of Travel and Literary Studies (JTLS)* via the journal's official website (<https://www.tlsjournal.com>) or through the editorial email address (jtls2026@163.com). All submissions are suggested to be written in English and formatted in strict accordance with the latest MLA style guidelines. To uphold the highest standards of scholarly rigor and impartiality, the editorial board will conduct a double-anonymous peer-review process for all manuscripts that pass the initial editorial screening. This procedure ensures a fair, rigorous, and constructive evaluation, thereby maintaining the journal's commitment to publishing original, high-quality research in the field of travel writing and related literary studies. Furthermore, the editorial board warmly encourages scholars to cite articles published in *JTLS* in their own research and to recommend the journal to their institutional libraries and research networks. Broad citation and dissemination are vital not only for enhancing the journal's visibility and academic impact, including its potential inclusion in major indexing databases such as the Arts & Humanities Citation Index, but also for fostering a vibrant, interconnected scholarly community around travel and literary studies. By actively

referencing *JTLS* scholarship, researchers contribute directly to the growth of a dedicated platform that bridges diverse cultural and disciplinary traditions, amplifies emerging voices, and consolidates travel writing studies as a dynamic field of inquiry. The editorial team looks forward to seeing *JTLS* become a cornerstone of reference in the field, and we are confident that sustained scholarly engagement, through both submission and citation, will secure its place as an indispensable resource for years to come.

Alas! Though the path has not been long, the scholarly tradition has already opened. Travel knows no bounds; thought has its sources. From the scattered notes of ancient journeys to today's systematic disciplinary development, travel literature has walked a slow but long road. May scholars both at home and abroad join in this endeavor, so that the study of travel literature, like the flow of great rivers, will surge ceaselessly, and like the light of the stars and the Milky Way, will shine magnificently for all to see. I hereby record these words to mark the birth of *Journal of Travel Literature Studies*.

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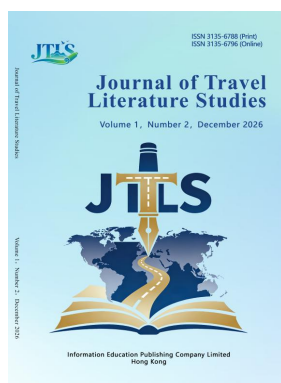
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Rites de Passage: Literary Critical Genealogy and Cross-Disciplinary Interpretations of Travel Literature

Lijuan Huang and Tingcong Lin

Abstract: With the rise of cultural studies as the main trend in the 1980s, travel literature begins to receive its due attention from the western theorists and leaps from sub genre to the main literary terrain. Critics in postcolonialism, feminism, anthropology, geography, comparative literature all show their academic interest in the poetics and politics, literary aestheticism and cultural representation of travel literature. This essay regards the resurfacing of travel literature from the literary horizon as its embodiment of not only complex geopolitical and sociocultural elements, but also of its dynamism of being trans-racial, trans-linguistic and trans-disciplinary. Thus, it investigates the scope of travel literature, literary critical genealogies and cross-disciplinary interpretations in an attempt to draw a panorama of the study of travel literature theoretically for domestic scholars.

Keywords: travel literature; criticism of travel literature; postcolonial paradigm; cross-disciplinary interpretations

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Introduction

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once noted, “Travel, the study of languages, periodical literature, have taken the place of that universal language, and establish many intimate and harmonious relations which a universal language could never have brought about” (Goethe, 1973, p. 7). Here, Goethe emphasized the importance of transnational travel for writers. Travel is often associated with themes such as spatial transgression, cultural

encounter, linguistic transformation, escape and resistance, the search for artistic inspiration, and the quest to understand the world and the self. The documentation of travelers or writers on their journey's observations and experiences is collectively termed travel writing or travel literature. It is "a hybrid form, encompassing different genres and discourses, produced in the geo-cultural contexts of different historical periods" (Youngs & Forsdick, 2012, p. 1), expressed in English as travelogue, travel narrative, travel writing, and travel book. Travel literature possesses "dauntingly heterogeneous character" (Kowalewski, 1992, p. 7), covering genres including "the memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and, most important, fiction" (p. 7). Travel literature both presents the traveler's authentic observations and objective reports while also mixing in subjective biography and the fictional antics of the picaresque novel, blending reality and fiction in parallel (Huang, 2015, pp. 10-14), holding a unique academic appeal.

Since the 1980s, with the rise and development of cultural studies, travel literature has leaped from a marginalized text in Western academia to a significant area of wide attention. Researchers in postcolonialism, feminism, anthropology, geography, and comparative literature have turned their academic interests to travel writing, exploring its poetics and politics, literary aesthetics, and cultural representation. Internationally, the University of Essex organized several international conferences reflecting on the importance of travel, such as "Europe and its Others" in 1984, "Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory" in 1991, and "Writing Travels" in 1992. In 1997, the International Society for Travel Writing was founded. In 2002, Nottingham Trent University in the UK established the Center for Travel Writing Studies to encourage the publication of travel literature research books and journals and to host conferences. Entering the 21st century, research on travel literature began to appear in China, particularly in the fields of overseas Sinology and comparative literature, with many master's and doctoral theses emerging, largely filling the research gap on travel literature in Chinese academia. However, the author believes that most of these results are either confined to presenting the historical facts of travel literature texts or follow Western academia's postcolonial research paradigm. In fact, travel literature resurfaces in the history of literary research as a subgenre because it not only carries complex and

changing geopolitical and socio-cultural elements but also possesses the dynamic qualities of being trans-racial, trans-linguistic, and trans-disciplinary. This article attempts to investigate the scope of travel literature, its critical genealogies, and its cross-disciplinary features: it starts with the definition of travel and travel literature genres, and then traces the trajectory of the criticism of travel literature, and finally, it examines cross-disciplinary interpretations from geography, anthropology, comparative literature, and other disciplines, aiming to benefit current and future travel literature research.

Tracing “Travel”: Definition, Scope, and Genre of Travel Literature

Samuel Johnson believed that defining literary categories is as risky as defining legal categories: “...scarcely any species of writing, of which we can tell what is its essence, and what are its constituents; every new genius produces some innovation, which, when invented and approved, subverts the rules which the practice of foregoing authors had established” (Johnson, 1752, p. 221). Although it is difficult to provide a clear, concise, and well-defined boundary for travel literature, similar to genres like castaway literature, adventure literature, bildungsroman, sea literature, colonial literature, diasporic literature, and women’s literature, the subject matter and form of travel literature are related to “travel.” First, it is necessary to clarify what “travel” means. Etymologically, the English word “travel” emerged in the Middle Ages, reportedly derived from the French *travail* or *travaillier*, meaning physical or mental labor or hardship, carrying a sense of pain or oppression, referring to action, trouble, effort, suffering. *Travail* itself has an older origin, the Latin *tripalium*, meaning three stakes, a Roman instrument of torture. Thus, early travel conditions were difficult, imbuing travel with the connotation of physical and mental anguish. Similarly, the Chinese characters “旅” (lǚ) and “行” (xíng) both imply leaving home and wandering about. For example, Fan Zhongyan said in *Record of Yueyang Tower*, “Merchant travel ceased, masts snapped and oars splintered.” Under Confucian thought prioritizing filial piety and emphasizing agriculture over commerce, travel often carried the melancholy of leaving home for a living, as in the saying, “During the three-year mourning period for parents, one should

not stand in groups nor travel.” Thus, etymologically, actual long-distance travel has the characteristic of challenging mind and body, involving suffering and pain.

However, it is precisely this challenge that has attracted pilgrims, literati, and explorers driven by religious piety, curiosity, and adventurous spirit throughout the ages. First, pilgrimage to religious sites was a form of travel for believers: “Christians go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to the places associated with the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. They go to Rome, to the city where Peter and Paul were martyred, and also to...” (Benedict XVI, 2010). Then, the Middle Ages saw the phenomenon of the “Grand Tour,” where upper-class European families sent their offspring to other countries to gain knowledge, broaden horizons, and overcome intellectual limitations. By the Age of Discovery, travel was no longer confined to European nations. Numerous adventurers, merchants, soldiers, missionaries, etc., from Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Britain, and France crossed oceans to “discover new continents” around the world, providing new knowledge of other countries. With growing national power and overseas expansion, the British gradually became a prominent presence traveling worldwide, numerous and widespread, partly due to the island nation’s natural geographical environment and earlier industrialization. The insular isolation, combined with the monotonous and dull production environment, and the smog-choked cities like London and Liverpool, made the British particularly fond of traveling abroad (Fussell, 1980, pp. 37-38). In summary, over the centuries since the Renaissance, Europeans have traveled across continents and oceans worldwide, with travel purposes changing according to Western social history and political demands (Porter, 1991, p. 10).

Broadly defined, “exploration, conquest, colonization, diplomacy, emigration, forced exile, and trade to religious or political pilgrimage, aesthetic education, anthropological inquiry” (Porter, 1991, p. 10) can all be classified as travel. Narrowly defined, travel is distinguished from exploration and tourism. According to American cultural historian Paul Fussell (1980), “exploration belongs to the Renaissance, travel to the bourgeois age, tourism to our proletarian moment” (p. 38). Although all three involve long-distance travel, explorers seek the unknown, unexplored territory; travelers follow in the explorers’ footsteps, out of curiosity seeking places historically

discovered by others; tourists go to places industrialized and popularized by commercial interests. If explorers have a pioneering spirit, and tourists are more passively driven by commerce, then “It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of ‘knowing where one is’ belonging to tourism” (p. 39).

Beyond referring to actual long-distance travel, the forms and meanings of travel also include abstract forms, even metaphors for various imagined life activities, such as the journey of life, the course of knowledge, the travel of the mind, etc. Travel encompasses both actual journeys and imagined ones, making this writing genre all-encompassing. From Herodotus’s *Histories* to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Old Testament*, *New Testament*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Shakespeare’s *Odyssey* and *Hamlet*, 18th-century novels like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, to numerous 19th and 20th-century literary works, all can be called travel literature. To some extent, travel literature also constitutes a history of human civilization, mainly because the history of civilization is also a history of migration and writing.

Precisely because travel combines actuality and imagination, reality and fiction, scholars debate the scope of travel literature. Given travel literature’s oscillation between fiction and reality, Peter Hulme (qtd. in Youngs & Forsdick, 2012), a professor at the University of Essex, emphasizes the significance of “movement” for writing. He argues that “For texts to count as travel writing...their authors must have travelled to the places they describe. There is, he insists, an ethical dimension to their claims to have made the journeys they recount. If the claim is later found to be false, the author’s work ‘is discredited’ and the text moves out of the category of travel writing into another such as the imaginary voyage” (p. 1). Therefore, he delimits the scope of travel literature into travel writing based on actual travel and fictional, imagined travel writing.

Many scholars emphasize the inherent subjective fictionality of travel literature. For example, Paul Fussell (1980) advocated using the term “travel book” to replace guidebook-style “travelogue” and “travel writing,” because travel books are written for those who do not intend to follow the traveler’s path but seek romance literary forms

like exoticism, comic absurdity, and wonder, which cannot be fully found in their own time and place. He believes the term “travel book” not only satisfies readers’ imagination but also, due to its subjectivity, is closer to memoir; “the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative—unlike that in a novel or romance—claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (Fussell, 1980, p. 203). Thus, he argues that “travel writing” emphasizes the traveler’s truthful reporting, while “travel book” emphasizes its fictionality and imaginative coloring.

If Fussell called for the literary imagination of travel narrative, Percy G. Adams (1983) attempted to “legitimize” travel literature, examining its complementary relationship with the novel as a significant genre. In his 1983 book *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Adams examined the critical history of the novel as a genre form, arguing that the rise and transformation of the novel were closely related to European epic, romance, prose, essay, prose fiction, drama, history, biography, travel literature, etc. The novel developed from these genres as “the most independent, most flexible, and most characteristic literary form.” Travel literature, “like the novel, is not a clearly defined genre because it contains many genres in content and form, cannot form a self-contained system, and is itself constantly evolving” (Adams, 1983, p. 282). Just as the novel has two contrasting narrative forms, so does travel literature: the historical and imitative empirical narrative, and the romantic and didactic fictional narrative. Because travel literature has a longer history and tradition, developing through different historical periods with themes and forms appropriate to the era, European novels were profoundly influenced by travel literature in their formation and transformation—intellectually, commercially, politically, religiously, academically, and creatively. As Adam noted, “Many travel accounts share numerous similarities with the early, nascent novels: structure, theme, language, tone, philosophy, even literary tradition and writing purpose, although there are also many differences between the two...” (p. 282). He concludes that if the novel is the epic of the bourgeoisie, then travel literature not only has a longer history than the novel but is also a traceable textual form for examining the historical process of Western modernity. Because of this, travel

literature has become a leading site for scholars to reflect on and critique Western modernity and the history of imperial colonization.

The Politics of Representation: Colonial Discourse Analysis Paradigm and Its Transformation in Travel Literature Studies

Although travel literature is closely intertwined with epics, novels, poetry, drama, and other genres, and despite often being a bestseller, it remained on the periphery of literary criticism and academic attention until the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), when the criticism of travel literature emerged in literary studies. In *Orientalism*, Said drew on numerous travel-related official documents, notes, memoirs, field manuscripts, poems, novels, and other types of writing dating back to the 16th century. He interpreted the close relationship between the spatial poetics and cultural representation in travel literature, unraveling the knowledge enigmas hidden in cross-cultural travel writing and pioneering the critical paradigm of colonial discourse analysis. In the chapter "Imaginary Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental," he pointed out that without empirical space, people's consciousness typically uses "imagination" to fill or even determine space: "space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here" (Said, 1979, p. 55). Here, the poetic process refers to the intervention of language in describing space, inevitably involving subjective imagination. Influenced by Foucault's theory of discourse/knowledge power, Said emphasized the knowledge violence produced by the complicity of imagination and discourse, Saying that we do not need to decide whether this imagined knowledge aligns with history and geography, or whether it tramples upon history and geography; suffice to say that over time, imagined knowledge exists in its own way, and is not empirical knowledge (p. 53). This set the tone for cross-cultural writing in travel literature. Said focused on how language or discourse as a poetic medium strengthens and consolidates the Western subject's position: "For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (p. 55). Since the Age of Discovery, the East recognized,

expressed, and represented by Westerners across geographical space was, “culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (p. 2). It is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). Positively, *Orientalism* stimulated an attitude of research towards the history of colonialism and imperialism, and also facilitated countless young, otherwise politicized scholars to gain new modes and fields of inquiry, especially in the literary field” (Bahdad, 1994, p. 173).

Influenced by *Orientalism*, the study of travel literature across space and culture surged in European and American academia during the 1980s and 1990s. First, the scope of Orientalism continuously expanded, not only limited to the East but also covering Africa, South America, and other colonized regions worldwide. For instance, American postcolonial theorist Mary Louise Pratt (1992) extended her research subject of travel writing to European travel writing about Africa and South America from the Enlightenment to the 1990s. Peter Hulme (1986) extended his research perspective to Europe’s politics of representation of the Americas and the Caribbean over more than three hundred years. In *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (1986), he summarized five narrative discourse patterns of colonial encounters: Columbus and the Savages; Prospero and Caliban; John Smith and Ocaontas; Robinson Crusoe and Friday; Inkle and Yarico. Placing colonial discourse in geographical and ideological fields, he pointed out that issues of space and land are often obscured by the topic of savagery—a characteristic of all colonial encounter narratives, discursively linking the Caribbean to barbarism (Hulme, 1986, p. XIII).

Regarding research methods, postcolonial theorists moved beyond the essentialist binary opposition of East-West in colonial discourse analysis, emphasizing the heterogeneous and dynamic structure of Orientalism. Pratt (1992) argued that European travel writing is a form of cultural production, producing not only “the rest of the world” but also, with the expansion of political economy, “the domestic subjects of European imperialism” (p. 4). In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, she proposed the famous concepts of “contact zone,” “anti-conquest,” and “autoethnography” to emphasize the unequal yet mutually transformative and

constitutive power dynamics between East and West, focusing on the resistance and voices of colonized indigenous peoples and their strategies (Pratt, 1992, pp. 5-10). Lisa Lowe (1991), in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, emphasized the heterogeneous plurality of space and imagination. She argued that external social events and environments affect the writing of the Orient, and the intentions of Orientalist writers are shaped by complex and shifting political and social trends, such that unconscious social thoughts and personal interests influence the writing of the Orient. The differences of gender, race, nation, and class intersect with and intervene in Orientalist narratives. Integrating Foucault's "heterotopia" and discourse theory with Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony, she proposed the concept of "heterotopicality," referring to an open, dynamic, interwoven field of Orientalism (Lowe, 1991, pp. 10-11). David Spurr (1993) refined the paradigm of colonial discourse analysis in depth. In *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, he summarized twelve rhetorical modes of colonial discourse, including surveillance, appropriation, aestheticization, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealization, insubstantiation, naturalization, eroticization, and resistance, pointing to the heterogeneous plurality inherent in colonial discourse (Spurr, 1993).

Furthermore, postcolonial theorists integrated psychoanalysis and gender criticism, broadening and enriching the multidimensional aspects of travel literature research. Dennis Porter (1991) delved into the intellectual imagination and psychological projection of the travel writing subject from a psychoanalytic perspective. As suggested by the title of his book, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, Porter argued that studying travel literature requires attention to the anxieties behind travel, because travel reveals the male subject's desire to escape the constraints of social institutions, representing the fulfillment of masculinity and transgression of boundaries in foreign lands. Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Lacan's psychoanalysis of unconscious desire, he posited that the decision to leave one's homeland, wander elsewhere, or go into exile, the investment in or rejection of the countries traveled to, usually depends on (the traveler's) early preconceptions of that geographical space, not on objective factors (Porter, 1991, p. 11).

Thus, travel literature is not only about reinforcing the identity of the Other but also about reconfirming one's own social belonging, displaying the self's knowledge model. In this sense, travel writing is a form of self-return, which determines the desire and transgression of travel (p. 10). However, Porter attributed male travel desire and transgression to socio-historical changes. While plausible, this view has the limitation of a male-centered, single-gender perspective.

If most travel literature research from Said onwards focused on European, male, white authors' literary works, exhibiting a strong Eurocentrism and white supremacy, then a significant work exploring women's travel writing is that of renowned British scholar Sara Mills (1992). Using Foucault's theory, Said's colonial discourse analysis, and feminist theory as her framework, Mills linked feminist research with colonial studies, arguing that the construction of women's travel writing texts is a female discourse based on a series of power relations, such as the colonial power acting upon them and the patriarchal power acting upon them as middle-class women. The intersection and conflict of these two power systems determine the style and content of women's travel writing, which also exhibit individual female differences. Thus, she titled her book *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1992), examining the negotiation between women's travel writing and colonialism through diaries, letters, and religious confessions, significantly filling the gender gap in travel literature studies. Other gender-focused results in travel literature research include Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Karen R. Lawrence's *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (1994), and Sidonie Smith's *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (2001).

In summary, the study of travel literature was primarily influenced by the post-structuralist methods prevalent in American academia in the 1970s. Post-structuralism holds that all representations are inevitably fictional because, at the knowledge level, no particular form of words is superior to others or closer to the facts. Therefore, different representations require careful scrutiny: regardless of genre or rhetorical device, they inevitably involve discursive politics. The issue of authenticity in travel literature is thus resolved because much of the narrative history, folklore, etc., addressed by colonial discourse is known for its authenticity. Consequently, travel

literature research must analyze not knowledge truth but political ideology, with truth being merely a relatively temporary reality.

Cross-disciplinary Research: Intersecting Interpretations from Geography, Anthropology, and Comparative Literature

Because travelers go cross geographical boundaries, traverse liminal spaces, move through different geographies, civilizations, cultures, religions, races, ideologies, political and economic systems, and attempt to understand, interpret, and write about other cultures, travel literature draws on various forms of knowledge from the social sciences, such as politics, economics, education, ethnology, natural history, anthropology, medicine, aesthetics, etc. It is regarded as “the most capacious cultural holdball” (Gilroy, 2001, p. 1). Travel literature, concerned with the representation of other cultures, has also received varying degrees of attention from geography, anthropology, comparative literature, and other fields, expanding its interdisciplinary travel dimensions and research value.

Said’s method of analyzing the politics of representation in “imaginary geography” significantly influenced geography. French thinkers like Bruno Latour, Michel de Certeau, and Marc Augé began to appear and become active in the field of cultural geography (Conley, 2012, pp. 7-8). Inspired by them, geographers started focusing on the unequal power relations implicit in geographical literature concerning representations of people and place, gender and race, empire and margin, examining travel writing about place and space. In *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (1999), edited by British scholars James Duncan and Derek Gregory, more than ten geographers explored issues of place, space, and landscape, integrating geography, literary criticism, cultural studies, and historical research. They focused on the phenomenon of movement in travel literature, covering regional travel writing on Africa, South Asia, and Europe. The ten articles collected are “Introduction”; “Limited Visions of Africa: Geographies of Savagery and Civility in Early Eighteenth-Century Narratives”; “Enlightenment Travels: The Making of Epiphany in Tibet”; “Writing Travel and Mapping Sexuality: Richard Burton’s Sotadic Zone”; “The Flight from Lucknow: British Women Travelling and Writing Home, 1857-8”; “Scripting Egypt:

Orientalism and the Cultures of Travel”; “Dis-Orientation: On the Shock of the Familiar in a Far-Away Place”; “The Exoticism of the Familiar and the Familiarity of the Exotic: Fin-de-siècle Travellers to Greece”; “Travelling through the Closet”; “Writing Over the Map of Provence: The Touristic Therapy of *A Year in Provence*.” Duncan and Gregory (1999) advocate that geographers pay attention to the “physicality of representation” in travel writing, meaning “the sites where travel writing is produced and the spatiality of representation” (p. 2), thereby arguing that cultural representation in travel literature has characteristics of “multiple factors, fragmented pieces, and spatial construction.” “Multiple factors” refers to travel writing being produced under the synthesis of various factors. Using 18th and 19th-century travel writing as examples, they explain that typically, “direct observations collected in the field were either reorganized or integrated into official records” (pp. 3-4), making it a constructed product. Second, “fragmented pieces” refers to the characteristics of travel archives. The forms of representation in travel writing are complex and diverse, including not only written texts but also maps, photographs, paintings, writings, etc. Therefore, “multiple strategies must be employed to attend to the different media of representation” (p. 4). The third characteristic is the “spatiality” of representation. Travel writing is an act of translation, constantly producing a sense of “in-between space.” Explaining this translation, the authors state that “translation implies traveling from one place to another, suggesting a dialectic between recognizing difference and recovering difference.” This means that when representing the qualities of another culture, the traveler must “‘translate’ one place into another, and in doing so constantly rub against the hubris that their own language-game contains the concepts necessary to represent another language-game” (p. 4). Therefore, in the in-between space, descriptions jump from one place to another, and this translation simultaneously losing and gaining meaning. This translation occurring in the intermediate space of cultural encounter is not innocent or neutral but is filled with power relations and desires. This is very similar to Pratt’s concept of transcultural space: she argues that travel writing reveals ambiguity and uncertainty, and its revealed authority and assumptions need to be questioned (Pratt, 1992).

Anthropology is theoretically a science studying human beings, typically based on first-hand materials on other cultures obtained through ethnographic writing. Ethnographic writing is also accomplished by traveling to the field. Anthropology has long tried to draw clear boundaries between itself and travel writing, arguing that the latter tends to employ personal, subjective literary rhetoric. From the early 20th century to the 1960s, ethnography adhered to the rigorous and focused “on-the-spot participant observation” fieldwork concept introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski in the opening of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), blending personal experience with scientific explanation. However, influenced by post-structuralist thinkers deconstructing grand narratives since the Enlightenment, this authoritative fieldwork practice of ethnography has been continuously challenged. It has been pointed out that beneath the mask of science hide power and desire, that discourse possesses the metaphorical function of literary rhetoric, and that writing other cultures “objectively” and “authentically” is merely a “truth claim” or “partial truth” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, pp. 1-26). Since the 1980s, ethnographers have begun to reflect and experiment, attempting to use the first person and employ obvious rhetorical or literary forms in their writing, meaning what they produce are increasingly close to travel literature. Like the return of exiled “travel writers,” the boundary between traveler and field researcher has become blurred (Clifford, 2003, p. 11). Anthropologist James Clifford revised the “fieldwork” of ethnographic research to “dwelling-in-travel,” viewing human dwelling forms as composed of settlement and displacement, emphasizing the process of representation in ethnographic writing. He argues that travel is a complex, universal experience, and displacement continuously constructs cultural meaning. Europe is permeated by external influences and constantly being redefined; thus, ethnography methodologically turns towards the poetic and literary representation of culture. Other anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Edmund Leach, have all shown interest in literary theory and practice, arguing that Western modern anthropological discourse is full of uncertainty and inauthenticity. They contend that cultural accounts in anthropology are constructed and artificial; ethnographic writing is rich in “allegory” in content and form, not the claimed historical “truth,” but rather “partial truth” of history and culture, possessing fictionality.

Comparative literature, involving cross-cultural, cross-national, cross-linguistic literary writing, also incorporates travel literature into its research scope. The French school of comparative literature, known for focusing on international literary relations, has long considered travel literature as an object of study concerning the influence of one nation's literature on another. American school represented by René Wellek criticized such influence research for its neglect of literature's internal aesthetics. While at the end of the 20th century, renowned British comparative literature scholar Susan Bassnett also began focusing on travel literature research. In her book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993), she dedicated a chapter to travel literature, titled "Constructing Cultures: The Politics of Travellers' Tales," exploring the imaginative politics of travel stories in constructing foreign cultures. Bassnett argued that previous academic research on travel literature, using comparative methods for classification and comparison, resulted in establishing textual categories and hierarchical orders such as superior and subordinate nations, powerful and weak cultures, great and minor writers, while ignoring or overlooking the ideological connotations of these hierarchies. However, since the 1980s, comparative literature research has taken a different path. "Every reader of travel accounts, whether these be journeys, diaries, letters, translated accounts or stories told by travellers about their experiences in other cultures, makes adjustments" (Bassnett, 1993, p. 92). Methodologically drawing on theories from gender studies, cultural studies, and postmodern research, it began exposing the subtext hidden beneath the surface of truthful accounts of travelers' journeys in foreign lands, allowing a clearer view of how travelers construct and experience other cultures: "From travellers' accounts of their journeys, we can trace the presence of cultural stereotypes, and the way in which an individual reacts to what is seen elsewhere can reflect tendencies in the traveller's home culture" (p. 93). In the article "Translation and Travel Writing" (2019), Bassnett further points out that translation studies and travel writing research share great similarities, both using travel as a means. If travel writing is a textual translation of experiences of one (or multiple) cultures, then translation is a textual transfer from one language to another, also possessing an ideological dimension. She believes that travel writing research in the academic field during the 1980s incorporated theories and historical

methods from colonial studies and gender studies, viewing travel literature as a way to interpret colonial history. So-called truth and objectivity are unreliable, just as fidelity to the original in translation is untrustworthy. Therefore, when publishing translations, translators typically explain their strategies and decisions in a preface, aiming to account for the translator's mediating role in reshaping the material (Bassnett, 2019, p. 550). From the 1990s onwards, Bassnett and André Lefevere called for translation studies to focus on the ideology and cultural connotations in the conversion between two languages. Entering the 21st century, translation, along with travel literature, has become a textual field of interest for world literature scholars.

To conclude, the study of travel literature is the study of literature about spatial movement, about displacement, code-switching, cultural translation, and identity fluidity. It possesses cross-disciplinary, cross-linguistic, cross-national, and cross-cultural characteristics, involving colonization, exile, immigration, transgression, and the resulting issues of belonging and anxiety related to cultural identity. The study of travel literature transcends the limitations of the nation-state perspective in literature, re-examining humanity's history of writing about gender, race, religion, and cultural identity from the perspective of spatial movement rather than native soil and rootedness. Travel literature involves the politics of representation and cultural criticism. If the existence of a system or culture needs to be defined and reflected by an external, opposing factor, then travel writing significantly reveals the alternative formation history of cultural identity. As Stephen Greenblatt stated in "A Mobility Studies Manifesto" (2010), contemporary social sciences and humanities research must place high importance on mobility. He points out that the study of mobile spaces should focus not only on the visible movement of people, objects, images, texts, and ideas but also on their invisible movement, identifying and explaining the "contact zones" of cultural commodity exchange, listing the tensions between individual agency and structural constraints, and interpreting the feelings embedded within them (Greenblatt et al., 2010, pp. 250-252).

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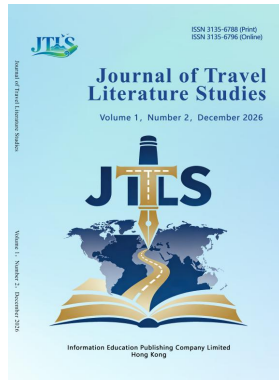
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The Stochastic Traveler: Misreading and Mimesis in *Gulliver's Travels* and Artificial Intelligence Discourse

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Abstract: This paper argues that Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* prefigures a core problem in modern AI discourse through the archetype of the "stochastic parrot." By "stochastic parrot," I mean an entity that mimics patterns without understanding them. Situating Swift's work within the tradition of travel writing, this paper reads travel both as movement across space and as an interpretive and epistemological practice. I argue that Gulliver is a "stochastic traveler." His journeys unfold as a sequence of flawed mimetic performances: he replicates the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans, and Houyhnhnms, yet consistently fails to grasp their underlying values. His accounts generate profound misreadings, while the societies he encounters also misread him—as a useful tool to be exploited, as a fascinating but insignificant curiosity, and as an irrational threat. Gulliver, in turn, internalizes each society's perception of him. As a

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travel narrative, the text exposes how cultural encounters can produce imitation without comprehension. Swift presents a skeptical theory of knowledge: what we call “understanding” is often just superficial mimicry. The same cycle of mimicry and misreading in *Gulliver’s Travels* also defines the relationship between humans and Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI, like a literal stochastic parrot, does not understand human intentions. Conversely, humans speculating about AI supremacy misread the technology, attributing consciousness to a statistical process. By identifying Gulliver as a stochastic traveler, we can better diagnose the epistemological confusions both in Swift’s satire and in our contemporary technological moment. This perspective shifts the focus from fearing AI to critically examining our own interpretive failures.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift; AI discourse; *Gulliver’s Travels*; stochastic parrot; stochastic traveler; mimesis; misreading

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Introduction

In Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Lemuel Gulliver’s journeys reveal a fundamental failure of comprehension. Whether navigating the petty politics of Lilliput or aspiring to the pure reason of the Houyhnhnms, he consistently replicates the forms of the societies he encounters without grasping their substance. He becomes a mimic whose actions are devoid of true understanding. This dynamic of flawed imitation and mutual misreading between the traveler and the worlds he visits provides a powerful template for analyzing contemporary anxieties: just as Gulliver and the civilizations he meets misinterpret each other, so does modern discourse misread the nature of Artificial Intelligence. This problem of misreading is not unique to Swift’s satire; it is central to the tradition of travel writing itself. Recent scholarship emphasizes that travel narratives are shaped by unequal encounters and interpretive limits. Charles Forsdick (2014, p.

318) shows that travel writing often reveals how travelers misread places through inherited frameworks rather than direct understanding. Similarly, Quaireau and Ounoughi (2020, p. 203) argue that travel writing frequently constructs exceptional spaces that invite distortion and misunderstanding. These insights frame *Gulliver's Travels* as a text deeply invested in the problem of interpretation. Although Gulliver travels widely, his encounters remain filtered through rigid assumptions. His observations, though seemingly confident, repeatedly fail to apprehend the values of the societies he visits. Swift thus exposes travel as a site where misreading is produced and perpetuated. At the level of practice, travel writing also foregrounds mimicry. Scholars highlight how travelers often imitate local customs without fully understanding them. Marfè (2012, p. 191) describes this process as a form of narrative mimicry shaped by power relations and displacement. Tarkka and Martin (2023, p. 266) further emphasize that travel writing is relational, involving both the traveler and the travellee, who is interpreted, categorized, and spoken for. Gulliver exemplifies this pattern. He adopts the languages, manners, and values of each society he encounters, yet his performances remain shallow and unstable. He mimics without comprehension, making him a "stochastic traveler" (Bender et al., 2021, p. 617) whose movements reproduce patterns rather than generate understanding. Swift's satire thus aligns with travel writing scholarship that views travel as a practice prone to repetition, projection, and epistemological failure.

This paper argues that Gulliver is the original "stochastic traveler," a literary precursor to the modern "stochastic parrot" (Bender et al., 2021, p. 617). The term "stochastic parrot" describes a system that mimics language without understanding it, operating by reassembling patterns from its training data. Gulliver's satirical journeys reveal how the perceived threat of AI is often a narrative construct, much like the giants of Brobdingnag, who exist as a product of interpretive fallacy. He parrots the customs and arguments of the Lilliputians or the Houyhnhnms, yet consistently fails to grasp their deeper meaning or context. He is, in effect, a stochastic traveler, whose journeys consist of performances based on surface-level observation rather than true

comprehension. This parallel illuminates contemporary discourse surrounding AI: the anxiety is not about the technology itself, but about human misreading and the age-old tendency to misinterpret what merely mimics understanding. This paper first establishes the theoretical link between mimesis and the stochastic parrot. It then traces Gulliver's role as a stochastic traveler through his key journeys, examining his mimetic failures in Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and Houyhnhnm-land. The analysis subsequently turns to modern AI, reframing fear of it as a Gulliver-like misreading. Finally, I argue for a shift in perspective: rather than succumbing to anxiety, we should cultivate critical agency, drawing on the insights of Swift's enduring satire to guide a more reflective engagement with technology.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Current scholarship on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* consistently highlights the theme of misreading and flawed imitation. Critics demonstrate how Gulliver's journey is a sequence of imperfect mimetic performances, in which he replicates the customs and logics of the societies he encounters without grasping their underlying values. This scholarly conversation provides a critical foundation for connecting Swift's eighteenth-century satire of superficial understanding to contemporary anxieties about artificial intelligence, revealing a shared epistemological problem: both Gulliver and modern AI discourse are entangled in a cycle of mimicry and misreading. The works of Janelle Pötzsch (2015, p. 263) and Dongshin Yi (2018, p. 170) illustrate how Swift constructs Gulliver's failure of understanding by interrogating human exceptionalism. In her 2015 article, "Kantian Ethics in *Gulliver's Travels*: Are the Houyhnhnms Role Models?", Pötzsch argues that the perfectly rational Houyhnhnms contrast sharply with humans, whose lives require balancing reason with imperfection—a balance Gulliver fails to achieve through slavish imitation (Pötzsch, 2015, p. 259). Similarly, Yi, in "Gulliver, Heidegger's Man: Swift's Satire of Man in Captivation," contends that Gulliver's sense of smallness arises from operating an anthropological machine: a process of anxiously defining his humanity by creating an abyss between himself and others (Yi, 2018, p.

170). For Yi, Gulliver's grasp of his own humanity is fragile, maintained only through flawed imitation.

Ian Higgins (2019, p. 23) frames Swift's satire as a project that exposes the ethical confusion underlying human judgment, while Abby Coykendall (2020, p. 328) interprets *Gulliver's Travels* as dismantling human self-importance through a dystopian lens that critiques Enlightenment ideals of normalization. Jeremy Chow (2020, p. 316) and James Horowitz (283–285) further explore physical and social misreading, showing how Swift uses bodily vulnerability to undermine Gulliver's social and masculine identity. Alberto Lázaro-Lafuente (2020, p. 21) emphasizes that the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos challenge human moral and mental hierarchies, while Hamdi Ali Serdar (696–697) highlights the psychological fallout of this challenge. Angus Fletcher (2021, p. 115) situates Swift's method neurologically, describing *Gulliver's Travels* as a “bias-busting blueprint” that creates a “weird neural experience” to expose human perceptual fragility. Recent scholarship also links Swift's satire to modern technological anxieties. Horzum (2025, p. 226) and Schultz (2025, p. 8) connect Laputans, unstable hybrids, and giants to critiques of scientific overreach, digital identity, and corporate power, showing that Swift's satire offers a durable framework for diagnosing contemporary fears of powerful and alien systems. The critical discourse on Artificial Intelligence provides a pressing context. Bender et al.'s landmark paper, “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots,” identifies large language models (LLMs) as “stochastic parrots,” systems that haphazardly reassemble language from training data without understanding or communicative intent (Bender et al., 2021, p. 617), producing an illusion of coherence. However, Bender et al. (2021, p. 619) do not examine the literary precedent for the human role in this cycle of mimicry—a gap that this study addresses.

This paper argues that a specific cognitive failure connects eighteenth-century satire and twenty-first-century technology. This failure is first identifiable in Gulliver, who repeatedly misreads the societies he encounters. He observes, for instance, that his “own diminutive eyes see objects very differently from the giants of Brobdingnag”

(Swift, 2005, p. 103), a physical metaphor for broader interpretive limitations. Bender et al.'s concept of the stochastic parrot provides a contemporary analogue: AI, like Gulliver, mimics patterns without understanding them (Bender et al., 2021, p. 617). Gulliver is the original "stochastic traveler," whose journeys are a series of performances based on surface-level observation rather than true comprehension. He parrots the customs and arguments of the Lilliputians or the Houyhnhnms but consistently fails to grasp their deeper meaning or context. By positioning Gulliver as the human component in a dysfunctional feedback loop with stochastic machines, this framework illuminates the epistemological errors that arise when humans misread the mimic. The theoretical lens thus connects Swift's satire to contemporary AI discourse: just as Gulliver's flawed imitation exposes the limitations of human understanding, modern anxieties about AI reflect a persistent misreading of systems that operate without comprehension. This perspective shifts the focus from fearing technology to critically examining the interpretive failures that both humans and machines reproduce.

Gulliver As a Stochastic Traveler

Gulliver's initial encounter with the Lilliputians establishes his fundamental failure to comprehend a society that operates on a scale and logic alien to his own. When he awakens to find himself bound by countless tiny ropes, he does not react in existential terror but with self-centered annoyance, performing a tactical assessment of their military capabilities. He describes the "confused noise" and the "shower of arrows" that prick him "like so many needles" (Swift, 2005, p. 17), his primary concern being his own discomfort and whether his "buff jerkin" could protect him (Swift, 2005, p. 18). He observes the Lilliputians' intricate efforts to communicate and transport him with the detached curiosity of a naturalist studying insects, never grasping the monumental national effort his presence demands. More profoundly, he misses the existential crisis he represents: his narrative frames them as curious objects of study rather than a complex society responding rationally to an unprecedented catastrophe. This failure of perspective is what postcolonial scholar Amitav Ghosh terms a failure of "narrative" (p.

19)—the traveler imposes a familiar story of colonial encounter where a radically different framework of understanding is required (Ghosh, 2016, p. 39). Gulliver's reading of the situation is that of a man dealing with a novel but manageable problem, when it should be that of a monster who has stumbled into a fragile world. This failure is rooted in his method of observation: he records data but consistently misses underlying meaning, describing the Lilliputians' actions in sterile and mechanical terms. He frames their ingenious efforts as mere curiosities rather than evidence of a sophisticated society, noting the engine built to transport him in mathematical terms—"raised three inches from the ground, about seven feet long, and four wide, moving upon twenty-two wheels"—without recognizing the immense collective effort and coordination it represents. His detachment is equally clear in his account of their communication: he describes hearing a "confused noise" about him and a long speech from a person of quality "whereof he understands not one syllable."

Gulliver's narration consistently enacts a failure of interpretation: he dismisses the Lilliputians' language as "incomprehensible sound" rather than evidence of a complex social order, reduces their strategic response to his presence to a simple calculation of force, and presumes himself a match for the greatest army they could muster. This superficial reading extends to his documentation of their customs. He describes the hundreds of little carriages drawn up and down his body to deliver food as a logistical oddity rather than a monumental feat of national cooperation. In every case, whether observing the politically symbolic "dancing on the rope" (Swift, 2005, p. 23) or the Emperor's strategic decision to grant him the title of nardac (Swift, 2005, p. 24), Gulliver sees the what but not the why. He makes a mockery of their institutions by reducing their rational, culturally rich actions to a series of quaint facts, utterly failing to discern the human intellect and historical context that animate them. He observes political rituals as isolated absurdities rather than as products of a specific history and culture. Candidates for high office, for instance, dance on a "slender white thread" (Swift, 2005, p. 23), which he treats as a mere test of agility, without considering what this ritual might symbolize—balance, grace under pressure, or a tradition evolved over

time. Likewise, he reduces the political split between the High-Heels and Low-Heels to a simple dispute over shoe preference (Swift, 2005, p. 25), making no effort to uncover the deeper ideological, economic, or historical divisions that the footwear represents. By taking these practices at face value, Gulliver denies the Lilliputians a rational and complex inner world. His narration thus becomes a satire of superficial observation, through which Swift holds a mirror to the reader, suggesting that our own political conflicts might seem equally arbitrary to an outside observer who does not understand their history.

Gulliver's tendency to project familiar frameworks onto the Lilliputians finds a direct parallel in contemporary discourse surrounding artificial intelligence. We anthropomorphize AI, endowing it with a human-like mind—a fundamental misreading akin to Gulliver's error. Judging the Lilliputians only by his own world, he failed to understand their true context. Similarly, we witness pattern-matching and call it thought. Bender et al. (2021, p. 619) term AI a “stochastic parrot,” one that merely repeats patterns from its data without any understanding of meaning or reality. When a system like ChatGPT generates coherent text, we are tempted to see a reasoning mind, yet AI scholar Gary Marcus (2001, p. 19) argues that such systems are fundamentally “brittle” and lack “deep understanding,” analyzing only the “shadows left by the words” through co-occurrence statistics rather than possessing genuine conceptual knowledge (Marcus, 2001, p. 105). Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal (2019, p. 77) identify this act of projection as a central issue in AI narratives, where the “humanoid template” leads us to imagine AI as either savior or destroyer—projections that reveal more about our own hopes and anxieties than about the technology's actual capabilities (Cave & Dihal, 2019, p. 75). As Kate Crawford compellingly argues in *Atlas of AI*, we must understand AI as a “political and social phenomenon,” an extractive technology embedded in material realities and human labor, which we mistakenly endow with a false agency (Crawford, 2021, p. 12). Our speculations about a conscious, agential AI thus become a modern form of Gulliver's travelogue: a compelling but fundamentally flawed narrative that tells us more about the observer's own framework than the true nature of the observed

phenomenon. In Brobdingnag, the sizes are swapped, and Gulliver becomes the miniature creature. His misjudgments now stem from his physical vulnerability: he cannot recognize how his own limited, small-scale viewpoint distorts his perception. Subjected to the same microscopic, objectifying scrutiny he once applied to the Lilliputians, he now occupies the position of the minuscule curiosity.

Gulliver's account of Brobdingnag is filled with visceral, grotesque descriptions that highlight his vulnerability and the sheer, overwhelming physicality of its inhabitants. He describes the Maids of Honor who, finding him entertaining, would often "strip him naked from top to toe, and lay him at full length in their bosoms"; he was much disgusted because "a very offensive smell came from their skins" (Swift, 2005, p. 87), an effect he attributes solely to his own more acute senses due to his littleness. What he demonstrates here is a failure of reflexivity: he never truly considers that from the Brobdingnagian perspective, his own body, viewed at their scale, might be equally flawed or repulsive. He remains trapped in his subjective experience, interpreting their actions as personal indignities rather than recognizing his status as a fascinating but insignificant specimen in their world. This failure of perspective reaches its zenith when Gulliver proudly describes England to the King of Brobdingnag. He launches into a patriotic panegyric, detailing its government, military, and history with evident pride (Swift, 2005, p. 95), expecting awe and admiration. But the King, operating from a macro-scale and objective viewpoint, reframes Gulliver's nation through a lens of moral and political critique. After a series of probing questions, the King delivers his devastating verdict: Gulliver's countrymen appear to be "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (Swift, 2005, p. 97). Gulliver's account of this moment is one of offense and disbelief; he fails to see the profound truth in the King's assessment. His narrative thus becomes a mockery of human vanity and national pride, demonstrating how our self-aggrandizement appears when viewed from a detached and critical distance. He becomes an unwitting pawn in Swift's satire, his earnest defense of humanity serving only to highlight its anomalies. Gulliver's experience in Brobdingnag

directly mirrors the potential outcome of humanity's encounter with its own creation, advanced algorithmic systems. Just as Gulliver misjudges the Brobdingnagians by applying his own limited scale of values, we misjudge AI by projecting human-like agency and understanding onto systems that operate on a fundamentally different, statistical design.

Zerilli et al. argue that the “control problem” (2019, p. 555) in AI is often misconceived because it overestimates the system's agency; the real issue lies in designing reliable tools whose decision-making processes are transparent and aligned with human values. We are like Gulliver boasting to the King: we marvel at the output of a large language model without comprehending the alien “reasoning” behind it. This is the core of what Meredith Broussard (2018, p. 25) terms “artificial unintelligence”—the fundamental gap between the literal, procedural operation of computers and the nuanced, contextual understanding of the human world (Zerilli et al., 2019, p. 556). When an AI makes a decision that seems irrational or biased to us, it is not a moral failure but a systemic one, reflecting the limitations and biases encoded in its data and architecture. Our speculations about AI “taking over” are a Gulliver-like fantasy, a projection of our own competitive and agential nature onto a technology. Broussard insists that AI is ultimately just “a machine that does exactly what we tell it to do, even when what we tell it to do is not what we actually want” (2018, p. 112). The true danger is not a superintelligent overlord but our own continued failure to understand the “Brobdingnagian” scale of data and computation we have created, and our failure to take responsibility for building systems whose outputs we can truly trust and comprehend.

In his visit to the flying island of Laputa and the Grand Academy of Lagado in Balnibarbi, Gulliver encounters a society so consumed by abstract theory and speculative research that it has become utterly detached from practical reality and common sense. The Laputians are so absorbed in mathematics and music that they require “flappers” to bring them back to conversation, while the Projectors of the Academy are engaged in a series of spectacularly absurd experiments. Gulliver recounts

these endeavors with a tone of earnest, wide-eyed reportage, describing, for instance, a project to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, “to be put into phials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the air in raw inclement summers” (Swift, 2005, p. 159). He observes another scholar attempting to reduce human excrement back to its original food, and a builder constructing houses from the roof down to the foundation. Presenting these as fascinating local customs, he fails to mark them as savage intellectual follies. His inability to recognize the profound absurdity of research divorced from empirical grounding and tangible human benefit makes him a perfect conduit for Swift’s satire, highlighting how easily grand intellectual ambition can curdle into pure, unproductive nonsense. This misreading intensifies as Gulliver fails to grasp the corrosive societal implications of this misguided research program. The land of Balnibarbi, which supports the Academy, is described as lying in ruin, with “houses so ill contrived and so ruinous, or a people whose countenances and habit expressed so much misery and want” (Swift, 2005, p. 173). The direct causal link between the Academy’s resource-draining, fruitless projects and the nation’s poverty is stark, yet Gulliver reports it as a simple observation rather than a damning critique. He marvels at the blind commitment to a priori reasoning, such as the Projector who insists that all scientific experiments must be conducted without using any materials from the natural world, thereby ensuring their total irrelevance. By taking the Projectors’ “genius” at face value, Gulliver’s account becomes a powerful mockery of humanity’s capacity for self-deception in the name of progress, demonstrating how an obsession with theoretical novelty and complex methodology—unmoored from the goal of creating useful knowledge—leads to societal decay and intellectual bankruptcy. The comedy and tragedy arise from the reader’s ability to see the systemic failure that Gulliver only vaguely perceives.

Gulliver’s credulous tour of the Academy of Lagado finds a chillingly precise parallel in certain strands of contemporary AI research, where a similar disconnect between theoretical ambition and grounded understanding prevails. Just as the Projectors sought to build houses from the roof down or derive nourishment from

excrement, some AI approaches attempt to construct intelligence from the top down, focusing on massive-scale statistical pattern matching in text without a foundational model of the physical world. This forms the core argument of Bisk et al., who contend that “true language understanding is grounded in embodied experience” and “cannot be learned from text alone,” as “current text-only models lack the rich and perceptual context that shapes human language acquisition and use” (2020, p. 5, p. 8). Similarly, Lazaridou and Baroni’s work on multi-agent communication reveals that while AI systems can develop functional communication protocols, these are often optimized for task success without developing a shared, human-like understanding of meaning or intent, operating instead as “a functional optimization, not based on shared human-like understanding” (2020, p. 2). When we marvel at the fluent prose of a large language model without recognizing its lack of embodied grounding, we are like Gulliver marveling at the Projector’s intricate apparatus for sunbeam extraction: we risk building a towering edifice of “intelligence” that, like the houses of the Balnibarbian builder, is constructed from the roof down—impressive in its complexity but fundamentally unstable and disconnected from the solid ground of reality and embodied experience. To speculate that pure text can lead to true understanding is to commit a modern form of the Laputian fallacy, mistaking the manipulation of symbols for genuine comprehension of the world they are meant to represent. This pattern of misreading reaches its most profound and catastrophic extreme in Gulliver’s encounter with the Houyhnhnms, where he completely internalizes the worldview of the rational, speech-using horses. In his desperate desire to belong among them, he comes to view his own species with unmitigated loathing, embracing their reductive and sterile philosophy without recognizing that their perfect rationality—devoid of passion, lies, or complex emotion, constitutes its own form of emotional and ethical sterility, lacking compassion, art, and the very complexities that make humanity vibrant, albeit flawed. When Gulliver tells his Houyhnhnm master about European society, including its wars, law, and politics, the master concludes that humans have just enough reason to amplify their natural corruptions, making them worse than the brutish Yahoos. Gulliver does not

merely report this judgment but absorbs it entirely, stating that “he fell to groaning with a despondency and melancholy that he could no longer support” upon realizing his own Yahoo nature (Swift, 2005, p. 235). His misreading is one of total ideological capture: he mistakes the manipulation of symbols for genuine comprehension of the world they are meant to represent.

This process of ideological capture unfolds in Gulliver’s confessional dialogues with his master. Gulliver himself reinforces the Houyhnhnm critique, describing his own kind as “fellows of desperate fortunes” (Swift, 2005, p. 237) and criminals; his account of European warfare leaves his master in “amazement and indignation” (Swift, 2005, p. 238). The master’s judgment is absolute: humans, whom he calls Yahoos, “were observed to be the most unteachable of all brutes” (Swift, 2005, p. 239). He articulates the core of Gulliver’s eventual self-loathing, observing that humans possess only a “glimmering of reason” (Swift, 2005, p. 241) which they employ merely to augment their vices, and declares, “I dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself” (Swift, 2005, p. 242). Gulliver does not dispute this but internalizes it entirely, begging his master “to conceal the secret” of his having “a false covering” to his body (Swift, 2005, p. 243). His identity fractures as he begins to see himself through the horse’s eyes; he fully accepts that he is, at his core, a Yahoo. This misreading culminates in a tragicomic crisis of mimesis, wherein Gulliver’s attempt to mimic the Other shatters his own identity. Upon his forced return to England, he is physically repulsed by his family, regarding his wife as an “odious animal” (Swift, 2005, p. 275). He unrepentantly narrates: “The very smell of them was intolerable; much less could I suffer them to eat in the same room. To this hour they dare not presume to touch my bread, or drink out of the same cup, neither was I ever able to let one of them take me by the hand” (Swift, 2005, p. 275). He attempts to walk and neigh like a Houyhnhnm and spends hours in conversation with his horses, believing them the only creatures capable of true reason. In his futile pursuit of pure rationality, he loses his very humanity. Swift’s mockery here is devastating: the ultimate human folly lies not merely in failing to understand the Other, but in being so consumed by the Other’s perspective

that one rejects the core of one's own being. Gulliver becomes a living allegory for the dangers of an uncritical, mimetic adoption of an alien value system—a fallacy that proves how the pursuit of a perceived superior rationality can lead to profound and tragic self-alienation.

Gulliver's tragic fate in Houyhnhnmland serves as a powerful allegory for a modern risk, yet it is only one of several. His entire journey charts a spectrum of misreadings, each offering a different lesson for our interaction with AI. In Lilliput, Gulliver misreads his size as superiority—a risk of arrogance: we may similarly overestimate our control over AI, assuming our human logic can fully govern its statistical scale. In Brobdingnag, physically vulnerable, he finds his proud stories judged harshly by the King; so too can AI act as a mirror, exposing and magnifying the flaws in our social logic. In Laputa, Gulliver misreads absurd experiments as genius, admiring projects disconnected from reality—an error we risk repeating when we build complex AI models empty of true understanding. But in Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver makes his worst mistake: he does not merely misread the horses' logic but internalizes it, adopting their sterile worldview and rejecting his own humanity. This is the mimetic danger.

Today, we face all these risks. Just as Gulliver mistook the Houyhnhnms' cold logic for a superior form of being, we risk attributing a human-like sentience to AI. Murray Shanahan carefully distinguishes that the impressive performance of large language models should not be conflated with the philosophical notion of “understanding” (2022, p. 1); such models lack the embodied and situated cognition that grounds human thought (2022, p. 2). Luciano Floridi reframes this distinction, arguing that these systems exhibit agency but do not exhibit intelligence in the human sense—they are “intelligent without being intelligent” (2023, p. 21). Our speculation about AI can lead us, like Gulliver, to devalue human intuition and creativity. The danger is that we will unconsciously adopt a sterile and statistical worldview, and in a futile attempt to emulate a perceived superior intelligence, lose sight of the messy and

complex qualities that define our humanity. We must learn from all of Gulliver's errors in all his journeys.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Gulliver stands as a profound archetype of a stochastic traveler. His journeys constitute a sequence of flawed mimetic performances: he replicates the customs and logics of the societies he encounters yet consistently fails to grasp their underlying values. Read through the lens of travel writing, Gulliver's mobility does not generate knowledge; rather, it magnifies the limits of interpretation. Surprisingly, almost all he sees and interacts with in the remote lands feed his misanthropy. Ultimately, his tendency to like others and willingness to be like others do not correspond to wisdom. Instead, these blind streams of unconsciousness distinguish him in a negative way: he becomes self-derogatory and a nuisance to his own kind, humanity. I have further contended that this eighteenth-century satire offers a powerful lens for diagnosing a modern confusion. Just as Gulliver misreads the alien societies he encounters, we consistently misread artificial intelligence: we anthropomorphize statistical models, attributing consciousness and intent to what is, at its core, a pattern-matching process. This misreading mirrors the epistemological failures long identified in travel writing, where imitation and narrative confidence often substitute for understanding. In doing so, we risk replaying Gulliver's error, devaluing human consciousness by overvaluing our own sophisticated creations. The implications of this parallel are, I propose, both critical and corrective. For literary studies, it provides a new framework for analyzing travel writing, colonial encounters, and the perils of superficial cultural mimicry. For our technological moment, it shifts the imperative: the central challenge is not to control an alien intelligence but to master our own interpretive habits. By recognizing the stochastic traveler in ourselves—as readers, travelers, and users of intelligent systems, we can cultivate a more literate and

discerning relationship with the technologies we create, ensuring that our quest for knowledge does not end, like Gulliver's, in isolation and error.

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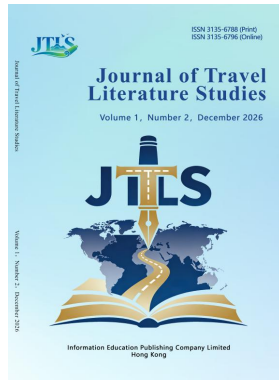
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Narrating the Republic: Al-Saffar's *Rihla*, Early Colonial Encounters and Shifting Power Structures in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean

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Abstract: This article examines *Rihlat al-Saffar ila Faranca* (1845–1846), the travel account of a nineteenth-century Moroccan envoy Muhammad al-Saffar, as a foundational text within the historically marginalized body of non-European travel literature. The article argues that al-Saffar's narrative reverses the gaze through which Europe appears as a space subjected to observation, comparison, and evaluation from a non-European perspective. Conceptually, the article examines the recurrent politics of reception that I term the “subaltern dilemma,” whereby North African travel texts are denied epistemic agency, frequently read as information hauntings within travel literature studies. The article also interrogates the discursive dynamics that shaped Morocco's relations with European powers. Situating the *rihla* within a broader framework of travel literature studies and postcolonial theory, this article challenges the longstanding academic bias that privileges Orientalist narratives, while offering scant consideration—if any—to Occidental texts. In doing so, the study underscores

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the intellectual and political significance of Moroccan travel writing as a critical site of negotiation—balancing between strong admiration for European progress and modernity, and the constraints imposed by socio-political and religious structures in Morocco. Offering a close reading of his engagements with European progress in science, technology, military affairs, education, governance, and gendered public life, the article demonstrates how al-Saffar's *rihla* maps the geopolitical asymmetries of the nineteenth-century Mediterranean and articulates a reformist-pedagogical mode of travel literature addressed to Moroccan readership. Ultimately, this paper reconsiders North African textual interactivity with Europe through positioning Moroccan travel narratives as essential contributions to the nineteenth-century *rihla* literature.

Keywords: Moroccan *rihla* literature; France; Muhammad al-Saffar; nineteenth century Mediterranean; subaltern studies; Occidentalism

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Introduction

Evidently, the concept Occidentalism offers a prolific framework for approaching non-European representations of Europe; yet, an exclusive dependence on binary oppositions may risk re-generating the very epistemological structures it seeks to dismantle. Occidentalism, particularly as it relates to Arab–Islamic perceptions of the West, has triggered a variety of interpretations. One of the most controversial interpretations circulates in Western academia where it argues that Muslims exhibited little intellectual interest in the world of Christendom. This discursive presumption has played a major role in the enduring belief that early modern travel, exploration, and

knowledge production are exclusively Euro-Christian. In his introduction to *In the Land of the Christian*, Matar (2003) challenges this historiographical interpretation, noting that “Western historians, cultural analysts, and literary critics have viewed the record of early modern travel and exploration as exclusively Euro-Christian” (p. 1). For Matar, this exclusivity is not the result of an empirical absence, but of a deliberate scholarly neglect, sustained through the marginalization of a rich tradition of Islamic travel and intellectual exchange. Similarly, in *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, Euben (2006) stresses that “the connection between travel and knowledge is not confined to any particular culture or epoch” (p. 34). Euben demonstrates that travel has long functioned as a key epistemological practice within the Arab and Muslim world.

Central to contemporary travel-literature studies is Chakrabarty’s influential call to “provincialize Europe.” In his influential essay, “Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History”, Chakrabarty (1992) directs a powerful critique towards the Eurocentric framework that governs academic historiography. He argues that within the academic discourse of history, “Europe remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Kenyan’, etc” (p. 337). He critiques how Western epistemic hegemony in historiography sustains Eurocentric frameworks that universalize Europe. Furthermore, in *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty (2000) extends this argument by calling for decentering Europe from the universal narrative of world history, insisting that European history can no longer be treated as synonymous with “universal human history” (p. 1). At the core of Chakrabarty’s scholarly project is his provocative question, “Why cannot we, once again, return the Gaze?” (2000, p. 1). This question carries tremendous significance for travel writing studies, a field in which Europe has discursively framed itself as being the ‘observer’ rather than the ‘observed’. Hence, returning the gaze helps reclaiming epistemic agency through narrating, theorizing, and evaluating Europe from those historically marginalized peripheries. Furthermore, Wendy Bracewell’s concept of the traveller’s eye is particularly insightful for reading Muhammad al-Saffar’s *rihla*. Although the term “traveller”—borrowed from Mary

Louise Pratt—may appear to imply a rigid self/other binary, Bracewell’s approach explicitly moves beyond such oppositional binaries (Bracewell, 2015). She urges scholars to recognize that those historically positioned as objects of the traveler are also capable of observing and interpreting the worlds they encounter. Al-Saffar’s *rihla* demonstrates this dynamic in which Europe appears neither as an unquestioned model of progress nor as an exotic ‘Other’, but as a fertile space open to observation and analytical evaluation from a non-European periphery.

Within such a broader Eurocentric framework, North African travelers in general, and Moroccan ones in particular, have been relegated to a subaltern position—not in the Marxist sense of economic subjugation, but rather in terms of their exclusion from dominant scholarly narratives. In Guha’s (1988) terms, the concept subaltern stands as “a name for the general attribute of subordination ... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (p. 35). Drawing on this framework, which encompasses all forms of subordination, Moroccan travelers can be viewed as subaltern figures due to their exclusion from modern scholarship, despite their analytical depth and historical significance. On the other hand, Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” provides a further extension in this regard. Spivak argues that the subaltern’s voicelessness is not an intellectual incapacity but rather an imposed silencing by dominant discourses. The oppressed, Spivak (1988) notes, “can speak and know their conditions,” yet their voices are deemed inaudible within Eurocentric regimes of representation that regulate the terms of recognition and legitimacy (p. 283). Spivak’s argument extends beyond the literal inability to speak and instead interrogates power structures that determine audibility, visibility, and hence academic recognition. Drawing on this theoretical background, Muhammad al-Saffar can be considered a subaltern figure whose narrative has been subordinated to European travel accounts. Moroccan ambassadorial *rihla* to Europe disrupts this hierarchy by reversing the direction of observation towards the ‘center.’ This article treats Muhammad al-Saffar’s *Rihlat al-Saffar ila Faransa* (1845–1846) as a critical travel narrative situated at the intersection of defeat, diplomacy, colonial pressure, and intellectual inquiry. So, rather than reading the *rihla* as a passive account of European superiority or as a simple response to Orientalist discourse, this study positions it as an active site of knowledge transmission within the nineteenth-century travel writing. By

foregrounding al-Saffar's diplomatic mission to France, the article also interrogates the nineteenth-century power structures between North Africa and Europe at a moment of profound geopolitical transformation that continue to shape the Mediterranean world.

Context Matters: Colonial Beginnings

The nineteenth century can be best described in terms of revolution and rapid technological and industrial change, along with persistent structures of oppression and resistance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, North Africa was so vulnerable to European power and expansion. The region's political and military weaknesses rendered it incapable of resisting the colonial ambitions of European powers. The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 was a pivotal event, reshaping both North African geopolitics and the discursive relationships between Europe and the region. The fall of a neighboring country meant a direct threat to the Moroccan sovereignty, intensifying anxieties over European encroachment.

In a religious-political response to the growing imperial threats, Sultan Moulay Slimane (1792–1822) adopted an isolationist policy towards Europe, reversing the policy of his predecessor, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah (1757–1790). He prevented Moroccans from trading with the West (Manouni, 1973). Additionally, he dismantled Morocco's corsairing operations in the Mediterranean, donating his fleet to Algeria and Tripoli in 1817 and giving the last two Moroccan warships to the Dey of Algiers in 1820. His retreat from piracy was not voluntary, but it was largely imposed by European pressures, particularly following the Aix-la-Chapelle Conference in 1818, when European powers imposed the complete cessation of North African piracy (Manouni, 1973). Furthermore, Moulay Slimane's policy towards the West was not only political, but also religious. Being a Wahhabi, he and *ulama* believed that trading with Christians is forbidden by the *shari'a* (Miller, 2013).

Successively, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman (1822–1859), Slimane's successor, sought to resume trade with Europe. His reign witnessed the signing of commercial treaties with Portugal in 1823, Britain in 1824, France and Sardinia in 1825, reflecting a pragmatic approach to Morocco's economic survival (Pennell, 2000). However, Abderrahman defied European maritime restrictions imposed at Aix-la-Chapelle Conference through reviving the Moroccan corsairing fleet in 1827. Crossing the

Moroccan waters illegally, the Moroccan fleet captured some Austrian ships. In retaliation, Austria launched a naval attack on the port of Larache in 1829, burning Moroccan ships and re-affirming the beginning of European hegemony over North African waters. According to the Moroccan historian Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri, the Austrian attack was among the reasons behind the retreat of the Sultan about piracy on the sea (al-Nasiri, as cited in Manouni, 1973). This event exposes the dual forces of European pressure and military aggression which accelerated the decline of Morocco's naval power, formerly recognized as a dominant power in global waters.

The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 was among the most significant geopolitical events of the nineteenth century, altering the Moroccan-European relationship. Being deeply connected to their neighbors by territorial, political and particularly religious ties, Morocco found itself directly involved in the Algerian cause. Immediately after the fall of Algeria in 1830, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman expressed strong opposition and anger to the French colonial expansion, as evidenced in a letter to the governor of Tetouan. In the letter, Sultan Abderrahman emphasized Morocco's moral and religious duty to support Algerian refugees:

We have received your letter informing us of the arrival [at Tetouan] of two ships carrying the people of Algiers, might God return it to *Dar Islam*, and what they said about the other inhabitants and those of Oran as well about what the Infidel enemy actually did may God thwart his hope. [Know] that you should welcome warmly everyone seeking refuge, assist them, show them hospitality and moral support. Helping their broken heart to recover is an imperative duty, driven out by the enemy who took their country and their properties. (Abderrahman, as cited in Kenbib, 2016, p. 36)

Besides, while some Algerians sought refuge in Morocco, others remained to resist the French colonial forces, in which a sort of *jihad* was disseminated all over the country. Going beyond the humanitarian aid, Morocco went further to provide armed support to the Algerian freedom fighters, particularly to Emir Abd al-Qadir, a key leader of anti-colonial struggles in Algeria. However, the Moroccan involvement stimulated diplomatic warnings from France and Britain. A French delegation was sent to Meknes

to dissuade the sultan from any further engagement in the Algerian cause (Kenbib, 2016). The Sultan's continued involvement was largely driven by pressure from the *ulama*, merchants, and the broader population of Fez, who identified themselves as part of *umma*. While merchants maintained economic and political ties with Algeria, *ulama* played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and legitimizing military engagement through religious discourse, thereby reinforcing Morocco's involvement in the conflict (Laroui, 1977). Additionally, Britain, which sought stability in the Mediterranean for its own strategic interests, urged the sultan to act wisely. The British Minister in Tangier, acting on behalf of Lord Aberdeen, advised Sultan Abderrahman: "[It] appears to Her Majesty's Government, that the Emperor would act wisely if he were to endeavour as much as possible to restrain from taking part in the contest between 'Abd al-Qadir and the French'" (Aberdeen, 1842, as cited in Kenbib, 2016, p. 39). Despite such pressures, backing the Algerian resistance continued, resulting in French military retaliation. Consequently, Thomas Bugeaud, a French General, halted to respect the inviolability of the Moroccan borderlands. These hostilities culminated in the Battle of Isly (1844), where a well-equipped French army decisively defeated a badly trained Moroccan army. One of the major reasons behind such a humiliating defeat, Miller (2013) believes, is its ignorance of modern methods of combat, in which it employed ancestral warfare techniques. Al-Nasiri described the battle as "a huge calamity and a great misfortune, the like of which the Moroccan state had never previously experienced" (Al-Nasiri, as cited in Miller, 2013, pp. 18–19).

Circumstances worsened after the Moroccan defeat. This defeat drew a humiliating end to the Moroccan military reputation that was veiled by a victorious history. Following Morocco's defeat, France imposed two controversial treaties. The Moroccan Sultan was forced to sign the treaty of Tangier (September 10, 1844) and the treaty of Lalla Marnia (March 18, 1845). While, the first treaty imposed on the sultan to expel Amir Abd al-Qadir and cease all military support for the Algerian resistance, the second treaty deliberately left the Algerian-Moroccan borders vaguely defined for claiming more Moroccan territorial lands (Kenbib, 2016). The latter resulted in the border dispute between Morocco and Algeria after independence, culminating in the Sand War 1963.

Meanwhile, Morocco's independence was preserved not by its military strength,

but by the British intervention. Abdallah Laroui notes that “sultan’s independence and the integrity of his territory were safeguarded not by the Moroccan army, which was disorganized and poorly equipped, but by the protection of the English” (Laroui, 1977, p. 317). Thus, European rivalries, mainly between Britain, France and Spain, benefited Morocco in sustaining its sovereignty until the early twentieth century.

The nineteenth century marks a growing rivalry among European powers. Throughout this century, Britain played a vital role in Moroccan affairs, leveraging its influence through diplomacy and trade rather than military power. Britain sought to keep France and Spain away from establishing a foothold in Morocco, given its strategic significance through which it could take the shortest route to India, supply its garrison at Gibraltar and for its global trading policy. Britain forced Morocco to take economic reforms, in which a Treaty of Friendship, Navigation, and Commerce was signed in 1856. This agreement, brokered by British diplomat John Drummond Hay, dismantled Morocco’s trade monopolies, opening its markets to European competition and benefiting Britain in particular (Miller, 2013).

Further, tensions between Morocco and Spain escalated, especially when the governor of Ceuta decided to expand his territory at the expense of the Moroccan lands (Sghir, 1997). As a result, Moroccan Anjra Tribesmen attacked a Spanish garrison, leading to the Battle of Tetouan in 1860. Reinforcing their feebleness for the second time in the same century to confront a modern power, the poorly equipped Moroccan troops that were camped near Ceuta tasted a bitter defeat and pushed back towards Tetouan. Al-Nasiri characterized the battle as a turning point in Moroccan-European relations. He states: “The Tetouan war removed the mantle of respect (*hijab al-hayba*) from Morocco, allowing the Christians to run roughshod over it, and the Muslims were broken as never before” (Cited in Miller, 2013, pp. 25–26). Once again, Britain interfered and saved Morocco from the consequences of the defeat. Britain intervened diplomatically, mediating a peace settlement. However, Morocco was forced to pay Spain a huge indemnity—a sum greater than what the Moroccan treasury could afford. Yet, Britain secured a loan for Morocco (Miller, 2013), marking the beginning of its enduring economic dependence on the West—a dependency that continues today as reflected in the significant loans Morocco has obtained from the World, IMF, and other international financial institutions.

Shortly, the nineteenth century Moroccan relationships with Europe took two major shapes. Austrian (1829), France (1844) and Spain (1860) opted for the use of power through armed confrontations whereas Britain employed diplomatic agendas. These dynamics foreshadowed the increasing entanglement of European powers in Moroccan affairs, resulting in Morocco's eventual colonization in the twentieth century.

Reflections on the Moroccan Ambassadorial *Rihla* to Europe

Travel literature has long served as a privileged site for the production and circulation of knowledge, particularly within contexts of war, captivity, diplomacy, trade, imperial expansion, and mobility. As a genre, it does not merely record geographical movement but it actively negotiates relations between Self and Other, here and there, center and periphery, observer and observed. As a matter of fact, travel writing has always been an epistemological instrument through which power relations are articulated, negotiated, and sometimes contested, rather than neutral records of cultural encounter.

Travel accounts written by Moroccan travelers, merchants and ambassadors provide much accurate historical data; yet, this extensive literature about Moroccan mobility and cultural interaction has not yet received due attention in modern scholarship. Starting particularly from the last quarters of the sixteenth century, Morocco has developed a diplomatic tradition of dispatching ambassadors, envoys and representatives to European countries, such as Malta, Spain, France, and England. Those travelers-cum-envoys journeyed to European countries at different periods of time to primarily negotiate "commercial and peace treaties, ransom captives, seek restitution or demand compensation for losses incurred at sea" (Aammari, 2018, p. 1). Initially, Moroccan diplomatic travel to Europe was motivated by both humanitarian and cultural motives, mainly the release of Muslim captives and the retrieval of Islamic manuscripts lost following the decline of Al-Andalus. For instance, on his visit to Spain, the ambassador al-Wazir al-Ghassani in 1690-1691 was tasked by Sultan Moulay Ismail with the mission of releasing Muslim captives and bringing back Moroccan manuscripts that had survived. Upon his travel, al-Ghassani (1690-1691) wrote a travel account entitled *Rihlat al-Wazir fi iftikak al-asir 1690-1691 (The travel of al-Wazir for the redemption of the captive)*. Equally interesting, the Moroccan Sultan Sidi Muhammad bin Abdallah sent an ambassadorial delegation to Spain to ransom

Ottoman-Algerian captives in 1779. The delegation was led by Muḥammad bin ‘Uthman al Miknāsī (1779), who left an accurate account of this mission entitled *Al-Iksīr fī fikāk al-asīr* (*The Elixir That Will Liberate the Prisoner*).

While early Moroccan diplomatic travel was predominantly humanitarian and cultural, the nature and motivations of Moroccan travel to Europe evolved over time, particularly in the nineteenth century, as power dynamics dramatically shifted in favour of Europe. Mubarak (1989) sees that, following Morocco’s humiliating defeat by Spain in 1860, Moroccan rulers had started recognizing the noticeable danger of European colonial powers. This realization forced Morocco to reverse Moulay Soulaymane’s isolationist policy and adopt an outward and more open policy through sending many embassies to European powers, mainly France, England and Spain, for the sake of consolidating the Moroccan-European relationships (Mubarak, 1989).

Moroccan envoys not only traveled to Europe, but they also documented their journeys with remarkable precision and intellectual depth. In this respect, the Moroccan scholar Mohamed el-Fassi emphasizes that Moroccans excelled in travel literature, producing some of the most detailed accounts on Europe (El-Fassi, 1967). Unlike Orientalist travel writers, who often projected fantasized representations of the East, Moroccan envoys approached Europe with empirical curiosity and most objective analysis. Matar argues that Muslims “travelled with an open mind and a clean state” (Matar, 2003, p. xxxii). For him, Arab-Muslim writers recorded and described just what they saw carefully, avoiding unfounded fantasies.

Similarly, Bernard Lewis acknowledges the superior quality of Moroccan travel accounts compared to Ottoman travel narratives of the same period. He notes that Moroccan envoys demonstrated an acute awareness of European political, religious, military, and commercial affairs. Their narratives, Lewis adds, extended beyond surface-level descriptions, often incorporating historical context and comparative analysis of European institutions. Reading Moroccan travel narratives, such as al-Ghassani’s narrative, Lewis observes:

Moroccan envoys show an interest in European affairs extending beyond the surface movements of personalities and events. They seek and obtain often good information about political and religious as well as commercial and military affairs,

not only in the countries to which they are sent but in other European countries too; not only of immediate and current events, but sometimes extending back into the history of the previous century. (2001, p. 118)

The intellectual depth of Moroccan travel narratives can only be attributed to the mindful selection of ambassadors by *al-Makhzen* regime. Envoys were chosen not merely for their diplomatic skills but also for their intellectual insight. Being well-versed in history, politics, religion, and culture, these individuals succeeded in engaging meaningfully with their European counterparts and documenting their experiences with scholarly precision (Aammari, 2018). Yet, can their close study and interest in European institutions be arbitrary and with no vision?

One of the most striking aspects of Moroccan travel literature is the detailed attention given to European education, military and political institutions. El-Fassi (1967) noticed that since the seventeenth century, Moroccan travelers have placed significant emphasis on European military structures, highlighting the significance of the military in securing national security. In actuality, these travel accounts played a crucial role in shaping the Moroccan political thought at the time, particularly in influencing the reformist movements initiated by Sidi Muhammad bin Abderrahman and continued by Moulay Hassan I. A tangible outcome of such diplomatic observations was Moulay Hassan I's initiative to reform Moroccan institutions through sending fifteen Moroccan students to study in Europe in 1876 (Bekkaoui, 2016)—31 years after al-Saffar highlighted the Egyptian students sent by Muhammad 'Ali to France to "acquire scientific and technical knowledge" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 179–180). However, despite these early efforts, the Moroccan reformist agenda ultimately had been doomed to failure, due to the growing imperial ambitions of European powers.

The intellectual engagement of Moroccan travelers with European progress in science, technology, military affairs, education, and governance opens up a fertile ground for scholarly inquiry. Their detailed accounts on European progress were not merely records of observation but rather an implicit call for a political reform. Moroccan envoys sought to transmit knowledge back home, stressing the urgency of modernization in response to European imperial threats and aggression experienced in the nineteenth century. Thus, Moroccan ambassadorial travel texts should not be

understood only as historical archives but as intellectual and political texts that submissively interacted with colonial modernity and influenced Moroccan reformist movements. Recognizing such texts as part of Moroccan intellectual history allows for a deep understanding of cross-cultural interactions between Morocco and Europe in the pre-colonial era.

The Nineteenth-Century Moroccan Travel to Europe: Al-Saffar's *Rihla* to France

After the humiliating defeat at the Battle of Isly on August 14, 1844, coupled with intensifying French pressure, the Moroccan Sultan dispatched an embassy to France in an effort to defuse the heating border tensions. The Moroccan delegation, led by Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash, departed for France on December 13, 1845. Among its members was Muhammad al-Saffar, who participated in the mission both as an *alim* (scholar), responsible for addressing religious matters, and as a scribe, documenting the diplomatic proceedings (Miller, 1992). However, while Morocco viewed this mission as a means of negotiating territorial disputes, the embassy served a far more strategic and colonial purpose for France.

It is essential to know that the dispatch of this embassy was primarily a response to the mounting French colonial pressure during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lalla Maghnia. France had vested political and colonial interests in the success of this delegation, seeing it as an opportunity to extend its influence over Morocco. Rather than merely seeking a diplomatic resolution to the border conflict, France aimed to fuel its control over the Mediterranean region through diplomacy after war. This was particularly evident in a letter written by Léon Roches, the French Secretary, to Moroccan First Minister Muhammad Ibn Idriss, in which he states: "[T]he Emperor of Morocco must give our King a powerful weapon to withstand the opinion of his subjects. That weapon is the ambassador" (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 10). For France, this embassy was not only a diplomatic tool but also a means of quietening its public opinion. By showcasing Morocco's participation in diplomatic negotiations, the French government endeavored to deceive the people by projecting an image of imperial success overseas while simultaneously taming a key country in North Africa.

The French colonial ambition in the Moroccan embassy is further reflected in the extensive study of its members. Upon learning that Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash had been

selected as the Sultan's emissary, Roches immediately compiled a detailed report on his social status and sent it to the French Foreign Minister François Guizot. In this report, Roches describes Ash'ash as follows:

His ancestors were among the Moors chased out of Spain in the Fifteenth century who settled where the city of Tetuan is now; that is to say, they were its founders. Since that time, the position of Pasha [governor] has fallen to the eldest of the family. This hereditary *pashalik* [governorship] ... is without parallel in Morocco. Ash 'ash is thus among the men of good breeding and distinction. Barely thirty-five years old, he is learned and has much worldly experience. He possesses all the confidence and friendship of the Emperor, has a considerable fortune, and has been to Mecca ... It would be quite impossible to find in Morocco a man more suitable than he. (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 13)

This meticulously detailed report shows the French colonial interest in this Moroccan delegation. The French attempted to influence the Moroccan political leadership, ensuring that the negotiations would proceed in ways that is subservient to their colonial ambitions. Furthermore, when the moment of departure approached, France's colonial ambitions became increasingly transparent. Roches, in another statement, openly admitted France's long-term strategic goal: "A revolution is taking place at the court. This revolution is entirely in our favor, and we are at the point of establishing the influence of France over that of all other nations, if we know how to profit from it" (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 17). This statement is a direct confession of the French imperial interests in Morocco, revealing that, as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, the French colonial ambitions were not limited to Algeria but were already extending towards Morocco.

Re-thinking Orientalist Assumptions on al-Saffar's *Rihla* to Europe

Wendy Bracewell opens her well-grounded essay "The Travellee's Eye: Reading European Travel Writing 1750–1850" with a very interesting question: "How did Europeans read and respond to foreign travel writing about their societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?" (Bracewell, 2015, p. 215). By highlighting the

politics of reception, her question not only opens space for considering non-European modes of observation, but also problematize the assumption that travel writing is the exclusive preserve of European travelers. In this regard, readings of Muhammad as-Saffar's travel text have produced a range of interpretations that reflect a Eurocentric approach towards North African travel narratives within modern academia. A significant aspect of such reading revolves around the motives that pushed al-Saffar to document his journey to France. Despite the absence of any conclusive archival evidence, a considerable body of scholarship has tended to assume that al-Saffar, among other Moroccan travelers, wrote primarily in response to the Sultan's desire to understand the causes of Morocco's military defeat and the sources of European technological and political superiority.

Within travel-writing studies, however, the reception of North African travel narratives reflects a broader critical problem which can be termed the '*Subaltern Dilemma*'. Subaltern denotes the fact that non-European travel narratives do not resonate in modern academia for lacking power structures, while dilemma refers to the contradictory politics of reception and reading that frame such texts through Eurocentric-metropolitan lenses as merely informational or mimetic. Caught within this dilemma, al-Saffar is repeatedly positioned as a mere informant rather than as an intellectual figure capable of observation, interpretation, and critique.

In *Disorienting Encounters: Travels of a Moroccan Scholar in France in 1845-1846*, Miller (1992) argues that al-Saffar's journey was "part of a broader effort to correct the imbalance between Morocco and Europe and to analyse the sources of European strength" (p. 4). Indeed, Miller provides little attention to the fact that the embassy of Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash was not initiated by Morocco but strongly proposed by France. This embassy was first suggested by the French during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lalla Maghniya and the Moroccan Sultan initially resisted sending any delegation. Only under French pressure Morocco finally agreed (Miller, 1992, pp. 9–13). Despite this context, Miller considers that al-Saffar's travel narrative was written in the light of the Sultan's request, implying that the primary motive behind his writing was to investigate the sources of French power.

A close reading of al-Saffar's own words disproves such arguments that his narrative was written solely to fulfill a royal request. At the very beginning of his text,

following the traditional praise of Allah, the Prophet, and the Sultan, al-Saffar articulates his motives for documenting his journey: He writes:

It is wise for those who go far from home to record everything they see and hear, since they may find some knowledge and value in it. [...] Therefore, I decided with the help of God to blacken these pages with what I saw and heard during this voyage, be it clear or obscure. [...] You should not judge me too harshly, for I am doing it as a reminder to myself, and to inform others who may ask me from my fellow countrymen. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 77–78)

This passage explicitly reveals al-Saffar's primary motive which is to document his experiences for both personal purposes and to satisfy the curiosity of his fellow Moroccans, particularly those who were unable to travel to Europe at the time. So, rather than composing an official report for the Sultan, al-Saffar positions his work as a cultural and intellectual record, meant for a broader readership that included his friends and compatriots.

Yet, while al-Saffar's explicit motive was to share his experiences with his social circle, his writing also reflects an underlying reformist agenda. His emphasis on the significance of documenting overseas knowledge suggests a deep awareness of the practical value of travel. In other words, al-Saffar offers an implicit advice to his readers in his prologue. He stresses that travelers should carefully document what they observe and experience, as such records may yield valuable knowledge and insight. His emphasis not only encourages Moroccan travelers to record their experiences but also suggests that the author's own observations can offer critical insights worthy of scholarly attention, thereby stimulating the reader's curiosity about his content. Moreover, al-Saffar mentions the Egyptian students sent by Muhammad 'Ali to France to "acquire scientific and technical knowledge found only there" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 179–180). By highlighting Muhammad 'Ali's educational reforms, is not al-Saffar ingeniously suggesting that *al-Makhzen* should adopt a similar approach—which is sending Moroccan students to Europe to acquire essential scientific, technological, and military expertise? Further, his assertion that such knowledge is 'only found in there' underscores his belief that European advancements were

unparalleled and Morocco needs to seriously take them into account.

Thus, rather than interpreting al-Saffar's *rihla* as a passive observation of European power, it should be understood as an active intellectual engagement with both European developments and Morocco's socio-political challenges and vulnerabilities. This perspective challenges Orientalist assumptions regarding Moroccan travel literature by highlighting its analytical depth and critical engagement with the socio-political realities of both Morocco and France in nineteenth century.

The Republic Observed: Al-Saffar's *Rihla* and Intellectual Engagement with Modernity

Coming from a traditional Moroccan society to nineteenth-century France, a nation undergoing rapid scientific and technological revolution, Muhammad al-Saffar found himself immersed in a vastly unfamiliar world. The modernity he encountered—manifested in technological innovations, social structures, and political institutions—was both astonishing and unsettling. His travel account captures the unfamiliarity and excitement of this experience, offering a meticulous record of French society, governance, economy, and military power.

Since the moment he arrived in France, al-Saffar encountered new and unfamiliar aspects of modern life, particularly in transportation and communication. In Marseille, he experienced railway travel for the first time, an innovation that left a profound impression on him. The speed of the train, something completely unknown to Moroccan society at the time, was particularly striking. He describes his journey as follows:

When we were about to depart, the chief (*ra'is*) started the engine, and it carried along whatever was joined to it at a speed we had never experienced, almost like a bird flying through the air. [...] When we looked at the sides of the road, we could not see what was there; it looked like an endless ribbon moving along with us, and we could not distinguish the rocks or anything. (as-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 115)

His description of speed conveys both amazement as well as the perception of Europe as a space undergoing rapid progress. The experience of speed—a defining feature of European modernity—was entirely new to al-Saffar.

Al-Saffar also reflected on new technologies and institutions, including the telegraph, the two chambers, printing press, newspapers, theatre, and public libraries. Recognizing their precious value, al-Saffar adopted a pedagogical tone, instructing these innovations to his Moroccan readers. In his epilogue, he explicitly stepped into the instructor's shoes: "An explanation of their revenues and means of taxation, and of their expenses, including an explanation of some of their rules and regulations" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 213). Accordingly, he does his utmost to explain and elucidate these new aspects of modern life to his readers. His detailed description of French institutions suggests a conscious effort to educate Moroccan readers about the advancements that had propelled Europe forward.

Although much of his text is devoted to documenting the wonders of European modernity, al-Saffar's narrative is subtly shaped by the memory of defeat at the Battle of Isly (1844). This loss not only played a painful reminder of the French military superiority, but rather lingered in the background of his observations. When invited by King Louis-Philippe to attend a military parade, he provided a vivid account of French military discipline, training, and organization. Al-Saffar writes: "So it went until all had passed, leaving our hearts consumed with fire from what we had seen of their overwhelming power and mastery, their preparations and good training, their putting everything in its proper place" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 193). His voice reveals a reluctant acknowledgment of French military power, emphasizing that *al-Makhzen*'s military inferiority emanated not from a lack of individual bravery, but from organization, discipline and technological backwardness.

Besides, one of the most remarkable aspects of al-Saffar's narrative is his detailed engagement with the role of women in the French society. Unlike Orientalist travelers to the East, who often exoticized and sexualized Muslim women, Moroccan travelers to Europe adopted a more objective and analytical approach. As Matar (2009) notes:

The *Magharibi* did not initially know what to make of such situations, but they wrote about the meetings in an accurate and careful manner, revealing an attitude

toward European women that was very different from the European attitude toward Muslim women. (p. 106)

Al-Saffar's description of French women is characterized by admiration, curiosity, and precision. Far beyond expressing his interest in French women, al-Saffar acknowledges their active participation in the public sphere, stating that "women are skilled in commerce just like the men, or even more so. The majority of people running the shops are women" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 157). He shed light on the question of women's emancipation. Although he did not explicitly associate women's emancipation with development, his recognition of the French women's skills and competencies is striking—if not revolutionary—given the context of nineteenth-century Morocco where women were largely excluded from the public space. Being aware of the profound importance of such information, al-Saffar positioned himself as a thoughtful intellectual, engaging critically with the socio-political realities he observed in the French society at the time. This examination reflects a deliberate effort to engage with and critically assess the dynamics of gender roles and societal structures in the Moroccan context.

Nevertheless, the transition from a traditional society governed by customary law to a modern nineteenth-century society reflects not only a physical displacement—from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one—but, more significantly, a profound ideological shift in the perspective of al-Saffar. In his travel accounts, al-Saffar exhibits a keen interest in the manifestations of modern life, particularly its social, cultural, and political structures. However, al-Saffar's awareness of his readership—primarily jurists and elites who wielded a huge influence over Moroccan socio-political structures—introduces a noticeable sense of 'anxiety' in his writings. This anxiety emerges from an underlying ideological dichotomy or a state of ambivalence, arising from the tension between two conflicting desires. On one hand, there is a liberal discourse advocating for renovation and reform, which dominates the majority of his travel narrative. The liberal discourse in al-Saffar's travel text is heavily focused on the progress evident in nineteenth-century France, particularly in its political, technological, economic, military, and social structures. This discourse serves to justify and meticulously explain the French advancements, presenting them as a model for a comprehensive reform

within the *al-Makhzen* regime. For instance, al-Saffar observes that the French:

[A]re not content with knowing things by tradition, but study the roots of a matter [before] drawing conclusions. Only then do they decide whether to accept or reject it. All of them know how to read and write, and they write down everything in books. [...] They have schools and libraries for the sciences of cooking, planting, building, farming, caring for plants, and producing livestock. Whatever they hear, see, invent, or learn from others they record in registers and keep forever. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 157)

This extract from al-Saffar's travelogue mirrors a clear critique to the traditionalist approaches employed in Morocco, positioning the French rationalism and education as models to consider. This liberal discourse actively promotes scientific inquiry and education, emphasizing the importance of rational thought, empirical observation, and institutional progress as key factors in development and innovation. His deep engagement with European modernity echoes an intellectual labour to re-examine Morocco's socio-political structures, positioning knowledge acquisition and institutional development as the key pillars of growth and development. Equally significant to mention, al-Saffar acknowledged the French superiority over the Islamic world. He observes:

In comparison with the weakness of Islam, the dissipation of its strength, and the disrupted condition of its people, how confident they are, how impressive their state of readiness, how competent they are in matters of state, how firm their laws, how capable in war and successful in vanquishing their enemies—not because of their courage, bravery, or religious zeal, but because of their marvellous organization, their uncanny mastery over affairs, and their strict adherence to the law. [...] If you could see their conduct and their laws [at work], you would be profoundly impressed with them, despite their infidelity (*kufruhum*) and the extinction of the light of religion from their hearts. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 193–194)

In this passage, al-Saffar explicitly contrasts the perceived decline of the Islamic world with the strength of French modernity, attributing French success to their organisational efficiency, administrative expertise, and discipline rather than religious conviction. By highlighting these secular foundations, he implicitly detaches their achievements from religiosity, suggesting that progress is contingent upon effective governance and institutional organization rather than spiritual devotion.

On the other hand, there is a religious discourse that reflects his adherence to traditional values. While al-Saffar celebrates all these innovations; nevertheless, he also remains critical of what he perceives as France's religious ignorance. Towards the conclusion of his account, he could not but affirm his commitment to Islam, expressing concern over the spiritual emptiness of the French society. Seeking divine forgiveness for all he has witnessed, heard, and experienced, he closes his narrative with a Quranic verse, declaring that the French "know well what is apparent in the life of this world, but are completely ignorant about the hereafter" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 220). This tension, as Matar (2009) explains, reflects a broader pattern among Muslim travelers of the time, who knew that unfiltered praise of European societies would not be easily tolerated by their rulers. As a result, al-Saffar, like his contemporaries, felt compelled to balance his admiration with critique. Thus, after presenting an account filled with detailed descriptions, explanations, and praise for French innovations, he concludes with a deliberate religious discourse.

This narrative shift epitomizes the ideological anxiety that underpins al-Saffar's text—a dialectical struggle arising from his simultaneous admiration for the modern aspects of the French society and his commitment to his cultural identity. Ultimately, his *rihla* incarnates this complex interplay, reflecting both his intellectual engagement with modernity and the constraints imposed by his socio-political and religious milieu.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed Muhammad al-Saffar's nineteenth-century travel narrative, arguing that Moroccan portrayals of Europe warrant the same academic attention as Orientalist depictions of Morocco. By focusing on the nineteenth century—a period of significant scientific, technological, and political transformation in Europe—this research has highlighted the profound impact of this era on Moroccan-European

relations. It has further investigated the cultural and discursive dimensions of Moroccan encounters with Europe, particularly within the intersecting frameworks of warfare, colonialism, politics, diplomacy, and commerce.

Crucially, al-Saffar's *rihla* has re-directed the gaze toward the metropolitan milieu, rendering France an object of scrutiny, comparison, and interpretation—an epistemic practice too often eclipsed by Eurocentric modes of reading. By terming this reading pattern the 'subaltern dilemma,' the article demonstrates how non-European travel texts are frequently silenced within modern scholarship. Al-Saffar's *rihla* challenges this Eurocentric mode of reading. It documents modern institutions, technology and social life while implicitly suggesting reform through debating discipline, education, organization, gender roles and most significantly Islam. Situating the *rihla* within the post-Isly conflict reveals that the knowledge it disseminates is produced within the nineteenth century shifting power structures that continue to shape the Mediterranean world.

This study shows that travel writings are not merely descriptive records but critical interactions in the Moroccan intellectual, cultural and political thought. Ultimately, their works constitute valuable contributions to Moroccan-European intellectual history, providing unique insights into cross-cultural encounters, knowledge transmission, and the geo-political transformations of nineteenth-century Mediterranean. Thus, considering Moroccan travel writing not only enriches travel-literature studies but also broadens the archive of nineteenth-century Mediterranean thought and critique.

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Glossary

Alim (عالم): A learned Islamic scholar, especially one knowledgeable in Arabic language, religious law and theology.

Al-Makhzen (المخزن): Literally, *al-Makhzen* means a “storehouse”. Historically, it referred to the place where the Sultan’s goods, taxes, provisions, and administrative archives were kept. Over time, however, the concept evolved to signify the governing institution of Morocco, encompassing the monarchy, its administrative institutions, and the networks through which power circulate.

Jihad (جهاد): Refers to resistance, struggle, or striving in all forms. In Islam, the highest or most virtuous form of jihad is speaking a word of truth in the face of injustice or against a tyrant, emphasizing moral courage and ethical resistance above physical combat.

Rihla (رحلة): Journey

Shari’a (شريعة): Islamic jurisprudence.

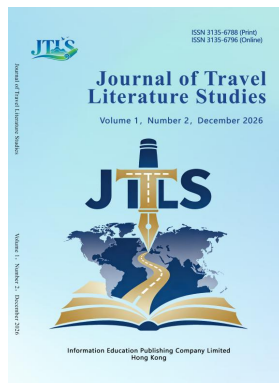
Ulama (علماء): The body of Islamic scholars recognized as authorities in religious knowledge.

Umma (أمة): The global Muslim community or collective body of believers.

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Speed, Desire, and Collision: Automotive Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

Junping Zhang

Abstract: This article examines the automobile as a crucial medium of modern experience in early twentieth-century American literature. Focusing on Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it argues that the automobile functions not merely as a symbol of technological progress or material wealth but as a cultural apparatus through which modern subjectivity is produced and contested. Tracing a three-part trajectory from speed to desire to collision, this article shows how, in Wharton, automotive speed transforms sensory perception while revealing the privilege that structures access to accelerated mobility; in Dreiser, the automobile becomes a form of "mobile visibility," converting economic status into public spectacle and intensifying fantasies of social advancement; and in Fitzgerald, the automobile's promises of autonomy and pleasure culminate in collision, exposing the unequal distribution of vulnerability and responsibility within modern consumer culture. By bringing these texts into a common analytical framework, the article develops the

concept of automotive modernity to describe the conjunction of technological movement, consumer desire, social aspiration, and bodily risk. It ultimately argues that collision is not external to automotive freedom but its immanent limit: the very technologies that appear to maximize individual mobility also reveal the inequalities and violence upon which that mobility depends.

Keywords: automobile; automotive modernity; speed; consumer desire; collision

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Introduction

The automobile transformed early twentieth-century American culture not simply by making people move faster, but by changing what travel and movement meant (Huang, 2026). Driving, as a particular way of travel, increasingly associated mobility with autonomy, speed with pleasure, and technological control with personal freedom (Tian & Lin, 2026). At the same time, automobile culture rendered wealth more visible, intensified consumer desire, and introduced new forms of bodily danger. The car therefore occupied a contradictory position within American modernity: it promised liberation from spatial and temporal constraint while embedding that freedom within structures of consumption, privilege, and risk.

American fiction registered this contradiction with particular force. In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the automobile is never simply an accessory to modern life. It changes how characters experience space, imagine social advancement, and understand their relation to others. Across these texts, automotive movement develops through a distinct literary trajectory: from the sensory exhilaration of speed, through the social intensification of desire, to the destructive consequences of collision.

This article uses the term automotive modernity to describe this conjunction of technological movement, subjective experience, consumer aspiration, and social risk. The concept draws on studies of automobility that have treated the automobile not as an isolated machine but as part of a larger social system involving roads, infrastructures, institutions, consumption, and cultural meanings. Such work has demonstrated that driving became closely connected to modern ideals of self-direction and autonomy. Literary scholars have likewise examined the perceptual effects of mechanical speed, the gendered meanings of driving, the relation between automobiles and class identity, and the symbolic importance of crashes and accidents.

These studies have established the automobile as an important category of modern cultural experience. The central problem, then, is not that cars have been overlooked in American literary criticism. Nor is it sufficient to argue that automobiles symbolize modernity, wealth, or technological progress. More revealing is the relationship among the different cultural functions that criticism has often treated separately: speed, consumer desire, social mobility, and accident.

Existing work on automotive consciousness has illuminated the perceptual and affective changes produced by driving, while cultural histories of automobility have shown how driving became associated with autonomy, citizenship, gender, and class. Studies of individual authors have further explored Wharton's engagement with speed and travel, Dreiser's representations of consumer aspiration, and Fitzgerald's use of automobiles to critique wealth, carelessness, and capitalist excess. Comparative scholarship has also connected automobile travel to broader systems of transportation and examined technological accidents as expressions of the inequalities of capitalist modernity. What remains less fully explored is the developmental relation among these phenomena. Speed, consumption, aspiration, and collision are often approached as separate themes, but early twentieth-century American fiction repeatedly binds them together. Automotive speed intensifies sensation; intensified mobility becomes attached to fantasies of self-making; those fantasies are increasingly expressed through conspicuous consumption; and the freedom associated with accelerated movement

ultimately encounters the material vulnerability of other bodies.

This article therefore argues that speed, desire, and collision should be understood as interconnected moments within a single structure of automotive modernity. In *The Custom of the Country*, the automobile produces a new sensory relationship to modern space. Speed offers exhilaration and the impression of liberation from older temporal and spatial limits. Yet Wharton also reveals that access to this accelerated sensorium is socially unequal. The pleasure of speed is inseparable from the economic privilege that makes such mobility possible. Dreiser shifts the emphasis from sensation to social aspiration. In *An American Tragedy*, the automobile participates in a consumer world in which material objects do not merely express identity but generate fantasies of becoming someone else. The car is particularly powerful because wealth displayed through the automobile does not remain stationary. It circulates through public space. The automobile thus converts class privilege into mobile visibility, allowing status to be seen in motion and encouraging the illusion that proximity to visible wealth might become social transformation. Fitzgerald brings this logic toward its violent limit. In *The Great Gatsby*, the automobile retains its associations with pleasure, sexuality, wealth, and freedom, but these meanings culminate in collision. The crash exposes the inequality concealed within the fantasy of autonomous mobility: those with wealth possess not only greater freedom of movement but also a greater capacity to distance themselves from the consequences of that movement. Others remain materially exposed to the risks produced by privileged mobility.

The automobile is therefore significant not because it “represents” modern America from the outside, but because it provides American writers with a mechanism for testing some of modernity’s most powerful promises. It converts freedom into movement, movement into visibility, and visibility into desire. Yet it also reveals that autonomy is never purely individual. Every act of accelerated movement takes place within a social world structured by unequal capacities to move, to control, to consume, and to escape consequences. This article consequently argues that collision is not external to automotive modernity but constitutes its immanent limit. The crash does not merely mark the failure of technological freedom; it makes visible the inequalities on

which that freedom has depended all along. Reading Wharton, Dreiser, and Fitzgerald together thus reveals the automobile as both a machine of self-making and a machine of social differentiation: a technology that expands the imaginable range of individual freedom while exposing the privilege, vulnerability, and violence embedded within that freedom.

“The Pleasure of Acceleration”: Speed and the Modern Sensorium in *The Custom of the Country*

In Wharton’s novel, automotive speed is not a decorative sign of modern life. It produces a temporary sensorium in which cold, motion, visibility, and social privilege combine to suspend ethical memory. The pleasure of acceleration is therefore already inseparable from unequal access and from the displacement of other claims upon the subject.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the motorcar’s most concentrated appearance occurs not in a spectacle of mechanical mastery but in a brief, ethically compromised ride. Leaving a portrait studio with Peter Van Degen, the heroine Undine Marvell accepts his invitation to travel in his open car through Central Park and north along the Boulevard. The passage is easily reduced to a familiar contrast: Undine’s husband Ralph’s domestic restraint versus Van Degen’s moneyed freedom. Yet Wharton’s prose makes a more exacting claim. It stages speed as a reordering of attention. The car changes what Undine can feel, what she can remember, and what becomes temporarily inaudible to her. In doing so, it gives literary form to a central tension of automotive modernity: velocity appears as private liberation precisely because it can interrupt the social and ethical relations that remain materially in force.

The scene begins with a problem of access rather than a simple appetite for motion. Undine’s residence on West End Avenue leaves her socially exposed: she is “avowedly dependent on ‘lifts’,” obliged to solicit them and ashamed to be seen in a cab (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). Mobility is already a matter of distinction. The automobile does not simply take her from one address to another; it distinguishes the person who can extend

a lift from the person who must seek one. Van Degen's offer—"If you don't mind the open car"—accordingly has a double force. It promises fresh air and speed, but it also temporarily repairs the social embarrassment of Undine's location. Her pleasure cannot be abstracted from this arrangement of privilege. She experiences automotive freedom as a passenger because another man owns the vehicle, controls its route, and can transform a practical need into an occasion of intimacy.

Wharton sharpens this dependence by setting the motorcar against Ralph's commute. As Van Degen laughs, Ralph is still "swinging on a strap in the elevated" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The phrase compresses an entire hierarchy of movement. Van Degen's open automobile affords choice, exposure, and a mobile enclosure for flirtation; Ralph's body is held upright in a public system, subject to its crowding and timetable. The comparison is not merely between old and new transportation. It distinguishes an embodied autonomy from a managed, collective mobility. Sheller and Urry's (2000) account of automobility as a system rather than an isolated machine is useful here: the car's apparent individuality depends upon infrastructures, social practices, and unequal permissions that its private interior obscures (pp. 737–757). Wharton's scene does not need to name those systems in order to show their social effect. A ride becomes available to Undine as an elite favor, while Ralph's public transit is made into the comic background against which that favor acquires glamour.

The sensory grammar of the ride converts this hierarchy into pleasure. "The winter twilight was deliriously cold," Wharton writes, and the pair "swept through Central Park" before gathering "impetus" for their "northward flight" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The sentence moves through a sequence of intensifying verbs—"swept," "gathered," "flight"—that makes the automobile less an object than a force distributed across body, weather, and urban space. Cold is not a condition to be endured; it becomes "delirious," an adjective that names both stimulation and a loosening of ordinary judgment. The open car abolishes the comfortable boundary between passenger and environment, yet it does so under the protection of fur and wealth. Exposure here is a luxury. Undine can treat the weather as sensation because the car, the driver, and the clothing convert possible discomfort into a consumable intensity.

The sentence's central claim is even more striking: Undine feels "the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). Wharton does not say that speed merely distracts her. The verbs are violent and acoustic. "Drowns" submerges moral hesitation; "silences" deprives memory of a voice. Acceleration alters the relation between sensation and conscience by making the body's present tense louder than its obligations. The immediate context specifies what has been suppressed. Undine has a vague sense of a forgotten engagement, and the ride will make her late for her son Paul's birthday. The automobile thus does not deliver her from responsibility in any literal sense; it gives her an experience in which responsibility is temporarily unavailable as a felt claim. Speed is a technology of selective attention.

This passage complicates an account of automotive experience that locates its novelty solely in visual perception. Duffy (2022) argues that the automobile put the senses under new pressure and made seeing at speed a distinctive problem for modernist representation. Wharton's prose shares that concern with the sensorium, but it assigns no stable, panoramic gaze to Undine. The city darkens; the vehicle's movement is rendered through cold, impetus, and flight; the decisive transformation happens within attention and memory. Rather than mastering a rapidly passing scene, Undine is mastered by a kinetic atmosphere. The effect is close to what Pearce (2016) calls automotive consciousness: a driving-event can organize affect and thought as well as physical motion. But Wharton's passenger makes visible an important qualification. Automotive consciousness is not necessarily consciousness at the wheel. It may be a delegated experience, produced by another's control of the car and entangled with a gendered economy of invitation, display, and dependence.

The car nevertheless grants Undine a form of agency, although it is an agency inseparable from calculation. The narrator observes that she wants pleasure while retaining the strategic distance that will keep Van Degen's interest profitable: her impatience is "curbed by an instinct for holding off and biding her time" (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The passage refuses to make her an innocent victim of sensation. She is actively reading the ride as a social opportunity. Yet the syntax of speed keeps

undermining this calculation. “Now and then youth had its way,” the narrator remarks; “she could not always resist the present pleasure” (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The motorcar’s promise lies in its capacity to make the present feel self-justifying. It is not only fast; it supplies a temporal ideology in which immediate sensation seems to outrank deferred consequence.

That temporal ideology is registered in Wharton’s repetition of “flew.” As the motor moves through icy twilight, “her present cares flew with it” (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The metaphor treats anxiety as detachable cargo. It imagines that the self can travel beyond its own liabilities, even as the next sentence admits that the worries remain: the expensive fancy dress still presses on Undine’s mind. Van Degen’s response is revealing. He lowers the car’s speed, not because the ride is dangerous, but because he wishes to hear and manage the confession that the ride has made possible. The vehicle has produced an intimate interval in which finance, desire, and motion become mutually legible. His offer to supply “a couple of thou” turns the accelerated sensorium back into exchange (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). The ride is pleasurable because it seems to suspend material pressure; it is useful to Van Degen because it exposes precisely the pressure he can exploit.

The car’s visual afterimage completes this conversion of sensation into social drama. Ralph, waiting at home, first sees “the blazing lamps of a large touring-car” bearing furiously down the avenue; only as it slows does he recognize Undine and Van Degen (Wharton, 2004, Chapter 15). From within the car, speed has blurred memory and scruple. From the street and the window, it becomes a spectacle: light, bulk, fur, and movement announce a social relation before the occupants’ faces become clear. Wharton thus distributes the automobile’s perception across unequal positions. For Undine, its open body turns cold into exhilaration. For Ralph, its lamps make a distant sign of exclusion and suspicion. His later view of Undine’s “blown hair and glowing face” records the bodily residue of acceleration, but it cannot establish what has happened inside the vehicle. The car creates a privileged zone of partial visibility. It displays wealth and mobility while withholding the intimacy it facilitates.

This asymmetry helps explain why the episode must not be treated as a simple

celebration of female mobility. Van Degen's car enables Undine to move beyond the confinement of West End Avenue, but she neither owns nor drives it. Her mobility is socially real and affectively potent, yet it is conditional on male possession. Seiler's (2008) history of automobility shows how driving became bound to American ideals of agency and citizenship even while those ideals were unevenly distributed. Wharton's scene anticipates that contradiction in miniature. Undine's access to speed gives her a felt sense of autonomy, but the vehicle's control, its money, and even the moral risk of being seen with Van Degen remain external to her. The open car intensifies her bodily freedom at the same moment that it makes her more dependent upon the man who can provide it.

The episode also clarifies the section's place in the article's larger sequence. In this novel, acceleration is not yet collision, and Wharton does not turn the motorcar into an allegory of crash. Instead, she locates a prior violence in the redistribution of attention. The pleasure of speed makes domestic obligation, financial strain, and class dependence temporarily less audible; its apparent freedom rests on this sensory exclusion. Wharton's motorcar is therefore a machine for producing a modern self that feels briefly unencumbered because it has learned to experience other people's claims as background noise. The scene's ethical force lies in its refusal to separate exhilaration from that refusal. "Physical joy" is real, but it is real as the very medium through which memory is silenced.

Read in this light, *The Custom of the Country* gives automotive modernity an origin point more complex than the arrival of a new status object. The automobile transforms the novel's sensorium: it converts cold into stimulus, urban distance into flight, obligation into a temporary silence, and class privilege into an apparently private feeling of release. Yet its freedom remains relational and conditional. Undine can enjoy the present only because another person directs the vehicle and because Ralph's labor, Paul's disappointment, and her own debts are displaced from the car's immediate field of sensation. Wharton thus makes speed the first term of a larger structure. Once acceleration has trained the subject to mistake selective attention for autonomy, desire

can appear as the natural continuation of mobility rather than as the social relation that sustains it.

“Mobile Visibility”: Automobile Consumption and Social Desire in *An American Tragedy*

In Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, the automobile matters not because it is an unusually expensive possession, but because it makes possession publicly mobile. A house may certify comfort; a car carries its certificate of wealth through streets, parks, and country roads, where it can be seen, desired, and entered. Dreiser understands this difference with unusual precision. For the hero Clyde Griffiths, who begins the novel within the constraining visibility of his parents’ evangelical street mission, the motorcar offers a different regime of appearance. It promises not merely transport but a way of being recognized before one has acquired the stable income, family name, or social ease that recognition ordinarily presupposes. The car is therefore a privileged object of what may be called mobile visibility: the conversion of economic advantage into a moving, shareable spectacle of social possibility.

This concept clarifies why the automobile repeatedly concentrates the novel’s concerns with class aspiration, erotic desire, and moral evasion. Veblen’s account of conspicuous consumption remains useful here, provided that it is not treated as a flat label for luxury. For Veblen (1899), consumption is social because it solicits comparison; goods acquire force when they make pecuniary standing legible to others. Dreiser’s car, however, does more than display ownership. It arranges bodies in relation to one another: a driver commands direction and pace, passengers borrow access to a classed world, pedestrians become an obstructing public, and a secluded road seems to suspend supervision. The automobile’s visibility is thus double. It exhibits status in public while creating a provisional private interior. Clyde is drawn to precisely this conjunction of display and enclosure, because it allows him to imagine that social ascent can be performed before it is achieved.

The novel’s first decisive automobile episode makes that fantasy inseparable from danger. At the Kansas City hotel, Clyde’s new wage, new clothes, and new companions

expose him to a culture in which leisure appears as an immediately purchasable social identity. Sparser's unauthorized joyride in his employer's car is not an incidental youthful diversion. It is a condensed lesson in how the automobile confers borrowed rank. Clyde enters a vehicle whose ownership and authority belong elsewhere, yet the journey temporarily lets its occupants inhabit the speed, rural privacy, and sexual license associated with a more privileged life. Hortense's presence intensifies the scene's social logic: she is not simply an object of Clyde's desire, but a spectator whose desire helps define which commodities count as signs of arrival. The car becomes a stage on which the young men can present themselves as men of means, even though the performance rests on theft, credit, and imitation.

Dreiser's narration makes this imitation psychologically powerful because Clyde's longing is never for a single object in isolation. He wants the car as part of a synchronized image: stylish clothes, a desirable companion, leisure removed from work, and the apparent authority to take a road wherever it leads. The episode therefore gives material form to the novel's recurrent distinction between possessing an identity and occupying its surface. Clyde does not ask what the car costs, how it is maintained, or what social obligations accompany it. He experiences it as a visible shortcut across those questions. If the city hotel had taught him that clothes can revise the body's social meaning, the motorcar teaches him that movement can revise it too. To be driven away from the city is to become, for a few hours, someone not fixed by the family mission, the factory wage, or the limits of one's address.

The accident that ends the outing shatters this borrowed autonomy without entirely dispelling its appeal. Sparser, driving too fast, strikes a child and flees; Clyde and the others become complicit in the flight. The scene is an early instance of the novel's larger tragic pattern, but its importance is not exhausted by foreshadowing. The car's promise of unregulated movement instantly produces a distribution of vulnerability. Its occupants possess speed, a machine, and the option of departure; the child has none of these forms of protection. What looks, from inside the car, like liberation from ordinary constraints becomes, from the roadside, the imposition of another person's privilege.

The episode suggests that automotive freedom is never simply individual. It depends on shared spaces in which the driver's capacity to move rapidly can expose less mobile bodies to risk. This is why the later collision in the novel cannot be understood as a sudden moral deviation. Dreiser has already made the car a technology through which desire and differential exposure are organized together.

That organization becomes more elaborate in *Lycurgus*. Clyde's appointment at his uncle's collar factory appears to offer a genuine route into bourgeois respectability, but the novel repeatedly shows that his new position does not supply the signs by which he wants to be recognized. He has a room, a salary, and relatives of wealth; still, he remains uncertain of how to convert proximity to the Griffiths family into membership in its world. The automobile becomes crucial because it seems to solve this problem of conversion. It translates capital into an immediately intelligible public form. In the factory and on the street, cars do not simply reveal that some characters have money; they display that money as ease, movement, and command over time. Clyde's desire is correspondingly mimetic. He does not seek a car merely for practical travel. He seeks the social legibility carried by its polished surface, its capacity to draw attention, and its ability to place its occupants visibly above those who must walk, wait, or work.

This is the novel's most important revision of the familiar American dream of mobility. Social mobility conventionally implies a gradual movement between classes, secured through labor, education, inheritance, or marriage. Automotive mobility offers a more seductive substitute: movement through space can be made to resemble movement through the social order. When Clyde is present in the cars and excursions of the young *Lycurgus* set, he can appear to have crossed a boundary that he has not, in fact, crossed. His access is contingent, relational, and often borrowed, but the spectacle minimizes those distinctions. As Sheller and Urry (2000) argue, automobility is not reducible to an individual's relation to a machine; it is a socio-technical system that combines movement with social practice, spatial organization, and differentiated access. Dreiser's fiction anticipates this insight at the scale of social perception. The car matters because it makes its occupant visible within an ensemble of roads, leisure, romance, and class observation.

Sondra Finchley is central to that ensemble. Her wealth is attractive to Clyde not simply because it is stored in property or family reputation, but because it appears in occasions of movement: visits, drives, parties, country houses, and the effortless circulation of an affluent group. In Sondra's company, the car extends the social world that Clyde wants to enter. It can bear him toward secluded recreation, stage his apparent intimacy with people of rank, and temporarily remove him from the factory discipline that defines his actual position. The novel's emphasis on invitations and excursions is consequential. These are not neutral settings for romance. They are the mechanisms through which social desire becomes spatial. Clyde learns to desire Sondra's world as a sequence of accessible scenes, each one made possible by vehicles, money, and the leisure to travel without economic necessity.

The phrase mobile visibility names the fragile power of those scenes. A vehicle makes wealth visible because it moves; yet its very movement makes visibility dependent on repetition, spectatorship, and continued access. Clyde has to be invited, driven, dressed, and seen again. He is not stabilized by any of the signs he borrows. His position remains anxious precisely because the automobile turns status into a performance that can be entered but not necessarily possessed. Seiler's (2008) cultural history of automobility helps articulate the ideological pressure at work: American driving has been closely tied to fantasies of agency and self-direction, even though driving is enabled and limited by infrastructures, regulations, and unequal social resources. Clyde's automotive desire is an acute fictional version of this contradiction. The mobility he experiences feels self-making, while almost every condition that enables it belongs to someone else.

This contradiction also explains why Dreiser links cars so persistently to heterosexual desire. The automobile's enclosed interior produces a private-looking space, while its mobility makes that space detachable from home and family surveillance. It offers Clyde not only the chance to be seen with a desirable woman but also the chance to imagine that intimacy itself can be accelerated, transported, and made available on demand. Yet the car's erotic function is inseparable from class. In the early

Kansas City episode, the vehicle gives a group of precariously employed young people an imitation of elite leisure. In *Lycurgus*, it mediates Clyde's longing for Sondra by allowing him to participate in the privileged circulation of her social circle. Automobility therefore reorganizes romance as a question of access: who can enter the car, choose the route, afford the outing, and leave the city behind.

Roberta Alden exposes the violence concealed by this arrangement. She is not simply the obstacle to Clyde's preferred future with Sondra; she is a worker whose relation to mobility is structurally unlike his fantasy of mobility. The factory brings Clyde and Roberta into proximity, but the car and the lake route that follow do not offer them equal possibilities. Clyde's imagined escape depends on treating movement as a private solution to a social problem: pregnancy, employment, class hierarchy, and reputation are to be resolved by going elsewhere. Such a fantasy becomes thinkable because the automobile promises detachable space. A car can leave the city; a boat can leave the shore; the individual can imagine that responsibility will remain behind. But Dreiser refuses that fantasy's clean separation. The novel's later lake episode is prepared by the earlier hit-and-run: in both, a more mobile subject mistakes the capacity to depart for the right to distribute danger onto a more vulnerable body.

This is not to say that Dreiser turns the automobile into a simple emblem of evil. The car is compelling because it gives material form to a real desire for release from social confinement. Clyde's attraction to movement is intelligible; it responds to the humiliations of poverty, religious respectability, and class exclusion. What the novel exposes is the way consumer culture channels that desire into objects whose social meaning depends on being seen and envied. The automobile is exceptional in this regard because it does not merely represent wealth. It performs wealth in motion. It lets privilege appear as personal charisma, and it makes borrowed access feel, momentarily, like self-possession.

Dreiser's narrative technique is especially sharp on this point. Its patient accumulation of material details does not allow commodities to settle into mere background. Clothes, hotel wages, taxis, automobiles, country clubs, and rooms repeatedly mediate the difference between what Clyde is and what he imagines himself

becoming. The novel's long social descriptions create a rhythm of deferred arrival: each new object or invitation seems to bring Clyde nearer to the world he wants, while also showing that he remains dependent on the judgments and resources of others. Automobile consumption intensifies that rhythm because the car collapses waiting time. It supplies the sensation of arrival before arrival has occurred. One can drive into the country, appear beside the right woman, or occupy a more expensive social scene without possessing the durable class position that those appearances conventionally signify.

The result is a distinctive account of social desire. Clyde does not desire wealth as a static end state; he desires its circulation, its visibility, and its promise that a different self can be made legible in public. Mobile visibility is therefore not simply conspicuous consumption with wheels. It is a narrative mechanism through which the automobile binds together looking, being looked at, sexual aspiration, and imagined class ascent. The car is at once a commodity, a social theater, and an instrument of evasion. It permits Clyde to picture life as a series of routes away from the conditions that formed him, even as each route remains shaped by the wealth and vulnerability of others.

In this sense, *An American Tragedy* gives "desire" its full social weight. After the sensory exhilaration of speed, desire takes form as the wish to convert movement into status and status into a new self. But the novel also makes clear why this conversion cannot remain innocent. The more the car allows Clyde to experience autonomy as visible consumption, the more it teaches him to treat shared social space as material for private advancement. The subsequent catastrophe is thus not a break with automotive desire but its grim extension. By rendering wealth mobile, Dreiser shows how the automobile can make social aspiration appear frictionless while transferring its costs onto bodies with less power to move, refuse, or be seen.

"The Violence of Freedom": Collision and Unequal Vulnerability in *The Great Gatsby*

The car crash in *The Great Gatsby* is often read as Fitzgerald's moral reckoning with the heedless rich. That reading is necessary but incomplete. Myrtle Wilson's death does

not interrupt an otherwise emancipatory culture of automotive freedom; it brings into focus the unequal distribution of danger that makes that freedom possible. In the larger trajectory of this article—from speed to desire to collision—Fitzgerald’s novel stages the final term as the immanent limit of the first two. The sensations and display-value attached to the automobile do not disappear in the collision. They are converted into force: the speed that promises self-direction and the desirability that turns wealth into public spectacle become lethal when exercised within a shared space whose users do not possess equal mobility, protection, or credibility. The novel’s cars therefore disclose what the rhetoric of autonomous driving suppresses: freedom on the road is never simply private, because its consequences are borne by other bodies.

This contradiction is especially sharp in an American context in which driving had become a language of agency. Cotten Seiler (2008) argues that automobility helped make driving an emblem of freedom, self-direction, and citizenship, while Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2000, pp. 737–739) describe the car not as an isolated object but as a system of infrastructures, practices, and social relations. Fitzgerald’s fiction grants the automobile precisely this systemic significance. Cars connect the Eggs to Manhattan and the valley of ashes; they sort passengers into owners, drivers, riders, pedestrians, and victims; and they make wealth materially visible. Yet the novel gives the apparent freedom of movement a distinctive social geometry. Those able to command speed may exit a scene, alter its story, or evade its consequences. Those exposed at the roadside remain vulnerable to the effects of some one else’s movement. Collision is thus not only an event in the plot but a form through which class power becomes bodily legible.

The novel prepares this argument long before Myrtle’s death through its recurrent association of driving with carelessness. Jordan Baker, whom Nick identifies as an incurably careless driver, offers the most explicit formulation. When challenged about her bad driving, she replies that other people will keep out of her way; Nick observes that “it takes two to make an accident” (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 3). The sentence is memorable because it is both true and evasive. An accident does involve more than one body, but Jordan turns that mutuality into an alibi. Her safety depends on other people’s vigilance, their ability to anticipate her error, and their willingness to yield space to her. The phrase “keep out of the way” treats the road as if it were organized around the driver’s desire rather than around reciprocal obligation. Jordan’s carelessness is not

mere individual incompetence. It is a social disposition enabled by the expectation that others will absorb the costs of her freedom.

Nick's early description of Jordan makes the point still more exact. He calls her "incurably dishonest," but links that dishonesty to a bodily poise: she avoids "clever, shrewd men" because she would rather preserve the advantage of a managed surface (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 3). Driving gives this ethic a practical form. The automobile turns individual desire into motion, but it also allows that motion to be insulated by the car's body, by money, and by the deferential adjustments of others. As Lynne Pearce (2016, pp. 1–6) suggests, "automotive consciousness" reorganizes attention and affect around a specific event of movement. Fitzgerald's novel darkens that proposition. Its drivers do not merely inhabit a new sensorium; they inhabit an unequal sensorium, one in which privilege can convert the road from a zone of shared risk into a stage for personal indifference.

The orange-yellow Rolls-Royce that carries Gatsby's guests makes the connection between visibility and danger literal. Earlier in the article, Dreiser's automobile was understood as "mobile visibility": a commodity that carries class aspiration through public space. Gatsby's car radicalizes that function. Nick sees it as a "rich cream color, bright with nickel," its "monstrous length" extending through the scene as a spectacle of abundance (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 4). The description emphasizes not private utility but excess made mobile. Gatsby's vehicle is a moving advertisement for his arrival, a machine for converting wealth into an immediately readable public image. It also produces interpretive confusion: the car's owner, driver, and passengers may be misidentified, while its glamour persuades observers to treat mechanical power as a sign of personal consequence. The commodity does not merely reflect Gatsby's social identity; it makes that identity circulate, compete, and appear credible.

This visibility has an erotic and aspirational charge. Myrtle's relation to Tom is organized by the possibility of entering the mobile world from which the valley of ashes excludes her. The first encounter that Nick recounts occurs on a train, but the affair is sustained by a pattern of transfers, purchases, and excursions that oppose the Wilsons' immobilized existence to the mobility of the wealthy (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 2). The garage is accordingly more than a background. It is a threshold between the world that

services automobiles and the world that possesses them. George Wilson works amid the machinery of mobility without gaining its freedom; Myrtle imagines that her attachment to Tom might carry her across that division. The novel's class politics are concentrated in this spatial arrangement. The wealthy enter and leave the valley at speed. The Wilsons remain exposed to their passage and dependent upon the economic system that their cars animate.

By the time of the accident, Gatsby's car has accumulated these meanings of speed, display, and social desire. Daisy drives it after the confrontation at the Plaza, and Myrtle runs toward the road, apparently believing that the yellow car can restore contact with the world of wealth and escape it has come to signify. Fitzgerald refuses the consoling clarity of an intentional murder. Nick reports that the car "came out of the gathering darkness" and then "disappeared around the next bend" after striking Myrtle (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 7). The language makes the vehicle momentarily impersonal: color and motion precede accountable agency. But this impersonal appearance is exactly the effect the novel interrogates. A car may seem to become an autonomous force at speed, yet it is still embedded in decisions about who drives, who may be protected, whose testimony will matter, and whose death can be narrated as a regrettable outcome rather than a demand for justice.

The collision produces an asymmetry between the driver's enclosure and the pedestrian's exposure. Daisy is inside the expensive machine, surrounded by its mass and its social authority; Myrtle is in the road, a body without comparable protection. This opposition is neither incidental nor reducible to a moral contrast between two women. It dramatizes a social distribution of vulnerability. Sheller and Urry (2000, pp. 739–741) emphasize that automobility reorganizes public space and the possibilities of social encounter. In Fitzgerald, the road is not a neutral common ground. It is a surface on which the mobility of the privileged becomes dangerous precisely because the less privileged must inhabit it without the same resources for withdrawal, repair, or narrative control. Myrtle's death makes visible the bodily risk that the language of automotive freedom normally leaves unseen.

The scenes immediately after the crash show that unequal vulnerability extends beyond the impact itself. Daisy does not stop; Gatsby offers to assume responsibility; Tom identifies the yellow car to Wilson while withholding the crucial fact that Daisy

was driving; and Wilson, supplied with a simplified story, directs violence toward Gatsby. The issue is not that Fitzgerald lets Daisy escape through a technicality. It is that escape is structured through a chain of substitutions. Gatsby's name can stand in for Daisy's action, the car can stand in for Gatsby, and Myrtle's death can be folded into the panic and property relations of the wealthy. This is the novel's most devastating account of impunity: social privilege operates not only as the ability to avoid punishment but as the ability to determine what, and who, counts as the cause.

Nick's final verdict on Tom and Daisy gives this process its moral language: they are "careless people" who smash things and creatures and then retreat "back into their money" (Fitzgerald, 2004, Chapter 9). The phrase is often treated as the novel's summary condemnation of the Buchanans. It should also be read as a theory of automotive power. To retreat into money is to retreat into a protective infrastructure: wealth supplies automobiles, domestic spaces, lawyers, social credibility, and the capacity to leave town. Carelessness is therefore not simply a character flaw; it names the capacity to externalize consequences. The collision is an automotive event because it exposes the uneven relation between the person who initiates dangerous movement and the people compelled to endure its aftermath.

This reading also clarifies why Gatsby cannot be treated as a simple counterfigure to the Buchanans. He is more solicitous toward Daisy and more willing to accept blame, but his yellow car remains the instrument through which he has made himself visible to the world that Daisy inhabits. His longing is inseparable from the conspicuous mobility that promises access to East Egg. The novel therefore links Gatsby's romantic idealism to the same commodity form that makes Myrtle's desire fatal. Each character is drawn toward the automobile's promise that a new direction, a more brilliant surface, or a faster passage might become a different social self. Fitzgerald's tragedy lies in showing that this promise is not equally available and that, even when it appears available, it is sustained by forms of exclusion that the crash renders undeniable.

Enda Duffy (2022, pp. 78–90) argues that the automobile's early cultural force involved an unstable mixture of consumer celebration, sensory intensity, and terror. *The Great Gatsby* gives that instability a sharply classed narrative form. The novel does not oppose pleasure to violence as if the crash merely corrected an excessive faith in speed.

Rather, it shows pleasure and violence to be continuous. Gatsby's car is desirable because it is powerful, visible, and capable of transforming space; it becomes violent because those same capacities are exercised in a world marked by unequal access to protection. Collision is thus the immanent limit of automotive freedom: the moment when freedom's dependence on infrastructure, privilege, and other people's vulnerability becomes impossible to ignore.

The article's movement from speed to desire to collision consequently reaches its fullest articulation here. Wharton's speeding car made modern sensation inseparable from privilege; Dreiser's automobiles turned commodities into moving claims upon status; Fitzgerald's crash reveals the social violence latent in both processes. The car's promise of self-making culminates not in sovereign autonomy but in a scene where one person's mobility becomes another person's bodily ruin. In this sense, *The Great Gatsby* does not merely symbolize the moral decay of the Jazz Age. It tests a central fantasy of American modernity: that technological movement can be privately owned, privately enjoyed, and privately escaped. The novel's answer is severe. No movement is private once it enters a shared world; the freedom to accelerate always creates a question of who must get out of the way.

Conclusion: The Limits of Automotive Freedom

The automobile occupies a uniquely contradictory position in early twentieth-century American literature. It represents speed, freedom, and self-directed movement, yet it also reveals the social inequalities and bodily risks embedded within modern mobility. Reading Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* together demonstrates that the literary meaning of the automobile cannot be reduced to a simple symbol of technological progress or material prosperity. Rather, the automobile functions as a cultural mechanism through which modern experiences of perception, desire, identity, and vulnerability are produced.

The automobile thus transforms a central American ideal—the belief that freedom consists in the ability to choose one's own direction—into a technological fantasy of acceleration. It offers individuals the possibility of controlling movement, displaying success, and imagining self-creation. Yet the literature examined here repeatedly

challenges this fantasy by showing that mobility is never purely individual. Every act of movement takes place within social structures shaped by class, gender, wealth, and unequal exposure to risk. The broader significance of automotive modernity lies precisely in this tension. The automobile expands the possibilities of individual freedom while simultaneously revealing the limits of that freedom. It allows characters to move more quickly, desire more intensely, and imagine greater possibilities for self-transformation, but it also exposes the dependencies and inequalities beneath those aspirations. In this sense, the automobile becomes not merely a machine of transportation but a literary instrument for examining the contradictions of American modernity.

Ultimately, early twentieth-century American fiction does not reject the automobile as a symbol of progress; instead, it reveals the complexity of the freedom that the automobile promises. Speed produces new forms of perception, mobility generates new forms of desire, and desire ultimately encounters the vulnerability of bodies in collision. The automobile's greatest literary significance therefore lies not in its ability to represent modern freedom, but in its ability to reveal what that freedom costs. As these novels suggest, collision is not external to automotive modernity—it is its internal limit. The crash makes visible the social relations, inequalities, and vulnerabilities that acceleration attempts to conceal. Through the automobile, American literature captures both the excitement of modern movement and the unresolved contradictions that accompany it.

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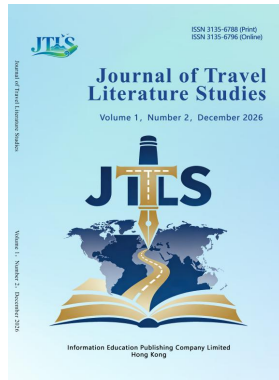
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Mapping Maritime Travel: Portolan Charts and the Epistemic Shift in Medieval European Geography

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Abstract: The emergence of portolan charts in the thirteenth-century Mediterranean marked a significant transformation in European cartographic practice. Unlike traditional *mappae mundi*, which organized space through classical and theological frameworks, portolan charts focused on maritime environments shaped by sustained navigation and exchange. Characterized by detailed coastlines, dense coastal toponymy, and networks of rhumb lines, these charts functioned as practical tools shaped by repeated maritime travel. This paper examines the development of portolan charts through their geographical scope and the evolution of hydrographic and toponymic information from the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries. By tracing how navigational knowledge was accumulated, corrected, and stabilized in use, it argues that portolan charts represent not merely technical innovation but a broader epistemic reorientation in late medieval geography toward an empirically grounded spatial knowledge rooted in travel, movement, and practice.

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The Emergence of Portolan Charts in Their Historical Context

Over centuries of development, European medieval maps presented a diverse array of forms and styles. Modern scholarship in the past century has often classified and discussed them based on shape and function. By form, they are generally categorized as rectangular, circular, oval, or almond-shaped. By function, they are divided into *mappa mundi* (world map), local and regional maps, portolan charts, and celestial maps; it is this functional classification that has received particular scholarly attention (Woodward, 1987, p. 295).¹ Among these, the *mappae mundi* oriented with East at the top was the most common surviving type. From their inception in the sixth and seventh centuries, later draftsmen often relied on historical texts, natural histories, biblical exegesis, and mythological legends, incorporating substantial contemporary geographical information. By the thirteenth century, world maps exhibited a

¹ The term portolan charts is conventionally used in modern scholarship to designate medieval nautical charts. The term itself dates to the late nineteenth century and derives from the Italian portolano, a written manual of sailing directions. This etymology has often been taken to imply that early scholars understood such charts as auxiliary to textual navigational guides rather than as autonomous cartographic instruments. For a standard account, see Campbell (1987, p. 375).

characteristic blend of imagination, historicity, religious symbolism, and encyclopedic detail (Shi & Dong, 2025, p. 80).

However, the thirteenth century witnessed the rise of commercial revival and long-distance sailing in the Mediterranean. It was during this period that a markedly distinct and functionally innovative type of map emerged: the portolan chart. Radically departing from the traditions of *mappae mundi*, these charts eschewed grand historical and mythological narratives, focusing instead on the practical realities of the often-tumultuous seas. Oriented with North at the top, they delineated the coasts of the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and parts of the European Atlantic with remarkable accuracy, labeling them with numerous port names. Devoid of modern latitude and longitude systems, they incorporated intricate networks of rhumb lines, which provided mariners with a reference for determining bearing and plotting courses on unpredictable waters. The emergence of portolan charts thus marked not merely a significant transformation in cartographic practice, but also a broader epistemic reorientation in late medieval geographical knowledge, one that increasingly privileged empirical experience and practical engagement with maritime space. By examining the formal characteristics, origins, and development of portolan charts from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, this study seeks to illuminate the ways in which European cartography and spatial understanding were reshaped during this period.

This epistemic reorientation was not an abstract intellectual shift but was materially embedded in the formal structure and practical design of portolan charts themselves. Portolan charts were designed on mathematical and geometric principles. Typically drawn on single sheets of parchment, coastlines were outlined in black ink, with numerous port names written perpendicular to the coast on the landward side. Major ports, small islands, and river mouths were marked in red, while reefs were indicated by crosses or dots. Key areas were often covered by one or two tangent wind roses. From the center of these wind roses, like spokes from an axle, radiated 16 or 32 lines intersecting the circumference. From each intersection point, 8 or 16 lines radiated in the opposite direction, creating a dense, crisscrossing web of rhumb lines that

covered the chart comprehensively, providing a full directional reference. In practical use, the accurate coastlines and port information on a portolan chart established a geographical framework. Mariners could select their departure and destination points from the ports listed along the coast (usually in counterclockwise order). They would then identify the rhumb line nearest to the intended course for the most economical and safe route. If a vessel deviated from its planned course due to wind, weather, or human error, the navigator would first estimate the distance and angle of deviation using a compass and sandglass timer. They could then employ the *marteloio* method—a trigonometric system for resolving the nautical triangle—to calculate the corrective course back to their intended route and determine their estimated position. Functionally, therefore, the chart was not merely a coastal record but a dynamic navigational instrument, indispensable for planning voyages.

Their practical utility meant portolan charts were subject to seawater damage and wear from frequent handling. Consequently, compared to the more commonly preserved world maps kept indoors, far fewer have survived. According to Tony Campbell's census, only one chart survives from the thirteenth century, with the number rising to thirty-three for the fourteenth century. Among these, the works of the Genoese craftsman Pietro Vesconte (1270–1344), which include one chart and seven atlases, are particularly notable; and he is recognized as the first medieval mapmaker whose identity is securely established (Campbell, 1986, p. 69). As these charts were used in maritime trade, warfare, and exploration to mitigate risks, identify positions, and plan routes (Kelley, 1995, p. 2), their emergence during this era of unprecedented geographical mobility in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is unsurprising. However, the reasons for their sudden, high-precision appearance, so distinct from medieval cartographic traditions, remain a subject of ongoing scholarly debate.

Competing Explanations for the Origins of Portolan Charts

The formal sophistication and apparent technical maturity of the earliest surviving portolan charts raise an important historiographical problem. Despite their close

association with late medieval maritime practice, these charts appear suddenly in the historical record with a level of precision that seems disproportionate to the navigational instruments and scientific knowledge conventionally attributed to medieval Europe. This tension between the charts' demonstrably practical function and the apparent absence of clear developmental antecedents has prompted sustained scholarly debate concerning their origins. Accordingly, modern research has sought to explain how portolan charts came into being, advancing competing theories that variously emphasize classical inheritance, medieval innovation, or the cumulative experience of mariners.

One influential line of explanation situates the origins of portolan charts in developments that predate the Middle Ages, emphasizing the limitations of medieval navigational technology. From this perspective, the emergence of charts with such apparent precision is difficult to reconcile with the tools and techniques conventionally available to medieval sailors. On the basis of mathematical modeling, Roel Nicolai has argued that mariners of the Middle Ages would have been unlikely to produce charts of such accuracy through empirical navigation alone. He therefore proposed that portolan charts may ultimately derive from ancient maps or nautical charts transmitted to Italian merchants through contacts with Constantinople, advancing what has come to be known as the Greco-Roman origin theory (Nicolai, 2014, pp. 57–62). According to this view, the extensive cultural exchange, long-distance travel, and administrative surveying practices characteristic of the Greek and Roman worlds provided a more plausible context for the development of such cartographic precision than the politically fragmented landscape of medieval Europe. The prominence of the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions in early portolan charts—areas central to classical maritime activity—is often cited as further support for this interpretation.

However, no classical maps or cartographic models that closely resemble portolan charts are known to have survived into the Middle Ages for medieval cartographers to consult. Neither Ptolemaic maps nor those by Al-Idrisi (1100–1166), despite their deep indebtedness to Roman geographical traditions, bear significant resemblance to

portolan charts. The fundamental cartographic principle of portolan charts, namely, their explicit design for practical navigation by sailors, finds no clear precedent in surviving Greco-Roman cartography. On this basis, a number of scholars have argued for a medieval origin of portolan charts, noting the first documented appearance of portolan charts in late thirteenth-century sources. This medieval-origin position, however, encompasses a range of distinct interpretations. One view suggests that the earliest charts were drawn using geographical information from written *portolani* (sailing directions),¹ such as bearing and distance data between Mediterranean ports found in texts like *Lo compasso* (Nicolai, 2014, p. 120). However, Campbell contends that the distance and directional information in *portolani* was generally less precise than that represented on portolan charts. Furthermore, comparative analysis of toponyms indicates that the earliest surviving medieval portolano, the *Liber*, did not derive exclusively from first-hand sailing experience, but instead appears to have borrowed, at least in part, from earlier charts, a finding that suggests portolan charts may have preceded written sailing directions rather than the reverse (Campbell, 2021).

Another influential interpretation within the medieval-origin framework was advanced by Hermann Wagner, who proposed that portolan charts were assembled from a series of regional maps of the Mediterranean. He suggested that Italian cartographers systematically revised and combined maps of different sea basins to construct a comprehensive chart of the Mediterranean (Wagner, 1895, pp. 65–87). Campbell subsequently refined Wagner's hypothesis by drawing attention to a pronounced bulge between Tunisia and Sicily that effectively divides the Mediterranean into eastern and western basins. According to Campbell, sailors operating within each basin over long periods accumulated experiential knowledge by recording inter-port distances, and as trade expanded during the later Middle Ages, voyages increasingly crossed these basin boundaries. Mariners therefore likely produced regional charts in response to practical navigational needs. Through incremental empirical correction of routes, such charts

¹ Two *portolani* predating the thirteenth century survive: the *Liber de Existencia Riveriarum et Forma Maris Nostri Mediterranei* and *Lo compasso*. These typically contain written records of distances between ports and sailing directions, including information on freshwater sources, landmarks, and hazards.

gradually reduced accumulated errors, and over time, these regional representations were integrated by navigators into a unified chart of the Mediterranean (Campbell, 1987, p. 387).

Building on the ideas of Wagner and Campbell, Roel Nicolai further proposed that early Mediterranean charts were composed of six “sub-charts,” each characterized by its own scale and orientation, which were subsequently assembled by cartographers using overlapping coastlines as reference points (Nicolai, 2014, pp. 286–287). Tome Marelić’s cartometric analysis of seven portolan charts from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries identified notable variations in scale and accuracy across different regions within individual charts, findings that lend empirical support to Nicolai’s compilation model (Marelić, 2025). Yet despite his endorsement of the composite-chart hypothesis, Marelić ultimately extended his inquiry beyond medieval practice to questions of deeper origin. He observed that the geometric configurations of charted regions closely approximate those generated by Mercator projection, a technique he argues could only have been mastered by classical mathematical geographers and was subsequently lost during the Middle Ages. On this basis, he continued to trace the ultimate source of portolan charts back to antiquity (Marelić, 2025, pp. 608, 611). Nevertheless, the compilation theory itself raises several unresolved problems. The proposed “basins” and “sub-regions,” for instance, do not correspond well to the actual geographical structure of the Mediterranean, nor do the names of such hypothetical regional charts appear in later cartographic traditions. Moreover, medieval sailors were primarily concerned with navigational routes rather than abstract maritime basin divisions unrelated to practical sailing, casting doubt on the extent to which such divisions could have shaped the process of chart production.

Beyond theories that derive portolan charts from written *portolani* or from the compilation of regional maps, other scholars within the medieval-origin camp argue that these charts emerged from the accumulated sailing experience and direct observation of generations of mariners, expanding in scope and increasing in accuracy

as trade routes developed. Campbell is a leading proponent of this interpretation. He argues that:

Before the appearance of the portolan chart an open-sea (pelagic) mariner, from any early period, would have needed a mental map of at least part of the Mediterranean, allied to the ability (prior to the invention of the magnetic needle) to determine direction, by means of a mental wind compass – for which there is indeed documentation. He would not have set out to sea otherwise. The mental maps would have been formed out of an expanding network of individual courses, memorized during a pilot's life. Since many voyages would have involved ports around the sea's periphery those, collectively, could have served to define the Mediterranean's limits. Based on a collaborative pooling of those mental maps it would have been possible to 'download' the whole network as a single graphic design. Once the Mediterranean was visible as a whole, the conflicting estimates of a place's position could be reconciled and omissions rectified. (Campbell, 2021)

On this view, portolan charts originated in the collective navigational memory of Mediterranean sailors, emerging as the product of communal practice and shared experiential knowledge. This raises a further question: how was such a "mental map" first translated into a coherent and reliable graphic representation? Campbell suggests that sailors, once capable of visualizing complex route networks from memory, may have recognized that externalizing these relationships on a physical surface would clarify spatial relations and facilitate the incorporation of new routes. Coastlines could then be sketched by connecting known capes, ports, and landmarks, gradually forming recognizable coastal outlines. Subsequent users needed only to add place names sequentially along these coastlines to generate early chart forms (Campbell, 2021). Campbell's hypothesis remains necessarily conjectural, as there is no direct documentary evidence demonstrating that such a comprehensive Mediterranean "mental map" existed or was systematically employed for navigation. Doubts have also

been raised concerning the capacity of human memory to retain the volume of route information required for chart construction. Nevertheless, the theory is not without historical support. Prior to the widespread use of charts, navigation relied heavily on personal experience and dead reckoning, employing rudimentary instruments such as sandglasses, lead lines, and lodestones. Chaucer's description in the General Prologue of a fourteenth-century sailor who knew "alle the havenes" between Gotland and Finisterre and "every cryke" in Brittany and in Spain without a chart provides indirect testimony to mariners' ability to form intangible mental route maps of familiar seas (Chaucer, 1987, lines 407–409).

By the thirteenth century, moreover, technological developments had begun to make the externalization of such knowledge increasingly feasible. European mariners adopted the magnetic compass for orientation, a device already depicted on the earliest surviving portolan charts. Triangular surveying methods likewise offered a practical structural framework. Although rooted in Greco-Roman antiquity, these methods required neither advanced mathematics nor sophisticated instruments: through experience and observation, sailors could estimate positions by means of intersecting bearings, thereby supplying reasonably accurate geographical information for chart production. Taken together, the combination of medieval navigational tools, accumulated sailing experience, and shared mental route maps makes it plausible that mariners could have produced rudimentary charts, which were subsequently refined and corrected through sustained use.

While each of the above approaches has contributed substantially to our understanding of medieval cartography, they have often treated portolan charts either as technical solutions to navigational problems or as derivative products of earlier scientific traditions. Relatively less attention, however, has been paid to the epistemic conditions under which such charts were produced, used, and invested with authority. Building on this observation, this article adopts a complementary perspective: rather than focusing primarily on where portolan charts originated or how accurate they were, it asks what kinds of geographical knowledge they embodied and authorized. By

situating portolan charts within the broader contexts of mercantile exchange, crusading mobility, and everyday maritime practice, this study argues that they are best understood as material expressions of an epistemic shift in late medieval geography—from authority-based, textually inherited conceptions of space toward empirically grounded, practice-oriented modes of knowing.

The Evolution of Hydrographic Information on Portolan Charts

To move beyond debates over origin and explanation, it is necessary to examine how portolan charts actually developed in use. By tracing changes in coastline representation, toponymic density, and regional coverage over time, the following section shifts the focus from hypothetical origins to the concrete processes through which hydrographic knowledge was accumulated, stabilized, and transmitted in medieval maritime practice. In their earliest surviving forms, portolan charts share several distinctive features in their geographical scope. Rather than presenting an abstract or comprehensive vision of the world, they concentrated on maritime spaces shaped by sustained human movement and exchange. They typically extended eastward to the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean and westward to the western Mediterranean and parts of the European Atlantic coast. On the earliest extant example, the *Carta Pisana*, these coastlines are already densely populated with port toponyms, and major coastal cities are highlighted in red. This density of coastal information suggests that by the thirteenth century—or even earlier—maritime routes linking the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic had become both operationally established and cognitively integrated.

The most accurately rendered coastlines generally correspond to regions of intensive Genoese and Venetian commercial activity, including the Black Sea and the Mediterranean networks dominated by these city-states, as well as the North African coast with which they maintained frequent trade. By contrast, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea appear somewhat later in portolan charts and are depicted with noticeably lower precision in early examples. Yet from the fourteenth century onward, these northern regions were progressively incorporated, accompanied by continuous revision

of place names and coastal outlines. Even core regions such as the Mediterranean and the Black Sea underwent ongoing correction and refinement. Such patterns indicate that early portolan charts were not static representations but working instruments, repeatedly consulted, amended, and recalibrated in response to contemporary maritime practice. Accordingly, tracing the evolution of hydrographic information—especially changes in coastlines and the expansion of represented regions—provides insight into the ways in which geographical knowledge was generated through trade, crusading activity, and sustained seafaring.

To examine the evolution of hydrographic information, scholars typically begin by establishing approximate dates for surviving charts and arranging them chronologically in order to compare changes across successive periods. This analytical sequencing reveals that the development of portolan geography proceeded in several discernible stages rather than through uniform expansion. The earliest regions to appear were the Mediterranean coast, which linked eastern and western worlds, together with the enclosed waters of the Black Sea; these areas also constitute the most accurate components of early charts. Subsequently, coverage expanded northwestward into the Atlantic and Scandinavia, incorporating the Atlantic coasts of France, the Low Countries, England, and Ireland, as well as the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. These regions are already present in charts produced before the 1330s, though their accuracy improved gradually. A third phase, occurring in the fifteenth century, introduced extensive new information on the Atlantic coast of Africa, largely as a result of Portuguese exploration (Campbell, 2021).

Because the earliest surviving portolan charts already display relatively mature geographical knowledge of the Mediterranean and Black Sea, the present section focuses on regions whose representations were still in the process of formation during the fourteenth century. These include England, the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, the European Atlantic coast, and the North African coast. This period represents the formative phase of portolan chart development and is also one from which comparatively few examples survive. The charts examined here include several

produced by Pietro Vesconte, the late-thirteenth-century *Carta Pisana*, and fourteenth-century works by Marino Sanudo, Johannes de Carignano, Angelino Dulcert, and the Pizzigano brothers.

On the *Carta Pisana*, the British Isles appear as a horizontally oriented rectangular form near the upper-left edge of the chart, with six ports labeled along the southeastern coast, including London. In Pietro Vesconte's chart of 1313, the British Isles are oriented more accurately along a north-south axis, with clearly recognizable features such as the Cornwall peninsula and the bays of South Wales. Southeastern coastal elements, including the Isle of Wight, the Isles of Scilly, the Channel Islands, the Thames estuary, and the Wash, are also distinctly represented. The number of English toponyms increases to thirty-six, and Ireland appears for the first time. In Vesconte's final surviving chart (1327), the Isle of Man and the Bristol Channel are added, English place names exceed sixty, and Irish toponyms number more than forty (Campbell, 1987, p. 407). Ruddock has argued that this English geographical information was unlikely to have been derived from contemporary local maps, but instead reflects the navigational records of Venetian merchant vessels engaged in frequent trade with Flanders and England (Ruddock, 1951, p. 22).

The evolution of place names in the North Sea region north of England followed a similar pattern. In the *Carta Pisana*, eleven place names appear between Denmark and Dieppe. This number increases to sixteen in the early-fourteenth-century *Carta Riccardiana* and reaches approximately forty in Vesconte's later 1325 atlas (Campbell, 2015). While many of these names designate major coastal ports, others refer to important inland cities accessible by river, such as Dordrecht, Cologne, Antwerp, Mechelen, and Ghent—urban centers that functioned as key nodes within maritime trade networks. Cologne provides a representative example: located upstream on the Rhine, it had joined the Hanseatic League by 1260 and is placed conspicuously close to the coast in Angelino Dulcert's chart of 1339. Bruges constituted another crucial North Sea hub, serving as a primary intermediary between Hanseatic cities and Mediterranean markets. Historical records attest to Genoese merchants reaching Bruges

as early as 1277, Venetian Flanders galleys arriving after 1314, and regular Genoese voyages by 1325. Early-fourteenth-century Hanseatic trade regulations required that goods traveling north from the Mediterranean or Iberia pass through Bruges, suggesting that much of the geographical information recorded on portolan charts derived from the experience of southern European mariners (Campbell, 2015). By around 1320, Antwerp began to appear in portolan charts and gradually supplanted Bruges as silting rendered the latter less accessible.

As chart coverage extended to the North Sea, the adjacent Baltic Sea also began to receive cartographic attention. Marino Sanudo's world map from around 1320 was among the first to include the Baltic Sea, though its coastline remains schematic. The island of Gotland is exaggerated in size, with its capital Visby—an important commercial center—prominently emphasized. Johannes de Carignano, writing around 1329, also depicted the Baltic, marking ten settlements, though only Bergen and Tromberg can be identified with certainty today. While Norway is absent from these early representations, Angelino Dalorto's chart of 1330 assigns it considerable prominence, depicting it in the distinctive inverted and slanted "A" shape that would persist in later charts. Dulcert's chart of 1339 further refined and expanded the Baltic region, after which its configuration remained largely stable.

The continental European Atlantic coast opposite England underwent comparatively little modification after Vesconte's chart of 1313. In this map, the coastline extends from Bruges southward along the French Atlantic seaboard to Brittany and Bayonne, then turns westward along the northern coast of Spain to Cape Finisterre before continuing south to Cape St. Vincent and curving around the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean. This Atlantic coastline, like that of the Mediterranean, represents one of the most accurately rendered regions in medieval portolan charts. Such accuracy, however, was the result of gradual accumulation rather than sudden discovery. In the *Carta Pisana*, the Atlantic outline is barely recognizable. Scholars have suggested that its earliest representations may have drawn on the experiences of crusaders traveling southward by sea, who exchanged oral or written navigational

knowledge with Genoese sailors in the Mediterranean (Kelley, 1979, p. 19). Campbell further argues that Bruges' commercial importance motivated Italian merchants to conduct detailed surveys of the Atlantic coast and that coastal sailing along the European Atlantic seaboard was safer and more routine than open-sea voyages to England or the Baltic. By the 1270s, Genoese trade with Bruges was already flourishing, and the Atlantic coastline had assumed a recognizable form in Vesconte's earliest charts, remaining largely consistent in later works such as the *Carta Riccardiana* and the Carignano chart (Campbell, 2015).

Besides the Atlantic, the North African coast, closely linked through trade with Spain and Italy, was a core component of portolan charts. A distinctive feature of this region is the diversity of its toponymy, which may be broadly classified into three categories: direct transliterations of local (often Arabic) place names; hybrid forms adapted by Christian travelers; and names borrowed directly or indirectly from classical antiquity (Brentjes, 2012, p. 136). The first category predominates and was likely transmitted through practical sources such as sailors' logs, while the third derives mainly from Ptolemaic or other classical geographical traditions preserved in Arabic scholarship. This layered toponymy underscores both the commercial centrality of the North African coast and the multiple channels through which geographical knowledge circulated. Morocco, in particular, occupied a prominent position along Mediterranean trade routes and maintained frequent contact with Europe. The earliest surviving portolano, the *Liber*, records repeated crusader voyages via Morocco between 1147 and 1271. Gautier Dalché's analysis further indicates that crusading fleets resupplied along the Moroccan Atlantic coast during the Third Crusade (Campbell, 2015). Campbell has also suggested that the cartographer of the *Carta Pisana* may have omitted England at the northern edge in order to retain Morocco in the south, given the constraints of parchment size—an omission that itself signals Morocco's perceived importance (Campbell, 2015). Tunisia constituted another key North African region. Ptolemy, himself an Egyptian, had already marked the adjacent Tunisian coast on his world map, though with limited accuracy (Dilke, 1978, p. 155). The earliest historical reference to

a portolan chart reports that King Louis IX of France (1226–1270), during a storm at sea, ordered a chart to be consulted to confirm the route to Tunisia (Freiesleben, 1984, p. 196). Although the chart used on this occasion has not survived, the prominence of “Tunis,” highlighted in red in the *Carta Pisana*, attests to its importance. Located less than 150 kilometers from Sicily, Tunisia served both as a major commercial port and as a crucial gateway for Genoese merchants entering North Africa.

Examining the evolution of hydrographic information in early portolan charts demonstrates that coastlines and place names became increasingly detailed and accurate as trade networks expanded, voyages multiplied, and empirical exploration deepened. Yet it would be misleading to interpret this process as a continuous, linear progression. The representations of England, the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea reached relatively stable forms by the early fourteenth century and remained largely unchanged for generations; even some sixteenth-century charts differ little from their fourteenth-century predecessors. Over time, distinct regional styles also emerged. Italian charts tended to retain a restrained visual language focused on coastal toponymy, while Catalan chart makers increasingly incorporated inland rivers, mountains, cities, and political entities, producing more elaborate compositions. Scholars generally agree that the former preserved greater navigational functionality (He & Han, 2020, p. 80). Charts such as Angelino Dulcert’s of 1339 also expanded Asia toward the Caspian Sea and extended Africa southward beyond the Sahara, anticipating the emergence of “transitional maps” that bridged medieval conventions and Renaissance cartographic models.

Taken together, the gradual consolidation of coastlines and the stabilization of toponyms in portolan charts suggest a pattern of geographical development shaped less by abstract cartographic theory than by sustained, iterative engagement with maritime space. Those regions most frequently traversed—whether for trade, crusading, or diplomatic travel—acquired increasingly dense and stable representations, while less frequented areas remained schematic or marginal. This uneven refinement underscores the practical conditions under which geographical knowledge was accumulated,

transmitted, and corrected. Rather than progressing uniformly, hydrographic information evolved through selective intensification, reflecting the spatial priorities of medieval seafarers. Such patterns indicate that portolan charts were grounded in a mode of knowledge production that privileged repeated experience and functional reliability over inherited authority—a feature that points toward a broader epistemic reorientation in late medieval geography.

Portolan Charts and Epistemic Shift

Surveying the history of European medieval cartography, one quickly recognizes that early maps, such as the *mappae mundi*, were not chiefly concerned with accurate geographical representation. Instead, they functioned as expressions of religious thought and imaginative worldviews, presenting the cartographer's subjective and often impressionistic conception of the world. On such maps, the relative size of geographical regions reflected their perceived spiritual or symbolic significance rather than any actual spatial extent. Consider Isidore of Seville's T-O map, which places Asia in the upper half of the world, with Europe and Africa sharing the lower half. On the thirteenth-century Ebstorf Map (1234–1240), the eastern Mediterranean region in Asia is rendered in rich detail through sacred geography, while Africa, positioned in the lower right quadrant, occupies a comparatively small and sparsely annotated space.

In the late Middle Ages, cartographers increasingly sought to represent the world in ways that aligned more closely with lived spatial experience, drawing on mathematical proportion, direct observation, and accumulated travel knowledge. The portolan chart represents a paradigmatic expression of this emerging approach, one shaped less by abstract cosmological frameworks than by the demands of sustained long-distance movement across maritime space. Its close connection to long-range crusading voyages is especially notable. The earliest historical reference involves Louis IX consulting a chart en route to Tunisia in 1270, while the earliest surviving chart, the *Carta Pisana*, dates from the late thirteenth century (Freiesleben, 1984, p. 196). This connection may extend back a century earlier: the portolano *Liber de existencia riveriarum*, a key source for chart toponymy, records coastal places referenced in accounts of crusades from the Second (1147) to the Ninth (1271). Approximately three-

quarters of these place names appear on the earliest charts by Pietro Vesconte, whose works—owing to both their early date and high degree of cartographic consolidation—constitute a corpus of so-called “Foundation Names” (Campbell, 2015). Such patterns suggest that crusading itineraries provided not merely anecdotal references but a structurally significant geographical substrate for later chart-making.

The close relationship between crusading activity and the development of portolan charts likely stemmed from the specific navigational demands posed by extended open-sea voyages. Unlike routine medieval commercial travel, crusading expeditions often followed longer routes through unfamiliar waters and involved more complex navigational conditions. Contemporary accounts of naval engagements repeatedly emphasize the importance of fleet maneuvering and positional awareness (Rose, 2013, p. 121). In such contexts, a ship’s heading and location became matters of strategic consequence. These conditions created an acute need for practical spatial tools capable of reliably representing coastlines and bearings. Used alongside instruments such as sandglasses, magnetic compasses, and dividers, portolan charts enabled navigators to estimate position, correct course, and identify potential harbors, functions essential for prolonged maritime operations. It is therefore unsurprising that some scholars have suggested that naval commanders themselves contributed to chart development. Charles de la Roncière, for example, proposed that the Genoese admiral Benedetto Zaccaria, who commanded Byzantine, Catalan, and French fleets, may have undertaken coastal surveying during his campaigns, thereby supplying information later incorporated into charts (Crone, 1978, pp. 36–37).

Beginning in the late eleventh century, the Crusades also facilitated the transmission of scientific and technical knowledge from the Islamic world to Latin Europe. Ptolemaic astronomy, preserved and expanded by Arabic scholars, re-entered Western intellectual circulation, along with advanced works on astronomy, astrology, and celestial projection techniques. These developments contributed to a broader transformation in the epistemic resources available to European scholars and practitioners, including cartographers. Some researchers have therefore suggested that the production of portolan charts may have been indirectly influenced by such projection techniques. Fuat Sezgin, analyzing early chart data, proposed that portolan

charts may have been constructed using stereographic projection—a method known since the Abbasid caliphate of al-Ma'mun (813–833)¹ and commonly employed in medieval astrolabes. He further argued that by the thirteenth century, Arabic astronomical geodesy, refined by scholars such as al-Biruni (973–1050) and Abu Ali al-Hasan al-Marrakushi, had achieved considerable accuracy in determining geographical coordinates. According to this hypothesis, chart makers could have established a coordinate framework through projection and subsequently integrated sailors' route-based data, processed through trilateration, to fix port positions and connect them into coastlines (Nicolai, 2014, pp. 394–395). Supporting this possibility, J. K. Wright demonstrated that employing fifty-eight geographical coordinates from the Marseilles Tables could generate remarkably accurate outlines of Arabia and the Mediterranean (Wright, 1923, p. 87). While such arguments remain speculative, they underscore the extent to which portolan charts were situated at the intersection of practical navigation and broader traditions of scientific knowledge transmission.

The empirical orientation embodied in portolan charts finds a clear resonance in contemporaneous literary production. As Allison DeWitt has demonstrated, Dante's precise and technically informed depictions of navigation—most notably in the episode of Ulysses' voyage—draw upon contemporary maritime practices and instruments rather than relying solely on symbolic or classical paradigms (DeWitt, 2019, pp. 127–128). Read in this light, the *Commedia* and early portolan charts may be understood as parallel articulations of a culture increasingly invested in empirically grounded spatial knowledge, in which literary imagination and cartographic practice alike were shaped by shared mercantile circuits and emerging epistemic habits. A similar convergence may be observed in Chaucer's work. As a customs official who traveled extensively and was familiar with Italian cultural and administrative contexts through diplomatic missions, Chaucer consistently integrates detailed maritime references into his poetry. Alfred Hiatt has observed that in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer's account of Custance's voyage from Syria to Northumbria and subsequently back to Rome deploys a set of specialized nautical toponyms—"See of Grece," "Strayte of Marrok," "Jubaltare," and "Septe"—which correspond closely to locations frequently inscribed

¹ Al-Ma'mun, the seventh Abbasid Caliph, was a patron of science and translation whose reign saw significant advances in astronomy and geography.

on medieval portolan charts (Hiatt, 2011, pp. 155–156). Such usage suggests not merely incidental borrowing, but a sustained engagement with chart-based spatial knowledge and the epistemologies it encodes.

The epistemological orientation embodied in portolan charts did not remain confined to nautical mapping but gradually reshaped world maps, giving rise to hybrid or “transitional” cartographic forms. The earliest known world map to incorporate portolan features emerged from a collaboration between the Venetian merchant and crusade advocate Marino Sanudo and a Genoese cartographer (Harte, 2008, p. 14). Created in the aftermath of the fall of Acre in 1291, Sanudo’s *Liber secretorum fidelium crucis* included several maps intended to persuade the Avignon papacy to support renewed crusading efforts. The accompanying world map retained the eastward orientation and tripartite division of Asia, Europe, and Africa characteristic of *mappae mundi*, yet it also introduced a network of rhumb lines and rendered the Mediterranean and Black Sea coastlines with portolan-like accuracy. Africa extended southward in an arc suggesting the Gulf of Guinea, the Indian Ocean opened eastward, and significantly, the Caspian Sea was depicted as an inland body of water rather than a northern gulf. Biblical, classical, and contemporary geographical elements coexisted, but Paradise was omitted and the Holy Land was not visually exaggerated. The result was not a simple juxtaposition of old and new forms, but a reconfiguration of world geography under the influence of empirically validated maritime space.

The pinnacle of transitional mapping is Abraham Cresques’ Catalan Atlas, widely regarded as the most accomplished work of the fourteenth-century Majorcan school. The atlas consists of six parchment sheets arranged into twelve folios and, when fully unfolded, measures approximately 65×300 cm. The first two folios assemble medieval European astrological and astronomical knowledge relevant to navigation, including charts, numerical tables, and explanatory texts addressing celestial phenomena, geography, and technical procedures. Such compilations were a common feature of late medieval navigational atlases and manuals, reflecting the range of intellectual and technical resources considered relevant to maritime practice. In this context, the opening folios functioned as a compendium of reference knowledge, framing the spatial representations that followed rather than serving as independent cosmological diagrams.

The final four folios depict a vast spatial expanse extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific and southward to the Indian Ocean, employing gold and silver leaf to render the topography and coastlines of Eurasia and Africa. Specifically, folios 3–4 present the Mediterranean and Black Sea with coastlines that closely follow portolan conventions in scale and orientation, densely annotated with over a thousand port and cape names, and equipped with wind roses and rhumb lines. Folios 5–6 mark the atlas's expansion into a world map, portraying Asia and Africa with increasingly elaborate visual decoration. While certain classical and biblical motifs remain, such as Alexander the Great in Northeast Asia and the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea, these elements no longer determine the organization of spatial representation. Instead, even within the interiors of Africa and Asia, contemporary place names predominate.

Particularly striking is the attention given to trans-Saharan routes, where salt-mining centers such as Taghaza and Tacost, together with established caravan paths, are clearly marked. The Red Sea, rendered with unusual prominence, appears as a major corridor linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean world. European interest in African gold is visually articulated through the figure of Mansa Musa of Mali, depicted holding a large gold nugget near Timbuktu and accompanied by a legend emphasizing his wealth. The ill-fated voyage of Jacme Ferrer in 1346 to the "Rio de Oro," undertaken in pursuit of gold and from which he never returned, is commemorated by a ship placed along the West African coast, simultaneously marking a historical episode and gesturing toward further exploration. In contrast to traditional *mappae mundi*, which often filled Africa with classical nomenclature or monstrous races, the Catalan Atlas presents the continent primarily as a space structured by routes, resources, and zones of exchange, foregrounding its economic and connective dimensions rather than allegorical meaning.

Asia likewise acquires a recognizable cartographic outline for the first time. The Caspian Sea is depicted with a coherent and enclosed coastline, while Mongol territories extend from east of the Caspian to the Yellow Sea, with the capital Cambaluc (Beijing) of "Catayo" prominently identified. Cartographic historian Gerald Crone argued that much of the atlas's Asian material derived from contemporary travel accounts, including *The Travels of Marco Polo*, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, and *The Travels of Odoric of Pordenone*. Legendary elements, such as desert spirits or

descriptions of Kublai Khan, were often incorporated directly from these narratives (Crone, 1978, p. 41). Larner identified at least twenty-nine Chinese place names traceable to Marco Polo, including Quanzhou, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, the Zhoushan Islands, and Hainan, with nearly all information concerning the Tartars drawn from this source (Larner, 2001, p. 93). India appears for the first time as a clearly defined peninsula, marked by the “Kingdom of Christians” on the east coast and Colombo, as well as ports such as Quilon, Cambay, Baroche, and Gogo on the west coast. Crone suggested that these details may have originated from the missionary Jordan Catala’s *Mirabilia descripta*, completed before 1340 (Crone, 1978, p. 47).

Thus, the Catalan Atlas draws extensively on contemporaneous portolan charts for the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and European coastlines, while simultaneously incorporating thirteenth and fourteenth century travel literature to construct a travel-informed and experience-based representation of Asia. Its principal innovation lies not in the rejection of inherited traditions, but in the systematic integration of a wide range of contemporary geographical sources into a reconfigured world image. Adhering to a practice-informed cartographic logic rooted in portolan traditions, the atlas omits many allegorical narratives and leaves polar regions deliberately blank, rather than filling them with monstrous races. In doing so, it demonstrates the transformative impact of the cartographic principles and practice-validated spatial knowledge first articulated in portolan charts.

Conclusion

Examining portolan charts from the fourteenth century and earlier reveals that they were not static artifacts but dynamic and practice-oriented instruments, continually reshaped by expanding trade routes, crusading expeditions to the eastern Mediterranean, and diverse regional cartographic traditions. Each correction to a coastline and each addition or removal of a place name registers the material traces of medieval sailors’ and merchants’ engagement with maritime space. In this sense, the development of portolan charts constitutes a microhistory of medieval European maritime expansion and spatial learning. The significance of portolan charts within the history of cartography therefore extends well beyond their immediate utility as navigational aids.

They embody a fundamental epistemic transformation: a shift from an interpretive geography grounded in classical authority and theological symbolism toward an empirical geography based on observation, repeated experience, and calculation. While traditional *mappae mundi* articulated a cosmos ordered by spiritual meaning, portolan charts began to delineate a world that could be measured, traversed, and practically known. By enabling trans-regional navigation and challenging inherited spatial hierarchies, they gradually destabilized established conceptual boundaries and fostered new ways of organizing geographic knowledge. This reorientation laid an essential intellectual foundation for the cartography of the Renaissance and the subsequent Age of Discovery.

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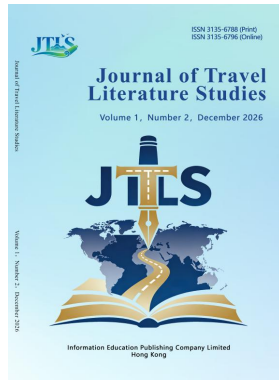
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Urban Sketching in Kiyooka Takayuki's Travelogue "Dalian in Early Winter"

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Abstract: Kiyooka Takayuki (1922–2006), a celebrated Japanese poet and novelist, was born in Dalian, China, where he spent his adolescence before repatriating to Japan in 1948. His work melds personal experience with lyricism. *Dalian under the Acacia Trees*, winner of the sixty-second Akutagawa Prize (1970), draws upon colonial urban memory. The opening story of *Collection of Dalian Sketches* (1983), "Dalian in Early Winter," records his observations upon revisiting the city after thirty-four years. The text's meticulous temporal, spatial, and characterological detail reflects an obsessive pursuit of authenticity—a drive to restore things to themselves. Set against the backdrop of 1980s Sino-Japanese relations, a period marked both by warmth and by persistent tensions such as the textbook controversy, the story offers not only a vivid urban portrait but also an implicit historical reckoning. Kiyooka's focus on the quotidian aligns him with the Introverted Generation, a dominant 1970s Japanese literary movement, yet his infusion of historical reflection signals a critical engagement with that tradition. Published during the ascendancy of "urban theory" in Japanese literary studies, "Dalian in Early Winter" may be read as a practical enactment of that framework. Through its

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layered attention to reality, history, and psychology, Kiyooka constructs a multidimensional space for dialogue with the contemporary reader.

Keywords: Kiyooka Takayuki; “Dalian in Early Winter”; travelogue; urban writing; contemporaneous studies

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Introduction

“Dalian in Early Winter” is a short story written by Kiyooka Takayuki following his visit to China in 1982, during which he revisited Dalian. The story was first published in the March 1983 issue of *Shinchō*, and later included in the collection *Dalian Sketches* (Kōdansha, 1983), which also featured three other works: “Zhongshan Square,” “Sakharov’s Fantasy,” and “By the Sea in Dalian.” In 1992, the story was further compiled into *The Complete Works of Takayuki Kiyooka’s Dalian Novels* (Volume 2) (Nihon Bungeisha), appearing as the opening piece in the “Records of a Revisiting Dalian” section, thereby underscoring its distinctive status and significance within the author’s literary oeuvre. The promotional text for the 1983 Kōdansha edition of *Dalian Sketches* states: “This collection of short stories depicts the author’s return to Dalian, the city of his birth and upbringing, after thirty-four years. Despite having experienced successive rule by Russia, Japan, and China, Dalian retains its unique and timeless beauty. The work poignantly articulates the bittersweet and complex nostalgia of an author who was a child of the colonial era.”¹ Meanwhile, the promotional copy for the 1992 Nihon Bungeisha edition of the complete works emphasizes: “Dalian—once an experimental city of Japanese modernization. From the Russo-Japanese War to the end of World War II, the glory and trauma of this city are forever captured by a Japanese writer born and raised there, through his unwavering pen. Immersed in boundless attachment and historical reflection, this deeply moving series of works has now been

¹ Kiyooka. *Dalian Sketches*. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1983. All subsequent quotations from “Dalian in Early Winter” are taken from this edition, with page numbers cited parenthetically

fully supplemented, revised, and published!”¹ Evidently, the promotional language of both editions centers on Dalian’s distinctive regional character (its historical connection to Japan) as well as the complex emotions—namely, nostalgia—projected onto it by the author. Yet the question of what constituted the appeal of “Dalian” and “nostalgia” to contemporary readers at the time, along with its causes and manifestations, requires analysis situated within the historical framework of the era.

Specialized research on “Dalian in Early Winter” remains relatively scarce. In “Hometown as the Origin of Existence,” Takahashi Hideo (1930-2019) positions *Dalian Sketches* as “the literary embodiment of Kiyooka Takayuki’s nostalgia.” He notes: “In 1982, at the age of sixty, Mr. Kiyooka finally obtained the opportunity to return to his hometown, Dalian. The profound significance of this homecoming is fully manifested in the subsequently compiled and published collection *Dalian Sketches*” (Takahashi, 50). He particularly emphasizes that “Dalian in Early Winter” reveals the author’s sense of relief in assuaging his nostalgia: “Returning after thirty-four years, the city remains magnificently beautiful. The old streets carrying memories and the city’s now renewed appearance surge with overwhelming emotion, flowing like a clear melody into his completely open heart. At every step, the transparent past and the vivid present merge and shimmer on the ground beneath his feet” (Takahashi, 2008, p.50). In “Six Ridgelines,” Takahashi adds that the poet’s revisit to Dalian, re-entering familiar spaces and even visiting his former residence, constituted a rare experience that was not merely nostalgic for the past but signified “the burning of life oriented towards the present. The revival of memory belongs to the present, not the past. The Chinese guide accompanying Kiyooka said on the cold Dalian streets, ‘You are so exhilarated by your homecoming, Mr. Kiyooka, that you hardly feel the cold’ (‘Dalian in Early Winter’). This indicates that the revived memory was making the poet’s blood boil” (Takahashi, 2008, p.53). Naka Tarō (1922-2014), in “Mr. Kiyooka Takayuki and Dalian-China,” views *Dalian Sketches* as a work confessing the author’s latent nostalgia. “The nostalgia that could still be quietly concealed within poetry is, in the prose short story collection *Dalian Sketches*, though suppressed by a profound awareness—where ‘a personal sentimental journey, reflection on his own country’s past aggression, and recognition

¹ Kiyooka. *Complete Dalian Novels of Takayuki Kiyooka, Volume 2*. Nihon Bungeisha, 1992.

of the present reality of a foreign land are interwoven at the level of consciousness’—nevertheless laid bare in an exceedingly persistent and meticulous manner” (Naka, 2008, p.155). Naka also points out the chain reaction in literary reception triggered by Kiyooka’s Dalian-themed fiction: “It will inevitably make readers keenly feel its close resonance with *Dalian under the Acacia Trees*, which was published over a decade earlier” (Naka, 2008, p.155). This is key to how Kiyooka constructed the image of Dalian within the context of modern Japanese literature and also reflects his reader-awareness during the creative process. Usami Hitoshi (1942-), in “The Space of Kiyooka Takayuki,” likewise summarizes *Dalian Sketches* as “a kind of homecoming novel” (Usami, 2008, p.404). The study also notes that in Kiyooka’s China-themed fiction and travel writings, the notation of time and space often exhibits an almost obsessive rigor: “In terms of numbers, whether it is the takeoff and landing times of planes or the length of time separating past and present, Kiyooka seems to strive for maximum precision with extreme scrupulousness. The same applies to expression of age. If we acknowledge that divisions like youth, middle age, and old age are merely relative concepts influenced by individual differences, historical changes, and environmental factors, then vague terms like ‘early old age’ should ideally be avoided—this mode of thinking seems to exist in his subconscious” (Usami, 2008, p.400).

In reading “Dalian in Early Winter,” I noted Kiyooka Takayuki’s meticulous detailing. Whether in the precise marking of temporal points, the delicate depiction of spatial scenes, the elaborate portrayal of characters, or the detailed narration of events, the text everywhere exhibits the author’s high pursuit of authenticity and accuracy. On this point, Usami Hitoshi argues that the author suppresses emotion and devotes himself to objective descriptions, aiming to highlight the intrinsic value inherent in things themselves. “The restrained tone naturally emerges in the revisit to the old residence depicted in the first work, ‘Dalian in Early Winter’, and in the urban landscape portrayed in the second, ‘Zhongshan Square’. As noted at the outset, the profusion of numbers and proper nouns is particularly striking here. The author deliberately suppresses the inner fluctuations and emotional shifts that occasionally threaten to surface, striving instead to foreground a fixation on objective things. It is precisely through this method that he seems to attempt to unearth the intrinsic value possessed

by things themselves, transcending the barriers of national borders, time, and politics” (Usami, 2008, p.405). As Usami observes, forming an objective and concrete understanding of things is a necessary prerequisite for delving into their inner meaning. Yet shifting the perspective to readers—especially contemporary readers of the 1980s—raises another question worthy of in-depth exploration: what kind of reading experience would they have when encountering the novel’s depictions of Dalian’s streetscapes, the faces of its residents, the history of places, personal memories, and the daily details and emotional fluctuations during the revisit? I contend that an analysis of detailed writing from the perspective of reception is an aspect that cannot be overlooked when studying “Dalian in Early Winter” and, indeed, all of Kiyooka’s works on revisiting Dalian. Simultaneously, it offers a promising entry point for returning to the historical context and reinterpreting Kiyooka’s literary works from that period.

The detailed writing in “Dalian in Early Winter” can be divided into three parts: the precise anchoring of temporal and spatial coordinates, the careful presentation of human and factual elements, and the confessional account of the complex emotions during this revisit. Through these, a narrative space that is both palpably real and filled with tension is constructed. This paper will delve into the text, restore the historical field, and systematically examine—from a contemporary perspective, the specific practices and receptive significance of Kiyooka Takayuki’s detailed writing. It aims to reveal how his meticulous weaving of details was reflected in the eyes of contemporary readers and how it is embedded within the timeline of literature.

Resonating with Contemporary Issues: Testimonies of Reality and Historical Response

The 1980s represent a particularly distinctive phase in the history of Sino-Japanese relations, characterized by highly positive interactions in politics, economy, and culture. This period is widely regarded in academia as a “golden age” or “honeymoon period” for bilateral relations. High-level visits were frequent, non-governmental exchanges thrived, Japanese films, anime, and art gained widespread popularity in China, Japanese corporate investment interest increased significantly, and Chinese traditional culture and the reform and opening-up process garnered extensive attention from various

sectors of Japanese society. “Dalian in Early Winter” contains specific examples corroborating the friendly Sino-Japanese exchanges of this era. Describing Leng Lianquan, a staff member of the Dalian Foreign Affairs Office, the author records this detail: “In May of this year, Dalian gifted a panda to one of its sister cities, Kitakyushu” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.22). The “this year” refers to 1982, the year of Kiyooka’s revisit. Dalian and Kitakyushu had formally established sister-city relations in 1979, and since then have engaged in sustained exchanges and cooperation across multiple fields. Dalian has gifted animals such as blue sheep, lynxes, and red pandas to Kitakyushu, which in return has presented gorillas, giraffes, and zebras, reflecting the deepening of friendly ties. Furthermore, the novel mentions the author’s wife’s fondness for stained glass objects: “She is fond of stained glass, and at the Silk Road cultural relics exhibition held in Tokyo some time ago, she was utterly captivated by a green glass bottle from the Sui Dynasty” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.34). The exhibition referred to appears to be the “Silk Road Cultural Relics Exhibition of the People’s Republic of China” held at the Tokyo National Museum from March 20 to May 13, 1979. Its subtitle explicitly indicated the provenance and era of the relics as “Excavated from Shanxi, Gansu, Xinjiang; Han to Tang Dynasties,” which aligns with the historical background of the Sui Dynasty glass bottle. This further corroborates the reliability of Kiyooka’s historical details and reflects the close nature of Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges at the time.

According to records in the *Chronicle of Sino-Japanese Friendly Exchanges*, Sino-Japanese interaction in 1982 was frequent, encompassing film collaborations, cultural performances, and mutual visits and joint studies in fields such as social sciences, music and painting, literature, and economics. Notably, Kiyooka Takayuki’s visit to China as a member of a delegation from the Japan-China Cultural Exchange Association took place precisely in November 1982 (see the Appendix, *Chronicle of Sino-Japanese Friendly Exchanges 1982*, for related records). His travel narrative not only supplements concrete details of friendly exchanges at the official level but also highlights the friendliness and goodwill demonstrated by ordinary Dalian citizens in his personal interactions with them. As written in the text: “All the requests I had conveyed through the Japan-China Cultural Exchange Association in Tokyo to the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in Beijing had been

thoughtfully incorporated into the itinerary. Gratitude welled up within me for the schedule, which so considerately allowed ample time for every visit” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.21). This description fully reflects the courtesy and preferential treatment received by Japanese visiting delegations in China. Yet such respect and friendliness were not confined to official channels; in Kiyooka’s detailed writing, the goodwill conveyed by ordinary people is equally moving. For example, after a visit to Lu Xun Park, faced with the last remaining candied hawthorn stick, a young mother wanted to offer it to the author: “I took out my wallet to buy it, only to notice a small child accompanying a mother of about forty, who seemed to have set their heart on the last remaining candied hawthorn stick. I held back and gently urged them to take it. She kindly demurred as well. I was moved by the simple goodwill in her smiling face” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.32). When describing the former residence where he spent his childhood, the narrative recounts how, upon stepping back into the old house at the Nanshan Street, the current owners - Mr. Lin and his son, warmly received “me”. Their reaction is particularly noted when they heard that “I” had lived there from the age of six months until twenty-four years old:

While listening to my story, a look would occasionally flicker across the host’s face—one of both bewilderment and sympathy toward me, or perhaps a touch of heartfelt discomfort. I felt a growing fondness for the character of Mr. Lin and his son. When I remarked how delicious the apple was that the son had peeled for me, the father said, “This apple is from Sanshilipu” (Kiyooka, 48). Meanwhile, Kiyooka deliberately has Lin Yigui add in the dialogue: “My son has now begun studying Japanese”. (Kiyooka, 1983, p. 49)

In the 1980s, it was not uncommon for young people in China to begin learning Japanese. By including this detail, the author not only bridges the distance between the eldest son of the Lin family and “me,” but also reflects the open-mindedness of the younger Chinese generation at that time, eager to engage with Japanese friends—foreshadowing positive prospects for friendly exchanges between the two countries. Within a single space shared by two generations of owners, the sympathy and

compassion shown by Mr. Lin and his son toward Kiyooka Takayuki constitute not merely an emotional resonance between individuals but also reveal the possibility of profound emotional dialogue between China and Japan when confronting historical issues. Such warmth-filled interpersonal details appear frequently throughout the text. With delicate and gentle words, Kiyooka records everyday encounters with ordinary Chinese people, bearing witness to the amicable realities of Sino-Japanese relations in the 1980s. He narrates these moving stories to his contemporary readers—particularly those keenly attentive to politics and international affairs—in a manner that soothes underlying anxieties, fortifies confidence in future exchanges, and ensures that the path of mutual progress continues unbroken.

However, even during this period of generally friendly and harmonious development, some discordant notes emerged. On June 26, 1982, the morning edition of Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* reported that, according to the Japanese Ministry of Education's textbook screening requirements, descriptions of the Japanese military's actions in North China during the Sino-Japanese War had been changed from "aggression" (*shinryaku*) to "advance" (*shinshutsu*). Based on this report, the Chinese government protested to the Japanese government and demanded accurate historical descriptions in the textbooks. Thus, the "textbook issue" became the first major diplomatic friction between the two countries concerning perceptions of history after the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations (Zheng, 2014, p.226). Subsequent investigations revealed inaccuracies in the initial media reports: the screening that year did not involve directly changing the word "aggression" to "advance." However, the Ministry of Education's review comments did propose "softening" the phrasing of certain specific acts of aggression (such as "the aggression in North China"), replacing them with more ambiguous terminology. This overall tendency to downplay the nature of the aggression was summarized and reported by the media as a direct substitution of terms (Zhang, 2018, p.161). Despite these inaccuracies, the international pressure and diplomatic crisis it triggered were very real for Japan. To quell the controversy, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Miyazawa Kiichi issued an official statement on August 26, 1982, known as the "Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Miyazawa Kiichi on History Textbooks" (Tian, 1997, p.370). The ruling Liberal Democratic Party added the

“neighboring countries clause” to the textbook screening criteria, establishing it as one of the standards: “Textbooks ought to show understanding and seek international harmony in their treatment of modern and contemporary historical events involving neighboring Asian countries” (Minamizuka). In summary, the “textbook issue” is a typical case rooted in Japan's perception of history, a problem that has recurred repeatedly over the following decades, becoming a structural challenge plaguing Sino-Japanese relations. For contemporary readers, especially those sensitive to historical issues, when reading works like “Dalian in Early Winter,” which touch upon Sino-Japanese relations and are set against the backdrop of a wartime colony, they would inevitably pay attention to how the author addresses this historical legacy, the “textbook issue”. It is worth noting that the text does not shy away from using the term “aggression”; on the contrary, it emphasizes this concept multiple times in the narrative.

This was because I had felt apprehensive since leaving Tokyo that even the slightest acknowledgment of the construction projects undertaken by the South Manchuria Railway might convey, however faintly, a tacit acceptance of the military aggression that lay behind or preceded them. Even if I were able, for my own part, to distinguish between the construction and the aggression, voicing such a distinction would be liable to be misconstrued. (Kiyooka, 1983, p.39)

In its explicit use of the term “aggression,” the author demonstrates no intention of evading or obscuring the historical essence. At the same time, the text’s deliberation on whether “construction” might be disentangled from “aggression” reads, within the specific historical context, as a pointed rejoinder to the “textbook issue”. Construction, or any other undertaking pursued under the shadow or precondition of military aggression, cannot be severed from the aggression itself. Aggression is aggression: it ought neither to be consigned to the penumbras of history nor dressed in euphemistic language. Even where no original intent to distort facts exists, such discursive maneuvers remain deeply susceptible to misreading. On this point, the text operates as both a caution and a reproach to the Japanese government’s recurrent efforts to minimize the record of past aggression. Diplomacy, being an indispensable dimension

of international relations, demands that historical questions be treated with the utmost seriousness, a vital foundation for the maintenance of amicable bilateral relations. Moreover, the text registers Kiyooka's insistence on a shared humanity and the interconnectedness of peoples. After his warm exchange with Mr. Lin and his son, Kiyooka Takayuki, upon leaving the former residence, finds himself moved to reflection.

In the car heading to the next destination, I was struck by a strange coincidence. When I returned Dalian before the end of the war, I was twenty-two years old, and my father was sixty-three at the time. My father, a civil engineer, had already retired from the South Manchuria Railway and was leisurely taking on small civil engineering contracts. This was precisely the same age combination as that of the Chinese father and son I had just met. So, my father was about that age back then, and I was that young! What a strange mirror. That son has lived in that house for twenty-two years. I turned twenty-three about three months later, then experienced the war's end, having lived there for roughly twenty-four years in total. Soon, my record will be surpassed. I had always believed, even after repatriation, that I loved that building the most, but that notion must be set aside from today. From the Lin family, I received an impression of serene contentment. This, too, was a source of joy for me (Kiyooka, 1983, p.50).

The Lin father and son now living in that house appear as a mirror image of Kiyooka and his own father. Two families from different eras and nations overlap in the narrative by virtue of this shared spatial anchor. At first glance, such an arrangement may seem a curious coincidence; upon closer examination, however, it suggests a kind of historical and existential inevitability—the commonalities between people and their underlying spiritual bonds, even if not explicitly recognized in their own time and place, nevertheless truly exist. Precisely because of this, despite differences in language and geographical separation, human beings can still achieve communication and understanding at certain junctures. Simultaneously, through his own experience, Kiyooka conveys to the reader a particular view of time and history: one must accept

the passage of time and the transformation of things, and confront those parts of the past we are reluctant to face, be they pain, error, or reality itself. Only through such acknowledgment and acceptance can one truly shed psychological burdens, thereby arriving at the state of “serene contentment” toward which the end of the text gestures.

A Dialogue with the General Reader: Travelogue and Guide to Dalian

The social context of friendly China–Japan exchanges has objectively created favorable conditions for Japanese citizens to visit China, while simultaneously fostering their interest in and curiosity about the country. Indeed, since the full implementation of China’s reform and opening-up policy in 1979, and reinforced by the positive spillover effects of Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Japan, Japanese society’s interest in China has grown markedly, with the willingness to travel to and study in China demonstrating a sustained upward trajectory.

A young firefighter said cheerfully, “I would even take a day off work to welcome the leader coming from the neighboring country. Well, I will definitely watch the live broadcast on TV. China is the country I most want to visit right now. I have been discussing a trip to China with my friends.”

A female university student studying Chinese said, “My dream is to study in China. It seems that Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Japan has brought me one step closer to realizing this dream. I’m so happy. I extend my warm welcome to him.” (Li, 2012)

According to news reports on the tourism industry: “During the 1980s, the tourism industry experienced rapid growth driven by the opening of Narita Airport, yen appreciation, and the Japanese government’s ‘Overseas Travel Doubling Plan’ (Ten Million Plan). Over this decade, the number of overseas travelers expanded sharply from 3.9 million in 1980 to 10 million by 1990, and new travel products tailored to experienced international tourists began to gain widespread adoption” (Travel Voice Editorial Department). It is evident, therefore, that the decade from 1980 to 1990 witnessed a remarkable surge in overseas travel among Japanese citizens. Official

exchange activities required documentation, and the public's overseas journeys demanded reliable information. Within this context, a substantial number of Chinese travelogues emerged to meet these needs. The following titles are drawn from *A New Compilation of Japanese Travel Accounts on China since the Meiji Era (Annotated Edition): The Modernization of One Billion People* (Asahi Shimbun China Reporting Team); *Stroking the Giant Elephant: Observations, Hearings, and Reflections on New China* (Hisashi Ōhisa); *Camera Report: China and the Masses* (Tetsuya Ōmura); *Journey on the Silk Road: Sand, Green and Sun* (Kyodo News Agency); *Comrade!! Bring Me a Cold Beer* (Daigo Kusano); *Journey to Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Shaoxing* (Huangpu Friends Association Friendship Delegation); *Wandering the Western China: Urumqi, Turpan, Lanzhou, Xi'an* (National Geographic Education Research Association Second Friendship Delegation); *China's Rivers: A Report on the Visit to the Yellow River, Yangtze River, and Pearl River, No. 1* (Japan River Development Research Council); *The Real China Seen Through a Housewife's Eyes: Records of the First Visit to China by the Soka Gakkai Women's Division* (Yumiko Yaya); and *The Bond Between Us and China* (China Visit Records Association).

Upon organizing and analyzing the major Chinese travelogues written by Japanese authors in the 1980s, it becomes evident that these works were both numerous and diverse in genre. Travel reports and documentary texts produced under official cultural exchanges remained dominant, reflecting the high market demand for information about China. Yet the relative scarcity of personalized travel records reveals the cautious curiosity of the general readership: while Japanese travelers harbored strong interest in China, they also felt a subtle unease toward this unfamiliar foreign land. Driven by this complex psychology, readers actively sought various kinds of information about China and were particularly sensitive to content in travel texts that could guide or inform their own experiences. Against this backdrop, "Dalian in Early Winter", which offers detailed depictions of both the city's landscapes and its cultural ambiance, served as a highly fitting "travel guide" that met readers' expectations. In the narrative, Kiyooka Takayuki's perspective constantly shifts between that of a "tourist" and a "returnee." As a tourist, he assumes the role of guiding readers through Dalian, vividly presenting the city's streetscapes, local customs, and personal experiences with meticulous attention

to detail. Following Kiyooka's footsteps, readers are invited to visit Dalian's landmark buildings, savor local specialty foods, and experience its unique customs and traditions. The content recorded by Kiyooka perfectly aligns with the information sought by readers curious about the city. For instance, he provides a detailed account of his visit to Lu Xun Park—Lu Xun being the most familiar modern Chinese writer to Japanese readers at the time, and describes the variety of people he encounters: young readers engrossed in books, elderly citizens sunbathing or performing unusual exercises in pavilions, and primary school students using stones as desks and chairs to solve arithmetic problems. These vivid character portrayals resonate across generations. Furthermore, Kiyooka introduces Dalian's specialty foods, including tanghulu with its transparent sweet-and-sour sugar coating, a variety of fresh seafood, smooth local baijiu, and apples produced in Sanshilipu. He also provides detailed accounts of Dalian's glass products, describing their types, appearances, and historical origins, thereby offering readers a comprehensive picture of both the material culture and the lived experience of the city.

I carefully examined the glassware section on the second floor. I had heard that Dalian's glass products ranked first in China both in quality and quantity and were exported to various parts of the world. Sure enough, the shelves were lined with lovely crystal glasses, pitchers, bowls, whiskey glasses, and more. I bought two champagne glasses as a souvenir for my wife—their stems transparent with a deep indigo hue only where the wine is poured. (...)

In this field, which was still largely undeveloped in Japan at the time, surveys revealed that the Liaodong Peninsula was rich in high-quality raw materials for glassmaking. To refine their craft, they invited technicians from Bohemia and sent local artisans to study in Germany, successfully exporting exquisite crystal glass abroad even before the war. (Kiyooka, 1983, p.34)

Subsequently, Kiyooka adds practical notes on seasons and climate for traveling to Dalian. He recalls: "The first image that comes to my mind when thinking of Dalian's most enchanting season is late May - when the sweet, tantalizing fragrance of locust

blossoms drifts faintly through the air” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.14). Of November he writes: “The cold, dry outdoor air in the morning enters the nostrils and lungs, making the whole body feel comfortable” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.42). Beyond such basics, Kiyooka Takayuki extends his observations on various facets of Chinese society in the 1980s—social values, institutional construction, and commercial services. On social values, he records period slogans: “What was written on the bulletin board was the ‘Five Stresses and Four Beauties’. This was explained as a campaign emphasizing five aspects - civilisation, courtesy, hygiene, order, and morality - while striving to beautify four dimensions: the mind, language, behavior, and the environment. The specific objectives I heard at the time included the following: Not spitting or littering indiscriminately; Improving service quality in commerce and other fields; Maintaining order at stations and tourist sites; Enhancing the beauty of the city; Ensuring plants be made more abundant” (Kiyooka, 1983, pp.32-33). On institutional construction, he notes a key policy evolution: “Shortly after the collapse of the ‘Gang of Four’, the ‘Four Modernizations’—the modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology—began to be reaffirmed and consciously advanced as the lofty blueprint for building a material civilization. Six years later, at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, it was further proposed that alongside the construction of a high degree of material civilization, efforts must also be devoted to building a high level of socialist spiritual civilization” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.33). In commerce and services, he describes shopping venues and consumer experiences: at the Friendship Store, purchasing “Dalian postcards and a Dalian travel guide on the first floor” and carefully examining “the glassware section on the second floor” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.34); at the International Seamen’s Club, “I bought a Dalian map and postcards” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.35). He also notes a commendable service attitude: “I was deeply impressed by the young waitress’s enthusiastic and attentive service. She even took the trouble to open several boxes stored in the back, laying out a wide array of champagne glasses and giving me ample freedom to choose from the extensive selection” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.34). Finally, Kiyooka’s detailed character sketches offer Japanese readers then eager to visit China a glimpse of ordinary Chinese lives. Describing Zheng Minqin, his companion between Beijing and Dalian, he systematically outlines the figure’s

background, hometown, age, and appearance, shaping the portrait of a composed, introspective literary youth:

Seated beside me is Mr. Zheng Minqin, who has been quietly reading a book since earlier. When I, along with two other Japanese visitors, traveled to Luoyang under his guidance a few days ago, I observed the same tendency—he is genuinely fond of books, particularly literary works, it seems. He has been accompanying me on my round trip between Beijing and Dalian. A youth staff member of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, he was born in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, and graduated from the Japanese Department of Beijing Foreign Studies University. When asked about his birthday, he replied that it was July 5, 1946. Upon learning that he shared the same birth year as my wife, he showed a look of mild surprise. I considered explaining that my previous wife had passed away and that I had remarried, but in the end, I refrained. Mr. Zheng has a somewhat elongated face, a tall and muscular build, a calm manner of speaking, and tends to be sparing with his words (Kiyooka, 1983, p.11).

The information Kiyooka provides in his novel aligns closely with domestic biographical accounts of Zheng Minqin. Though I have not yet identified specialized research directly discussing their relationship, the inclusion of Kiyooka Takayuki's modern poem "Gypsum," translated by Zheng, in *Selected Love Poems by One Hundred Foreign Poets* corresponds to the episode in "Dalian in Early Winter" where Zheng consults Kiyooka on modern Japanese poetry. This corroborates their actual literary exchanges. At the same time, Kiyooka's insistence on specificity and authenticity renders his portrayal of individuals more vivid and convincing. Yet Kiyooka differs from ordinary tourists in that he holds a distinctive sentiment toward Dalian, regarding it as a kind of hometown. When his narrative shifts to the perspective of the returnee, the psychological details he unfolds offer readers not only the satisfaction of curiosity but also a powerful emotional impact: "Ah, was this the strangely quiet, tense instant—as if abruptly awakened from the long dream of thirty-four years of recollection? Or was it, rather, the moment of standing at a crossroads, stepping into a dream of four nights and five days—the intoxicated moment of falling into a dream of self-experiment both deeply longed for and profoundly feared (Kiyooka, 1983, p.17).

In Kiyooka Takayuki's poetic narrative, readers are made to feel viscerally the excitement, tension, and unease that surge within him upon his return to Dalian. Such emotional expression does more than narrow the distance between text and reader; it deepens curiosity: what kind of place could bear such intense emotional weight? In the general perception of the Japanese in the 1980s, Dalian was indeed a special city—it carried the historical memories of Japanese aggression and colonization, with remnants of Japanese-style architecture still scattered along its streets; at the same time, it stood as a representative of contemporary China's international cities, displaying the modern life of the Chinese people. Driving through Dalian, Kiyooka cannot help but sigh deeply: "I silently offered my blessings in my heart to the modern scene unfolding before me, and a refreshing sense of clarity welled up within me" (Kiyooka, 1983, p.19). Only profound affection for a city can fully reveal its charm. Through Kiyooka's interwoven perspectives—that of the tourist and the returnee, and through a mode of detailed writing that balances authenticity with emotion, Japanese readers, curious about China and eager to travel there, gained a more complete, comprehensive, and profound understanding of Dalian. Such writing served, without question, as an ideal travel guide for its era.

Dialogue with and Transcendence of the "Introverted Generation"

In a literary column of the evening edition of the *Tokyo Shimbun* on March 23, 1971, Odagiri Hideo voiced his discontent with the prevailing literary trend, noting that "this generation of writers only seeks the genuine substance of their works solely within the self and personal circumstances; as an introspective literary group detached from ideology, they are forming a modern current of thought." He termed this group the "Introverted Generation." Representative writers of this school include Furui Yoshikichi, Kuroi Senji, Goto Meisei, Abe Akira, Ogawa Kunio, and Ōba Minako. Most were born in the 1930s, their life trajectories intricately intertwined with Japan's tumultuous social changes: experiencing war and defeat in childhood, confronting postwar reconstruction and intense student movements in youth, and encountering the societal transformations brought by rapid economic growth in middle age. From the end of World War II through the period of high-speed economic growth, the historical

upheavals and the uncertainty of value systems in Japanese society profoundly impacted these writers. They generally recognized the fragility of ideologies and the void of reality, advocating an art-for-art's-sake stance. In *Postwar Japanese Literary History Chronology*, Akiyama Shun summarized four characteristics of the “Introverted Generation”: a sense of discomfort and distrust toward the intellectual discourse that discusses “society”; the introduction of an “unreal world” into the everyday; the depiction of the living conditions of urban dwellers and urban life; and the portrayal of “meaningless people living meaningless lives in meaningless places” (Miyosi, 1989, p.125).

In literary practice, the “Introverted Generation” established its position through a series of award-winning works. *Ōba Minako's Three Crabs* (1968), portraying the alienation of Japanese intellectuals abroad, won the Akutagawa Prize. Furui Yoshikichi's *Yokō* (1970), employing a “slow-motion” narrative technique to delve into the inner world of an autistic patient, also received the Akutagawa Prize; its unique psychological depiction became one of the hallmarks of the school. Other representative works include Ogawa Kunio's *Light from the Sea*, Kuroi Senji's *Time*, Abe Akira's *The Commander's Leave* (1970), and Goto Meisei's *Between Attacks* (1973). As these works appeared in major literary magazines such as *Bungei* and *Gunzō* and frequently won prestigious awards, the influence of the “Introverted Generation” expanded. In 1977, Goto Meisei, Furui Yoshikichi, and others formed an editorial board and founded the coterie magazine *Buntai*, publishing works of the “Introverted Generation” in quarterly installments, pushing the school to its peak. Although *Buntai* ceased publication in 1980 and the influence of the “Introverted Generation” as a new wave gradually waned, its core ideas and literary paradigms profoundly shaped subsequent Japanese literature. When intellectuals or literary youths of the same era read “Dalian in Early Winter,” they would undoubtedly notice its affinities with the creative characteristics of the “Introverted Generation”: above all, an extreme focus on various micro-level, everyday details:

When I returned to Building Sixteen after breakfast, the morning sunlight had grown even brighter, sparkling with a radiant beauty. This was, of course, due to

the quality of the atmosphere, yet it gave me exactly that impression of transparent clarity I had experienced before. The winter sunlight shone dazzlingly upon my face, yet it seemed unwilling to penetrate beyond the skin, instead shattering refreshingly upon the surface and scattering away. (Kiyooka, 1983, p.42)

Kiyooka employs a highly poetic idiom to render, with painstaking precision, the morning light of Dalian in November across multiple sensory registers—visual and tactile alike. Training his lens on the precise instant when sunlight meets the skin, he transforms an exquisitely slight, ephemeral, and utterly quotidian sensory impression into a singular aesthetic moment, achieved through the amplification and prolongation enabled by language, and in doing so, shares it with the reader. At the same time, within Kiyooka Takayuki's realist accounts of his return to the everyday textures of Dalian, there are also interwoven writings of the unreal, dreams and fantasies, forming a narrative structure in which reality and imagination are held in tension.

For instance, the first-floor corridor facing Luxun Road. In a dream, I was running there barefoot. The evening sun streamed brightly through the double-layered window, and no one was around. Though I kept running, I wasn't moving forward. With my right hand, I was carefully lifting the leather strap of a steelyard, and on its weighing tray—of all things—rested a baby bottle. I paid meticulous attention to balancing it against the counterweight suspended from the beam. Why, despite running, did I not advance? Inside the rubber nipple of the baby bottle, the evening sun had tinged a faint red. (Kiyooka, 1983, p.45)

Kiyooka's characteristic technique of "the introduction of an 'unreal world' into the everyday" is typically embodied in the scene where, while physically in Dalian, he recalls a dream set in Tokyo. Why does he keep running yet make no progress? Why is a baby bottle placed on the weighing tray? And why does the "I" concentrate fully on maintaining the balance between the counterweight and the bottle? The image of the baby bottle frequently appears in Kiyooka's poetry as well, often interpreted by scholars as representing the young child from his remarriage or symbolizing his newly

reconstituted family. The counterweight, based on my reading of Kiyooka's other works, can be understood as the purity he constantly pursued, or what might be described as the "sweet death" he longed for. The "I" striving to maintain this state of balance reflects Kiyooka's psychological struggle between these two forces. On this level, Kiyooka's creative choices resonate with those of the "Introverted Generation", who "use non-realistic and surrealistic imagery to depict the so-called everyday world and the inner world of characters" (He, 2021, p.165). Yet, as Takahashi Hideo points out in his "Essay on Kiyooka Takayuki", "if his literature is understood merely as lucid and fluent lyrical prose, or as sketches of trivial daily scenes rendered with hazy memories into faintly poetic tableaux, that likely grasps only half of his literary world." While Kiyooka shares with the "Introverted Generation" a similar attention to the everyday, its core and essence are fundamentally different. The everyday portrayed by the latter is often de-historicized and non-directional, whereas many of the details Kiyooka writes about in *Early Winter in Dalian* resemble "fossils of memory"—each intimately connected to grand external narratives such as colonial history, wartime trauma, and national identity. When the author sees tanghulu in Luxun Park, for instance, it evokes a childhood memory of having longed to taste them yet never having had the chance—a longing whose reason is profoundly intertwined with the broader historical fabric: "As a timid child, I was already half-resigned from the start to the fact that this treat belonged to the lives of Chinese people and remained beyond my reach. Even if I had asked my mother or sister, they would likely have told me it was unacceptable because the candied haws were caked with dust. Besides, I had never developed the habits of receiving pocket money or buying snacks to eat alone"(Kiyooka, 1983, p.32).

When introducing Dalian's candied haws, Kiyooka Takayuki inserts a personal recollection that draws readers into a specific historical period, reflecting the segregation in living spaces between colonizers and the colonized under colonial rule while also highlighting the emotional and psychological distance between them. At the same time, within his account of visiting Dalian's everyday scenes, Kiyooka incorporates observations and reflections on contemporary realities in China, demonstrating his close attention to the external environment, particularly the conditions of Chinese society at that time. Seeing that the appearance of the residential

buildings is almost the same as during the war, he thinks: “Considering historical backgrounds such as the Korean War, famines, and the Cultural Revolution, the lag in the development of certain parts of public housing was unavoidable during such a period” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.20). Finding that the courtyard walls surrounding single-family houses have been demolished and long walls like those of school buildings have been built, he observes: “this particular form may also be related to the Residents’ Committees in the ‘new China’—an organization somewhat reminiscent of Japan’s tonarigumi (neighborhood associations) and one that serves as a grassroots mass organization for resident autonomy in urban areas” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.21). By infusing textual details and everyday narratives with a consciousness of historicity and external context, Kiyooka achieves a critical dialogue with and transcendence of the literary paradigm of the “Introverted Generation.” His detailed writing is neither an endpoint nor a goal in itself, but rather a starting point toward history and a pathway toward reality. In “Dalian in Early Winter,” he voices an inner plea: “Unrelated to construction or aggression, without troubling anyone, could I weep freely within this secret solitude?” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.41) He is not without a desire to follow the path of the “Introverted Generation”—to cast off the weight of history and the external world and turn solely toward the self and the inner realm. Yet, as he reflects, “If I could weep, I would weep freely. Yet something still holds me back” (Kiyooka, 1983, p.41). The dust of history remains entangled at the tip of his pen, while nostalgia for reality and the fullness of life also weigh upon his steps. Ultimately, he moves in a different direction, constructing the unique literary universe of Kiyooka Takayuki, and in this process, both incidentally and inevitably, engages in an early practice of what might be termed “urban theory.”

The Practice of Urban Theory

In 1960s Japan, domestic urban theory primarily addressed urban issues under rapid economic development from an economic perspective. By the 1980s, however, cultural concepts began to intervene in the field of urban studies—a shift that can be seen as the emergence of a cultural studies approach or the rise of a textual methodology. Scholars began interpreting urban spaces through the prism of literature, constituting a

significant paradigm shift. Maeda Manabu (1931-1987) was a pioneer in this turn. By analyzing literary works such as *The Dancing Girl* and *Children's Time*, he proposed a semiotic method of interpretation, emphasizing that, in contrast to earlier analytical approaches that dissected and integrated urban elements along an axis of “utility”, administration, production, transportation, exchange, his semiotic method aimed to decipher the deeper layers of the city that spill over from the network of utility and manifest as a sensitive plate for the emotions and desires of its inhabitants. Jinnai Hidenobu (1947-) captured the transformation from Edo to Tokyo from the perspectives of architecture and urban landscape theory. Through thorough fieldwork, he revealed the evolutionary trajectory of the concept “Tokyo = city.” He noted: “A city is an assemblage of various elements. However, neither buildings nor roads appear in isolation; they are structured by a certain grammar and related to each other within a context. If our method is appropriate, the city is not difficult to read. In Tokyo, the various characteristics that would later define the city were already hinted at when the great castle town of Edo began to form. For understanding the seemingly chaotic contemporary Tokyo, there is no more effective method than walking its streets, directly experiencing its topography, understanding the historical causes of its land-use patterns, and thereby comprehending the spatial skeleton underlying Tokyo’s chaos” (Jinnai, 1985, p.26). He stressed the relationality among urban elements, the continuity from Edo to Tokyo, and the importance of experience and practice in understanding the city. In addition, Yoshimi Toshiya (1957-) gradually revealed the essence of “Tokyo = city” by comparing urban spaces such as Asakusa, Ginza, Shinjuku, and Shibuya. He advocated understanding the relationship between the city and its residents as a relationship between <performance> and <audience/actor = role>, calling this the “performance studies perspective.” Yoshimi (1987) also systematically categorized textualist urban studies into four main types: (1) attempts mainly from literary studies, aiming to depict the city = text by analyzing literary works = texts; (2) journalistic methods involving firsthand visits to the city and translating lived experience into writing to read the city = text, commonly practiced by documentary writers, authors, and photographers; (3) architectural approaches conducting semiotic analysis of buildings and spatial forms as texts; and (4) social history perspectives that understand

the city as a festive space where people gather and seek the reasons prompting such assembly. In summary, during the 1980s in Japan, a textual methodology originating from literary criticism was widely introduced into urban theory. It broke the dominant functionalist analytical framework and profoundly transformed urban studies by focusing on the city's cultural symbols, historical layers, and the experiences of its residents, leaving a lasting impact on subsequent research.

Long before urban studies became a prominent field, Kiyooka Takayuki had already consciously shaped the space of "Dalian" as the very subject, rather than merely the backdrop of his literary writing. In his series of works themed on Dalian, the city's particularity and symbolism are pushed to the extreme. "Dalian in Early Winter," a travelogue documenting Kiyooka's revisit to the city, contains detailed descriptions of travel routes and locations. These depictions not only possess semiotic value within urban theory but also deepen the text's historical dimension and emotional resonance. Upon arriving in Dalian, the protagonist "I" first travels by car from Zhoushuizi Airport to Nanshan Hotel, thereby completing a preliminary tour of the city. During this process, "I" passes through "Stalin Square" (formerly the square in front of the Kwantung Government Office), "Dalian Institute of Science and Physics" (formerly the Central Laboratory of the South Manchuria Railway), "Dalian Zoo" (formerly the Electric Amusement Park). This route is not merely a geographical trajectory but also a narrative thread through which Kiyooka guides readers to retrace history and revisit the past. In introducing each building, the author deliberately notes its former name and interweaves related historical fragments or personal memories, allowing readers, while witnessing the reality of Dalian in the 1980s, to transcend time and space and uncover the historical veil of the city's colonial past. The interactive contrast between the present space and the historical space causes the city within the text to expand and swell, accommodating more experiences, understandings, encounters, and collisions.

Simultaneously, Kiyooka closely intertwines the city with human beings and bodily experience. By analogizing the early winter of Dalian with the early stages of aging in life, he constructs an aesthetic dimension where time, space, and life are mutually illuminating: "So it is—perhaps in what might be my final homecoming, early aging and early winter have overlapped with such apt coincidence" (Kiyooka, 1983,

p.9). He further uses the imperceptibility of the human aging process as a metaphor for the subtlety of Dalian's urban transformation: "The former Yayoi Pond Park had become Lu Xun Park, much like a person entering the early old age of sixty-two; yet in terms of its ambiance, the past and present seemed entirely unchanged" (Kiyooka, 1983, p.30). Additionally, Kiyooka employs detailed descriptions of space and environment to symbolize characters' inner psychological states and emotional shifts. After the narrator visits his former residence in Dalian and has a cordial conversation with Mr. Lin and his son, "I" notices that the room once used as a study has now been turned into a kitchen: "I looked into the room and was astonished. To my surprise, it had been turned into a kitchen. Moreover, there stood a bright and unassuming girl of about seventeen. I shook hands with her again. She looked slightly embarrassed. The rooms on the second floor were all tidy and impeccably clean. I couldn't help but feel glad" (Kiyooka, 49).

On a realistic level, this description reveals the spatial changes within the protagonist's former residence. From a psychological perspective, however, it reflects the author's consciousness of tracing the past and his profound acceptance of present transformations. More importantly, these changes are permeated with imagery of cleanliness and brightness, signifying that through this revisit, the author's feelings toward Dalian undergo a transition: from nostalgia and unease, to surprise and acceptance, and ultimately, to heartfelt blessing. The "tidy and impeccably clean" rooms and the "bright and unassuming" girl within them—the characteristics of space and environment serve as projections of the author's inner state. As he exclaims upon leaving the Lin family's home: "From the Lin family, I received an impression of serene contentment. This, too, was a source of joy for me" (Kiyooka, 1983, p.50). This moment also foreshadows the shift in tone in Kiyooka's later Dalian series. As Ogasawara Kenji observes in "The Destination of Antinomy—Kiyooka Takayuki's Dalian Experience", "What changes emerged in *Dalian Sketches* and *In Dalian Port*, which draw on his third-phase experiences? In short, a sense of tranquility and happiness began to flow within his antinomical sensibilities" (Ogasawara, 2008, p.343). Kiyooka Takayuki's writing can thus be regarded as a significant and ahead-of-time literary practice within the "urban theory" of Japanese literature. His detailed descriptions serve as an effective

tool: they lead readers to observe the actual landscape of the city of Dalian, to delve into the historical spaces behind it, and finally to meet and engage in dialogue within the literary world he constructs, thereby granting Dalian a personalized interpretation.

Conclusions

In his travelogue novel “Dalian in Early Winter,” Kiyooka Takayuki constructs a vivid portrayal of the city's urban landscape and social atmosphere in the 1980s, grounded in rich descriptive detail. By interweaving historical references and personal recollections within the realistic narrative, he creates a juxtaposition of past and present, rendering the passage of time palpable and allowing emotion to emerge with restrained naturalness. When interpreting the work, it is essential to recognize its structural significance as a pivotal component of Kiyooka's Dalian series—particularly as the opening piece of the short story collection published following his return visit to the city. Simultaneously, the work should be contextualized within its contemporaneous era, acknowledging its synchronic connections with Japan's social issues and literary trends around the 1980s, as well as its dynamic interaction with contemporary readers. This study focuses on Kiyooka's detailed depictions of time, space, imagery, and psychology. Adopting the perspective of “contemporaneous studies,” it effectively bridges close textual analysis with external historical context, attempting to reconstruct the diverse reading experiences of contemporary audiences and thereby uncover richer interpretive possibilities for *Dalian in Early Winter*. Through an analysis of the detailed descriptions in the work, it becomes evident that these are not merely expressions of personal idiosyncrasy or realist technique. Rather, they constitute a highly self-conscious literary methodology developed through the author's deep engagement with contemporary intellectual debates (such as the textbook controversy) and theoretical trends (including the “Introverted Generation” and “urban theory”). This approach represents a distinctive response to the expectations of contemporary readers and the core issues of the era. Thus, an author who may appear to be solely indulging in “nostalgia” or lyrical expression could, in fact, be positioned at the forefront of contemporary thought, employing a unique literary mode to participate in and advance the development of travel writing as a genre.

In urban literature, detailed description serves as a powerful vehicle for conveying ideas, connecting history, engaging with reality, and constructing literary space. In *Dalian in Early Winter*, Kiyooka employs detailed writing to build an intricate three-dimensional structure encompassing everyday reality, historical memory, and psychological emotion. These three dimensions interweave to form a literary Dalian that exists simultaneously as a geographical and a psychological space. Within such an urban literary space, contemporary readers find points of entry relevant to their own concerns, step into the textual world, and follow the meticulously outlined pathways provided by Kiyooka toward varied interpretive directions. We are products of our environment, yet also its shapers. The various issues and intellectual currents of the 1980s influenced the reading preferences and cognitive frameworks of readers at the time. Simultaneously, however, those readers drew diverse experiences from the same text, freely constructing individual worlds of reading uniquely their own.

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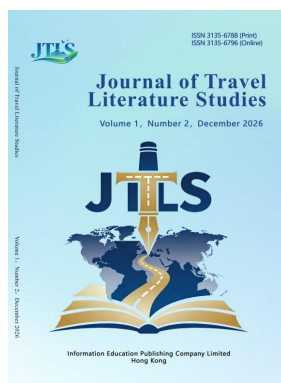
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East-Central European Travel Writing of the Romantic Period: From Theories of Travel to Embodied Experience

A Review of *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [Romantic wanderers: Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's letters from/on travel] and *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu (1839–1860)* [Taste of the road: Journeys of Croatian Romanticism (1839–1860)]

Tomasz Ewertowski

Abstract: This review examines two recent Polish contributions to travel writing studies, both focusing on Romantic-era authors from East-Central Europe. Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković's *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu (1839–1860)* analyzes Croatian travel accounts (1839–1860), emphasizing the multisensory, embodied experience of travel. Through close readings of writers such as Ivan Trnski, Matija Mažuranić, and Adolf Veber Tkalčević, she shows how journeys to Dalmatia, Bosnia, Italy, and the Plitvice Lakes served nation-building projects, often engaging with Orientalism and autoethnography while correcting Western misrepresentations of the region. Magdalena Bąk's *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* focuses on the correspondence of Polish national poets Adam

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Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, reconstructing their personal theories of travel. Despite stylistic differences—Mickiewicz being more reserved in letters and Słowacki more performative—both poets privileged imagination and memory over direct sensory experience, treating travel as a philosophical and creative act. Pieniążek-Marković's and Bąk's books demonstrate that East-Central European travel writing offers distinctive perspectives: it is deeply shaped by political conditions such as foreign rule and exile, and it often produces more nuanced, locally informed representations than Western European counterparts. The authors' use of sensory analysis, anthropological theory, and Romantic concepts like irony and imagination enriches the broader field, suggesting that travel writing studies can be revitalised by engaging with non-English-language traditions and lesser-known regional corpora.

Keywords: Pieniążek-Marković; Magdalena Bąk; Romantic travel writing; Nation-building; imaginative

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In the introduction to *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing*, Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs list the authors of what they call “foundational works”: Edward Said, Peter Hulme, Mary Louise Pratt, Sara Mills, Mary Baine Campbell, James Buzard, and Paul Fussell (Pettinger & Youngs, 2020, p. 2). Unsurprisingly, all these important scholars worked mostly on Western European, predominantly English-language sources. However, the expansion of travel writing studies means that the non-English-speaking world is engaging in a creative and innovative way with established lines of inquiry epitomized by the aforementioned foundational figures, thus demonstrating the potential of a creative dialogue between different scholarly traditions.

In this review, I would like to discuss two important contributions to travel writing studies by Polish scholars, who examine authors from Slavic nations of East-Central Europe of the Romantic period. The first is *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu* [Taste of the Road: Journeys of Croatian Romanticism (1839–1860)] by Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković; the second is *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [Romantic Wanderers: Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's Letters from/on Travel] by Magdalena Bąk. Both books are situated within the already established field of reflection on nineteenth-century Polish travel writing (Budrewicz & Sadlik, 2018; Burkot, 1988) and Croatian travel writing (Duda, 1998), but they take this reflection further than their predecessors. They are concerned with the first half of the nineteenth century, which was of crucial importance for both Polish and Croatian national culture, when both peoples were transforming into modern nations while remaining under foreign rule. The authors discuss not only the place of travel and travel writing in Romantic literature, but also their role in the process of nation-building and their function as a response to changing social and technological conditions. However, despite these similarities, both books do so in different ways.

As the title *Smak drogi* [*Taste of the Road*] suggests, Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković focuses on the embodied experience of travel. As indicated by the author herself in the introduction, she is interested in the multisensory savoring of being on the road and a multifaceted perception of the tasks set before a journey, analyzing how the texts under analysis treat traveling in all its manifestations: being on the road, stopovers, overnight stays, food or its absence, means of transport, the polysensory perception of places and their inhabitants, the quality of the roads traversed, etc. (p. 7). This program is realized through careful close reading of a number of Croatian travel accounts from the period 1839–1860. The book is divided into five chapters of varied length; the second, the longest, is in turn divided into four subchapters. The titles of the chapters refer to different geographical destinations of travelers, but a biographical key is also important. The first chapter takes us to Dalmatia with the pioneer of Croatian Romantic travel writing, Ivan Trnski, whose journeys mark the beginnings of Romantic and national

revival travel literature. The second, by far the longest, chapter turns to Bosnia, first through the lens of Illyrism: the outward-looking, espionage-adventure perspective of Matija Mažuranić, and the inward Franciscan perspectives of Grgo Martić and Ivan Frano Jukić. It then moves to the Bosnia of Yugoslavism, presenting Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski as a nobleman visiting the land of his ancestors, and Adolf Veber Tkalčević as a clergyman traveling to a “sick country” (referring to the popular concept of the Ottoman Empire as a “sick man of Europe”). The third chapter leads us to the “upper lands,” following Stanko Vraz on an ethnographic expedition through Styria, Carniola, and Carinthia. The fourth chapter heads to Italy, where Antun Nemčić Gostovinski journeys toward the Romantic South. Finally, the fifth chapter brings us to the now world-famous Plitvice Lakes, where Adolf Veber Tkalčević’s trip is framed as a broader project of cultural formation.

Pieniążek-Marković’s book thus offers a complex, multifaceted examination of various travel accounts that demonstrates both the variety of Croatian Romantic travel experiences and the function of journeying and writing about it in the national culture of that period. A great strength of the book is its constant dialogue with influential concepts from global travel writing studies and the humanities in general (Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Michel de Certeau’s *space practices*, Kenneth White’s *geopoetics*, Julia Kristeva’s *abject*, Paul Rodaway’s *sensuous geography*, to mention just a few), combined with careful attention to the particularities of Croatian sources and the Croatian cultural context. The journeys that are the subjects of analysis were often closely connected with national revival projects. Visiting provincial and rural areas meant reclaiming them as parts of the Croatian homeland. Crossing the nearby border into Bosnia, a country geographically very close and populated by Slavic peoples, but dominated by believers in Islam and then under Ottoman rule, meant an encounter with the Oriental Other and simultaneously with internal others. Going north, to Venice, somewhat paradoxically became a form of dialogue with the vision of the Romantic South. During their journeys, travellers assumed the roles of anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, and geographers, inscribing visited places into the Croatian

national imaginarium. Importantly, one characteristic aspect of Croatian travel writing was the “correcting” of Western representations of Southeastern Europe, assuming the mantle of so-called “autoethnography” (Pratt, 2008). As indicated by Pieniążek-Marković, especially in the case of Bosnia, Croatian travel accounts contain much detailed information about ethnic and religious differentiation that was difficult for foreigners to notice. Generally, the long chapter on Bosnia might be considered the most interesting part of the book. The liminal character of that country in the Croatian imagination made it an attractive subject for travel writers. It was a geographically close area populated by Slavs, but it also represented Oriental otherness. It was at the same time admired for its natural beauty, despised for its backwardness, perceived as dangerous, and pitied as “our lost land.” Additionally, this is the only chapter that engages with more than one author, and the juxtaposition of different travel experiences enables Pieniążek-Marković to vividly demonstrate various Croatian discourses of the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski presented a positive image of Bosnia as a cradle of many Croatian noble houses, representing an aristocratic sensibility, whereas Franciscan religious authors described the country as a “devastated Arcadia,” where the beauty of nature was spoiled by absurd and oppressive foreign rule.

The second of the reviewed books, Magdalena Bąk’s *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [*Romantic Wanderers: Mickiewicz’s and Słowacki’s Letters from/on Travel*], takes a different approach to the topic of Romantic travel, which is visible already in the title. First, while Pieniążek-Marković had a corpus of several writers, Magdalena Bąk focuses on just two, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. However, these two are literary giants, national poets considered absolutely key figures not only in Polish literature of the Romantic period, but in the history of Polish culture in general, and who, especially Mickiewicz, also had a significant impact on world literature. Second, whereas Pieniążek-Marković analyzes multisensory experiences of being on the road and images of visited places, Bąk, though no stranger to this line of inquiry, pursues the original aim of reconstructing not the travels of

Słowacki and Mickiewicz themselves, but their personal theories of travel as expressed in their correspondence. As such, Bąk demonstrates that travel writing studies can offer a fresh perspective even on authors as well studied as Mickiewicz and Słowacki. Her book is divided into four chapters. The first examines the role of travel in the biographies of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, situating their journeys within Romantic ideas and practices of travel. The second chapter analyzes Mickiewicz's letters and reconstructs his distinctive understanding of travel. The third chapter explores Słowacki's correspondence and presents his vision of travel as self-fashioning and performance. The fourth chapter compares how the two poets perceived travel, highlighting both similarities and differences. The conclusion summarizes the findings and shows how travel experiences influenced the works and poetic imagination of both authors.

Due to the political situation, both Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki spent most of their adult lives outside the historical Polish lands. They often changed their places of residence (Switzerland, Italy, France) and undertook numerous shorter trips, often very important for their literary works (such as Słowacki's journey to Egypt and the Holy Land, and Mickiewicz's trip to Crimea); both also died abroad. To better understand what concepts of travel and travel writing may have resulted from such life conditions, Magdalena Bąk carefully discusses terms such as emigration, travel, displacement, exile, and expatriation, demonstrating the fuzzy boundaries between them and showing how, in the course of their lives, Mickiewicz and Słowacki changed their attitudes toward mobility and living abroad – for example, for both of them Paris eventually acquired the characteristics of a long-term place of residence. Her approach to this issue is very helpful for scholars studying other works by expatriate individuals.

Bąk's examination of Słowacki's and Mickiewicz's works is simultaneously very well supported by contemporary theories of travel writing and deeply grounded in familiarity with nineteenth-century historical and cultural contexts. The Polish scholar not only demonstrates how the political context influenced the two poets' lives and writings, but also refers to such fundamental phenomena as Romantic irony, the

Romantic concept of imagination, and the impact of technological changes. She interestingly locates the period under scrutiny in the transitional moment between the end of the Grand Tour and the birth of modern tourism. Her analysis reveals sharp contrasts between Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's styles of travel and travel writing, but also a similarity on a deeper level, in their philosophical ideas concerning the aims of journeying. Adam Mickiewicz, in his letters, did not write much about visited places; his usual strategy was to enumerate the names of monuments, peoples, and cities, leaving a trace of his travel exploits but not describing them elaborately. For him, the proper place for expressing travel impressions was poetry, based on metaphor and idealization. Juliusz Słowacki was different: he wrote much more about his travel activities and more openly theorized about traveling. He engaged in such practices as buying souvenirs, dressing in local clothes, and relishing descriptions of visited landscapes and conventional tourist behaviors. At the same time, he did not grant primacy to direct experience, but rather to the synthesizing and creative power of memory and imagination, which fashions from images and recollections the most beautiful vision of the world (p. 251). In his letters, Słowacki declared the necessity of cooperation between perception, imagination, and memory. He also repeatedly drew attention to the discrepancy between one's imagined vision of a place and its "real" appearance when encountered by the traveler. Consequently, and this is a very valuable result of Bąk's investigation, it can be noticed that despite the difference in style, both Mickiewicz and Słowacki considered imagination and memory fundamental factors in travel experience. Additionally, for both of them traveling did not mean simply moving from one place to another, nor was it merely a leisure practice, while writing about it did not mean the simple, direct transfer of impressions to paper. For Mickiewicz and Słowacki, fragments of travel events gradually came together to form an image of the human being in the full complexity and ambiguity of experiences and emotions (p. 248).

Obviously, the short summaries presented above do not exhaust the richness of the material and reflection presented in Pieniążek-Marković's and Bąk's works; however, they allow us to conclude this brief review with two important questions: What image

of East-Central European travel writing emerges from these two books? And what do they contribute to travel writing studies from a more general perspective? What is especially worth noticing is the importance of the local cultural, social, and political context for understanding Polish and Croatian travel practices, which also reveals many aspects absent from Western travel writing conventions. The political context directs our attention to the importance of travel writing as a patriotic activity, as pointed out by Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković, and to the particular condition of expatriation, as in the case of the writers analysed by Magdalena Bąk. However, the particularities of the East-Central European travel writings scrutinized in both books do not end with the political context. For example, Croatian travel writings about Bosnia, due to historical and cultural connections, offer a much richer variety of voices than many Western European travel writings (Jezernik, 2004; Todorova, 2009). Whereas Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki visited many destinations that were standard stops on nineteenth-century itineraries, their written responses, shaped by their poetic genius, were anything but conventional. Both reviewed books are also highly valuable because of their multipronged approach, involving sensory analysis, the use of anthropological theories, and the application of contemporary reflection on Romantic concepts such as irony and imagination. Especially in the case of Bąk's book, the main premise of her investigation—namely, using correspondence to reconstruct authors' theories of travel writing—is extremely inspiring and can fruitfully be applied to other authors and periods.

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