Looking Backward: A Thematics of Contemporary American Travel Fiction

Steven R. Luebke

At the Key West Literary Seminar in 1991, Russell Banks stated that travel literature is “written to make a point about home” (“Itchy Feet” 1). Whether it is due to the fact that distance encourages examination of and appreciation for what we have left behind; or whether it is due to the blurring of borders through mass transit and mass communication; or whether it is the result of what one writer called a “cultural implosion” due to the proliferation of American popular culture, the seeming paradox Banks points out appears to be especially true for contemporary American fiction in which Americans move beyond domestic borders and confront other peoples and cultures. Whether they travel to the Canadian wilderness or to Japan, contemporary characters cannot escape America; many seem fixated as much on what they have left behind as on what lies in front of them.

Traditionally, travel in American literature has been associated with the possibility for a new beginning. The archetypal American Adam described by R. W. B. Lewis, for instance, emerged from what we think of as the original, historical American travel experience: the migration to the New World. The American Adam was

an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone and self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.... His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. (3)

Hopeful and “forward-looking” as the American Adam is, he better represents nineteenth- rather than late twentieth-century America. In contemporary novels, America has become a stifling mass society, a land associated with oppression, desuetude, or dissatisfaction rather than opportunity or freedom. Moreover, our heroes are neither “emancipated from history” nor “undefiled” by “inheritances” of family, race, or culture. On the contrary, heroes of travel novels published between the late fifties and mid-eighties might find a more appropriate biblical parallel in Lot’s wife than in Adam, since their journeys are “backward-looking.” The outbound journey becomes, for them, a journey back to America—an examination of or a confrontation with its values and conditions.