

Of Travel Writing As a Genre – An Extract from ‘The Bumper Book of Vitali’s Travels’

(hitherto unpublished tips for an aspiring travel scribe)

Strictly speaking, travel writing as a literary genre does not exist. It is only in the English-speaking countries that the so-called ‘travel literature’ is sold in separate ‘travel sections’ of big bookshops (in the USA, the section is normally called ‘Travel Memoirs’). In German or, say in Russian, there is no special term to denote ‘travel writing,’ and books about voyages are classified as ‘adventure literature,’ ‘memoirs’ or even ‘autobiography.’ The latter makes a lot of sense to me. Indeed, were Chekhov, Dickens and Mark Twain ‘travel writers?’ True, they all felt the need to travel at certain stages of their lives and careers (Chekhov – to the island of Sakhalin, Dickens – to America, Mark Twain – to Europe and around the globe), but, while doing so, they remained what they always had been – great writers and masters of a number of ‘proper’ literary genres: novelists, essayists, playwrights etc.

Modern times have created a new breed of scribes, whose one and only speciality is writing about their travels. They think that travelling in foreign lands is more likely to offer interesting observations that are hard to find in their normal daily routine. But literature, and that includes ‘travel literature,’ is very much about discovering beautiful and exotic things in the familiar and seemingly unexciting environment.

The best ‘travel writers’ of modern times: Jan Morris, Eric Newby, Patrick Lee Fermor, Colin Thubron etc – despite devoting a disproportionate amount of their time to writing about their travels, have considerable achievements in other literary genres.

Conclusion: a true writer is always an artist, whether he spends his life on the road, or never leaves his town or village.

Many aspiring young writers these days are willing to write about nothing else but travel. This desire is normally dictated by a shortage of life experience and the delusion that writing about travel is not only easy, but also allows for all sorts of lucrative freebies – luxury hotels, first-class flights, sumptuous (and, no doubt, free) meals in best restaurants. This self-deception is largely due to the extraordinary popularity of Bill Bryson’s amusing and irreverent travelogues. One literary critic aptly called this new ‘Brysonesque’ style of writing ‘**cheerful laddism.**’ Such books are but collections of jokes and puns (‘it was so quiet in the pub that one could hear a fly fart’ – Bill Bryson), but have little – if anything – to do with literature or quality journalism. And, contrary to what most people think, they actually do not sell that well. Unless you are Bill Bryson, of course.

In short, before you start wandering the globe in the hope that this will provide you with new experience, make sure you already have plenty to share and to say.

For the reasons I’ve just explained, from now on I will refer to ‘travel literature’ as travel journalism. I am using the latter term without quotes, for, unlike the illusionary eponymous literary genre, travel journalism does exist and takes a lot of space on book shelves as well as in newspapers, magazines and online. Below, I will try to share with you some of my thoughts on

how to write, to structure and to sell such material. If the examples I will be quoting are not from my own writing, their sources will be named in the text.

The Importance of Getting Lost

At my Creative Writing seminars and Travel Journalism workshops, I am often asked what the most important skill of a travel journalist is. My answer is the ability to get lost. It is only when you have lost direction and are getting seriously concerned about where the next road turn is going to take you that you start noticing some really important details about a town/city or a landscape. That is why a good sense of direction can be a liability rather than a merit for a travel journalist – just as, at times, a too thorough knowledge of a foreign language becomes an impediment for a translator of poetry, who – most importantly – has to be a poet himself.

One of my most evocative travel experiences was getting (seriously!) lost in the Alps and, without realising it, wandering from Liechtenstein, where I was based, into Austria. It was only when I was sitting in a country pub, still being sure I was in Liechtenstein, that I started noticing strange things: a portrait of the Austrian Chancellor on the wall, huge Wiener schnitzels on the patrons' plates and so on. But only when they calculated my bill in Austrian schillings (it was before the euro) and not in Swiss francs, the currency of Liechtenstein, did I realise that I was in Austria.

Travel writing is indeed like poetry, for which, if we believe Boris Pasternak, you don't have to look high up in the mountains, since there is plenty of it scattered in the grass under your feet; you only have to go to the trouble of bending down and picking it up. This also means that to come up with a good travel article, you don't have to travel to the jungles of Equatorial Africa, the Amazon River delta or other remote corners of the world. Write about places nearer to home, but try to find in them something that no one has seen before. At my seminars, I often give students the task of writing a travel article about the street they live in. 'Open your eyes wide, get lost in your own street, imagine you've never been in it before – and you'll be genuinely surprised by what you'll find.' Their first reaction is usually rather sceptical: 'There's nothing in my little lane to attract a tourist ...' Yet, after looking at it with the eyes of a perceptive first-time visitor, most manage to discover very interesting things.

In short, it doesn't really matter where you travel to. What **does** matter is **what you see**. 'We see only what we have the gift of seeing,' wrote Henry Longfellow. And your vision gets much sharper, if you are not sure where you are going to ...

'A good traveller is one who doesn't know where he is going to,' wrote Chinese novelist Lin Yutang. The same applies to a good travel journalist.

Descriptions

As Jerome K. Jerome noted in his travel book *Three Men on a Bummel*, descriptions of places never work on paper. The great English humourist was of the opinion that even the worst of picture postcards could give you a better idea of a landscape or a monument than the very best of literary descriptions.

I think that he was right. But only to an extent. Impersonal and clichéd descriptions, overloaded with adjectives, are indeed pretty useless. If you write: 'The little mountain church was beautiful,' it means absolutely nothing to the reader, for beauty **is** in the eyes of the

beholder, and concepts of it differ from person to person. On the other hand, if you were to say: ‘The church, nestling in the valley underneath me, looked so light and fragile that I felt like putting it on the palm of my hand and carrying it back home,’ the reader would see a much clearer picture. That is why, rather than saying: ‘My hotel was overlooking the sea,’ write: ‘I fell asleep to the soothing sounds of the surf behind my hotel room window.’

The conclusion is: describe by all means, but do it through **INTERACTION** with yourself and/or other people. The only meaning of a site or a landscape lies in the way they are perceived by a traveller, ie yourself.

As for the **adjectives**, or epithets, one has to be very sparing: try not to use more than one adjective at a time and make sure it is the only right one. The travel journalist here has to act like an experienced pharmacist and allow no more than one drop of an adjective per noun (two – in rare cases: one descriptive and one qualitative; see ‘frail wooden scaffolding’ or ‘sharp black rocks’ in the quote below). If it is right, the effect of the medicine (or, in this case, the image) will be enhanced. On the other hand, if you apply too much of it, there’s a serious risk of counter-effects due to an overdose.

Here’s how I chose to describe the monastery of Simonopetra in Mount Athos – the fourteenth-century skyscraper, sitting on a tower-like rock high above the sea:

‘The monastery’s guest quarters were situated along the perimeter of the top of the monastery building. To get to the bathroom, one had to pass through a circular terrace, clinging to the monastery walls. This frail wooden scaffolding was precariously suspended above the bottomless precipice. It shook under your feet like an unsteady ship deck during a sea-storm. Through gaps between squeaky floorboards sagging under your feet, sharp black rocks licked by the foamy sea were clearly visible a good hundred metres below. In short, it was an ideal place for committing suicide, even if you didn’t feel particularly suicidal. It was also ideal for deterring you from using the bathroom too often.’

Another important element of description is **getting one’s reference points right**. If you say: ‘I went out onto the deck at 3am.,’ the immediate question is: how did you know it was 3am. and not 3.30 or 4? Write instead: ‘I woke up and looked at my watch. It was 3 o’clock in the morning. I got dressed and went out onto the deck.’ Similarly: ‘The castle was over 600 years old.’ How did you know that, the reader would wonder? A more authoritative (and honest) way of expressing the same thought would be: ‘According to a local tourism brochure, the castle was over 600 years old.’

The Power of Detail

Nothing brings a travel feature to life better than a precise, unusual and telling little detail. Always keep your eyes open for seemingly unimportant little things – be it a persistent Alpine flower bursting through the rock or a hardly visible mark on a person’s face. Mark Twain was a master of detail. In the opening chapter of his book *Innocents Abroad*, describing the world’s first package tour from America to Europe, the tourists are standing on the deck of the ship about to sail off to the Old World and waving to the people on the pier who came to see them off. The latter are waving back, of course. The writer then notes: ‘The flag on the ship’s mast tried to

wave but failed.’ – and the whole scene immediately comes alive. One can even feel the gentle sea breeze on the faces of the intrepid would-be travellers ...

Once in Moldova, I went on a tour of the forty-two-kilometre-long old wine cellars in Novie Maleshti. My escort in that underground city, complete with streets, lanes and crossroads – so wide that lorries drove freely along them – was a local wine-maker, whose face carried an amazing little detail: he had a clearly visible scar, left by a wine glass, on the bridge of his nose – the result of years and years of daily (and often hourly) wine-tasting. That little trait was so evocative that I was able to write in my feature: ‘I was escorted around the cellars by a local man, with a professional wine-taster’s corn on the bridge of his nose.’ The reader does not need to know much more about that person and can still see him very clearly. **One precise little detail can be worth pages and pages of description.**

The most evocative details are often found off the beaten track. That is why I always encourage my students to **get off the main tourist drags and venture into back lanes** (in a city) and dirt-tracks (in the countryside), with their eyes and notebooks wide open.

Also, no matter how tired and rushed you may be, make sure that the first thing you do on arrival to a new destination is pop into a coffee shop, buy a cuppa and observe the locals. Listen to what they say (knowledge of foreign tongues would come handy, if you are abroad). Watch their body language. Browse through a local rag. Local newspapers often carry useful tips and information that you won’t get anywhere else. These first impressions of a new place are invaluable. My experience shows that the details spotted on the first day, when one’s perception of a place is fresh and one’s mind is open, are particularly memorable and revealing. A good travel writer should strive to become a **master of first impressions.**

Taking a Plunge

How do we structure a travel article or a book? The obvious temptation is to build up your narrative in a strictly chronological order: arriving, looking around, describing, departing. Yet this is not always the best way to grab the reader’s attention. In quality travel journalism, it is ‘bad manners’ to start an article with ‘The train was approaching Moscow’ or with ‘I fastened my seat belt in preparation for landing.’ The editors of the travel section of the *Daily Telegraph*, where I used to work, would always cross out such clichéd openings.

Where to start from then? From the middle! Take a plunge into the narrative, begin with the climax (if any), and then reverse to the chronological beginning. This ancient literary device is known as *in media res* – ‘in the middle of things,’ the expression first coined by Horace commenting on the works of Homer.

‘My boat overturned in the middle of the river’ as the first sentence of a travel article is a good example of ‘taking a plunge.’ In more than one sense, in this particular case.

I applied the *in media res* approach while writing a long and all-encompassing travel feature (which later became part of one of my travel books) on Mount Athos, the unique self-governing monastic mini-state on the Halkidiki peninsula in Northern Greece, the first paragraph of which was as follows:

‘The mountain path was steep and narrow. Strewn with rough shapeless rocks and mule droppings, it wound mercilessly uphill along the edge of an abyss, and it seemed endless. Cicadas chirred deafeningly, as if they were laughing at me. The white-hot disc of the midday

sun with several fluffy clouds around it – like a giant freshly-cooked portion of bacon-and-eggs – glared from the blue sizzling frying pan of the Hellenic sky. Puffing like an early steam engine, I trudged higher and higher up the track, scaring tiny agile lizards from under my trainers. My feet felt alien, as if I was walking on stilts, and streams of hot, salty sweat were pouring down my forehead ...’

I did it again in another *Daily Telegraph* feature on travelling among the indigenous ethnic minorities of Alaska:

‘She was sitting on the pavement (or, as they say in America, ‘sidewalk’), next to a ‘Paws for Coffee’ coffee-shop for dogs, in a wind-swept suburb of Anchorage, Alaska’s biggest city. Her slanting Inupiaq eyes stared straight in front of her, across the buzzing freeway and further – past a McDonald’s outlet and a grey modernistic bungalow of an ‘Alaska Cremation Center’ – into nowhere. She was drunk. Or stoned. Or, most likely, both – alcoholism and drug-addiction are still rife among Alaska’s natives. A soiled Russian Orthodox cross, carved out of whale’s bone, was dangling round her dried-out parchment-like neck ...’

In media res (or taking a plunge) is my favourite way of starting a travel feature. I never had reasons to regret choosing it. Refreshed by the initial ‘plunge,’ the narrative as a rule develops easily and runs ahead freely.

Avoiding ‘Props’

There is a growing tendency among modern travel journalists/writers to make up for their lack of knowledge and insight with unorthodox means of transport and curious objects (or subjects) they carry. It has become ‘fashionable’ to travel around the world by bicycles, to criss-cross it in old jalopies, to fly over it in colourful balloons, or walk across it on their hands. One scribe travelled to Eastern Europe with a pig. Another roamed Ireland carrying an old fridge. Yet another one went across America with ... Einstein’s brain in the boot of his car! Such articles and books can trigger a couple of laughs, some of them may even sell, yet whatever the commercial outcome, this is not literature or journalism, but a sort of literary (or journalistic) scam. By diverting the reader’s attention from important realities they are unable (or unwilling) to observe, these writers confess to their own laziness and incompetence.

Avoid using props, for, as I have said repeatedly (‘and I will say it again’ – *pace* Tony Blair), the only ‘luggage’ you need is a pair of sharp and compassionate eyes. Observe, research, describe and report **without ever getting arrogant or patronising to the locals**. Otherwise, you may end up with something resembling the following passage, a spoof extract from a stereotypical travel book on Eastern Europe that I put together, having studied a number of failed travel-writing endeavours:

‘On a dull rainy morning, my Hungarian (Polish, Czech) unemployed friend Gyula (Stanislaw, Bohumil) kindly – for just a hundred US dollars, the equivalent of his salary for ten years – offered me a lift to Warsaw (Bucharest, Bratislava) in his dilapidated Skoda (Dacia, Polish Fiat). We are chugging towards the drab capital city along a bumpy, pot-holed dirt-track, lined with destitute prostitutes, prostituting destitutes and corrupt, bribe-seeking policemen in their grey uniforms. We drive past gloomy apartment blocks with peeling stucco on their façades

and filthy washing hanging from the balconies. Hungry, skeleton-like children, dressed in rags, play in the debris and follow with their sad eyes the gleaming BMWs of the new rich and the Mafiosi – with sub-machine-guns and rockets launchers sticking out of their bullet-proof windows ...’

And so on ...

One Last Thought:

Despite popular beliefs, travel journalism is a difficult and highly competitive genre. Don’t go into it for the sake of freebies and exciting journeys, for being a travel journalist is an extremely demanding, tiring and lonely profession. During my long travel assignment in the USA, when I had visited thirty-nine states within five months and had to be on the road every day (while filing a newspaper column as I went), I came close to having a nervous breakdown due to over-exhaustion. At times, I had just a couple of hours to make sense of a big city, like Boston or Santa Fe, and to write about it, having found something that other writers had so far failed to spot. It was one of the most trying experiences of my life.

Having said that, travel journalism can be great fun for those who are able and willing – above anything – to observe.

The Bumper Book of Vitali’s Travels

Thirty Years of Globe-Trotting (1990 – 2020)

by Vitali Vitaliev

Published by Thrust Books



Coming soon for the Amazon **kindle** and in paperback.