

ENGL2045 TRAVEL WRITING – Week 10

In search of stillness: Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1979) was one of the first travel books to take as a major theme nature under threat from man's activities.ⁱ The journey is both an empirical record of a disappearing wilderness (and attempts to halt it by proposing a wildlife park, even though this is in conflict with the interests of the local inhabitants) and a romantic quest for self-healing which is transformed, superficially at least, by a Buddhist approach to nature.ⁱⁱ The "alternative" (to western thought) philosophy of Buddhism and other eastern thought and religion is presented both as a possible route to salvation for Matthiessen, and as a challenge to western modernity, cast in the role as enemy of nature and the environment. The stillness and non-linearity that Buddhism offers is set against the western mind's insistent linearity and rationalism which underpin progress – the onwards drive of capitalism and expansion.ⁱⁱⁱ Matthiessen seeks "stillness" through Buddhist philosophy and, in the total immersion in the present moment that meditation promises, he hopes to find a salve for personal crisis (the death of his wife from cancer). He finds in Buddhism a philosophy in which man and nature might be reconciled – an ideal which is demonstrably not realised in Nepal: "One day that boy and others will destroy the forest, and their sheep fields will erode in the rain, and the thin soil will wash away into the torrents." (31) The romantic continues to idealise nature, but the scientist and realist see the writing on the wall – primitive, unspoilt nature is in retreat.

Matthiessen's partner on the trip is the renowned zoologist and explorer, George Schaller, whose scientific purpose is to gather data on Tibetan "blue sheep", to prove through empirical observation of its habits that this "peculiar specimen" is "more goat than sheep". (184) Like Matthiessen, Schaller is also concerned with conservation and even more pessimistic about its likely success – indeed the journey all along is prescient with failure. The scientific mission overlaps with Matthiessen's nebulous romantic (and Zen and I-Ching) quest for self-healing, and the unsuccessful (in an empirical sense) search for the near-mystical snow leopard. Matthiessen questions his own motives for the journey:

why was I going? What did I hope to find? ... To say I was interested in blue sheep or snow leopards, or even in remote lamaseries, was no answer ... to say I was making a pilgrimage seemed fatuous and vague ... so I admitted that I did not know. (121-2)

Although he might have been vague about the purpose of his journey, once it is underway, Matthiessen quite deliberately uses the narrative to set up an East/West dialogue, a critique of western thought. This was, I would suggest, predetermined as Matthiessen had studied eastern philosophy and religion for some years before the trip. The mostly silent Schaller is set up as the rationalist foil against whom the romantic and eastern-leaning Matthiessen explores the "alternative" concepts of Buddhism. Escape through an alternative spiritual centre is what Eric Cohen labels the "existential mode" of touristic experience, which is common among disillusioned westerners in the twentieth century.^{iv} But although Matthiessen is, like romantic travellers before and since, on a personal quest, he turns it into a culture clash – a struggle between different value systems and ways of seeing, the outcome of which might impact on the future of nature. Schaller points to a fundamental difference - an incompatibility between eastern and western thinking: "GS refuses to believe that the Western mind can truly absorb nonlinear Eastern perceptions". (63) But, as Matthiessen points out, there are many instances of nonlinear thought and scientific theory in the West (from ancient meditations on time, to Einstein's theory of relativity). Nevertheless, in his willingness to embrace eastern ways of thinking to see nature afresh (which is what makes *The Snow Leopard* so compelling), he is still influenced by western epistemes and aesthetic models. The east/west dualism he formulates is itself an example of the use of western rationalism. Even as he instructs readers in Buddhist approaches to nature, he frames his own representations through western aesthetic and scientific models. This is an observation, not a criticism, as it is hard to see how

he could have organised things differently, coming to eastern landscapes and eastern thought through a western tradition of nature. We can sense that his conversion to Buddhism is authentic, and yet we can also sense that he is writing to a western audience and expressing himself through western modes of thought and feeling.

Matthiessen begins the journey as a romantic, finding delight in the landscape despite the human suffering on display:

In the heat and stench and shriek of Varanasi, where in fiery sunrise swallows fly like departing spirits over the vast silent river, one delights in the smile of a blind girl being led, of a Hindu gentleman in white turban gazing benignly at the bus driver who reviles him, of a flute-playing beggar boy, of a slow old woman pouring holy water from the Ganga, the River, onto a stone elephant daubed red. (22)

The romanticised image of blind youth, poverty and tottering old age is transformed in the traveller's eye through spiritual associations with the natural setting. Nature somehow alleviates the social realities and reframes them, and in his romantic reverie, Matthiessen returns to the idea of the "happy savage" – "one understands why 'village life' has been celebrated as the natural, happy domain of man by many thinkers from Lao-tzu to Gandhi." (24) This is reminiscent of Cook and Banks (and then Rousseau and others) describing Tahiti, but now inflected with eastern philosophy. The idealisation of village life is brought on by nostalgia for a mythical bucolic timelessness made explicit when he joins the ancient trading routes – "the rest walls impart a blessedness to this landscape, as if we had wandered into a lost country of a golden age." (25) But this is not a paradise that has escaped the ravages of time. Even in this remote region, modernity casts its long shadow: nature is under threat from erosion and people are suffering; the mood switches as the hardships of the journey cause him to take a less rosy view of the idyll – "since the encounter with the crawling child, I look at paradise askance." (33)

The picturesque is another western model of nature that Matthiessen adapts to eastern thought: "I am struck by the yin-yang of these rivers – the one slope white, right down to the water, and the other dark, yet with a snow patch on the dark side and a dark rock on the white, each side containing the seed of its own opposite." (155) This image of the "balance of cosmic principles" is not, however, divined from nature. As with the picturesque, it results from the projection of an idea onto the landscape. Finding balance and harmony in the framed image he perceives in nature follows picturesque technique –not a different (eastern) way of seeing, but a different aesthetic model projected onto the landscape with alternative religious and philosophical associations (I Ching, Tantra, Buddhism).

An interesting cross-over between eastern and western thought is through the idea of "enlightenment". For Sakyamani in the fifth century B.C., this is attained when the "transparent radiance of a stilled mind opens out in *prajna*, or transcendent *knowing*"; this leads to the experience of "'true nature', his Buddha-nature" at one with the nature of the universe. (27) This form of enlightenment corresponds loosely with German Romanticism in intuiting knowledge through nature, but opposes the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment in the West. Western modernity demands restlessness, linearity and progress, all of which are quite at odds with the "stillness" at the heart of the eastern form of enlightenment Matthiessen presents. Even in Romantic travel writing, stillness is rarer than restlessness and the urge to keep moving. If we think of Byron and D.H. Lawrence, the idea of a still centre is remote, and Matthiessen himself is never really still – the journey commands that he keeps moving, and with this motion, his mind is visited by a continuous series of conflicting images.

He sees through a western aesthetic of romanticism when he reports, "this landscape is hallucinatory – gorges and waterfalls, the pines and clouds that come and go, fire-coloured dwellings painted with odd flowers and bizarre designs, the cloud-mirrors of the rice paddies in steps down the steep mountainside, a flock of vermilion minivets, blown through a wind-tossed tumult of bamboo." (44) Distant peaks dissolving into the clouds and sky is a stock image of the romantic quest for the liminal, the edge of consciousness, the fluidity in forms of

nature that mirror the desire for dissolution of self. But, as with the picturesque earlier, the landscape here is also marked out with non-western elements: exotic birds, bamboo and rice paddies, the latter performing the same role as the lake-as-mirror (and the earth's primal eye) in the romantic sublime. The question here is whether eastern landscapes are appropriated by western romanticism or whether the ideas behind western romanticism are being skewed through eastern forms of thinking such as Buddhism.

Matthiessen is sometimes aware he is translating eastern landscapes into aestheticised western patterns of thought. Below Rohagon he finds a copse which, as a composite picture, evokes the woods of home, but in detail, the woods differ enough to produce for him a dreamlike quality: "The wildwood brings on a mild nostalgia, not for home or place, but for lost innocence – the paradise lost that, as Proust said, is the only paradise." (127) He begins with a general image of familiarity in the unfamiliar, an idea which underlies all representations of alterity in travel writing, then proceeds to association with the western (Freudian) idea of the uncanny, that in turn produces the reverie grounded in western literature (Proust) and a western concept of sacred time: from paradise to loss, from the golden age to the fall. But the chain of association does not end here, because Matthiessen is, as ever, keen to interlace eastern and western thought, so the image of the lost time of childhood induced by the wildwood is reinterpreted through Milarepa as loss of "presencing" rather than a particular time, loss of the state of total immersion in the present: "this is the paradise of children, that they are at rest in the present". (127)

Matthiessen's search for stillness in nature (as mirror to his own quest for inner calm) is thwarted by various reminders of time and being. One of these is *transience*, the brief candle of being flickering in the darkness of eternity, reminder of impermanence and imminent crossing into the ultimate stillness of non-being. It shows again how the present cannot be grasped except in fitful hallucinatory moments. As in the Venerable Bede's example of man's sojourn on earth spanning no more than a swallow's brief flight through one window of the meeting hall and out the other, Matthiessen too sees transience in the quickness of a bird: "With the first sun rays we come down into still forest of gnarled birch and dark stiff firs. Through light filtered by the straying lichens, a silver bird flies to a cedar, fanning crimsoned wings on the sunny bark. Then it is gone, leaving behind a vague longing, a sad emptiness." (77) This is the emptiness that follows the failure to grasp the present while at the same time reflecting on life's brief span. But the emptiness he experiences on the icy slopes of Kang La is reminiscent of the romantic sublime. As with Shelley's encounter with Mont Blanc, and through similar romantic intuition, Matthiessen relates the powerful void to a space of transcendence, an immensity in which nature and mind interfuse:

No wind, no cloud, no track, no bird, only the crystal crescents between peaks, the ringing mountains of rock that, freed from the talons of ice and snow, thrust an implacable *being* into the blue. In the early light, the rock shadows on the snow are sharp; in the tension between light and dark is the power of the universe. (162)

But Matthiessen interposes eastern thought when he describes: "This stillness to which all returns, this is reality". (162) Here he is thinking of Milarepa again and the "pearly radiance of Emptiness, the Uncreated, without beginning, therefore without end" which is the stillness meditation works towards, because this void is where "one's own true nature is reborn". (91) Matthiessen connects Buddhist meditation with the romantic sublime, finding in each the powerful void in which the "true nature of the self" might be glimpsed: "Snow mountains, more than sea or sky, serve as a mirror to one's own true being, utterly still, utterly clear, a void, an Emptiness without life or sound that carries in Itself all life, all sound." (162) The paradoxical everything in nothing, yet the ultimate stillness seems beyond reach, or beyond apprehension – the unrepresentable which takes us back to the sublime. As for the early Christian pilgrim to the Holy Lands, whose spiritual journey can only be fulfilled in the next world, consciousness and ego obscure the threshold to paradise: "as long as I remain an 'I' who is conscious of the void and stands apart from it, there will remain a snow mist on the mirror." (162)

From romantic and quasi-religious meditation, Matthiessen comes to a realisation of the hyper-materiality of nature: “Truth is near, in the reality of what I sit on – rocks”, and so an idea that has evaded him in the Heart Sutra: ““form is emptiness, and emptiness is form””, is suddenly revealed to him: “The mountains have no ‘meaning’, they *are* meaning; the mountains *are*.” (195) Rocks become the concrete signified-referent, an idea further semiotically-charged in the landscapes of Nepal and Tibet where rocks are frequently painted with lotus flowers, Buddhist symbols and the mantra “OM MANI PADME HUM” carved directly into the river rock. (138) The mantra short-circuits any problems of representation by connecting language directly to nature in rock-carvings and “meaning-less” signifiers (literally thought in language, rather than language about thought). By contrast, where romanticism aspires to transcendence, it is brought back to earth by words, as Shelley famously admits:

The wingèd words on which my soul would pierce
Into the heights of Love’s rare Universe,
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire -
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (Shelley, *Epipsychidion*)

But it seems Matthiessen also falters as he travels from the space of meditation to the site of writing:

The sun is round. I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it,
there is a ringing that we share. I understand this not in my mind but in my heart,
knowing how meaningless it is to try to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing
that mere words will remain. (196)

I suggested earlier that the search for the snow leopard is a failure in an empirical sense in that, although Matthiessen and Schaller see traces of the snow leopard, so are convinced of its existence, they never actually catch sight of one. Other scientific goals are achieved, so the travelogue as a whole is still on one level an empirical scrutiny of the natural world. But it can be read more productively as an eastern-centric presentation (re-orientation, or *re-easting*) of romantic and picturesque descriptions of nature. The snow leopard himself [or herself] seems to stand for something more – a psychic connection to his wife perhaps, but also the unseen persistence of wilderness nature. It is part of the primitive that continues to exist by evading empirical scrutiny. When they come closest to seeing the snow leopard on the Crystal Monastery, Schaller surprises Matthiessen by saying ““maybe it’s better if there are some things that we *don’t* see””, (223) and later, when he leaves the Crystal Monastery, Matthiessen (in conversation with himself) agrees: “Have you seen the snow? No! Isn’t that wonderful?” (225) The Lama at the Crystal Monastery has taught Matthiessen to find joy in what *is*, so there is no disappointment in not seeing – this might be a Buddhist approach to the non-appearance of the snow leopard. From an environmentalist perspective it is also better that the snow leopard remains unseen - it might just enable him/her to survive.

TUTORIAL QUESTIONS (1.4.2011)

1. Consider Matthiessen’s presentation of conflict between Eastern and Western values.
2. Consider the representation of nature as either 1) a personal quest or 2) an environmentalist entreaty.

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ⁱ Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* [1979] (London: Pan Books (Picador), 1980). References to this edition cited in the main text parenthetically.

ⁱⁱ We are reminded frequently that the author has recently lost his wife to cancer and that this has resulted in much introspection and soul-searching.

ⁱⁱⁱ Writing in the wake of the 2008 “credit-crunch”, topical discussion in the west is all about the need for the world to slow down, to take stock and perhaps not be solely driven by increases in profits and GDP, especially when these have often been falsified. Interestingly, there seems to be no talk of this in East Asia, where Buddhism is most evident.

^{iv} Eric Cohen, “Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences”, in *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions*, ed. Susan L. Roberson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp. 29-55 (at p. 42). Although, taken together with his LSD “trips”, Matthiessen is also engaged here in what Cohen calls the “experimental mode”, (at pp. 41-2).