Travelling in the West: The Grand Tour

View of the Rio di Cannaregio with the Ponti dei Tre Archi
Giovanni Antonio Canal, called Canaletto, 1697-1768

James Boswell, Journal (1765)  
Tobias Smollett, Travels Through France and Italy (1766)  
[Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy (1768)]

The Grand Tour and Early Tourism

In this module, we examine travel writing as the personal, diary-like, narratives of journeys undertaken principally out of self-interest. The Grand Tour of Europe was generally prescribed for the purpose of health, leisure or education. Unlike travel as exploration, this early form of tourism invites travellers to visit particular designated sites, which have been already documented in literature and travel guides. Guidebooks were increasingly available at this time to meet the demands of the tourists. The appearance of guidebooks began to make the need to document places visited unnecessary. The main purpose of grand tour narratives was generally to record personal impressions of places, not objective accounts.

This is the beginning of prescribed travel, because itineraries, and instructions on what to view and how best to view it (see Smollet below), precede the journey itself. It is also prescribed in the sense that, for the English upper classes, the Grand Tour was considered as required travel, either for education or health. For the young gentlemen of England in the 18th century, a period of six months up to five years or so in France and Italy on the Grand Tour, was an expected part of their education, (the full tour also included cities in Austria, Germany and Russia). Although the Grand Tour was especially popular in the eighteenth century, some of the English elite had been taking tours in mainland Europe much earlier. Francis Bacon’s essay, ‘On Travel’ (1625) sets out the guidelines for European travel as a political, economic and cultural experience, and the first reference to the ‘Grand Tour’ is in Richard Lassels’ An Italian Voyage (1679).
Grand Tourists were generally self-financing, and were not under pressure to publish accounts of their journeys. Such records that do exist of the Grand Tour are often in the form of letters home, or journals/diaries, which were not intended for publication. Some of these were published much later, posthumously (as with Mary Montagu). But travel narratives were also composed by well-known literary figures such as Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, who developed a literary form that in part mimicked personal records of the Grand Tour. In other words, they feigned ‘letters’ to real or imaginary recipients, even though the content of these letters might have been based on actual experience. This latter group would certainly have expected their 'letters' and 'journals' of their travels to be published. These we can see are far more crafted and polished as literary works, and borrow from the novel literary devices such as characterization, setting and sometimes plot.

But we must remember that the main purpose of taking the Grand Tour was to expose young men especially to European culture – this included visiting the ruins of classical Greece and Rome, as well as contemporary art galleries, museums and buildings. There is a great deal of ‘showing off’ attached to the Tour, and this can be found sometimes in a writing style that verges on the pretentious, and on a narrative that boasts of sights seen.

The Grand Tourist, often under the wing of a tutor, was expected to become a connoisseur, displaying not only his knowledge of architecture, art and history, but also foreign languages and a refined sensibility for appreciating foreign culture. It became fashionable, faddish even, for writers and travellers on the Grand Tour to take particular interest in the picturesque, to develop aesthetic responses to nature and to art and architecture. Major centres of the Grand Tour included the curiosities and art works of ancient Rome, Florence and Venice.

The sons of English aristocrats were sent to further their education in two main areas: 1) aesthetically and culturally - to learn about the art and culture of Europe, to become a connoisseur, and learn refinement at the hands of the supposedly more refined aristocrats of Europe, 2) politically and socially - to learn the languages and customs of other European countries and prepare themselves to for employment as ambassadors, foreign service, etc. and participate in England’s newly acquired role in world history.

Although The Grand Tour was undertaken to initiate young men of fashion into the polished society and fine art of Europe, Grand Tourists of the eighteenth century, acquired a reputation for drunkenness, lewdness, chauvinism and boisterous behaviour. Then as now, tourism was an opportunity to slip the moral shackles of home and misbehave. This caused one Frenchman to declare in 1785, that “In a hundred there are not two that seek to instruct themselves", "to take punch and tea at the inns; to speak ill of all other nations and to boast without ceasing of their own; that is what the crowd of English call travelling” (Dupaty). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu went further, calling the young Englishmen “the greatest bunch of blockheads in nature”.

In the eighteenth century, the Grand Tour was 'invaded' by the bourgeoisie (newly rich middle classes) who were intent on following in footsteps of the aristocracy - considerable snobbery and ruffling of aristocratic feathers no doubt ensued. Later, Cook’s nineteenth century excursions would bring the masses to tread the same paths, and the Grand Tour then becomes a kind of second-hand experience.
The Picturesque

… (simply, a landscape that is arranged as might be a picture), was an eighteenth century aesthetic fashion which was developed by English writers and artists from French and Italian modes of landscape painting (by Claude [see opposite] and Poussin especially). Introduced to England in the 18th century it was immediately taken up by writers, travellers, painters, gardeners and landscape architects as a ‘way-of-seeing’ (and sometimes altering) the countryside. The supposition was that the viewer was himself or herself acquainted with the aesthetic and, in an age of sensibility, an educated person. Although ideas of what constituted the picturesque or the sublime (see below) varied considerably, there was a formula: foreground detail, middle ground with prospect and distance merging into the sky, framing by trees or buildings to create the prospect.

For English and American visitors to Europe in the eighteenth century, an appreciation of the picturesque distinguished men of refinement from tourists who failed to see, or to appreciate the timeless beauty beneath the surface reality. Clearly a degree of snobbery is present in this. The picturesque is not an absolute category, but a shifting fashion specific to a particular culture and social group. In seventeenth-century Europe, the picturesque might be defined by graceful architecture and other evidence of human activity in the landscape, but the English picturesque of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, merged with Romantic vision and the sublime to install an appreciation of untamed nature. From the nineteenth century onwards, guide books, such as the Blue Guide started to classify the picturesque as more or less any situation with a good view. On today’s Michelin touring maps of Europe, the picturesque is marked on roads as a green line, as a guide to car drivers.

The Sublime

Often incorporated as an element in the picturesque, the sublime was introduced by Edmund Burke as a philosophical concept standing in opposition to ‘beauty’ in the landscape. The sublime is found in chasms, cataracts and rugged mountains and refers as much to the feeling invoked by such elements of nature – fear, shock, horror. Somewhat spuriously, Burke gendered landscapes with the beautiful signifying the feminine (rounded, welcoming, passive) and the sublime masculine (rugged, penetrating). It was not until the eighteenth century that the sublime in nature was sought out in landscapes - the appreciation of mountainous scenery was largely introduced by the Romantics, and tours of the Alps were added to the Grand Tour in the early nineteenth century.

The Sentimental

Travel in search of the picturesque follows certain cultural preconceptions, fashion and so on, but sentimental travel, is where the traveller records the 'true impressions' of a place as they strike his refined sensibility. The sentimental traveller is usually an ironic figure (after Sterne), but he is supposed to record fine impressions and atmosphere of a place and the manners of its people. This 'refinement' of the sentimental traveller, does not come naturally, of course, and implies education, class and upbringing. At best, sentimental travel is a subjective but cultivated approach to travel, but at worst, it implies affectation or pretense. In Laurence Sterne's Sentimental Journey (1768) the idea of sentimental travel is proposed, but Sterne is almost certainly being ironic. He does show undisguised scorn for all other kinds of travellers, especially for the earnest and splenetic (irritable, angry, pessimistic) Smollett, but at the same time, he satirises the affected
manners and habits of the upper classes.

James Boswell, Journal (1765)

Boswell is best known for his biography, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, but in his *Journal* he reveals his 'true' self as a young 'man about town' and a womaniser. In this excerpt, Boswell has suspended his legal studies at the age of 24 to take the Grand Tour. We find him in Rome, following the prescribed itinerary of sights and sites, accompanied by his guide (the antiquary, Mr. Morison) and making all the right noises for a young gentleman on the Tour. He draws attention to what have become clichés of the Tour, the Forum and the Colosseum, pictured as significant ruins which suggest the splendour of past times (the Roman Empire) and the poignancy of such scenes which evoke a strange kind of beauty (ruins became very fashionable in English gardens in the 18th century). In the Colosseum, Boswell comes across a hermit, who has set up home in one of its archways - this is another cliché, and believe it or not, some English gentlemen, on return to England, not only built replicas of the Forum and Roman temples in their gardens, they also installed 'hermits' in fake caves and hovels.

Goldsmith’s poem *The Traveller* (1764) capture this image:

… these domes, where Caesars once bore sway,
Defac’d by time and tottering in decay,
There in the ruin, heedless of the dead,
The shelter-seeking peasant builds his shed …

Note how the whole passage in Boswell can be read as a conspicuous show of education and refinement as if he wants to convey his knowledge to the reader as much as the scene itself. Wandering around the artistic and architectural treasures of Rome, breaking into Latin and discoursing with his antiquary on the merits of classical art, all of this is designed to prove that Boswell is a gentleman, as is the fact that he wrote the journal originally in French. But we might detect some irony and self-satirising in the journal: Boswell was a notorious womanizer, and yet in the journal he seems discomfited by young women, or perhaps aroused in their presence. The last few lines are interesting - after describing how beautiful and rewarding his situation in Italy is, how he has the company of pleasant ladies and is proceeding well in his induction in Italian culture, he says, "... I cannot say I am happy. I am surprised by this. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to look for" - we are left to wonder what it is that escapes Boswell here.

Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne

These two writers were established novelists and men of letters of the 18th century so their travel narratives are more obviously literary. *Literariness* is a term rather difficult to pin down, but I think we can see how, in Sterne's writing especially, the writing is designed to produce certain effects and is highly crafted. Note the writing style, use of adjectives and figures of speech, the attention to mood and feeling, as well as the novelistic devices of plot, character and setting.

It may be significant that both Smollett and Sterne knew they were close to the end of their lives when they wrote these narratives: Smollett died in 1771 in Italy, and Sterne died in London in 1768, the year *Sentimental Journey* was published.

Smollett, Travels Through France and Italy (1766) - Letters I and XXIX

Soon after this was published, Smollett acquired the reputation of being the most ill-humoured and bad-tempered English traveller to cross the Channel. He was so rude about some places in
France and Italy, that he was unable to return without fear of being stoned by the local people (this was an actual threat by a resident of Nice, affronted by Smollett's (mis)representation). Much of Smollett's reputation comes from his portrayal in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, published two years later in 1768. For Sterne, the 'learned Smelfungus' (his nickname for Smollett) was typical of the unfeeling traveller who could travel "from Dan to Beersheba" (Biblical reference to the extent of Israel/the Holy Lands) and cry "'Tis all barren ...". Sterne's book was very popular in Europe, and Smollett suffered by contrast with Sterne's sentimental traveller.

As a travel book, however, Smollett's book is rather more *useful* than Sterne's. *Sentimental Journey* is really a fictionalised *satire* on travel – i.e. a book *about* travel rather than a travel book. Smollett's *Travels Through France and Italy*, on the other hand, describes a real journey recording his experiences between June 1763 and June 1765 on a journey across Europe with his wife searching for a kinder climate for his failing health (he died in Italy in 1771). It is a factual account, but also one which records personal impressions and anecdotes. Note that the form of the account - a series of letters - is simply a device, as these are addressed to no one in particular.

In 'Letter I', Smollett describes his journey to Dover by stagecoach [NB: this begins in England] and his subsequent arrival by boat in the French port of Boulogne. Note the irascible (easily provoked to anger) tone of Smollett even when he is referring to English roads and inns. This tone dominates his letters. The epistolary form of the narrative (written as letters), in which each 'letter' is dated and signed, gives the impression that events are described while fresh in the mind, and not edited with hindsight. But the whole narrative was probably edited for its subsequent publication.

In ‘Letter XXIX’, the experiences of being a 'tourist' described by Smollett might ring a bell with the modern budget traveller. The insecurity of being away from home and the sense that one is always being 'ripped off', or 'fleeced' as Smollett puts it, is an all too common experience it seems. The postilions (men who drive or ride the horses pulling the stagecoach) and the hostlers (who look after the horses at the inn), appear as greedy and untrustworthy as modern-day taxi drivers and touts. He does not hold back when criticising innkeepers and others who he thinks are trying to cheat him (which they probably are). It seems that the English had created a reputation for themselves in Europe as being the tourists with the most money and the least sense, and so were easy pickings - "[The English] are supposed to have more money to throw away; and therefore a greater number of snares are laid for them". It is perhaps this reputation that Smollett is trying to counter.

Smollett uses most of his ink to complain about the journey and the accommodation, but it is not true (contra Sterne) that he never finds any place worth see for example his visit to Viterbo, Lake de Vico. Before Sterne's attack on Smollett, *The Travels* was well-received by some in England as it offered a contrast between what some English regarded as British no-nonsense values and the effeminate and affected habits of the French and Italians. (Note that Britain and France had been at war a few months prior to Smollett's journey). Smollett is the British 'bulldog', standing for honesty, decency and a matter-of-fact intelligence rather than what some English might have considered the limp-wristed, perfumed Continental ways.

Note that Smollett refers to a guide book, the popular *The Grand Tour* (1749) by Thomas Nugent. The guidebook takes him to those places marked out as either beautiful or of historical
importance, or both. This marks a beginning of modern tourism then, following the 'beaten track', rather than discovering places anew. Smollett seems to have some doubt about the educational value of the 'Tour', describing the young English gentlemen sent on it as "raw boys, whom Britain seemed to have poured forth on purpose to bring her national character into contempt: ignorant, petulant, rash, and profligate, without any knowledge or experience of their own ..."

A common experience for all tourists is reading up on a site and then being disappointed by seeing the place that has been built up in the imagination. The trope of disappointment – where representation and received ideas do not measure up to actuality - can take a number of forms, but one that is common in 'Grand Tour' narratives is that of disappointment with present day realities that obscure the ancient, classical world. Like pilgrims, who travelled to the Holy Land to see the Scriptural past, Smollett and English Grand Tourists find the present impoverished. This is especially true in Rome (see also Boswell). But we musty also be cautious in case this 'disappointment' is expected and therefore feigned to some extent. Boswell’s responses are to some extent formulaic, prompted by earlier literature.

Sterne, _A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy_ (1768)

This is not properly a travel book, but an example of 'fictional travel' - i.e. a novel or short story in which travel is the major theme or is central to the plot. The form is that of a novel (or novella) with the main character Mr. Yorick as first person narrator. Although Sterne is writing about real places, the journey is fictional and he wrote it in England.

Sterne's book is a kind of 'antidote' to Smollett and the style of travel writing in which the external realities of places are described and some connection is sought between the guide book, the past and present realities. On the Grand Tour, the overriding mood is often one of disappointment, and Sterne seems to suggest that this is because English travellers, of whom Smollett is typical, fail to connect emotionally with their surroundings in a positive way, and instead resist the foreign-ness that they have travelled to experience.

Sterne therefore introduces, promotes and then proceeds to enact the 'Sentimental Traveller', who from the very beginning selects a chaise (carriage) that is in 'tolerable harmony with [his] feelings'. The joke is that this is a 'Disobligeant' - a chaise that carries only one person, suggesting that he does not wish to meet or converse with anyone else. A further joke is that this chaise is not actually going anywhere, but is rather the 'vehicle' for his writing this narrative. He maintains the conceit that the time of writing is the same as the time of travelling (or rather not travelling). Full of his conviction that a man can find delight in the variety offered by foreign places, if he has the right temperament, he castigates 'Smelfungus' (Smollett), but actually Sterne travels nowhere, and his fictitious character, Yorick is perhaps a dupe (a clever dupe) who sends up the sentimental traveller while at the same time attacking the 'splenetic' traveller, the 'idle traveller' etc.

Further Reading:
Malcolm Andrews, _In Search of the Picturesque_ (1989)
Chloe Chard, _Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour_ (1999).

Paul Smethurst (23.9.2009)

Tutorial – 18th February – prepare a short presentation (5-6 mins) based on one of the
following questions.

1: Find an example of Boswell or Smollet responded aesthetically and culturally to landscape or ruins.

2: Could you describe Smollett and Boswell as acting like modern tourists? Find an example which either demonstrates them acting like modern tourists, or the opposite.

3: Find an example in Smollet or Boswell which illustrates the use of literary devices (such as plot, character, metaphor, rhetorical language, dramatic action, irony, humour, etc.) In other words, something the travel writing shares with literary genres such as the novel or short story.