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CONCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY IN CONTEMPORARY TRAVEL WRITING

From Siberian Nature to Hyperreal America

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

What conceptions of ‘authenticity’ can we find in contemporary travel writing? Where do they come from and how can they be challenged? To answer these questions, this study maps out what seven travel writers portray as ‘authentic’ in relation to travel, to nature, to local populations and to artistic representations in travelogues published between 1970 and 2019, mostly in French and in English.

In the field of criticism on travel writing, the concept of ‘authenticity’ has only been addressed head-on in relation to tourists. Previous studies neglect to explain what travel writers deem ‘authentic’ in natural destinations, what an ‘authentic’ relation to nature or to the local inhabitants may be for them, and how ‘authenticity’ is redefined by semioticians who travel to hyperreal places.

I argue that three conventional and constructed conceptions of ‘authenticity’ dominate the corpus under study: ‘authenticity’ as exoticism and reverence to tradition, as the belief in the ability of the wilderness to return the self to its original state, and as the postmodern acknowledgement of the limits of art and literature. I contend that some of these conceptions are legacies of the travel-writing and nature-writing genres, while others correspond to the authors’ own theories and approaches to writing or comply with postmodern aesthetics.

The present study blends a formalist approach that brings to the fore the stylistic, rhetorical and compositional strategies devised by travel writers to achieve certain effects, and an ideological criticism of the premises and implications of their representational choices.

Part I explores the conceptions of ‘authenticity’ upheld in travelogues that focus entirely or partly on the wilderness: Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*, Colin Thubron’s *In Siberia*, Sara Wheeler’s *Terra Incognita* and Sylvain Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges*. Aided by Lawrence Buell’s and Greg Garrard’s ecocritical concept of “toxic discourse”, **Chapter 1** shows that nature gives the travellers a sense of ‘authenticity’ when it is free of the elements of modern life that they seek to escape. In **Chapter 2**, I contend that the emphasis these travellers place on epiphanies and contemplation is uniquely illuminated by their indebtedness to the Transcendentalists. In **Chapter 3**, I argue that physical strain and endangerment give the travellers the opportunity to showcase and authenticate their performance as risk-taking adventurers. **Chapter 4** focuses on the metaphors Matthiessen and Tesson use to express the immersive relation to nature for which they long, and which takes the shape of “Becoming-Animals” that are best accounted for with the help of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept. The predominance of a multifaceted self-reflexivity in the texts of Tesson and Thubron leads me to argue that they abide by a postmodern conception of ‘authenticity’ that I discuss in **Chapter 5**. The focus shifts towards the conceptions of authenticity that underpin their approach to *writing*. I show that Tesson and Thubron conform to the postmodern convention that consists in mitigating their own authority and reflecting on the limits of the literary medium.

Part II charts the conceptions of ‘authenticity’ that semioticians endorse in relation to artistic and literary representations and foreign cultures. In **Chapter 6** and **7**, I analyse Umberto Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality”, and argue that Eco adheres to a postmodern conception of ‘authenticity’ that valorises irony, parody and the type of art that acknowledges its own artificial nature and encourages critical interpretations. Lastly, in **Chapter 8**, by analysing Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* and Jean Baudrillard’s *America* in the light of their authors’ theoretical works, I show that they represent their destinations in an abstract way to match their preference for non-referentiality and to avoid representational claims that they implicitly portray as inauthentic.

ABSTRACT IN FINNISH

Millaisia käsityksiä 'autenttisuudesta' voimme löytää nykyajan matkakirjallisuudesta, mistä ne tulevat ja miten niitä voidaan kyseenalaistaa? Näihin kysymyksiin vastaamiseksi tässä tutkimuksessa kartoitetaan, mitä seitsemän matkakirjoittajaa kuvaa autenttisenä vuosina 1970-2019 julkaistuissa, enimmäkseen ranskan- ja englanninkielisissä matkakertomuksissa suhteessa matkustamiseen, luontoon, paikallisväestöön ja taiteellisiin representaatioihin.

Matkakirjallisuuden kritiikissä autenttisuuden käsitettä on käsitelty suoraan vain suhteessa matkailijoihin. Aiemmat tutkimukset jättävät selittämättä, mitä matkakirjoittajat pitävät autenttisenä syrjäisissä luontokohteissa, mitä autenttinen suhde luontoon tai paikallisiin asukkaisiin voi olla heille ja miten autenttisuus määritellään uudelleen semiootikkojen matkatessa hyperrealistisiin paikkoihin.

Väitän, että kolme pääkäsitystä autenttisuudesta hallitsee tutkittavaa materiaalia ja että ne ovat konventionaalisia ja konstruoituja: autenttisuus eksotiikkana ja perinteen kunnioittamisena, uskona erämaan kykyyn palauttaa minuisen alkuperäiseen tilaansa ja postmodernina taiteen ja kirjallisuuden rajojen tunnustamisena. Väitän, että osa näistä käsityksistä on perintöä matka- ja luontokirjallisuuden lajeista, kun taas toiset vastaavat kirjoittajien omia teorioita ja lähestymistapaa kirjoittamiseen tai ovat postmodernin estetiikan mukaisia.

Tämä tutkimus on lisä innovatiiviseen matkakirjallisuuteen keskittyvään kasvavaan tutkimuskokonaisuuteen, joka osoittaa toisuden esittämisen uudistumista. Se täydentää tätä tutkimusalaa yhdistämällä formalistisen lähestymistavan, jossa tuodaan esiin matkakirjoittajien tiettyjen vaikutusten aikaansaamiseksi suunnitellut tyylilliset, retoriset ja sommittelustrategiat sekä ideologisen kritiikin, joka kohdistuu heidän representaatiovalintojensa lähtökohtiin ja seurauksiin.

*Ensimmäisessä osassa tarkastellaan autenttisuuden käsitteitä, joita ylläpidetään kokonaan tai osittain erämaahan keskittyvissä matkakertomuksissa: Peter Matthiessenin *The Snow Leopard*, Colin Thubronin *In Siberia*, Sara Wheelerin *Terra Incognita* ja Sylvain Tessonin *Consolations of the Forest* ja *La panthère des neiges*. Luvussa 1 osoitetaan, että luonto antaa matkailijoille aitouden/ autenttisuuden tunteen, kun se on vapaa nykyaikaisen/modernin elämän elementeistä, joita he pyrkivät pakenemaan. Lawrence Buellin ja Greg Garrardin ekokriittisen 'myrkyllisen diskurssin' käsitteen avulla kyseenalaistan tämän käsityksen autenttisuudesta. Luvussa 2 väitän, että se, että nämä matkailijat painottavat oivalluksia ja kontemplaatiota, on ainutlaatuisen selkeä osoitus heidän velkaantumisestaan transsendentalisteille. Luvussa 3 väitän, että fyysinen rasitus ja vaaraan hakeutuminen antavat heille mahdollisuuden esitellä ja todentaa suoritustaan riskinottajina ja seikkailijoina, mikä herättää henkiin perinteisen vastakkainasettelun turvallisten turistien ja rohkeiden matkailijoiden välillä. Luvussa 4 keskitytään metaforiin, joita Matthiessen ja Tesson käyttävät ilmaistakseen uppoutuvaa ja transformatiivista luontosuhdetta, jota he kaipaavat ja joka saa muodon ohimenevistä 'eläimiksi tulemisista', joita voidaan parhaiten selittää Gilles Deleuzen ja Félix Guattarin käsitteen avulla. Monitahoisen itserefleksiivisyyden hallitsevuus Tessonin ja Thubronin teksteissä saa minut väittämään, että he noudattavat postmodernia käsitystä autenttisuudesta, jota käsittelem luvussa 5. Painopiste siirtyy autenttisuuskäsityksiin, jotka tukevat heidän lähestymistapaansa kirjoittamiseen. Osoitan, että nämä kaksi matkustajaa nondattavat*

postmodernia konventiota, joka koostuu oman auktoriteetin lieventämisestä ja kirjallisen välineen rajojen ja oman ymmärryksen rajojen pohjimuksesta vieraita toisia kohtaan.

Toisessa osassa kartoitetaan semiootikkokojen hyväksymiä käsityksiä autenttisuudesta subteessa taiteellisiin ja kirjallisiin representaatioihin ja vieraisiin kulttuureihin. Luvuissa 6 ja 7 ehdotan kattavaa määritelmää hypertodellisuudelle, ennen kuin analysoin Umberto Econ "Matkoja hypertodellisuudessa". Väitän, että Eco noudattaa postmodernia käsitystä autenttisuudesta, jossa arvostetaan ironiaa, parodiaa ja sellaista taidetta, joka tunnustaa oman keinotekoisien luonteensa ja rohkaisee museokävijöitä kriittisiin tulkintoihin. Hän myös pyrkii määrittelemään 'autenttisuuden' uudelleen subteessa simulakrumeihin. Lopuksi luvussa 8 analysoin Roland Barthes'n Empire of Signs -teosta ja Jean Baudrillard'n America-teosta tekijöidensä teoreettisten teosten valossa ja osoitan, että he esittävät kohteensa melko abstraktilla tavalla, jotta ne vastaisivat heidän mieltymystään ei-viittauksellisuuteen ja välttäisivät representaatioväitteitä, joita he epäsuorasti kuvaavat epäaidoiksi. Annan myös tiekartan niiden tyylillisten, retoristen ja sommittelua koskevien valintojen tunnistamiseksi, joita he tekevät luodakseen viittaamattomuuden vaikutelman.

ABSTRACT IN FRENCH

À l'heure de la postmodernité, le concept d'« authenticité » apparaît comme un mythe remis en question avec les autres métarécits, et les chercheurs en études touristiques considèrent comme vaine la quête de l'authenticité que poursuivent certains voyageurs. Les spécialistes de la littérature de voyage continuent pourtant à faire usage de l'adjectif « authentique » pour décrire le type d'expérience que certains écrivains voyageurs recherchent ou atteignent, sans pour autant expliquer avec précision l'usage qu'ils font de ce terme.

Identifier ce qui est dépeint implicitement ou explicitement comme étant « authentique » dans le voyage : tel est l'objectif de ce travail. Quelles conceptions de l'authenticité dominent la littérature de voyage de l'extrême contemporain ? Quelles conceptions de l'authenticité les écrivains voyageurs remettent-ils en question ? Il s'agira d'abord de déterminer ce que quatre écrivains voyageurs présentent comme étant authentique dans leur expérience de la nature sauvage (Colin Thubron, Sara Wheeler, Peter Matthiessen, Sylvain Tesson), puis d'analyser les transformations subies par le concept d'authenticité dans les récits de voyage de sémioticiens qui abordent des questions sémiotiques liées à la langue, à l'art, à la culture et à l'hypperréalité (Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes).

Nous tâcherons de comprendre l'origine de ces conceptions de l'authenticité et de mettre au jour leurs prémisses et paradoxes ainsi que les problèmes éthiques qu'elles soulèvent. Pour ce faire, la méthode choisie associe une analyse des moyens formels, stylistiques et rhétoriques utilisés par les auteurs pour produire certains effets à une critique idéologique de la portée de leurs choix représentationnels. Le corpus sera notamment examiné à la lumière des concepts de « discours de la toxicité » développé par les fondateurs de l'écocritique, Lawrence Buell et Greg Garrard ; de « devenir-animal », théorisé par Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari ; d'« opacité » telle que l'a définie Édouard Glissant et d'« altérité radicale », concept créé par Lisa Isherwood et David Harris.

Trois grandes conceptions de l'authenticité dominent ces récits de voyage : l'authenticité des cultures qui correspondent à un idéal exotique et traditionaliste, l'authenticité de la nature comme sanctuaire où le voyageur retrouve la partie de lui-même qu'il juge authentique, et l'authenticité postmoderne comme geste rhétorique qui consiste à reconnaître l'écart qui sépare le monde de sa représentation (littéraire ou artistique). Certaines de ces conceptions semblent héritées des conventions qui ont marqué le genre de la littérature viatique, certaines sont liées aux systèmes théoriques développés par une partie des écrivains étudiés, et d'autres encore se sont développées en réponse aux changements esthétiques associés à la postmodernité.

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Helsinki, October 2022

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED PAPERS

Certain sections of this thesis have appeared earlier as chapters or articles, and they are reproduced with modifications with the permission of the publishers.

Parts of **Chapter 6** and **Chapter 7** have been previously published in a chapter titled “I Object to Your Position: Hyperreal Decontextualizing of Objects”, in *Context in Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Jakob Ladegaard and Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen, London, UCL Press, 2019, pp. 172-189.

Parts of **Chapters 1.2, 4.4.** and **5.3** have been previously published in the article “Echoes of the Past and Siberian Nature’s ‘Radical Otherness’: An Ecocritical Reading of Contemporary Travel Writing”, in *Cultural Resonance and the Echo Chamber of Reading*, a special issue of *Revue canadienne de littérature comparée/ Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, guest edited by Shuangyi Li, vol. 47, no. 4, Dec. 2020, pp. 480-495.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

All translations from the French are mine, unless indicated otherwise, for instance by a reference to the published translation in the bibliography and/or by a parenthetical reference that indicates the page number of the English translation (always quoted first) followed by the page number of the French original.

As opposed to the rest of the corpus of primary texts, Sylvain Tesson’s *La panthère des neiges* (2019) was untranslated at the time this thesis was written, and the translations of this text into English are therefore all mine. Since then, Penguin has published a translation by Frank Wynne, titled *The Art of Patience: Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet* (2021).

ABBREVIATIONS

DAF *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française 8th edition*

ODL *Oxford Dictionary Lexico, online (since this thesis was written, this website has been renamed Dictionary.com)*

TLFI *Dictionnaire Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*

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À mes parents Charles et Nicole,
Et à la mémoire de mes grands-parents Valérien et Asunción

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“I felt that wherever authenticity resided, it must be elsewhere.
And needless to say, I was in search of authenticity.
What else is there?”

Robert Stone¹

1. Foreword

In autumn 2019, I took a day trip to Glencoe, a landmark of the Highlands. Once disembarked from the buses, the hundred visitors and I scattered in the valley and they endeavoured to find a spot where they could photograph themselves with as few people as possible in the background. I found I could not truthfully do the same and leave the crowd of tourists out of the frame. They could not be edited out of the travel experience; they were part of Glencoe. To capture the situation in a faithful way, I could have photographed the crowd in front of Glencoe, yet who wants strangers and tour buses in their holiday pictures?²

Some may experience epiphanic moments amid a crowd but for most of us, ‘authenticity’ in travel is associated with relative solitude. But what else is it associated with and why? Added to my many other experiences acquired while visiting countries as a tourist and living abroad as an expatriate, this trip moved me to rethink what is considered ‘authentic’ travel, where preconceptions about ‘authenticity’ come from, and why they can and should be questioned.

2. Purpose and significance of the study

This dissertation does not seek to label some books, experiences and writing techniques as more ‘authentic’ than others. It aims to map out what seven contemporary travel writers explicitly or implicitly portray as ‘authentic’ in their journeys and in their texts, and how they reinforce, question, or rethink what has previously been considered ‘authentic’. It also seeks to determine where their preconceptions of ‘authenticity’ may come from, how they may be challenged, and how their texts thus analysed help us think more critically about the concept of ‘authenticity’ in travel literature in general. Most of the time, these writers do not clearly signpost and advertise what they deem ‘authentic’, which means that the results of this study ultimately rest on my interpretation of their

¹ Unpaged interview.

² I later discovered that Walker Percy had raised a similar conundrum and had proposed that a person who wished to capture the essence of the Grand Canyon may “stan[d] behind his fellow tourists . . . and se[e] the canyon through them and their predicament, their picture taking and busy disregard” (48-49). Percy’s proposal was judged unsatisfactory by Jonathan Culler, because “it d[id] not deliver an unmediated experience”, the Grail of tourists and travellers questing for authenticity (“Semiotics” 6).

texts, informed by the history of the travel-writing genre and of the concept of ‘authenticity’ that I will presently introduce.

An analysis of the way my chosen authors present their experience and interact with human and nonhuman others will unveil what they consider to be an ‘authentic’ relation to nature (Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler and Thubron), to the history of the local populations (Thubron); what they deem ‘authentic’ art in hyperreal settings (Eco), and what they see as an ‘authentic’ way of writing about foreign lands (Tesson, Thubron, Barthes and Baudrillard). This research will reveal that age-old conceptions of ‘authenticity’ with problematic undertones endure but compete with new types of ‘authenticities’ that have emerged from the postmodern context. To be more specific, I shall demonstrate that the corpus oscillates between conceptions of ‘authenticity’ that valorise exoticism, solitary travel, and the pursuit of a sense of wholeness in nature, and conceptions of ‘authenticity’ that go hand in hand with respect for the “radical Otherness” and “opacity” of foreign people and places (Isherwood and Harris 9; Glissant 189). An in-depth study of these attempts will reveal their ethical implications and also show how ‘authenticity’ can be reinvented as a context-bound, relational and dynamic concept.

I borrow the term “radical Otherness” from Lisa Isherwood and David Harris (9), who crafted the notion in the fields of sociology and feminist theology to designate a space where the difference of others is neither “assimilate[d]” nor “annihilate[d]”, where others are not considered a variant of the same, nor a reverse image of the self (2). Isherwood and Harris employ the notion in accord with poststructuralist and feminist approaches that reject binary dialectics in favour of a movement of relational becoming (18). Transposing the concept into literary studies, I intend to preserve the idea of a disruptive otherness that sparks a reconsideration of the hegemonic position of the self, and of the self’s identity and knowledge of foreign others. “Radical Otherness” as I use it entails that the travellers in my chosen texts seek to go beyond their preconceptions and attune themselves to perceiving the difference of others without consuming this difference as an exotic sight. On the one hand, it implies that these travellers are ready to have their preconceptions about themselves and others altered, sometimes even to transform themselves, and on the other hand that they recognise the “opacity” of foreign others (be they human or nonhuman), to use Édouard Glissant’s concept (189). To complement the ideas contained in Isherwood and Harris’s “radical Otherness”, I shall draw upon the ethics of “opacity” that Édouard Glissant develops, and that are concisely encapsulated in the following passage of *Poetics of Relation* (*Poétique de la relation*, 1990):

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge . . . For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. (190/204)³

³ “Non pas seulement consentir au droit à la différence mais, plus avant, au droit à l’opacité, qui n’est pas l’enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable, mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible. Des opacités peuvent coexister, confluer . . . Renoncer, pour un temps peut-être, à cette vieille hantise de surprendre le fond des natures” (Glissant 204).

This concept is particularly enlightening for the study of representations of otherness in contemporary travel literature, because it offers a counterpoint to exoticism. Glissant explains that, when Western writers are in a position to describe foreign others, to “create [them] afresh”, they are tempted to “reduce” them in the hope that it will make it easier to understand them and to fulfil a fantasy of “transparency” (190/204).⁴ Taking a stance opposite to Victor Segalen’s, Glissant proposes to replace this fantasy with the “right to opacity for everyone” (194/209).⁵ Glissant’s “opacity” and Isherwood and Harris’s “radical Otherness” bear witness to recent changes in the conceptualisation of otherness, which are also reflected in the corpus of travel writing I selected.

This research answers multiple changes that have occurred in the past fifty years in the concept of ‘authenticity’, and in the possibility and conditions of travel and of travel writing. Mass tourism has pushed some travel writers off the map to locations viewed as ‘authentic’ in proportion to the seclusion and dangers they afforded. Simultaneously, the ecological crisis has shifted our understanding of the environment, which can be seen in recent nature writing. In the era of climate change, slow travel has acquired an ecocritical dimension, perhaps even further enhanced at the time of the covid-19 pandemic,⁶ during which only “vertical travel” in one’s immediate surroundings was possible (Cronin 19).

Paradigmatic shifts have also altered the way we think about cultural objects and foreign others. Films, internet and other media have affected the reciprocal preconceptions people have of each other’s cultures and contributed to the emergence of parallel (hyper)realities that Baudrillard calls “simulations”. In addition, the mass (re)production and global circulation of goods and art objects have increased the presence of simulacra – reproductions of artworks. Simulations and simulacra are the latest blow in a long-developing crisis of representation that can be traced back to the decline of the artistic aura that Walter Benjamin diagnosed in 1935. If, in practice, in the world of art, the original is still valued greatly and the copies less so, since the late 1960s, in philosophy and literature, poststructuralist thinkers have developed theories that place the emphasis on difference rather than on resemblance to a model.⁷ These theories open the way for a revaluation of the worth of copies, and of the philosophical notion of the original.

The way we think about foreign others has also been transformed since the 1960s. Postcolonial studies have pointed out the Eurocentrism of the travel-writing genre and its complicity with imperial discourse, while Foucauldian analysis as practised by Edward Said among others has revealed the structures of power embedded in its language and in

⁴ “[C]rée[r] une nouvelle fois”, “réduire”, “Transparent” (Glissant 204).

⁵ “[P]our tous le droit à l’opacité” (Glissant 209).

⁶ For instance, researchers at the universities of Sydney and Oslo launched The Urban Field Naturalist Project, which invites grounded travellers to increase their awareness of the wildlife that grows in urban interstices. The stories posted on their website put into perspective traditional notions of travel, exoticism, and wilderness, and suggest that ‘authenticity’ can be relocated into people’s daily lives. Another example of this trend would be the special issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* dedicated to micro journeys during the covid-19 pandemic (April 2022).

⁷ See, for instance, Michel Foucault’s *This is Not a Pipe (Ceci n’est pas une pipe)*, 1976) and Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition (Différence et répétition)*, 1968).

the conditions of production of the travel texts. Contemporary travel writing is now produced against the background of a multifaceted crisis of representation that has spurred some travel writers to reflect on their own practice. Even though it is likely that, as Tim Hannigan suggests in the *The Travel Writing Tribe*,⁸ few travel writers concern themselves with theories that are written about the travel-writing genre, their writings may still be influenced by changes in their wider societal context.

Most of the corpus I selected shows an erosion in belief in the ability of language to represent reality faithfully.⁹ This erosion can be explained in the light of postmodern, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories that have emerged, though these theories do not have an equal impact on all the writers I study and only impact them indirectly for the most part. As this study will show, the conceptions of ‘authenticity’ that underpin the selected travelogues play a large part in how the travellers navigate the pitfalls of representation that have been brought to light in the past sixty years.

3. Beyond the tourist: The voluntary nomad

In the field of criticism on travel writing, the concept of ‘authenticity’ has only been addressed head-on in relation to tourists to indicate that their travels were classic examples of ‘inauthenticity’. Middle-class sightseers shielded from the natives in “air-conditioned comfort” have been reserved special scorn (Boorstin 111) because their experience is seen as “always mystified”, “based on inauthenticity”, “superficial” and ultimately “morally inferior to mere experience” (MacCannell 102). Instead of experiencing the “real thing”, which is “as free as air” (Boorstin 99), these anguished subjects of modernity yearn for sacralised sights that have been “marked off . . . as worthy of preservation” (MacCannell 44). Drawing from Erving Goffman’s study of Shetland Islands communities, Dean MacCannell contends that even tourists looking for the unmarked ‘authentic’ will search in vain because allegedly unmarked “kitchens, boiler rooms [and] executive washrooms” are as “mystified” as tourist sights (93).¹⁰ ‘Authenticity’ in tourism appears to be a paradoxical concept because it requires markers to prove that what travellers are seeing is indeed ‘it’, yet it is simultaneously grounded on the desire for unmediated reality.¹¹ Like MacCannell, Jonathan Culler argues that the

⁸ Thubron, for instance, admits to reading little of the scholarship written about travel literature (unpaginated transcript of the interview Hannigan conducted with Thubron, in preparation for the publication of *The Travel Writing Tribe*).

⁹ I shall abstain from framing the terms ‘reality’ and ‘real’ with quotation marks, although, to borrow the words of Irmtraud Huber, who made the same choice, “I am very much aware of the discursive nature of reality and the relativity of truth, and so on. Nevertheless, in my opinion there are limits to the practicability of such a (doubtlessly important) awareness. To say that reality is constructed and perceived differently by different subjects is not to say that it does not exist or that no basic understanding about the word’s meaning is shared” (255).

¹⁰ In *The Presentation of Self in the Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman explains that the behaviours observed in these “backstage” locations are also performances, albeit adapted to different circumstances (111-122). For a detailed description of the six types of “staged authenticity” that MacCannell theorises based on Goffman, see *The Tourist*, 101-102.

¹¹ Experiences that do not live up to the preconceptions of the traveller disappoint him, as exemplified by Jonathan Raban’s impatience when he watches a Native American spirit dance under neon lights instead of firelight in *Passage to Juneau* (74). Yet even experiences that conform to markers are bound to be

‘authentic’ eludes even tourists who go off the beaten track because when they think that the quaint alleyway market they have stumbled upon is ‘authentic’, they create a marker of ‘authenticity’ and overlay it on the real market, which thus becomes mediated and less ‘authentic’ (5).

Studies on tourism fail to address the question of ‘authenticity’ in unmarked natural places, and neglect to explain why “[t]he few remaining wildernesses in the post-modern world are sought as avidly as ever”, and why “Siberia, Alaska, and the poles feature heavily in contemporary travel writing”, as Peter Hulme remarks in “Travelling to Write” (94). Culler writes that “[i]n their appreciation of an attraction, tourists can be predominately involved with either a sight or a marker. At the spot of the Bonnie and Clyde shoot-out or on a Civil War battlefield there is nothing to see or engage with except markers, while the visitor to Niagara Falls may be impressed while ignoring all markers (and without even knowing that it is ‘Niagara’ falls he is seeing)” (“Semiotics” 8). However, he does not explain what ‘authenticity’ may mean for unmarked natural sights, nor what being “engage[d] with” a sight implies. Research also remains underdeveloped regarding what an ‘authentic’ *relation* to a place and its inhabitants may be for authenticity-seekers. Lastly, the academic field lacks analyses of the concept of ‘authenticity’ in hyperreal settings and in the travel texts of semioticians such as Eco, Barthes and Baudrillard.

Above all, scholarship on ‘authenticity’ in tourism does not account for the literary and self-reflexive nature of the texts I study. In this study, I shall pay particular attention to the conceptions of ‘authenticity’ that underpin the literary choices and formal experiments of some of the professional travel writers I study. I will also show that they adopt an ambivalent position. Although the desire for an unmediated experience is still prevalent among voluntary nomads such as Tesson and Matthiessen, who search for it in epiphanies and physical exhaustion, the travellers under scrutiny also reflect on the preconceptions (or markers) they bring with them on their travels, thus paradoxically acknowledging the existence of insuperable mediation. Prior to studying their texts, I would like to conceptualise the position that these travellers occupy. They can be seen as ‘voluntary nomads’, a category of travellers which helps frame the multidimensional travel writers of the age of globalisation better than the category of ‘tourist’.

Voluntary nomads are entangled in networks of economic actors, as tourists are, but they differ from tourists in ways that require closer scrutiny. They are essentially professional travel writers but some of them can also be defined as part-time ethnographers since they “live in the native village”, “use the vernacular, stay a sufficient (but seldom specified) length of time, investigate certain classic subjects”, like the ethnographers that James Clifford describes (*Predicament* 30). Like ethnographers, they long for “the ‘never-before-seen’” and the “beauty in decay” (Brennan 180). Thubron, for instance, speaks Russian relatively well, spends months at a time in Russia, sometimes weeks at a time in the same village, and is on the lookout for ancient, nearly extinct, religious and cultural traditions.

‘inauthentic’ because of the mediation of the markers that endow them with symbolic power, as illustrated by Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature”.

Lastly, these nomads resemble the tourist that MacCannell describes, because they appear as anxious subjects of modernity seeking to retrieve a lost authenticity. In his description of tourists, MacCannell points out a key element that also concerns contemporary travel writers: nostalgia. He explains the nostalgia of tourists as “a response to the generalized anxiety of modernity; that is, the certainty of tourist sights (and sites) helps assuage the feeling of drifting and fragmentation that afflicts the modern subjects in the West” (14). It seems that this search for “certainty”, as opposed to “fragmentation” also affects the voluntary nomads I study. As we shall see in **Chapter 1**, it appears that, for these travellers, nature plays the soothing role that tourist sites play for MacCannell’s tourists. Nature provides a sense of peaceful wholeness that counterbalances the fragmentation of modern life that Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler and Thubron sometimes seek to escape.

4. Researcher’s positioning and methods

Unlike my grandparents and great-grandparents, Republicans forced into exile by the Spanish Civil War in 1939 and immigrants who came to France in hope of a better future in the early 1930s, I have never been forced into exile out of economic necessity or on account of threats made to my life based on my political beliefs. Yet the memory of their forced migrations means I am aware that, as a lettered white woman holding citizenship within the European Union, I speak from a position of privilege. The corpus I research, mostly composed of educated white male urban travellers from high-income countries, is not representative of coercive mobilities, which would have taken me on a very different academic road.

The travellers I selected are semioticians or voluntary nomads. They embody what Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk call “privilege through movement” and concern themselves with the range of literary possibilities at their disposal (qtd. in Huggan 3).¹² Studying them can increase our understanding of the limits and affordances of travel literature and our awareness of the ethical implications of the representation of otherness within the framework of non-coercive mobilities. The rich variety of formal means they devise justifies a study of my corpus, and more generally of the travel-writing genre, “for its own sake and not merely as a symptom of a certain time”, to borrow Guillaume Thouroude’s words (286).¹³

So far, scholars have assessed the value of travel writing based on its ability to function as committed literature and to overcome imperial representations.¹⁴ Consequently, the

¹² Graham Huggan quotes Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, Zed Books, 1999, 25.

¹³ See **annexe 1** for an essay on the status of travel writing as a minor literary genre in the French academic field.

¹⁴ Despite the crucial insights the recent works of Debbie Lisle and Paul Smethurst offer into innovative travel writing, these works come as examples of this trend. Both of them articulate binary arguments around the assumed imperial nature of the genre. Lisle investigates the “colonialist style of writing” that still pervades contemporary travel texts and the “efforts [writers make] to distance themselves from the genre’s implication in Empire” (3-4), while Smethurst researches the “formalistic means” by which imperial travel writing produces the world, and those means by which postcolonial travel writing disavows this “tainted” legacy (“Introduction” 3).

literary value of the genre has been overshadowed by its status as a cultural object (Cooke 6), and the “specific artistic principles and designs” that drive travel authors have been overlooked (Korte 3). Although one should not underestimate the lack of objectivity of travel literature written in the service of empires, I think that travel texts should be submitted to as wide a range of approaches as novels are.¹⁵ Studying contemporary travel texts does uncover residual imperial stances. However, it also brings to the fore problems of representation outside the realm of postcolonial studies and reveals the artful literary resources that travellers tap to represent otherness, without appropriating or exoticising that otherness. No traveller in my corpus travels to former colonies in the texts I chose,¹⁶ and the formal choices they make are often better explained by the literary legacy they inherit and the postmodern or poststructuralist turn they inhabit than by their entrapment in or liberation from imperial discourse.

Nevertheless, I work on the assumption that nonfiction *authors* are accountable for the way they portray others (local people and nonhuman others), and I shall therefore discuss the ethical implications that result from their representational choices. However, I consider that, when they write about themselves, the *traveller-narrator* they foreground is artificially constructed, and relates to them more or less loosely. As Alex Drace-Francis puts it when he explains the use of term “persona”, due to “the rhetorical and performative processes at work in travel writing”, “the figure of the traveller-narrator is more a creation of the travel and writing processes than a discrete human agent preceding or producing them” (182). Consequently, I do not claim to make assertions on the beliefs, wishes and purposes of the *authors*, only on those of the *traveller-narrator*, understood as a *persona* they create.¹⁷ For instance, when I mention “Sara Wheeler’s belief that permanence may exist”, implied quotation marks should be assumed around “Sara Wheeler”, as I base my interpretation on evidence contained within a given text, and cannot ascertain the real beliefs of the extra-linguistic Sara Wheeler, who may project other *personae* in her other travelogues. Unless there is clear indication that I am referring to the extra-linguistic *authors* (when I mention their interviews, bibliography, literary context, real life events and ethical responsibility, for instance), it should be presumed that I am referring to the *traveller-narrator* they create.

¹⁵ Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs’s argument restores equality between travel writing and the novel, and is worth quoting in support of this position: “To associate travel writing predominantly with empire and ‘race’ is to take a narrower view of it than of, for example, the novel, which has existed in its recognisable form for a fraction of the time that travel writing has been in existence and examples of which are no less culpable in transmitting racist views than are some travel texts” (11). Terry Eagleton also condemned the tendency of scholars to comb travel texts for forms that produced colonial representations: “once you have observed that the other is typically portrayed as lazy, dirty, stupid . . . enigmatic and a number of other mutually contradictory epithets, it is hard to know what to do next apart from reaching for another textual illustration of the fact” (qtd. in Forsdick, et al. 2). Charles Forsdick et al. quote Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Reviewing Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*, Verso, 2002, 19.

¹⁶ However, Tesson and Matthiessen pass through or near currently occupied territories in Tibet.

¹⁷ The concept of the “persona” seems particularly relevant when looking at travel texts that subvert the authority of the self-contained narrator, foreground the unreliability of memory or include contrasting voices. As my corpus presents few or none of these characteristics, I have decided not to include any sustained study of the differences between author, narrator and persona beyond this statement. However, Barbara Korte’s theory may be of assistance to scholars who wish to address in depth an aspect of authenticity I am only obliquely touching upon, namely the strategies that travel writers devise to convince readers that they are trustworthy narrators.

Returning briefly to the question of ethics, accountability and the ideological criticism of the corpus, I would like to make it clear that I see nonfiction travel writing as “answerable to the world”, to borrow Bill Buford’s phrase (“Editorial” 7). In my view, a text’s accountability depends greatly on whether one considers it fiction or not, which is why I rely on an exclusive definition of travel writing as nonfiction, in line with Peter Hulme’s restrictive definition of the genre (qtd. in Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* 4).¹⁸ I presuppose that critical approaches, ethical implications and readerly expectations vary greatly depending on the relation that a text holds to reality.¹⁹ Critics may not object to the fictional narrator of H. P. Lovecraft and Kenneth Sterling’s “In the Walls of Eryx” calling the inhabitants of an alien planet “sly devils” (§7), in the same manner as they would object to Paul Theroux writing “the Afghans are lazy, idle, and violent” (87). What we can detect of the author’s intention concerning the text’s status as fiction, nonfiction, or something in-between matters in one’s investigation of the reasons for their thematic and stylistic choices. Nevertheless, treating nonfiction travelogues as nonfiction is what enables us to call out travel writers on their Orientalist and exoticist discourse, even when they take rhetorical precautions against ideological readings of their texts, and claim like Theroux, “[m]y travel book is about my trip, not yours or anyone else’s” (x), or explain, like Barthes, that he will not write about Japan, but about “a system” he calls “Japan” (*Empire* 3/11).²⁰

The method of reading I apply is tailored to fit both the literary and nonfiction aspects of the texts. To determine how the writers create certain effects, and to address the literariness of the travelogues, I follow the French praxis of ‘*explication de texte*’ in **Chapters 1-5** and **8**. It can be briefly described as a blend of structuralism and formalism that is “engaged in the internal relations of the text”, to quote Gérard Genette (“Sketching” 73), and that consists in relating the effects produced by the text to its formal configurations. I shall look at the overall structure of the texts; at recurring thematic, stylistic and prosodic patterns; and in more detail at syntax, lexical fields, rhetorical figures and prevalent tones.

I shall propose certain hypotheses as to what the authors intentionally set out to convey, and I shall occasionally try to clarify the framework around their creative intent by setting their travelogues in the context of the theories they have written (**Chapters 6, 7, 8**). Nevertheless, I shall above all seek to go beyond the reconstruction of the writer’s intent. Thus, I occasionally consider the texts in the light of theoretical concepts with which their authors did not explicitly engage and/or which postdate their texts (**Chapter 4**). The type of criticism I privilege “consists of pursuing questions that the text does not pose to its model reader”, to borrow Jonathan Culler’s words (“Defence” 114). It shares common traits with the type of criticism that Culler advocates

¹⁸ “For texts to count as travel writing, Hulme believes, 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” (Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* 4).

¹⁹ Having gathered together a number of avid travel literature readers in a workshop, travel writer and literary critic Tim Hannigan questioned them about what was most unacceptable in a travel book. He found that, while the reordering of episodes was regarded as tolerable, forging anecdotes was unequivocally condemned (“Contracts” – unpublished conference paper).

²⁰ “C’est ce système que j’appellerai: le Japon” (Barthes, *L’empire* 11).

in “In defence of overinterpretation” (1992), which consists in asking “what the text does and how: how it relates to other texts and other practices; what it conceals or represses; what it advances or is complicitous with” (115). As a result, my readings may at times appear adversarial and resistant to the perceived intentions of the authors. Other interpretations than those I propose are possible, and the readings I offer do not aim to close the door on “the text’s plural” that Barthes favoured (*New Critical Essays* 79/140).²¹

The analysis I carry out might go against the intentions of the authors when I investigate the ethical issues raised by their representations of human and nonhuman others. To address the ethical implications of the travelogues, I sometimes look at them as cultural artefacts and not just as aesthetic objects. I postulate that they belong to a societal context which they can influence, which is why I set out to clarify and sometimes criticise the cultural bias of the authors (**Chapters 7 and 8**) and the ethical principles they endorse when they represent travel, nature and local people (**Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8**). I partly base my analysis on the behaviour the travellers adopt on their journeys (or what they report of it), and what it indicates of their conceptions of ‘authentic’ travel, and ‘authentic’ relations to nature and local people. To try and understand where their conceptions of ‘authenticity’ come from, I trace them back to some of the main definitions of ‘authenticity’ that I outline later in this introduction.

I also presuppose that the selected authors are engaged in a larger aesthetic and literary context which has a bearing on their writing. Postmodernism can, for instance, clarify some of the characteristics found in Tesson’s and Thubron’s texts (**Chapter 5**), while Eco’s essay is best studied in dialogue with certain conceptions of high and hyperreal art (**Chapter 6 and 7**). A better understanding of the travelogues under study can be gained by placing them within the travel-writing genre, which to some extent I do in all the chapters. Comparing these texts with other travelogues that represent travel and otherness in similar or different ways makes it easier to identify the intertextual legacy these writers engage with, and to gain perspective on the ethical implications of their representational choices. This type of comparison also helps to determine how the texts of the corpus rethink the concept of ‘authenticity’, what they add to the genre of travel writing, and how they further “our general understanding of how literature operates – its range of possibilities and characteristic structures” (Culler, “Defence” 118).

5. Primary sources

The corpus has been selected to shed light on what ‘authenticity’ may mean for travellers who journey to the wilderness, and travellers who address semiotic issues in connection with language, culture and hyperreality. As observed by Corinne Fowler, Charles Forsdick and Ludmilla Kostova, there has not been as much disruption of generic boundaries in postmodern travel literature as there has been in postmodern novels (“Introduction” 5). However, the two types of contemporary travel writing I selected

²¹ “[L]e pluriel du texte” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 140).

develop competing kinds of ‘authenticities’ closely associated with the postmodern condition, which the travellers try to escape, embrace or mediate.

The choice of these texts springs from the observation that hyperreality and simulation, whose pervasiveness in our lives we now take for granted,²² involve a major shift in our system of representation and in what we perceive to be genuine. Yet, surprisingly, old conceptions of ‘authenticity’ continue to hold considerable value,²³ and the belief that a more genuine life is located in nature, far from globalisation, remains strong.

To study this double phenomenon, I have selected nonfiction travel writing published by semioticians and voluntary nomads no earlier than 1970, in English and French – with the exception of Eco’s essay, which was originally published in Italian. Among their common characteristics are a journey to an unfamiliar place, a concern with form, with the ethics of travel/writing and with the difficulty of picturing foreign others in a suitable way. Furthermore, the travelogues of voluntary nomads engage with the conventions of the genre, and those of semioticians tackle issues raised by language and signs.

I will first explore five travel narratives that depict the ‘authentic’ relation to nature as best realised in unspoiled wilderness: *The Snow Leopard* (1978), Peter Matthiessen’s journey to the Himalaya; *In Siberia* (1999), Colin Thubron’s exploration of Russia after the fall of Communism; *Terra Incognita* (1996), Sara Wheeler’s travel to the Antarctic; *Consolations of the Forest*, the six-month seclusion of Sylvain Tesson at Lake Baikal (*Dans les forêts de Sibérie*, 2011); and *La panthère des neiges*, to date his latest opus, which recounts his journey to the Himalaya (2019).²⁴

I then turn my attention to three travelogues that reflect more openly on the concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘inauthenticity’ in relation to artistic practices, foreign cultures and writing, mainly in the United States and Japan: *Empire of Signs* (*L’empire des signes*, 1970), which stages Roland Barthes’s happy loss of bearings in Japan; *America* (*Amérique*, 1986), by Jean Baudrillard, who is fascinated by American artificiality; and “Travels in Hyperreality” (“Nel cuore dell’impero: viaggio nell’iperrealtà”, 1975),²⁵ in which Umberto Eco moves through American theme parks and kitsch wax museums.

For the convenience of readers who may be unfamiliar with these works, I have included brief summaries of the texts and short presentations of their authors in **annexe 2**.

²² Hyperreality can be defined as an artificially improved version of reality, its pervasiveness exemplified by digitally-created Instagram influencers and dead actors revived with computer-generated images.

²³ For instance, reproducible digital art is fitted with old guarantees of ‘authenticity’, as illustrated by Christie’s first sale of a purely digital artwork, Beeple’s digital picture “Everydays: The First 5000 Days”. In 2021, the artwork sold for \$69,346,250 with a new type of authenticating certificate called NFT (non-fungible token). Even though the artwork itself is easily disseminated and reproduced, this certificate is unique, and thus based on the old conception of authentic art as unreproducible. See www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx

²⁴ Sylvain Tesson’s *La panthère des neiges* (2019) was untranslated at the time this thesis was written, and the translations of this text into English are therefore all mine. Since then, Penguin published a translation by Frank Wynne, titled *The Art of Patience: Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet* (2021).

The limits of this project required that I left aside other exceptional works of recent nature writing, such as Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980), William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieEarth: A Deep Map* (1994), Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005), Robert MacFarlane's *Landmarks* (2015), and Sylvain Tesson's *Sur les chemins noirs* (untranslated, 2016), to cite only a few. In the realm of hyperreality, critics who wish to go further may turn to Michel Butor's *Mobile* (1962), which resembles and predates Baudrillard's *America*, or they may delve deeper into the travelogues of Pico Iyer: *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988), in which he portrays the transculturation of American pop culture in Asia, and *The Global Soul* (2001), in which he interrogates the sense of identity of the frequent flyer in the era of the global circulation of goods and images.

Although the scope of this project meant that I could not give these texts the attention they deserved, I will occasionally evoke and compare some of them with the main corpus.

6. Authenticity in travel writing

1. Preamble and etymology

'Authenticity' is such an ideologically charged term that it requires cautionary quotation marks, and researchers are strongly encouraged to find an alternative word. In the era of postmodern subjectivity and relativity, the term elicits distrust because it seems to deal only in absolutes, postulating that there are people, objects, experiences, books etc. that have inherent 'authenticity' and others that do not. The term is seen as dubious because, at first sight, it calls forth an essentialist view that reifies and reduces entities to a fixed set of characteristics that they supposedly possess and that define their identity once and for all. This essentialism fuels national doctrines of ethnic purity, which also explains due reservations about 'authenticity'. It also fosters colonial, Orientalist and exoticist prejudices, as illustrated by travellers who lament the changes that their destinations undergo because such changes are incompatible with what they perceive as the fixed essence of these countries.²⁶

To start dispelling the "sinister twist" associated with the term (Berman xiv), it is crucial to postulate that 'authenticity' is always constructed. Scholarship shows that the concept is the offspring of specific historical conditions, and that its meaning has significantly evolved since it emerged in the sixteenth century. Conflicting conceptions of what is 'authentic' coexist throughout history, and the line remains blurred, shifting and questionable between what is seen as 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'.

Yet, as Charles Lindholm asserts in *Culture and Authenticity* (2008), 'authenticity' is not to be dismissed as an inconsequential illusion (141), and there is no denying that belief in it has a concrete impact on people's life choices and behaviours, on their travel and consumption decisions, on political speeches, on conservation policies, on the art trade

²⁶ We might think, for instance, of Paul Bowles's *Their Heads are Green and their Hands are Blue*, in which he complains about the Westernisation of 1950s Morocco.

and on marketing strategies, and so on. Rather than pulling away from a politically hazardous term, it seems necessary to engage with it and demystify its power. I will therefore examine its contemporary expressions and their aesthetics, historical roots, implications and paradoxes. I shall now remove the inverted commas around authenticity, as they signal a reluctance and scepticism towards the concept that impede its thorough investigation.

To contextualise the ideas of authenticity found in the corpus, I will first unwrap the etymology of the term, before attaching the choices made by the travel writers to the three main conceptions of authenticity that I have identified in their texts. I start by studying authenticity as the belief in the ability of unadulterated nature to return the self to an original state of wholeness. I will then move on to defining postmodern authenticity as the acknowledgement of the gap between word and world. Lastly, I shall examine the correlation between authenticity and tradition.

Some of the definitions found in dictionaries endure to this day, while others have been altered or rendered obsolete by postmodernity. Etymologically, ‘authentic’ is an inheritance of the Latin ‘*authenticus*’, which comes from the Greek ἀὐθεντικός, a compound of αὐτός (which became ‘auto’, ‘the same’) and ἐντός (linked to the Latin ‘*intus*’, ‘inside’). In short, authentic is that which is not determined, controlled or dominated by an external agent, and whose existence comes from within itself (*Littré*), and/or that which is “pure” and “unadulterated” (*TLFI*), which clarifies the fact that wild nature, which has no other origin than itself, is often viewed as authentic. Stories are seen as authentic when they are evocative and true to life (*TLFI*), or accurate and true to facts (*ODL*). People are judged authentic when they are able to reach beyond appearances and express their inner self (*TLFI*), which is often defined as a pre-social self, as per Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s legacy.

The French dictionaries *Littré*, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, and *Le Trésor de la Langue Française* also agree on the definition of ‘authentic’ as that which possesses unquestionable authority, sometimes adding that this authority had been conferred upon it by an official representative who had the legitimacy to do so (such as a clergy member for relics or an art expert for paintings). If we transpose this concept to the field of travel writing, we can make the assumption that such ‘authority’ can be held by trail-blazing past explorers, by representatives of the literary canon – for instance Henry David Thoreau for nature writing – or, at the time of empires and in the early days of anthropology, by colonial ambassadors, local informants, and tribe leaders and shamans.

Nonetheless, in postmodernity, a kaleidoscope of viewpoints has rendered the notion of absolute authority suspicious and has contributed to the questioning of notions of centre from where legitimation of the ‘authentic’ could be issued. In travel literature, the ‘authority’ of imperial discourse has been undermined by authors who spoke from marginal positions, such as women under colonial rule and British-educated writers born overseas. To cite only a handful of examples, in the nineteenth century, Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley introduced heterogeneity into the response to the colonial other (Mills 3). Closer to our own times, Caryl Phillips renewed the genre by “interposing his blackness”

between the implied white reader and the white subjects of *The European Tribe* (1987) (Smethurst, “Introduction” 11). One might also think about *L’Africain du Groenland* (1980) by Togolese writer Tété-Michel Kpomassie, who recounts his eight-year peregrinations to reach Greenland. Contrary to many contemporary travel writers, Kpomassie does not benefit from easier travel due to the remnants of a global colonial order. As I shall later point out in more detail (**Chapter 5**), the authority of the traveller is also questioned when travel writers wonder, as Thubron sometimes does in his Russian trilogy, whether they have the right to judge, understand, or speak for foreign others.

Where manufactured objects, such as artworks, are concerned, authentic means that an item conforms to certain traditional manufacturing rules. *Oxford Dictionary Lexico* gives the example of Italian food, Walter Benjamin that of art that has not been produced by technology, Eco that of statues that are not made of wax. Items are deemed authentic when their geographical and/or temporal origins are well established, and when the identity of their author is indisputable. However, this definition has been weakened by societal changes, such as global migrations, increased cultural hybridity, mass production, media and simulacra. As a result of these changes, the alleged authority of the original is now weakened and seen as suspicious,²⁷ while the avowed lie of the copy denotes a certain postmodern honesty.

2. Authenticity as the restorative sojourn in unadulterated nature

Scholarship on authenticity eludes almost completely the study of the concept in relation to nature. Nature is barely evoked as the locale where travellers “experience their true essence” (Lindholm 40), without further explanation as to what or why that may be. Benjamin argues that the environment is not subjected to the concept of authenticity and not as vulnerable to the erosion of this concept as art objects are, because natural landscapes lack the “highly sensitive core” that authentic art objects possess and lose when they are reproduced (14). Yet, ironically, the only example of “aura” that he gives is tied to a natural sight: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye while resting on a summer afternoon a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (15). Clearly, the branch and the mountain qualify as auratic because they are anchored in the “here and now” (13). Unlike what Benjamin would have his readers believe, authenticity does not necessarily require the depth of centuries-old traditions materialised

²⁷ On the fallacy of cultural ‘authenticity’, see Appiah 107 and Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*. On the “reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality” that parody brings about in the twentieth century especially, see Hutcheon, *Postmodernism* 11. For more arguments in support of the idea that “[t]he art of the present day . . . displaces the original work from its central position”, see Benjamin 24, who also mentions that some originals are created to be reproduced rather than to be unique (17). The fact that Benjamin developed the concept of aura in reaction to technological reproducibility also suggests that the concept of authenticity is born from and correlated to the presence of copies. The aura surrounding an original artwork is partly a function of the circulation of its images in the form of postcards, advertisements, artbook illustrations, etc. It is thus possible to argue that the original derives its authority from its copies, and that this authority is the product of a questionable selection process influenced by economic considerations.

in artistic masterpieces: it can also simply be located in the enjoyment of nature, here and now.

But which nature? The selected travel narratives that recount journeys to Siberia, Antarctica and the Himalaya give evidence that nature is seen as authentic when it possesses certain traits and fulfils certain functions. Authentic nature is conceived as wild, empty, preferably located far from modern society, in an unchanged Golden Age. It offers an escape from technological civilisation and/or daily responsibilities, an opportunity for epiphanic moments, encounters with animals, spiritual transformation through physical hardships, and a return to a core self.

As we shall see in **Chapter 1**, some writers regard traces of technological civilisation, daily life responsibilities and even other human beings as unwanted intrusions on their journeys. Wheeler, for instance, enjoys nothing more than setting aside the responsibilities of her London life during her extended stays in Antarctica (*Terra* 94). Matthiessen records the negative alterations of his mood caused by letters from home, the sound of a radio breaking the Himalayan silence, and the sight of the brightly coloured tents of a foreign expedition (*Snow* 214, 117, 264). Text messages, processed food and tourists are elements of modern life that Tesson also prefers to avoid (*Consolations* 191/242, 3/21, 38/61), while Thubron recovers from the distressing sight of poverty and horror by immersing himself in Siberian nature (*In Siberia* 139). Tesson and Matthiessen enjoy the company of others sparingly, and solitude remains their main mode of acquiring authentic experiences.

The idea of a nature that is authentic by virtue of the pre-modern lifestyles it affords borrows from what Lawrence Buell calls “pastoral ideology”, and which he defines as the discourse that idealises the “(re)turn to a less urbanized, more ‘natural’ state of existence” (*Environmental* 31). As Paul Alpers stresses, pastoral landscapes are an age-old literary device grounded on “the central fiction that shepherds’ lives represent human lives” (459). Pastoral literature thus locates authenticity in a fictional Golden Age that has little in common with the lives of contemporary travellers from high-income countries.

Pastoral ideology is problematic because it relies on a very restricted, romanticised and unpragmatic vision of the ideal relation to nature. The flaws of this conception of authenticity have been criticised by various scholars. In *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), Theodor Adorno attacks Martin Heidegger’s discourse (or “jargon”) precisely because it postulates that it would be desirable to return to an essential state of humankind epitomised by the farmer (59).²⁸ In truth, Adorno observes, farmers are poor, exploited and subsidised (46). For him, Heidegger’s authenticity is grounded on a mistaken “nostalgic fantasy of primal wholeness” (Jay 25), and the same could be said about the authors I study, even though they trade shepherds and farmers for Sherpas, villagers and forest rangers.

For the ecocritic Greg Garrard, pastoral ideology is also nefarious because it is escapist. It excludes urban spaces from the realm of the authentic, and erases any mention

²⁸ The same remark has recently been reiterated by the founding fathers of ecocriticism, who criticise “pastoral ideology” because it “implies an idealisation of rural life that obscures the reality of labour and hardship” (Garrard 41).

of toxic waste, radioactive matter, polluted water, etc., wishing simply that they did not exist. Rather than taking stock of our embeddedness in nature, whose virginity ceased with the birth of our species, pastoral texts praise the beauty of an idealised rural life. Garrard questions this discourse because it relieves escapists who write, read, or seek out pastoral fantasies from the responsibility of acting towards the preservation of the environment in their daily urban lives (78).

Rousseau's writings give a hint as to where the idea of a contaminating society comes from. The French philosopher has been identified as the founding father of "personal authenticity" in seminal works by Marshall Berman,²⁹ Lionel Trilling³⁰ and Charles Lindholm (Lindholm 2).³¹ As the beginning of his *Confessions* (1782) shows, Rousseau claims that society encourages criminal and objectionable behaviours even in good-natured individuals (he takes himself as an example).³² *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* also sheds light on Rousseau's misanthropic side,³³ which is revived in the writings of Tesson in particular – albeit with ironic self-consciousness. In contrast to the blame-worthy urban socialite, Rousseau's Noble Savage embodies an authenticity that rests on an ideal of self-sufficiency and self-definition, and that is better acquired alone and away from other human beings. Traces of this idea can be seen in Tesson's and Matthiessen's choice of solitary travel and in their respective depictions of forest rangers and Sherpas. For instance, Matthiessen bestows purity upon the inhabitants of the "pure" Land of Dolpo (*Snow* 13), whom he deems admirable by virtue of a lifestyle "spared" from contamination by modernity (24). His expectation seems to be that he will acquire some of the perceived purity of the land and of its inhabitants if he imitates their lifestyle.

To understand how self-sufficiency and detachment from society came to be viewed as authentic, we can return to the etymology that links authenticity to self-mastery: the Greek word αὐθεντίας denotes a master, someone who is in command of their own actions (*Littre*). In literature, this conception of authenticity is epitomised and developed by the American Transcendentalists, who believed that one's core self could be nurtured through self-reliance, open air life, and the contemplation of a soothing, untamed nature.

²⁹ In the realm of political philosophy (*The Politics of Authenticity*, 1970).

³⁰ In aesthetics and literature (*Sincerity and Authenticity*, 1972).

³¹ In cultural anthropology (*Culture and Authenticity*, 2008).

³² A closer look at Rousseau's *Confessions* shows a pattern blaming negative external influences for immoral behaviour in individuals, which could spur us to retort that individuals thus described escape accountability. In Book I, Rousseau recounts an idyllic childhood, a paradisiacal state of happiness, innocence, good temper, soft inclinations that would have lasted forever (according to him) had he not encountered people who mistreated him, were unfair to him, and spoiled his character and his innocence. A telling example is to be found in Book II, in which he claims that his desire to write his *Confessions* originates partly from the necessity to free himself from the "unbearable weight of remorse" that he had to carry after getting a maid fired ("*l'insupportable poids des remords*", 136). He had falsely accused her of stealing a ribbon, thus most likely condemning her to a life of prostitution. Yet he takes care to end the episode by explaining that he was just a child then. Had the master of the house "encouraged" him to confess his lie instead of "intimidating" him, says Rousseau, he might have confessed and saved the maid's honour. These justifications divert the blame from him and place it on other people and external factors, which raises suspicion as to the "*weight of remorse*" he mentions (emphasis added).

³³ Rousseau was vindictive and intent on anathematising his enemies. For him, society – especially French society – was inherently based on insincerity, because it required that one impersonate characters on the social stage (Trilling 17).

Their marked influence on nature writing allows us to understand better the contemporary writers' conception of an authentic relation to nature.

In Transcendentalist writings, like in part of my corpus, the most authentic relation one can have to nature is epiphanic, which stimulates spiritual transformation. For Emerson and Thoreau especially, nature showed a divine unity that could be glimpsed through joyful epiphanies triggered by contemplation. Such epiphanies channelled a kind of spirituality that they deemed unquestionable and authentic because it was individually experienced, not at church but through direct exposure to nature, which was seen as a "sacred" place (Thoreau, *Walking* 32). In a similar way, when they shun their urban routines and the company of others and seek a close relation to nature, Wheeler, Tesson and Matthiessen attempt to create conditions conducive to moments of contemplative clarity, hence the focus of **Chapter 2** on their re-enactment of transcendentalist principles. The epiphanies Tesson and Matthiessen recount and the religious certainty Wheeler acquires in nature possess a comforting and rejuvenating power, as evidenced, for instance, by the translation of Tesson's book title *Consolations of the Forest*, and of the twenty-second chapter of *La panthère des neiges* – "The consolation of the wild" (158).³⁴

The theological origins of the concept of authenticity may explain why spiritual power is granted to allegedly authentic nature. Lindholm explains that, initially, authentication concerned religious relics and ritualistic objects. These objects derived their authenticity from their function in rituals, their ability to work miracles, the believers' consensus as to their power, and, if applicable, from the religious institution that had authenticated them (Lindholm 14-15). There is, most certainly, an element of faith in authenticity³⁵ which causes devotees to expect that they will be 'purified' by the authentic: "For believers, contemplating these sacred relics can heal the wounded soul and redeem the debased modern world" (Lindholm 16). In secularised societies, this power has been passed down to art, which is now "expected to provide the spiritual substance of life" (Trilling 98). Walter Benjamin summed up this evolution by likening the cult of beauty to a "secularized ritual", arguing that "the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art is always founded on theology" (17). Based on the corpus I selected, it seems that nature is now expected to fulfil the same spiritual function.

In hope of spiritual experience, some travellers appear to revive one of the oldest forms of travel known to us, pilgrimage, by assuming a range of its characteristics such as spiritual transformation – only they prefer "old-growth forests to the stone naves of churches" (Tesson, *Consolations* 52/78).³⁶ By definition, pilgrims journey to shrines where they expect "redemption" and sometimes even "ecstasy" to be granted to them (Cohen 614; M. B. Campbell 37). They travel through religious memory, retracing the steps of saints or visiting sacred locations designated as such by holy books. They aim for places that are central to their native or elective spiritual, ethnic or cultural identity (Schramm 139). The travellers of the corpus share several of the pilgrim's defining traits: they retrace the steps of figures mythical to them (Wheeler), stop at historically significant

³⁴ "La consolation du sauvage" (Tesson, *Panthère* 158).

³⁵ Hence, we can suppose, one of the English translations of the title of Umberto Eco's essay collection: *Faith in Fakes*.

³⁶ "À présent, je préfère les futaies aux nefs de pierre" (Tesson, *Forêts* 78).

locations (Thubron), seek enlightenment at monasteries (Matthiessen), or reenact the ascetic life of hermits (Tesson). Yet what seems to help them most to access a form of revelation is being in *natural* places and overcoming physical hardships. By giving them the illusion “of a morally superior life” (Huggan 8), physical pain draws them closer to pilgrims, whose journeys are often “kinetic ritual[s]” – one might think of devotees approaching shrines on their knees, for instance (Turner qtd. in Coleman and Eade 2).³⁷

The choice of physically demanding travel also serves to distinguish the traveller from the tourist, in a faithful gesture towards the etymology of travel as *travail*,³⁸ and in compliance with the literary conventions of the travel-writing genre. While the tourist allegedly “moves toward the security of the pure cliché”, genuine travellers put their physical integrity at risk, which supposedly secures their higher rank in the hierarchy of travellers (Fussell 39).³⁹ Even in 1990s travel writing, many writers such as Mary Morris and Dervla Murphy endorse “the implicit message that travel has to involve pain for it to be ‘authentic’” (Mulligan 76). Pain may range from lack of hygiene and sleep deprivation to life-threatening situations. Thus, Wheeler mimics the first explorers by postponing laundry and attempting to sleep in an igloo (*Terra* 276, 164), and Robyn Davidson refuses to wash during her camel trip in the desert, despite having enough water at her disposal (196). On the other end of the spectrum, Tesson recounts nearly falling into the crevasses of Lake Baikal (*Consolations* 4/23), and Matthiessen narrates walking on steep mountainsides (*Snow* 92).⁴⁰

According to Graham Huggan, there has been a shift from these “older-style authenticities of *endurance* that used to epitomize and valorize ‘the hard work of travel’”⁴¹ towards the “potentially self-consuming authenticity of *endangerment*” epitomised by the catastrophic Everest expedition of Jon Krakauer (178, emphasis original). Huggan sees these pursuits partly as expressions of “residual masculinist anxieties” (9), partly as the belief in “a kind of visceral authenticity which includes the sense of heightened awareness (on a very physical level) experienced during endangerment” (Adams qtd. in Huggan 189).⁴² The types of travellers Huggan refers to have also been described as “seekers of adrenaline” (Lindholm 48), who look for experiences during which “[t]he immediate demands of the situation filter out much of the reflexive, social aspect of the self . . .

³⁷ Simon Coleman and John Eade quote Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Columbia UP, 1978, xiii.

³⁸ Based on its Latin etymology “*trepalium*”, which was an “instrument of torture” (ODL).

³⁹ Thus, in the last lines of Eric Newby’s *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), Wilfred Thesiger calls Eric Newby and Hugh Carless “pansies” because they inflate their airbeds for a comfier night (255). In *Labels* (1930), Evelyn Waugh makes fun of travellers who quest for the pains of travel, and more specifically those who indulge in a “peculiar relish in discomfort”, and he targets his criticism at Hilaire Belloc’s *The Path to Rome* (Mikkonen 166-7 and 149-52).

⁴⁰ In the middle ground stands someone like Paul Bowles, who aestheticises discomforts and turns them into elements of local colour in *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue*. Bowles explains that the desert is an enthralling place even if edible food is scarce, one needs Halazone tablets to render the water drinkable, the roads are unsafe and sleeping conditions poor.

⁴¹ Graham Huggan quotes Gillian Kenny, “‘Our Travelers’ Out There on the Road: Lonely Planet and Its Readers, 1973-1981”, *Jumping the Queue*, edited by Gabriella Espak, et al., University of Queensland Press, 2002, 111-119, 119.

⁴² Huggan quotes Kathleen Adams, “Danger-Zone Tourism: Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times”, *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Peggy Teo, et al., Pergamon, 2001, 265-80, 275.

leaving them feeling free from social constraints” and granting them “access to what they perceive to be their authentic selves” (Lois 121). Their narratives draw upon the conception of authenticity as “overwhelming and undeniably felt physical reality” that “can be ratified . . . by the evocation of feelings that are immediate and irrefutable” (Lindholm 48, 1).

As the analysis of the corpus will show, the Rousseauist belief in the existence of a ‘true’ self beneath a surface self continues to influence the writings of travellers who embrace this kind of authenticity. They seem to believe that discomfort, physical exertion and even life-threatening situations are ideal sanding stones that will return their self to its authentic, pre-social state. Thus, Tesson appreciates “[c]abin life” because it is “like sandpaper”: “Its scours the soul, lays bare one’s being, ensavages the mind, and reclaims the body for the wild, but deep in the heart it unfolds the most sensitive nerve endings” (*Consolations* 220/277).⁴³ Similarly, in the middle of her physically demanding trek in the Australian outback in the 1970s, Davidson enjoys “the sloughing off, like a snake-skin, of the useless preoccupations and standards of the society [she] had left” (181).

The authentic self that remains is sometimes described as an inner child, and more often implicitly portrayed as an ‘animal’ self. In both cases it is characterised by wildness, spontaneity, and physical sensations. For example, in *Consolations of the Forest*, Tesson depicts physically demanding activities such as hiking, woodcutting and ice-breaking as particularly satisfying. His subsequent travelogue *La panthère des neiges* also strengthens the impression that he sees the mode of existence of animals (their spontaneity and their ability to be in the present moment) as worthy of imitation. “Animals”, he writes, with a hint of regret for a lost state, “belong to the origins biology had pulled us away from” (*Panthère* 163).⁴⁴ Observing and imitating animals would draw us closer to a desirable original condition, and, in addition, provide access to epiphanies. Like saints and children, animals possess a “wildness” that the social, adult self has lost, according to Matthiessen, who romanticises the world-vision of his seven-year-old and wishes he was capable of as much spontaneity (*Snow* 47).

The texts I selected bear witness to a change in what an authentic relation to nature may be for travellers. The conception of the environment that dominated travel writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is best exemplified by Carl Linnaeus’s classification of the known fauna and flora in *Systema Naturae* (1735), and best understood in the light of the biblical command to exert dominion over nature. During the first conquests and colonisations, scientific expeditions charted, named and appropriated the natural world in an attempt to construct “global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history” (Pratt 15). In stark contrast to the first naturalists aboard these expeditions, the contemporary travellers I study exhibit the desire to render nature in poetic rather than scientific terms, and to let it change them, rather than the reverse. Relinquishing anthropocentrism in favour of “deterritorialisation”,⁴⁵ Tesson and

⁴³ “La vie en cabane est un papier de verre. Elle décape l’âme, met l’être à nu, ensavage l’esprit . . . mais elle déploie au fond du cœur des papilles aussi sensibles que les spores” (Tesson, *Forêts* 277).

⁴⁴ “Les bêtes . . . appartenaient aux origines dont la biologie nous avait éloignés” (Tesson, *Panthère* 163).

⁴⁵ I shall return to the Deleuzoguattarian theoretical framework in more detail in **Chapter 4**.

Matthiessen hint that an authentic relation to nature implies enmeshment in it and the desire to be transformed by it.

3. Postmodern authenticity as the acknowledgement of the gap between word and world

It is remarkable that the fantasy of wholeness remains so lively, considering the changes that the notion of authenticity has undergone in postmodern times. Two contradictory conceptions of authenticity thus coexist in the works of contemporary travel writers. As Casey Blanton phrased it:

A search for authenticity, wholeness, and meaning often drives their journeys as it did for travel writers in the past. Yet, the understanding that authenticity is not a stable entity, but a ‘predicament of culture’ is most often the final realization of this most recent travel writing. (xiv)⁴⁶

In answer to the double need to reach wholeness and represent fragmentation, conflicting strategies can be found side by side in the texts I chose. On the one hand, rhetorical structures traditionally associated with fiction help travel writers create a sense of wholeness and coherence that empirical experiences may lack. Percy G. Adams, who examined the interconnected development of the novel and travel texts, found that they shared motifs such as hero, narrator, action and character types, which earned travel writers the reputation of being “embellishers of the truth or . . . plain liars” (85). Eric Bulson’s *Novels, Maps, Modernity* and Kai Mikkonen’s *Narrative Paths* also demonstrate that exchanges between fiction and nonfiction travel writing are numerous.

On the other hand, because travel writing is nonfiction, we can expect it to register the fragmented and subjective nature of experience rather than merely mend it. When it manifests itself in the texts, this fragmentation can take the form of incomplete quests, polyphony and self-deprecation, as we shall see in **Chapter 5**. I would like to argue that such literary devices correspond to a postmodern conception of authenticity that consists in openly acknowledging and foregrounding the limits of the traveller’s understanding and the limits of literary representation.

The tension between the narrative and nonfiction natures of the travel-writing genre is embedded in its very definition. Travel writing is accountable both “to the world” and to our need for “fictions”, as Bill Buford phrases it in his introduction to the first *Granta* issue dedicated to travel writing:

⁴⁶ However, there are notable exceptions among popular contemporary travel writers. Paul Theroux, for instance, exhibits no self-reflexivity, and does not seek to identify or overcome cultural assumptions.

Travel writing is the beggar of literary forms:⁴⁷ it borrows from the memoir, reportage and, most important, the novel. It is, however, pre-eminently a narrative told in the first person, authenticated by lived experience. It satisfies a need. A need for fiction answerable, somehow, to the world. Or perhaps I've got it wrong. Perhaps it's a need for a world answerable to our fictions. ("Editorial" 7)

As memorialists, travel writers write accounts of their life and experiences, from the point of view of a social subjectivity, emphasising the historical moment their travels epitomise, rather than the course of their inner life. As reporters, they possess the credibility of the eyewitness reporting unadorned facts.⁴⁸ As storytellers, they are expected to create artistic objects that will attract the attention of the reader. What is perhaps missing from Buford's definition is the travellers' exploration of their inner life, which is paramount to contemporary travel literature according to Sara Wheeler and Dea Birkett: "the writer's inner journey is the most important part . . . of any travel book. It doesn't make any difference where you go; it's your interpretation of it that matters" (ix). In the corpus I selected, the influence of the memoir and reportage dominates in the texts of Wheeler, Thubron and Eco, who take care to report on specific historical and sociological conditions, whereas the literary craft of storytellers and literary experimenters is a central concern in the works of Tesson, Matthiessen, Barthes and Baudrillard.

Because of its status as nonfiction, travel writing has to address the disorganised nature of reality, which conflicts with the meaningful reorganisation of experience that occurs in writing. It means that the travel text "is constantly hesitating between pointing out its aporia and implementing solutions to overcome them", as Christine Montalbetti puts it (6).⁴⁹ To give the impression that the gap between world and word is bridged, travel writers may try to give a retrospective meaning to their experience and give it a coherence that feels novelistic, or, on the contrary, admit that the literary form cannot fully hold lived experience.

Montalbetti identifies some strategies that reveal this hesitation between exacerbating and mitigating the loss from real world to discourse. Such strategies include using ellipsis to point to the ineffable nature of reality; borrowing from fiction; conforming to conventional scenes of the genre; spinning metaphors that associate writing with painting and the world to a pictorial representation; resorting to neologisms and foreign words; drawing instead of writing; comparing the unfamiliar to the familiar; commenting on real-world inscriptions and including the words of local people. The travelogues I study most

⁴⁷ Letters, diaries, memoirs, philosophical essays, scientific and ethnographic field journals, novelistic objects – the protean nature of nonfiction travel writing has earned it the reputation of being a parasitical literature, even though the novel is no less hybrid. I side with Guillaume Thouroude's definition of travel writing as an independent genre: "If it is true that the *récit de voyage* accommodates other genres, it is doing so no more than any other genre: after all, the novel accommodates poetry, drama, and travel writing, while prose poems accommodate the private diary, fiction, travel writing, etc. Consequently, it is misleading to consider travel writing as a quintessentially hybrid genre as opposed to other presumably 'pure' genres" (382).

⁴⁸ The "fundamental literary mechanism of legitimation in the genre" consists in "claim[ing] authority as a direct observer" as Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés put it (3).

⁴⁹ "[L]e texte ne cesse d'hésiter entre la désignation de ses apories et la mise en place de principes de résolution par où il les dépasse" (Montalbetti 6).

certainly rely on these strategies. Tesson, for instance, compares himself to the fictional Robinson Crusoe (79/109), he associates his picnic with Vasily Perov's painting *The Hunters at Rest* (75/104), twists a Russian phrase into a neologism to describe the Russian state of mind (221/278), and recounts writing haiku on snow, momentarily bridging the gap between the substances of the text and of the world in a manner reminiscent of the logograms Christian Dotremont wrote on the snow (51/76). But the micro-strategies Montalbetti focuses on do not account for the macro-structures used by writers to achieve overarching coherence in the texts I study.

To create the impression that their texts bridge the gap between text and world, travel writers may draw upon macro structures typically associated with fiction, for instance by reshaping their journeys into completed quests or transformational journeys, as Tesson does (unconvincingly) in *Consolations of the Forest*. The reshaping of the journey into a narrative with a transformational arc and a clear closure at the end satisfies the desire to give meaning to disconnected experiences, to “[k]now the river mouth, dominate its course, finally seize life as destiny”, to borrow the words Albert Camus used to describe the novel as a genre (271).⁵⁰ Travel writers figure out a meaning for their experience by superimposing certain narrative structures onto it, some of which may evoke fiction. For instance, the journey can be rearranged to have an exposition (generally in the country of residence), followed by disruptive events (the desire or reason for the journey), adventures (people met, choices made, challenges overcome), and, ultimately, a resolution, preferably after the traveller has undergone a moral transformation. To illustrate the dyad exposition/disruption often found in the travel-writing genre, we may take British travel writer Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), which starts with the inadequacy he feels as a salesman in London, thus setting the stage for his disruptive decision to go to Nuristan. Similarly, Caryl Phillips begins *The European Tribe* (1987) with anecdotes of his childhood growing up a black boy in England, “being constantly told in many subtle ways that [he] did not belong” (9), which eventually set him on his way to the United States and, after a short return to Oxford University, pushed him to look for answers around Europe and in the West Indies. Janicke Stensvaag Kaasa (476), Casey Blanton (xi), Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (6) point out that travel literature also shares other key traits with the novel. Besides a sequential ordering of the events, both genres rely on a narrator, a central character, and a type of narration designed to capture the attention of the readers.

At times, these rhetorical structures are used to create and convey the meaning that the travellers want to attribute to their journey; at times, they are undermined, which reveals the limits of the literary medium and the limit of the traveller's understanding. I will concern myself more particularly with the type of authenticity that emerges when the travellers question the structures I have just mentioned. I propose to call this type of authenticity ‘postmodern’ in connection with some characteristic traits of postmodern literature that the travellers of my corpus adopt to interrogate the possibilities and limits of the literary medium. For example, widespread as it is, the quest structure suffers from the postmodern “age of suspicion”, to borrow Nathalie Sarraute's phrase, and the

⁵⁰ “Connaître l'embouchure, dominer le cours du fleuve, saisir enfin la vie comme destin” (Camus 271).

contemporary travelogues of the corpus I selected challenge the necessity and possibility of completing it. For instance, Matthiessen never finds the leopard he is looking for, and the search of Thubron for the “core” of Siberia remains unfulfilled (*In Siberia* 83).

Thubron’s text in particular appears concerned with registering both the fragmentation he witnesses in Siberia and the fragmentation of his experience there. Although it is articulated around a single purpose (finding the core of the country), *In Siberia* takes stock of the ruins, and the damage to the USSR, it acknowledges the incoherent nature of historical reality in a way that complies with a postmodern type of authenticity best described by Martin Jay in his interpretation of Adorno. For Adorno, it is possible to achieve a less absolute, more context-bound kind of authenticity that “involves the registering of modern life’s historical disasters, the ‘scars of damage and disruption’”, as Jay puts it (29). This authenticity “means fidelity to the historical moment, with all its traumatic contradictions, rather than retreat to an alleged prior state of plenitudinous wholeness before the fall into alienation” (29).⁵¹ When Thubron represents the horrifying scars of history, we may say that he displays this type of authenticity, as opposed to the moments when he recoils from them into soothing nature.

Postmodern conceptions of authenticity also appear in the corpus when writers reflect critically on the filters that influence their perception of reality (such as previous intertexts and their own subjective viewpoint) and when they admit to the failure of the journey and/or of the text to make original claims, to rely on stable models, to reach definite conclusions about the foreign others and to portray reality accurately. For instance, Wheeler and Tesson foreground the intertextual nexus from which they borrow, and thus mitigate claims of originality. They also question the authority of these previous texts, as we can see when Wheeler inspects the myths of the first Antarctic explorers, and when Tesson oscillates between ascetic and hedonistic intertexts, thus preventing his readers from reaching stable interpretative grounds. Thubron also exposes the limits of his epistemological tools when he first attempts to understand Siberia with the help of history, but soon admits that the metanarrative of historical progress falls short of explaining the horrors of the Gulag.

Some of these postmodern traits were already present in modernist writings such as Graham Greene’s *Journey Without Maps* (1936) and Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia* (1941). Binary oppositions between modernism and postmodernism such as those drawn by Ihab Hassan are easily contradicted by examples. Like Stacy Burton, I see a certain continuity rather than a stark opposition between modernist and postmodernist travel narratives (16). I also think it is legitimate to wonder, as Simon Malpas does, whether we should “bother” at all with the prefix “post”, since

⁵¹ In *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), Adorno denounces Heidegger and the intellectuals he mockingly calls “the authentic” precisely because they hide the gap between the words they use and the objects to which they refer. These intellectuals use a “jargon of authenticity”, that is to say, a series of linguistic and theatrical codes and conventions designed to make you forget this gap. Adorno condemns them for concealing the artificial nature of these conventions and claiming that their discourse draws its authority from Heaven (see *Jargon* 5, 65). Conversely, Adorno suggests that discourses that acknowledge the historical context of their production, and only claim limited authority, shape a type of authenticity that is less absolute and more in keeping with postmodern times

the postmodern can be seen as a strand of (self-critical) modernism with which it shares many characteristics (44).

However, I postulate that travelogues published after the 1970s are influenced by a very different literary and societal context than travelogues published in the first half of the twentieth century. Representations of a fragmented post-war world replaced the belief in wholeness, in teleological history, and, to a certain extent, in the ability of art to represent reality. Metanarratives have been disowned in favour of stories that avow their subjective and partial nature and acknowledge the existence and limits of the medium. The understanding we once had of the concept of 'truth' has been dramatically altered as well: being true to facts now seems a less attainable objective than being true to one's own limited, provisional and subjective interpretation of these facts. The contemporary travelogues I study were also published long after the end of the Second World War, past the height of decolonisation that we can situate in the 1960s, and well into the era of mass tourism and mass consumption. Due to this context, they differ from inter-war travelogues and possess their own specific traits; hence, my choice of the term 'postmodern' rather than 'modern' to define the type of authenticity they rely on. Other critics have previously identified a shift in the travel-writing genre in the 1980s and 1990s, but, apart from Alison Russell and Caren Kaplan, they have cautiously called recent travel texts "innovative" (Edwards and Graulund 9-10), "cosmopolitan" (Lisle 5), or "counter travel writing" (Sugnet 75), rather than 'postmodern'.

The near unbroken continuity Stacy Burton presupposes between travel writings from the 1910s to the 1980s is mostly helpful when one wishes to contrast travelogues written between the 1910s and the 1980s with texts from the 1800s, as she does. It seems necessary to nuance this continuity when looking at travelogues published only in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, lest one overlooks their unique traits. The field of criticism could benefit from, yet still lacks, an extended formal comparison of travel writing published before and after 1945. Such a study would be invaluable to assess the scope of innovation that has developed in the genre in the last seventy years.

The self-reflexive distance that the writers take in their works seems to be key in creating an impression of authenticity. In the second part of this project, I shall investigate this self-reflexivity as a mark of postmodern authenticity in the travelogues of Eco, Barthes and Baudrillard, which are more loosely connected to the travel-writing genre, and more closely related to philosophical essays. We shall see that these texts engage with the mediation of signs (including words and artistic representations) and with the distance that exists between reality and representation.

This distance can be understood in various ways, all linked to the open acknowledgement by writers and artists that artistic representations are questionable and limited. As mentioned earlier, Walter Benjamin partly defines the artistic aura as "a distance" (15). He explains that the means of the artwork's production – that is to say, the unique hand of the artist – and the modality of its reception – in a unique location, by a small contemplative audience – conferred upon the artwork this auratic distance. But this distance, which he does not explain in depth, can also be interpreted as the acknowledgement by art that it cannot fully capture the object represented, but only the

“trace-presence of something no longer literally, physically present but nonetheless still shimmering” (Kaufman 122).

In the kitsch museums and theme parks Eco visits in “Travels in Hyperreality”, the distance between model and representation becomes the battleground for interpretative freedom, as museum curators seek to prevent creative interpretations of the art on display. Art that shows its artificial nature and acknowledges the gap between model and representation, and museums that encourage creative interpretations are depicted by Eco as more authentic than art and institutions that seek to conceal this distance and reduce this interpretive space.⁵² This idea could be summarised in the following words, which I borrow from Miles Orvell: “we prefer a marble figure to a waxwork: the former does not try to look like what it is not” (82). Eco suggests that when there is enough distance between the original art piece and its reproduction, a new type of authenticity emerges, which can be given to simulacra and not exclusively to originals.

The distance between signs (artistic and literary representations) and the reality they refer to may mark the limits of the medium, but it also offers a space for creativity. Barthes and Baudrillard make the most of this creative space in *Empire of Signs* and *America*, respectively. In Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*, Japanese signifiers appear so foreign to him and so detached from any familiar reality, that he takes the liberty to endow them with new meanings.⁵³ In Baudrillard’s *America*, referents vanish, replaced by empty signs, which fascinate him. In both cases, the travellers seem to wish for a different relationship with signs and signification than those available to them in their home country.

If in postmodern times authenticity means that art should openly claim its representational nature, for these two writers it means that literature should not even attempt to imitate life, which is, at any rate, unrepresentable. Literature should rather construct abstract literary worlds that exist in parallel to reality. Such is the case in Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s travelogues, which both raise “the semiological problem of the correspondence of sign and thing” that Miles Orvell mentions in passing in his study on authenticity (xix), and that I shall study in detail in **Chapter 8**.

4. No authenticity without tradition?

The third main conception of authenticity that can be found in the corpus is closely related to tradition, nostalgia and the veneration of the past. On the one hand, the belief in the authenticity of tradition underlies the exoticist portrayal of local people, as we shall see when studying Barthes in **Chapter 8**, and, on the other hand, it explains the special relation some hyperreal representations have with the past, as I will show in **Chapter 6**.

This conception of authenticity can be observed in the narratives of exoticist travellers who value what they perceive as the traditional aspects of the cultures they encounter. A close look at Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* will reveal that what he sees as most authentic about Japan has little to do with the modern country he visits in 1966. Abiding by what Segalen

⁵² The reasoning is the same as for “the jargon of authenticity” – see previous note on Adorno.

⁵³ Emptying a country of its meaning (the layers of identity it has accumulated through history up to now) to rewrite it according to one’s own theoretical agenda may be regarded as a colonialist move, as I shall point out again in **Chapter 8**.

called “[e]xoticism in Time . . . [e]scape from the contemptible and petty present” (24/48),⁵⁴ Barthes keeps modernity at bay in favour of an archaic Japan where art is epitomised by sumo and traditional Kabuki theatre. He is not alone in desiring (temporal) difference. Paul Bowles, for instance, famously stated: “Each time I go to a place I have not seen before, I hope it will be as different as possible from the places I already know” (xxi). Similarly, T. E. Lawrence “loathed modern hybridity”, and ended up writing “about imaginary others” because the purity he sought never existed (Carr 10). These travellers do not place much value on hybridity, and they seem to fear the threat of a monoculture that would end what they implicitly portray as authentic travel.⁵⁵

They do not simply praise cultural difference, but define it in restrictive terms, as temporally backwards in relation to their own culture, which remains the standard against which to assess others. To a certain extent, these writers may be regarded as heirs to Orientalism because they assess the authenticity of others against the “battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” that they have projected onto them (Said 6). Said explains that this type of discourse places the West at the centre and denies equal existence to other cultures (8). One of the aims of this discourse is to ensure that “European culture” gains “in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3).⁵⁶

To a certain extent, *The Snow Leopard* also bears traces of an exoticist type of authenticity, eulogising the ‘traditional’ lifestyles of foreign people. Matthiessen can be compared to the tourists of Antigua that Jamaica Kincaid mocks in *A Small Place* because they marvel at the damaged library, find it quaint, and forget that it is highly impractical for the people who live there all year round. Similarly, Matthiessen praises the physical efforts, discomfort and scarce sustenance that form part of the local people’s daily life in Dolpo as if they were a sure path to enlightenment. It seems that, to retain their regenerative power and provide the Western urbanite with the opportunity to time travel to pre-modern havens, foreign countries must remain uncontaminated by Westernisation – including comfort and technology.

The veneration of the past is sometimes associated in the corpus with the trope of fading authenticity. This trope can be summed up as follows: the traveller who wishes to behold “beauty in decay” grants authenticity to populations and landscapes that are portrayed as if they were on the verge of extinction (Brennan 180). There is no denying

⁵⁴ “L’Exotisme dans le Temps . . . Fuite du présent méprisable et mesquin” (Segalen 48).

⁵⁵ In the fourth section of the opening chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss considers that this threat has already materialised and that ‘uncontaminated’ travel has disappeared: “A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories” (*Tristes*, Picador edition 43). In the original: “Une civilisation proliférante et surexcitée trouble à jamais le silence des mers. Le parfum des tropiques et la fraîcheur des êtres sont viciés par une fermentation aux relents suspects, qui mortifie nos désirs et nous voue à cueillir des souvenirs à demi-corrompus” (*Tristes*, Plon edition 38).

⁵⁶ According to Charles Lindholm, initially, the depiction of others as inferior was a reaction of the West caused by the discovery during the voyages of explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that other cultures existed and that they could potentially threaten the West’s cultural hegemony (5). He argues that the concept of authenticity was born when the West decided to define itself as authentic in opposition to these newly discovered cultures.

that the threat of a worsening of the global environmental destruction and species extinction is very real and that some cultures are at risk of disappearing because of the cultural hegemony of more powerful actors on the international stage. Nevertheless, the extinction of cultures and nature are in part exaggerated and simplified – in a word, fantasised – by travel writers who revive the idea of fading authenticity. Matthiessen does this when he states that “[o]ne day . . . the last of an old Tibetan culture will blow among the stones and ruins” (*Snow* 249), that “for his children’s children, the power, peace and healing of the night will be obliterated” (117) and that the Tibetan town of Saldang will eventually “be abandoned to the desert” (245). He also interprets abandoned or neglected temples of old religions as signs of a threatened culture, and desertification of overgrazed plateaus as an endangered nature.⁵⁷ Like the modernist wayfarers before them, contemporary travellers seem to find consolation in imagining that, for want of being the first explorers, they can at least be the last to see the foreign lands in their Edenic state. The existence of their travelogues is thereby justified because they become the repository of dying cultures.

The motif of fading beauty is problematic for several reasons. First, the cultures and nature that the travellers depict as dying may not be so. Thus, in the foreword to *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972), Matthiessen indicates that he had been wrong to predict the disappearance of animals that actually started faring better after his journey:

With the collapse of colonial governments, the destruction of wildlife by rampaging Africans had been widely predicted, and a glimpse of the last great companies of wild animals on earth was the main object of my trip to Africa in 1961. Since then (though their future remains uncertain) the East African parks and game reserves have actually increased in size and numbers. (26)

In a conference talk, Scott Manning Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk), a scholar of Native American and Indigenous Studies, raised a connate issue about the disappearance of Native Americans, who were portrayed as nearly extinct long before they actually were.⁵⁸ This portrayal, he explained, was a way to wish them out of existence and to spin romantic fantasies from their disappearance. The rhetoric of the disappearance of cultures and nature is problematic because it possesses questionable fatalistic undertones. Many wayfarers who use this motif seem to adopt the attitude of bystanders witnessing and lamenting this disappearance. Seldom do they reflect on solutions or take action, and few question their own responsibility as travellers or the fact that they may be complicit with the tourism that hastens the disappearance of some cultures and natural areas. As Stevens highlighted in relation to the genocide of the Native Americans, when one speaks of the “disappearance” of an ethnic group – or, I would like to add, of a culture, or a species – it effaces the agent responsible for this disappearance, as if it happened by itself.

⁵⁷ Peter Bishop expresses a similar idea when he writes that “to Matthiessen, the traditional peoples and cultures seemed doomed” (205).

⁵⁸ In a conference talk he gave in 2017, Stevens used the painting “The Last of the Race”, painted in 1847 to illustrate his point. This painting’s title epitomised the “aspirational vanishing” that pervaded the American rhetoric and that hinted that the disappearance of the Native Americans had been a *promise* of American civilisation even before it was carried out. At the time this painting was finished, there were still hundreds of thousands of Native Americans, Stevens stresses.

Travellers who use this rhetoric refuse to reflect on the causes of this disappearance and on the possible agency they have in averting it.

In addition, in the case of cultures proven to be disappearing, the readers may wonder whether it behoves Western travellers to decide what should be saved, and whether foreign countries could not be portrayed as modern and changing, like the West. We could also question how traditional the glorified lifestyles really are, considering that many cultural stereotypes that pass for traditions are in fact recent conventional fictions, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger demonstrate in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Like Hobsbawm and Ranger, Kwame Anthony Appiah is suspicious of preconceptions about cultures and argues in *Cosmopolitanism* that syncretism is a perennial condition:

[T]rying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion. The textiles most people think of as traditional West African cloths, are known as java prints, and arrived at the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled by, the Dutch. The traditional garb of Herero women derives from the attire of nineteenth-century German missionaries, though it's still unmistakably Herero, not least because the fabrics they use have a distinctly un-Lutheran range of colors. (107)

The portrayal of other cultures as museum pieces also creates problems of objectification and reciprocity, especially considering that the corpus I selected scarcely informs us on how local people view the travellers' cultures.

The preference some travellers show for traditional and exotic lifestyles may be indebted to the history of the travel-writing genre. Travellers were typically expected to come back with tales of wonders, El Dorado, cannibals, Vegetable Lambs of Tartary and other marvels. The wonder-struck tone that dominated the genre since Herodotus remained in effect even as explorers began to concern themselves with cartographic accuracy influenced as they were by the fabulous accounts they had read. When Christopher Columbus set sail, it was with the guidance of Marco Polo's and Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, the latter describing cyclops who ate raw flesh, and people with hooves and eyes on their shoulders. As the French travel writer Gilles Lapouge remarks in *L'Encre du voyageur*, even the first explorers navigated around a world already scripted with literature and myth. No wonder then, writes Lapouge, that Columbus expected cyclops on the island of Cuba (66). No wonder, we could perhaps add, that some contemporary travel writers still look for cultures that will match their preconceived notions of exotic difference.

The impact of the conception of authenticity as tradition goes beyond travellers' encounters with local people. The connection between authenticity and tradition also has implications for the representation of rich globalised spaces such as Japan and the United States by European writers like Eco, Barthes and Baudrillard. Yet one may wonder what really remains of the ability of tradition to grant authenticity in destinations marked by transculturation,⁵⁹ and by the circulation of cultural heritage through copies, mass media and mass consumption.

⁵⁹ The term "transculturation" entails mutual exchange and modification of each other's cultures, and it is usually attributed to Fernando Ortiz (Holland and Huggan 22). Mary Louise Pratt has used it to theorise

On the one hand, Eco's, Barthes's and Baudrillard's travel narratives postulate that Europe retains a certain monopoly over authenticity, essentially due to its long history. This notion can be summed up by the words of Sir Jack in Julian Barnes' novel *England, England*, when he attempts to define England's added value: "what we *do* have, . . . is what others don't: an accumulation of time" (39). The association of authenticity with duration and tradition can be traced back to Benjamin, for whom authentic art was defined by tradition, that is to say by its ability to express the *zeitgeist* of the era that had produced it, and to accumulate layers of duration through the centuries (13). Eco and Baudrillard hint that the United States epitomises inauthenticity because, in contrast to Europe, it has "no past and no founding truth" and it cannot draw upon a stock of "primitive accumulation of time" (Baudrillard, *America* 58/76).⁶⁰ All it can do is "plunde[r]" the European past with "voracity" and replace the accumulation of time with an accumulation of objects (Eco, "Travels" 23). The two semioticians identify compensatory mechanisms at play in American museums, culture, and theme parks, which appropriate European art objects and/or their historical or symbolic value, to try and mimic the "accumulation of time" that the country allegedly lacks.

However, on the other hand, these travelogues report the decay of old Eurocentric conceptions of aesthetic authenticity. First, the aristocratic pedigree of European authenticity is damaged by hyperreal reproductions, as illustrated for instance by the grotesque hyperreal reproductions that Eco mocks. Second, the reprocessing of European history and original art by hyperreal copies gives birth to alternative realities that threaten to supplant the originals and sap their power. Hollywood reinterpretations of Tibet flourish while real Tibet withers, says Iyer (*Global* 36), and some reproductions of European art even pretend to replace the "now ruined, almost invisible" originals, as illustrated by the simulacra of Leonardo da Vinci's fifteenth-century "Last Supper" Eco beholds in Santa Cruz museum ("Travels" 18). Eco, Iyer and Baudrillard sometimes view this symbolic destruction of originals as a creative process worth marvelling at. Indeed, some simulacra that differ so much from their models that they become originals in their own right, undermine the Platonic hierarchy of authentic original and inauthentic copies, and suggest the possibility of an aesthetic judgement that does not devalue reproductions.

5. Authenticities left aside

As close readings of the corpus will show, the conceptions of authenticity as unadulterated wilderness that can return the self to its original state, as exoticism and a preference for tradition and as the postmodern gesture towards the limits of art and literature, may overlap in paradoxical ways even within the travelogues. They may also coexist alongside other conceptions of authenticity that I do not address here. For

"how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (7).

⁶⁰ "Pour n'avoir pas connu d'accumulation primitive du temps, elle vit dans une actualité perpétuelle. Pour n'avoir pas connu d'accumulation lente et séculaire du principe de vérité, elle vit dans la simulation perpétuelle, dans l'actualité perpétuelle des signes" (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 76).

instance, I exclude from this discussion major philosophical disputes and ideas, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist authenticity, which consists in "acknowledging one's freedom and taking responsibility as a self-determining being" (Michelman).⁶¹

I do not touch upon the differences that may exist between French, English, American and Italian conceptions of authenticity either, although they may impact the international corpus I have selected, which comprises writers who have been subjected to different cultural and intertextual influences. Lionel Trilling suggests that "a distinction is to be made between the French and the English mode [of sincerity]" in literature (58), but he gives too little evidence for such a distinction to be used as a conceptual framework. I choose to focus rather on the characteristics that the texts of the corpus have in common and that make a comparative analysis worth undertaking.

Scholars who wish to pursue other paths in the study of authenticity in travel literature may also choose to explore the authenticity that some individuals find inside communities, which I do not address, as opposed to the authenticity of solitude, which I discuss in **Chapters 1** and **2**.⁶²

In **Chapter 5**, I reflect to some extent on the authenticity achieved by travelogues that conform to familiar conventions of the travel-writing genre, but the exploration of intertextuality as an authenticating technique could be pursued further. I do not discuss the conception of authenticity as artificiality further, although it could be done with the help of the ideas that Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde and Henry James developed each in their own way in *The Painter of Modern Life* (*Le peintre de la vie moderne*, 1863), "The Truth of Masks" (1886), and "The Real Thing" (1892) respectively.⁶³ I also leave aside any conceptualisation of the dichotomy between the two types of authenticities that Henry James reflects on and that Miles Orvell calls "artistic" and "literal" authenticities (122).

Another important exclusion from my discussion is any sustained focus on the preconceptions of authenticity that underpin the representation of the local populations in my chosen travelogues, even though it could be fruitful to study the persistence of synecdochic 'types' of people in contemporary travel writing, for instance by critiquing them in the light of Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "herborizer" (26).

Finally, I have focused mainly on how preconceptions of authenticity affect the way travel writers interact with and represent foreign others (human and, mostly, nonhuman) and how they seek to create a sense of authentic writing by disclosing and reflecting on

⁶¹ See the entry "authenticity and inauthenticity" in Stephen Michelman's *The A to Z of Existentialism*.

⁶² Some thinkers ascribe more authenticity to the community than to the individual. For instance, Charles Taylor believes in the transcendent potential of a larger order that would give "meaning to the world", that is, a spiritual meaning beyond the simple facts of life (*Ethics* 3). For him, individuals should try to define "what constitutes a good life" in a universal sense (17) and engage with "greater issues that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical" (14), rather than seek happiness in their own way (18).

On the subject of authenticity and community, Marshall Berman argues that it is possible to think up a form of community that is compatible with authenticity. He defines "the politics of authenticity" as "a dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed" (1). In the realm of cultural anthropology, Charles Lindholm's opus will be compelling to those who wish to study consumer communities and sub-cultures as freely chosen sources of personal authenticity.

⁶³ In the short story "The Real Thing", an illustrator realises that his drawings are more convincing if he uses lower-class models posing as aristocrats than if he uses real aristocrats as models.

the limits of representation, and I have only obliquely addressed the strategies these writers develop to persuade readers that they are reliable narrators.

7. Theories and chapter overview

All chapters are related to the three major definitions of authenticity I outlined above: authenticity as unadulterated nature's ability to return the self to its original state (**Chapters 1-4**), authenticity as acknowledgement of the gap between word and world (**Chapters 5-8**), and authenticity as nostalgia for the past and reverence to tradition (**Chapters 3, 6 and 8**).

The chapters are set out to follow a thematic approach, from the conceptions of authenticity associated with the wilderness, to those more theoretically oriented that inform the representation of art and culture. A thematic setup was preferred to a chronological one because the publication dates of the two sets of texts overlap, which makes it challenging to draw definite conclusions about a chronological evolution between the two parts of the corpus. To put it simply, the travelogues authored by semioticians assume a crisis in understandings of authenticity, and the travel narratives focused on nature betoken a renewed engagement with the authentic, but their publication dates overlap, which suggests that both approaches to the concept of authenticity developed at least partly in parallel, rather than sequentially or in reaction to each other. The lack of clear-cut chronological shift becomes clearer, if we consider that the crisis of representation that Barthes and Baudrillard explore in *Empire of Signs* (1970) and *America* (1986) respectively does not seem to affect Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), published around the same time, and which adopts an enchanted tone. The analysis carried out in this thesis yields some insights regarding the impact that the historical and literary contexts have on the conceptions of authenticity identified in the texts. This study does not however aim to make claims about a consistent sequential evolution of conceptions of authenticity over the fifty years that the chosen corpus spans.

The conclusions I shall present also result from the use of a varied body of theoretical tools. The first part of this study will largely draw upon critical studies of the travel-writing genre to explore the way solitary travel writers define authenticity in relation to the environment. In addition, in **Chapter 1**, I shall reframe my chosen travellers' escape from modernity with the ecocritical concept of "toxic discourse" (Buell, *Writing* 30), which will be central in understanding the problematic implications of their perception of nature as pure. In **Chapter 2**, I will show that the emphasis they place on epiphanies and contemplation is uniquely illuminated by their indebtedness to the Transcendentalists, especially Thoreau and Emerson. Then, in **Chapter 3**, Graham Huggan's concepts of the "authenticities of endurance" and "endangerment" will cast light on the value some wayfarers ascribe to risk, danger and physically demanding experience (*Extreme* 178). In **Chapter 4**, animal studies and the Deleuzoguattarian notion of "Becoming-Other" will give cues to understanding the role played in the texts by metaphors that dissolve the boundaries between the traveller and nature. **Chapter 5** will

be more concerned with the postmodern traits some travelogues possess, focusing especially on failed quests and parodic rewritings.

In the second part of this project, that is, in **Chapters 6, 7 and 8**, the focus will shift away from nature and towards the conceptions of authenticity that underlie the representation of culture, signs, writing and art in the travelogues of three semioticians and university scholars. I shall primarily study Eco's, Barthes's and Baudrillard's travelogues in the light of their own theories in semiotics. **Chapter 6** will start with a comprehensive definition of 'hyperreality' based on Eco's and Baudrillard's texts. I will then discuss the types of authenticity that Eco identifies in American hyperreal museums, and which he mocks and undermines. **Chapter 7** will be concerned with the role that interpretive distance plays in the production and reception of authentic art according to Eco. I shall demonstrate that he favours artistic representations that acknowledge their artificial nature. The artistic distance between models and representations and between originals and reproductions (simulacra) seems to play a key role in the conception of authenticity that underpins his text. Eco suggests that when reproductions differ sufficiently from the originals that inspired them, they can acquire their own authenticity, and this challenges the traditional hierarchy between authentic original and inauthentic copy.

Chapter 8 turns to the aesthetics of non-referentiality that dominates Barthes's and Baudrillard's travelogues. I will argue that, for them, literature is at its most authentic when it does not attempt to represent reality. This chapter will chart the formal means that Baudrillard employs to go beyond *mimesis*, which to him appears unfit to describe the simulation that has replaced reality. It will also examine the stylistics and rhetoric that Barthes devises in order to keep his impressions of Japan alive. The chapter will close with a critical investigation of the ethical implications of this aesthetics. More specifically, I will interrogate Barthes's and Baudrillard's representations of foreign countries with the help of Edward Said's definition of Orientalism and Tzvetan Todorov's conceptualisation of exoticism, and conclude that Barthes's *Empire of Signs* is partly underpinned by a conception of authenticity linked to tradition.

PART I

AUTHENTICITIES

OF

THE ENCOUNTERS WITH NATURE

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Starting from the postulate that authenticity is always a construct that varies according to societal and literary contexts, I shall examine the conceptions of authenticity that underpin the travelogues of Sara Wheeler, Colin Thubron, Sylvain Tesson and Peter Matthiessen. First, I aim to identify what these travel writers consider to be an authentic relation to nature and to animals. Second, I aim to reflect on their travelogues in the light of the postmodern literary context in which they were written in order to determine the conceptions of authentic travel *writing* that these travellers foreground. Through this study, my goal is also to make hypotheses about the genesis of their conceptions of authenticity, and to scrutinise the ethical issues they raise.

My investigation will be guided by questions such as: How do the selected travel writers interact with nonhuman others (nature and animals)? How do they relate to and represent the people they meet? How do their texts fall in line with or renew the conceptions of authenticity they inherit from past travel literature?

To establish what they conceive of as an authentic relation to the wilderness, I shall first explore the way these travellers portray their natural environment. I shall analyse their conceptions of unadulterated nature and discuss the ethical and ecocritical implications of these representations in view of Greg Garrard's and Lawrence Buell's criticism of "toxic discourse" (Buell, *Writing* 30). I will then investigate how indebted to transcendentalist writings their descriptions of nature are. This investigation will show that *Terra Incognita*, *Consolations of the Forest*, and *The Snow Leopard* contain the idea that one of the most authentic relations one can have with nature is contemplative, regenerative and epiphanic. I will argue that the epiphanies sought by the travellers suggest that they fantasise an authentic relation to nature that would be pre-civilised, pre-reflexive, and mediated only by the senses.

This conception of authenticity also appears to underlie the value the wayfarers place on physical sensations. Following the theoretical trail blazed by Kathleen Adams, who spoke of "visceral authenticity" (qtd. in Huggan 189),⁶⁴ and Graham Huggan who explores the notion of "authenticity of endangerment" (178), I shall scrutinise the role played by the body, danger, discomfort and physical strain in Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues. This inquiry will lead me to analyse several questionable *topoi* that they inherit from the travel-writing genre: the conquest of a feminised nature, the emphasis on hardships as markers separating them from tourists, and a fascination with 'wild' men – a variation on Rousseau's Noble Savage.

Far from simply following in the footsteps of past travel writers who left them with a certain legacy as regards the representation of nature, the travellers of the corpus also reinvent the encounter with their nonhuman environment. With the help of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "Becoming-Other", I will turn my attention to the metaphors Tesson and Matthiessen use to depict their encounter with animals. I shall

⁶⁴ Graham Huggan quotes Kathleen Adams, "Danger-Zone Tourism: Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times", *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Peggy Teo, et al., 2001, 265-80, 275.

point out the non-anthropocentric ethics contained in the way they conceive and represent authentic encounters with the nonhuman.

I will then move on to explore further the innovations contained in these contemporary travelogues compared to earlier journeys. I contend that Tesson's and Thubron's texts can be considered postmodern as they raise and address issues linked to the concept of authentic writing that have emerged with postmodern aesthetics. I will seek to determine what an authentic relation to past literature, to one's own literary practice, and to the expected outcome of the journey may mean for these authors. I shall analyse the fragmentation that seems to be at work in their travelogues, as they challenge the authority of the travel writer and reflect critically on their models, assumptions and writing. I will first analyse Tesson's relations to the generic canon through the ongoing intertextual dialogue of *Consolations of the Forest*. I will also take this narrative as a case study to examine the limits of the macro-structure of the transformational arc, and ponder whether the travellers still portray it as a narrative form suited to translating their experience. Finally, I turn to Thubron's *In Siberia* to study the unresolved tension between the notion of authenticity understood as a safe haven, often located in a fantasised past, and the postmodern notion of authenticity that requires travellers to acknowledge the limits of their understanding and the fragmentation they face on their journey.

CHAPTER 1:

Authenticity as Escape from the “Toxic Taint” of Humanity

Introduction

Whether or not the travellers in my chosen texts perceive and portray their journeys to the wilderness as authentic seems to be conditioned by certain factors. In the first four chapters, I aim to map out the characteristics that these wayfarers expect the wilderness to possess and the types of encounters with nature they implicitly portray as authentic. I will give evidence that the travel writers I selected nurture the idea that the authentic wilderness should be empty, challenging and dangerous in order to be awe-inspiring, rejuvenating and (paradoxically) sheltering.

The wilderness in which Sylvain Tesson, Peter Matthiessen and Sara Wheeler dwell and the natural settings that provide relief to Colin Thubron share one particularly striking characteristic: they are relatively desert. These travellers convey the impression that the type of nature they seek, enjoy and implicitly describe as fitting their own ideal needs to be free from certain traces of human presence. Through their journeys, they seek to escape technological civilisation, the responsibilities of home, urban squalor or mass tourism, which are all represented as “toxic”. These elements are at odds with what they portray as an authentic experience in the wilderness. This almost complete separation of nature, described as pure, and the unwanted human presence that appears to be polluting it, can be understood as “toxic discourse” (Buell, *Writing* 30).

I shall first unravel the concept of “toxic discourse” that Greg Garrard and Lawrence Buell developed, before looking at the connotations attached to the term “wilderness”, in order to find clues that would explain the link the travellers make between authentic wilderness and the lack of human presence. I shall then examine the specific elements that Thubron, Matthiessen, Tesson and Wheeler describe as pollution that impedes their authentic experience, or from which they are relieved during their stay in nature. In a fourfold analysis of the “toxic discourse” at work in their travelogues, I will show that the wilderness is portrayed as authentic when it affords Thubron a way out of the ruins of history, Matthiessen a break from the responsibilities of home, Tesson an escape from technology, consumption and tourism, and Wheeler relief from the nuisance of urban life. These four case studies will provide us with an opportunity to compare the forms of escape found in the corpus with conventions of the travel-writing genre.

Finally, I shall seek to put this conception of authenticity into perspective and question its ethical implications. The rhetoric of toxicity at work in these texts raises concerns that Garrard encapsulates when he warns that such a discourse “perpetuate[s] a harmful distinction between nature, seen as wild and pure, and the toxic taint of humanity” (15). I find it crucial to explain further why this discourse can be considered “harmful”, and shall therefore lay out the ethical issues that arise from the travellers’ rejection of civilisation, and briefly present different representations of wilderness by inviting other nature writers into the conversation.

1.1. “Toxic discourse” and the myth of empty wilderness

The travel writers’ repeated shunning of unwanted human presence in the corpus of chosen texts can be accounted for with the help of the concept of “toxic discourse” (Buell, *Writing* 30), which relies on the idea that nature “is pure only by virtue of its independence from humans”, who appear as a source of pollution (Garrard 78). I borrow this concept from the ecocritical theories of Garrard and Buell, and develop it further to encompass some forms of pollution that they had not included when they first theorised it. In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell argues that the rhetoric of toxicity is constructed around four *topoi*: “a mythography of betrayed Edens”, “images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration”, “the threat of hegemonic oppression” against small communities, and the “gothicization of public health issues” with lurid descriptions of all-pervasive toxic chemicals inherited from nineteenth-century tales of urban squalor in industrialised cities (Buell, *Writing* 37, 38, 41, 43). The travelogues under study meet the first two criteria. Lake Baikal, for instance, appears as a “betrayed Eden” when Tesson fulminates against noisy tourists who disturb the peace of his abode (*Consolations* 25/45), and the Himalaya is fatalistically portrayed by Matthiessen as a haven whose most remote corners are desecrated by the presence of tourists (*Snow* 264).

In this study, I alter the concept of “toxic discourse” to include more than the literal pollution – the environmental or health damages caused by toxic waste, plastics, chemicals – that the ecocritics focused on when they first developed their theories in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. I propose to reconceptualise this rhetoric to include the figurative pollution that human presence represents for the travellers who portray tourists, technology, tokens of home and numerous other elements of modern urban civilisation as a form of contamination that conflicts with their ideal wilderness.

“Toxic discourse” is a dual concept that pairs up the rejection of unwanted “toxic” elements to the praise of “the pastoral ideal” that Buell defines as “a nurturing space of clean air, clean water, and pleasant uncluttered surroundings that ought to be one’s by right” (*Writing* 30, 38). The ideal haven and “locus of stability and value” was previously epitomised by the Edenic garden, but as Glen A. Love argues, the wilderness is now expected to fulfil this function (203). According to Love, this new representation of the wilderness springs from an ecocritical questioning of anthropocentrism, best served by the literary exploration of a kind of nature that clearly contrasts with civilisation (203).

The expectation that wilderness should be empty of human presence is already given in the very definition of the word, which derives from Old English ‘wildēornes’, a “land inhabited only by wild animals” (*ODL*). In French, ‘wilderness’ is translated by means of the adjective ‘sauvage’ – ‘wild’ – preceded by the appropriate noun – *région sauvage*, *animal sauvage* etc. – which denotes an undomesticated, uncultivated and awe-inspiring space (*TLFI*). The French definition of the term conjures up the notion of the sublime that gained momentum in the seventeenth centuries with Edmund Burke’s essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and still holds sway today. This definition gives some indications concerning the sort of feelings a traveller

might expect to experience in the wilderness: awe, wonder, fear. As we shall see in **Chapter 2** and **3** when I address the travellers' epiphanies and the emphasis they place on fear and danger, these inherited ideas circling the notion of the sublime are still associated with representations of the wilderness.

The term may also be translated as '*désert*', which strengthens the idea that the wilderness is imagined as an empty locus. It is noteworthy that the travellers under scrutiny do not choose lush jungles but vast expanses of flat land (Antarctica), sparsely populated mountains (Himalayan and Siberian summits) and stretches of tundra. The set of ideas associated with such locations in Western imaginings makes them the ideal space to stress the ascetic quality of some of their journeys. Tesson's, Matthiessen's and Wheeler's flight from civilisation, the introspections they carry out in the wilderness, and the desert-like environment of their destinations have an almost biblical ring, bringing to mind the idea of a transcendent experience gained in the desert. Because of their Nordic location,⁶⁵ the destinations chosen by the travellers also evoke a utopian space conducive to religious experience.⁶⁶

All in all, the natural milieu they depict is ideologically charged and imagined as pure but challenging. The very term 'wilderness' comes with both positive and negative connotations that still live on. It connotes hostility, violence and cruelty in both French and English. These negative ideas are found as early as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where wilderness is linked to threat (Garrard 68), and they are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition that had Adam and Eve exiled from the tame Garden of Eden, and cast into the wilderness. Garrard (68) and Kylie Crane (2, 24) emphasise the theological duality of the concept: on the one hand a place of exile and sanction, and on the other hand a sanctuary from persecution where one can receive God's guidance. In the travelogues selected for analysis, the ambiguity remains, as the wilderness shields travellers from modernity yet also serves as the space of self-inflicted pain associated with spiritual betterment (see **Chapter 3**).

⁶⁵ I use "Nordic" here in the sense that Daniel Chartier gave to the term – as a "sign system" (13). Although geographically *polar*, Sara Wheeler's "Antarctica" is ideologically "Nordic" in this sense, because it is represented with the help of what Chartier calls "the codes of the sign system that is the imagined North" (13), such as low temperatures, whiteness and vast empty land.

⁶⁶ The cultural imaginings surrounding the North sometimes associate it with a utopia, as illustrated by the ancient Greek legend of the Hyperboreans, a mythical people that were said to live in the far north and whose society "was based on an ideal of justice, law, purity and peace", as Timothy P. Bridgman puts it (73). I shall address some of the cultural imaginings of the North in more detail when I explore intertextuality in Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* in **Chapter 5**.

1.2. Nature as relief from the ruins of history in Colin Thubron's *Siberia*⁶⁷

Colin Thubron's journey, *In Siberia*, gives us a first illustration of the *topos* of wild nature as sanctuary. When he sets off for Siberia after the fall of the Soviet Union, he steps into a post-apocalyptic world. The narrative opens on the ruins of the bulldozed house where the Romanovs were shot, follows the British traveller as he moves eastwards, stopping regularly at Stalin's abandoned Gulag camps, and ends in the ruins of a uranium mine in Butugychag. The wreckage he passes through includes, for instance, "broken farm machinery" in Tobolsk (*In Siberia* 32), "desolate, near empty" villages on his way to Pazyryk (82), and a mica mine "left to decay" in Buryatia (153). The devastation affects the Russians too: many are poor, very old or sick, begging for money, hunting jobs; the inside of their homes is a world of squalor and carelessness.

When his historical erudition no longer suffices to make sense of this state of desolation, Thubron turns to nature as an escape. When free of signs of human presence, nature seems to offer a sense of authenticity to the traveller, who portrays it as a safe, stable and reassuring place by contrast with the bewildering ruins of history that he visits. Romantic descriptions of the natural environment offer him a relief from his failure to make sense of the horrors of the Gulag. Thubron's wilderness functions in a similar way to the wilderness that Garrard theorised "as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city" (Garrard 66).⁶⁸ Descriptions of idyllic landscapes allow Thubron and his readers to escape the ruins of Russian history. Thus, he often cushions difficult encounters with Siberians within two layers of beautiful scenery. The epitome of this strategy occurs when Thubron sojourns in the very poor fishing village of Potalovo. There, as he is talking to a wretched old man who has lost both his wife and son, a drunken young man barges in, asking for vodka and cigarettes, which the poverty-stricken old man cannot afford. Thubron recovers from the episode through the description of an idyllic natural environment that contrasts sharply with the fishing village. He describes the wilderness as "cleansing", "uninhabited", "beautiful", "mysterious", "unexplained" and endowed with "perfection":

⁶⁷ I have published a first version of this section in my article "Echoes of the Past and Siberian Nature's 'Radical Otherness': An Ecocritical Reading of Contemporary Travel Writing", *Revue canadienne de littérature comparée/ Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 47.4, March 2021.

⁶⁸ Greg Garrard's point was made earlier by William Cronon in "The Trouble with Wilderness", *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90: "For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness" (60). Both Garrard and Cronon are indebted to Thoreau, who argues in his essay *Walking* (1863) that wilderness is a fertile ground for the regeneration of humankind. It provides "nourishment and vigor" (27) and "refreshes" (29) and "recreate[s]" those who dwell in its midst (32).

Beyond the village the tundra spread. Its only trees were stunted larches, which showered down a golden dust of needles at my touch. . . . This wilderness girds the Arctic Sea for more than four thousand miles. After the squalor of the village, it spread a *cleansing* emptiness. . . . Everywhere lakes broke out in circles and oblongs brimming level with the earth. Their water was auburn, *uninhabited*, darkly *beautiful*. Ferns lifted through its surface from a sediment of leaves. They were a little mysterious. Their geometric *perfection* – formed during the annual contraction and thawing of the ground – still happens *unexplained*. (*In Siberia* 139-40, emphasis added)

The gentle rhythm and depth of natural history are hinted at through the “sediment” and “annual contraction and thawing of the ground”, which offer Thubron respite from the tragedy of human history. Nature is portrayed as an enduring force, as pristine, stable, and even endowed with Adamic innocence, as illustrated by Thubron’s description of Lake Baikal:

It is, too, the oldest of all lakes. . . . Steeped in its own ecosystem, it has endured since the Tertiary Age, for over twenty-five million years. . . . Many [species] remain, it seems, from the ancient seas that once covered most of Siberia, and in the pure abyss of the lake retain a kind of evolutionary innocence. Sponges and primitive crustaceans survive almost unchanged. (157)

The lake embodies resistance to change and a kind of purity tied to geological time. Nature’s stillness offers a counterpoint to the ruinous passing of time that Thubron seeks to understand throughout his journey. Such narrative sequences call forth the idea that the wilderness acts as the “locus of stability and value”, as Glen A. Love puts it (203). They also evoke a pastoral ideal that, in Garrard’s words, is based on “the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies” (63). The comforting role of nature in Thubron’s travelogue can be deemed part of the “toxic discourse” (Buell, *Writing* 30), since nature is only comforting *because* it is empty of human beings, who are themselves a form of pollution.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the passages where Thubron finds relief in nature are interstitial, interspersed between scenes of greater importance in the economy of the book (his conversations with Gulag survivors and their descendants for instance), which is built around the traveller’s attempts to understand the scars of history. Thubron’s descriptions of nature show signs of the “toxic discourse”, but *In Siberia* as a whole is hardly escapist. Thubron relentlessly confronts the frightful loss of life in the Gulags, reflects on Russian history, and includes the voice of the local inhabitants, regardless of how dreary their tales are.

1.3. Pre-modern nature far from the responsibilities of home in *The Snow Leopard*

In *The Snow Leopard*, nature's perfection seems conditioned by the absence of signs of modern life. Matthiessen and his travel companion George Schaller lament any intrusion of civilisation, modernity and technology, which clearly conflict with their idea of an authentic journey in the plateau of Dolpo. Tourists and communicative devices seem to attract particular aversion. Thus, the travellers are "sorry" to be brought back to their century when "from the police house [of Tarakot] comes flat tin music from a small radio with weak batteries" (*Snow* 117). In a comparable fashion, when he encounters a Japanese expedition, which cures his porter Dawa from dysentery, Matthiessen remarks: "I am grateful to the mountaineers, but the bright tents and foreign faces, like the mail at Shey, are an intrusion" (264). Ironically, the mountaineers' aversion is selective, considering that it does not target the modern equipment that enables their journey, such as well-insulated snowshoes and sunglasses against snow blindness. We can also point out that Matthiessen's rejection of other "foreign faces" reveals his paradoxical fantasy of being the only foreigner in a Tibet untouched by globalisation and peopled only by inhabitants that he deems Tibetan-looking.

When the wilderness is free of such "intrusions", it possesses the ability to return the self to its authentic being – or so some travellers seem to think, as I shall study in more detail in **Chapter 3**. The idea that a core self can be retrieved through crossing desert areas can be found, for instance, in Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*, when she writes: "what I wanted to do, . . . was to be alone, to test, to push, to unclog my brain of all its extraneous debris, not to be protected, to be stripped of all the social crutches, not to be hampered by any outside interference whatsoever" (91). Matthiessen recounts a similar experience a month after the start of his journey: "My head was cleared in these weeks free of intrusions – mail, telephones, people and their needs – and I respond to things spontaneously, without defensive or self-conscious screens" (*Snow* 112). Both travel writers convey the impression that an authentic self is hidden under a more superficial self. If we look closer, we see that the parts of the self that Matthiessen portrays as less authentic are linked to interpersonal relations and to modernity. For instance, in mid-November, Matthiessen, who intentionally kept his children's letters unopened, records the following change in his sense of self: "We have had no news of modern times since late September, and will have none until December, and gradually my mind has cleared itself, and wind and sun pour through my head as through a bell. Though we talk little here, I am never lonely; I am returned into myself" (213). He represents solitude and silence in a pre-modern nature as conducive to an experience of his true self.

The lack of news that delights Matthiessen begets interrogations about the son he has left at home and yet mentions several times in his diary. Are the letters of his son a hindrance to the enlightenment that Matthiessen seeks? Does authentic travel require that the traveller shows that he cast aside his family ties? If we are to believe James Stull, Matthiessen's text, which stages the journey of a father of four shortly after the death of his wife, exemplifies the genre of masculine adventure narratives that endorse "running

away from problems” and “the American myth that it is still possible to eschew social responsibilities and commitments and reaffirm the primacy of the singular (male) self on the open road or highway” (qtd. in Ross-Bryant 93).⁶⁹ Since Matthiessen sees the letters of his son as disruptive, it seems that he wishes for his journey to remain sealed off from his fatherly responsibilities at home, which corroborates Stull’s reading.

We could consider Matthiessen’s hint that he prefers a clear break from home as a way to comply with two conventions of the travel-writing genre. The conventions of autobiographical writing (admitting one’s flaws to appear sincere to the readers) and of travel writing (leaving Penelope and Telemachus behind) converge in some travelogues to enhance the quest’s value with an initial fault or sacrifice. The guilt of leaving home, which could be disruptive, because it ties Matthiessen to the past when he would rather focus on the present, is aestheticised and eased through the catharsis that the act of confession enables – “I have neglected my children”, writes Matthiessen (*Snow* 272). In addition, when “home” is integrated in the travel narrative as the place one leaves behind, it becomes an element in opposition to which the journey can develop and acquire value.

It seems that authentic travellers are those who can overcome the guilt of leaving. This guilt acts as an obstacle one should triumph over like a mountain or a raging sea, as Jonathan Raban suggests in *Passage to Juneau: A Sea and its Meaning*, when he sets sails to Alaska: “Travelling always entails infidelity. You do your best to mask the feeling of sly triumph that comes with turning your back on home and all it stands for; but disappearing into the crowd in the departure lounge, or stowing your bags in the car at dawn, you know you’re a rat” (38). Yet not all negotiate their relation to guilt, their children and technology with such stark oppositions as Matthiessen or Raban do.

Robert Maynard Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), Jamaica Kincaid’s *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2004) and Dervla Murphy’s *Where the Indus is Young: Walking to Baltistan* (1977) offer an interesting counterpoint to the conceptions of authentic travel that we find in Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*. Writing at around the same time as Matthiessen, Pirsig blends philosophical discussions illustrated with people’s ability or inability to deal with technology, reminiscences of the traumatic past of his semi-autobiographical narrator, and concerns about his son, whom he takes on his journey and who plays an important role in the narrative. He thus offers an enlightening counterpoint to Matthiessen’s opus. That same decade, Dervla Murphy published *Where the Indus is Young*, which also features her six-year-old daughter Rachel, who had earned her place as fully-fledged travel companion through her endurance during their previous journey in South Asia (recounted in *On a Shoestring to Coorg*, 1973). Rachel’s reactions, her observant remarks and her interactions with the local children are closely woven into the narrative, which conveys the impression that Murphy valued her presence and viewpoints. Murphy occasionally lets her readers get a glimpse of what her destination looks like through her child’s eyes, while other travel writers such as Matthiessen, less inclined to travel with children, struggle to adopt this type of gaze, the

⁶⁹ Lynn Ross-Bryant quotes James Stull, *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction*, Greenwood, 1993, 120-121.

freshness of which they envy. Interestingly, in Murphy's opus, Rachel is sometimes described and her speech reported with the same detachment that other travel writers use to portray adult travelling companions that are not relatives. This rhetorical choice can be interpreted as a way of representing Rachel as a self-standing person with her own merits rather than reducing her to being the travel writer's dependent daughter. Alternatively, Murphy's toning down of their mother-daughter relationship can be seen as a strategy to comply with the travel-writing convention that separates family and travel. Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers* also enables us to question the conception of the authentic wilderness as a place that is strictly separated from the outstretched arms of relatives left behind. Although Kincaid complies with the convention that consists in admitting guilt at leaving her thirteen-year-old son behind, she is unapologetic about the joy she feels at being on an adventure, and, contrary to Matthiessen, she tells the readers of her eagerness to use modern technology to phone her son when possible. Thus, home and away remain connected rather than strictly separated and technology is well integrated into the journey.

1.4. Sylvain Tesson's escape from technology, consumption and tourism

The escapist nature of Tesson's project is claimed from the outset of *Consolations of the Forest*, since readers enter the book through a preamble titled "A Sidestep" (xi/9),⁷⁰ and exit it with a reminder that "[t]he cabin is *a sidestep*" (212/267, emphasis original).⁷¹ The rejection of technology and the choice of flight as a rationale for the journey recur in his subsequent book *Sur les chemins noirs* (2016), which recounts his hike from southeast to northwest France on country paths that are unkempt and unknown to tourists.

What Tesson seeks to sidestep includes consumer society, technology, and especially tourists. *Consolations of the Forest* starts with his puzzled look at the ketchup section of a grocery shop: "Fifteen kinds of ketchup. That's the sort of thing that made me want to withdraw from this world" (3/21).⁷² Tesson, who quotes the Desert Fathers and reads Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, could have explained his ascetic retreat in spiritual or philosophical terms, or with macroeconomics, but chooses instead to position himself against capitalism by attacking *ketchup*. Added to the hyperbolic phrase "withdraw from this world" (even more dramatic in French, as it can mean 'to commit suicide'), targeting Heinz sauce with such a pompous statement signals the humorous tone of the author as much as his rejection of consumer society.

Tesson also conveys the impression that an authentic life in the woods should be pre-modern and more specifically pre-technological. Close to the diary's end, he makes an anaphoric list summing up the deprivations he chose, and their affordances, which reveals the selective nature of his aversion: "Without a car, the hermit walks. Without a supermarket, he fishes. Without a boiler, he chops wood . . . without a TV, he opens a book" (219/275).⁷³ He bans modern technologies and signs of globalisation from his

⁷⁰ "Un pas de côté" (Tesson, *Forêts* 9).

⁷¹ "La cabane est le lieu du *pas de côté*" (ibid., 267).

⁷² "Quinze sortes de ketchup. À cause de choses pareilles, j'ai eu envie de quitter ce monde" (ibid., 21).

⁷³ "Privé de voiture, l'ermite marche. Privé de supermarché, il pêche. Privé de chaudière, son bras fend le bois" (ibid., 275).

wilderness. Were it not for the all-pervasive mocking tone of the book, Tesson's engagement with the place could be read as nostalgic and even pastoral, since the pastoral mode "always implies that we are returning, in the fiction, to where we used to be", and more specifically to pre-modern ways of life, as Frederick Garber puts it (455). Nevertheless, due to the self-deprecatory comments and the irony that suffuse *Consolations of the Forest*,⁷⁴ it may be more appropriate to call this text *mock* pastoral.

Tesson's text contains the desire to return to an earlier era that he seems to imagine as more authentic: an era free from modern consumerism, as we have seen, and free from tourists, as I shall presently point out. *Consolations of the Forest* feeds from the *topos* of the travel-writing genre that consists in scorning tourists. Tourists belong to the pollution Tesson would rather avoid, as we can see through his contempt for the (non-Russian) foreigners who ask him inept questions (38/62) and want to exchange email addresses (215/271). As in Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, the traveller is less inclined to welcome foreign tourists than local visitors. In view of Tesson's rejection of modern consumer society, it is possible to hypothesise that tourism is at least partly held in contempt in his travelogue because of its links to this societal model: tourism makes the monetary aspect of travel conspicuous, whereas the voluntary nomads such as Tesson typically erase it from their books.

Tesson comes from a long line of writers who make no bones about their disdain for tourism. There are in fact few writers who, like Paul Theroux, admit to being tourists themselves (Theroux 119). As Jonathan Culler humorously points out, in travel writing, "[a]nimal imagery seems their [the tourists'] inevitable lot: they are said to move in herds, droves, flocks, or swarms; they are as docile as sheep but as annoying as a plague of insects when they descend on a spot" ("Semiotics" 2).⁷⁵ There is a plethora of examples of travel writers representing tourists as a form of pollution. To cite only a few, one might think for instance of Robyn Davidson's annoyance when a bus of tourists pesters her for pictures in *Tracks*: "They had two-way radios, winches, funny hats with corks on them, stubbies (beer bottles) and leather stubbie-holders with emus, kangaroos and naked women tooled on them, all this to travel down a perfectly safe road. And they had cameras" (126). In the field of French travel writing, one might also think of Tesson's travel companion, Cédric Gras, who said in an interview that "[t]he enemy of the traveller is the tourist" and hinted that Russia was particularly appealing precisely because "there isn't really any tourist attraction there" (§4).⁷⁶ Finally, considering Tesson's extensive indebtedness to the works of Jacques Lacarrière, one may compare the former's descriptions of Australians and Germans as intruders (*Consolations* 38/62, 215/271) to the latter's description of tourists as cemetery desecrators (Lacarrière, *Sourates* 37).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ I shall comment on Tesson's irony and self-deprecation further in **Chapter 5**.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Culler may be indebted to Paul Fussell, who, a year before him, wrote in almost identical terms about the animal imagery of the "anti-tourists fulminations" of the 1870s, 1920s and 1930s (see Fussell 40-41).

⁷⁶ The travels of Cédric Gras and Tesson across Russia by means of motorbike and sidecar are recounted in Tesson's *Bérézina* (2015). Gras voices his dislike of tourists in an interview given to *L'express* in 2018: "L'ennemi du voyageur, c'est le touriste. Or, là-bas [en Russie], à part quelques villes, il n'y a pas vraiment d'attraction touristique".

⁷⁷ While the indebtedness of Tesson's themes, ideas and style to the works of Jacques Lacarrière are too extensive to be studied here, it is worth remembering that Tesson refers to Lacarrière's *Men Possessed By God* (*Les Hommes ivres de Dieu*) throughout *Consolations of the Forest*.

What are we to make of the idea that authentic travel is opposed to tourism? My contention is that Paul Fussell found the underlying cause of contempt for tourists when he brought up class: “From the outset mass tourism attracted the class-contempt of killjoys who conceived themselves independent travelers and thus superior by reason of intellect, education, curiosity, and spirit” (40). Agnieszka Sobocinska and Richard White go further, arguing that the alleged moral superiority of travellers over tourists hides elitist insecurities and aims to safeguard aristocratic hierarchies (568). This argument is also supported by Caren Kaplan, who writes that “the rejection of tourism in favor of ‘pure traveling’ signals powerful anxieties about hierarchical values” (79). Rather than scorn tourists, travel writers could recognise that not everyone can spend six months in a cabin on Lake Baikal. As Davidson writes, “[i]t’s a bit much to ask people who have three weeks holiday a year to spend it struggling with the confusions of an alien place, or to put up with discomforts when what they have earned is rest” (qtd. in Holland and Huggan 201).⁷⁸

There is no denying that “travel writers obviously participate in the tourist industry they claim to scorn”, as Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan point out in *Tourists with Typewriters* (xi). Yet reluctant as they are to see their art tainted by association with consumerism, few make their ties to the book industry as clear as Davidson does when she lays out her moral struggles and guilt of being “a sell-out” for *National Geographic* (91). Save for Wheeler, who mentions being part of the American National Science Foundation’s Antarctic Artists’ and Writers’ Program, the travellers I study seldom lay bare their economic ties – apart from when they thank their sponsors in the “acknowledgement” section, as Pico Iyer does for instance in *The Global Soul*. One can easily surmise that explanations about sponsors would conflict with the desire of some travellers to appear independent and with the praise of self-sufficiency found in some of their books, such as Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest*. In Tesson’s works especially, one might note the absence of an “acknowledgement” section – at least in the books and editions I listed in the bibliography. Leaving economic matters aside strengthens the impression that his travelogues are above all aesthetic objects detached from the socioeconomic context of their production. The modernity and consumer society which he shuns in his journey to Lake Baikal is thus kept at bay in the paratext too.

Disparaging tourists is in keeping with the “rhetoric of exhaustion” typical of twentieth-century travel literature (Cronin 2). By dreaming up an uncontaminated Golden Age, Tesson sustains this rhetoric, which revolves around the complaint that real travel is on the wane on account of technology and tourism. To acquire a better picture of this type of discourse, we can read Tesson’s rejection of technology and tourism side by side with the comments of Ryszard Kapuściński, for whom “the town once reached by the river steamer is a wholly different place from the one reached by a Ryanair flight” (222) and Gilles Lapouge, who rues aeroplane travel, computer typing, and postmodernity at the start of *L’Encre du voyageur* (2007).

As Heather Henderson argues, locating the past in far-off lands or re-enacting past conditions of travel through slow transport are two of the “self-insulating strategies” that enable travellers to “reimagine” the past, “keep the contemporary world at a distance” and “keep their romantic visions alive” (233, 237). Such travellers make it seem like the

⁷⁸ Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan quote Robyn Davidson, “Walk on the Wild Side”, *Guardian Weekly*, 4 August 1996, 27.

best way to overcome technological “exhaustion” is to walk or use other idiosyncratic means of transportation, such as horse riding in Tesson’s *La Chevauchée des steppes* (2001). With the help of these manoeuvres, they recreate a sense of authenticity and convey the impression that they are brushing against “the lost innocence of a Golden Age” (Henderson 233).

Shunning technical progress has formed part of the rights and privileges of travellers since the 1800s. The motif is epitomised by John Ruskin, who compared “going by railroad” to “becoming a parcel” and “being ‘sent’ to a place” (qtd. in Boorstin 87),⁷⁹ and by Robert Louis Stevenson, who preferred to push aside the industrial advance of rail and hike with a donkey in the French Cévennes instead. Therefore, one may doubt critics – such as Debbie Lisle and Stephen Levin – who argue that this trend is on the rise in contemporary travel writing, and who contend that it is concomitant with a rejection and criticism of the conditions of postmodernity and late capitalism. Taking as an example Theroux’s annoyance at finding movie ads in Delhi and skyscrapers in South-East Asia, Lisle interprets the backward glance of contemporary travel writers as a reaction against globalisation (221, 25). Yet, Theroux’s dissatisfaction could also be interpreted as the reaction of a Western traveller against the Westernisation of foreign countries that he would rather have frozen in an exotic past to which he can travel at will.

The argument according to which modernity and/or postmodernity cause contemporary travellers to retreat to slower modes of travel could be nuanced. Considering Thoreau’s ostensible preference for walking over rail in *Walden* and Stevenson’s decision to journey with a donkey, we may doubt that slow travel aligns mostly with a recent stance against the latest conditions of global capitalism. Rather than seeing the choices and comments made by these travel writers as a reaction to recent societal changes, we could see them as a constant of the travel-writing genre, which is replete with examples that portray the journeys of the backroad adventurer as more authentic than the guidebook paths of aircraft passengers.⁸⁰

We can also doubt that this “rhetoric of exhaustion” is as dominant in recent adventure travel as Lisle and Levin argue (Cronin 2). Levin contends that adventure travel no longer enables “self-realisation” in postmodernity (5), but the epiphanies that the travellers of my corpus experience offer good counterexamples that challenge this idea. They align rather with the strand of contemporary wonder-filled travelogues that Simon Cooke studies in *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder*. Although I side with Levin when he contends that contemporary adventure travellers experience modernity as a source of constraints and alienation (4), it also seems necessary to question his contention that some travel writers “portray a failed identification . . . [with] the social order” (3). This claim would require a better definition of the kind of “social order” the travellers supposedly reject, considering that they often seem to hold in high esteem other social orders such as the local people’s. We could stress that these alternative social orders seem to be preferred to those that the travellers escape for reasons that are not especially related to a sustained criticism of the conditions of late capitalism, contrary to what Levin argues, and that have

⁷⁹ Daniel Boorstin does not provide a specific reference.

⁸⁰ According to Simon Cooke (28), what Michael Cronin calls the “rhetoric of exhaustion” has been a feature of the travel-writing genre at least since the seventeenth century. For more on the roots and forms of this rhetoric, see Cooke 1-10, 25-30, 37.

more to do with exoticism and with the myths of the Noble Savage and of “the Ecological Indian” (Garrard 144).⁸¹

Tesson’s own rejection of modern civilisation in *Consolation of the Forest* seems to be a literary stance in keeping with the conventions of the travel-writing genre rather than a political stance rejecting the conditions of late capitalism. For instance, the idea that civilisation corrupts and that one had better step away from it can be seen as an inheritance from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Tesson quotes extensively. The intertextual nexus that Tesson includes in his travelogue strengthens the impression that his “sidestep” is literary rather than political (*Consolations* xi/9): he mentions Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, in which the French philosopher flees society to contemplate his memories and thoughts, rather than political works such as *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*.

Rousseau provides a relevant frame to understanding Tesson’s rejection of certain aspects of civilisation. His *Reveries* enable Tesson to evoke voluntary solitude, peaceful herborisation and a rich inner life (*Consolations* 80/111). These themes encourage readers to draw a parallel between Tesson’s retreat on Lake Baikal and Rousseau’s on Lake Biel. We could go further in the comparison and read the passage where Tesson presents himself as a victim of noisy visitors as a parody of the alleged persecutions Rousseau said he suffered in Môtiers. The passage that best illustrates the “toxic discourse” in *Consolations of the Forest* is placed shortly after Tesson’s arrival at the cabin (Buell, *Writing* 30), when his tranquillity is disturbed by noisy notables from Irkutsk, who have come to party at the lake:

What I came here to escape has descended on my island: noise, ugliness, testosterone-fuelled herd behaviour. And I, poor fool, with my speeches about retrenchment and my copy of Rousseau’s *Reveries* on the table! . . .

In the fourth century, . . . [u]nable to bear even the slightest intrusion, they [the Desert Fathers] went deep into the sandy wastes, burying themselves in grottoes. The world they loved was cleansed of their fellow men . . . (25/45-46)⁸²

Tesson feeds the “toxic discourse” by railing against people who do not share his personal view of a desirable (silent) life and who do not fit in to the emptiness he wishes to find at Lake Baikal. He portrays himself as a victim of indelicate visitors in a manner that is reminiscent of Rousseau’s complaints against his supposed persecutors in *Reveries*. After presenting himself as the misunderstood victim of people’s wickedness in the first *promenade*, in the fifth, Rousseau depicts the bliss he felt on St. Peter’s Island in Switzerland, where he took shelter. However, Tesson’s passage resembles a parody rather than an uncritical homage. Contrary to Rousseau, Tesson is aware and critical of the

⁸¹ I address exoticism and these two myths in **Chapter 3**.

⁸² “Ce que je suis venu fuir s’abat sur mon îlot: le bruit, la laideur, la grégarité testostéronique. Et moi, pauvre poire, avec mes discours sur le retranchement et mon exemplaire des *Rêveries* de Jean-Jacques sur la table! . . .

Au IV^e siècle, les Pères du désert . . . ne supportaient plus la moindre intrusion. Ils refluèrent au fond des déserts, s’enfouissaient dans les grottes. Leurs réserves d’amour se vouaient à un monde vide de leurs semblables” (Tesson, *Forêts* 45-46).

unsavoury side of his own withdrawal. His self-deprecatory tone mitigates the blatant misanthropy expressed by the word “cleansed” for instance, which we can interpret as a symptom of “toxic discourse” (Buell, *Writing* 30), even if it seems borrowed or at least partly attributed to the Desert Fathers.

Although it is advisable to consider Tesson’s pervasive irony when reading his provocative comments, they still seem to feed what Buell calls the discourse of “betrayed Edens” (*Writing* 37). The passage quoted above escalates until Tesson compares the noisy visitors’ “attack” on the “virginity of the world” to “disembowelling Poles” (*Consolations* 25/45).⁸³ This hyperbolic sense of outrage at the toxicity of the intrusion can be read as mock pastoral. On the one hand, the traveller conveys a sense of pastoral ownership with the possessive “my island”, which echoes Robinson Crusoe’s feeling of entitlement in Daniel Defoe’s novel,⁸⁴ and the pastoral ideal of possessing “uncluttered surroundings that ought to be one’s by right” (Buell, *Writing* 38). On the other hand, Tesson mitigates his provocative comment with a pinch of self-deprecatory humour, calling himself a “poor fool” (*Consolations* 25/45). All in all, Tesson positions himself as the heir to certain traditions of (travel-)writing that present solitary travel in a pristine wilderness as more authentic, yet still distances himself from such traditions and filters them through his irony, the extent of which I shall survey in more detail in **Chapter 5**.

1.5. Far from financial troubles and local cultures – into Sara Wheeler’s nonhuman nature

At first sight, it seems that Wheeler’s Antarctic cannot be soiled by “the toxic taint of humanity” (Garrard 15). Indeed, so hostile are the conditions of life and work there – even adapted scientific equipment breaks down – that the human presence remains minimal, and therefore she considers that it has no impact on the continent’s pristine state: “I never felt sorry or guilty or upset about it [finding modern conveniences on Antarctic stations]; I perceived bases as the tiniest fragments of human life on a vast, unspoiled white continent. It would be like getting upset about a couple of specks of dust on the Bayeux tapestry or one inharmonious note in a Mozart sonata” (*Terra* 23). Contrary to Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s journeys, Wheeler’s presence in the Antarctic is heavily reliant on technology, and it would have been paradoxical to find in her text a rejection of the insulating suits, helicopters and modern communications she depends on. In addition, she dedicates significant space to the people she meets, portraying them as likeable idiosyncratic personalities, endearing them to readers with anecdotes about their love life (the Danish fish biologist, for instance, who had fallen in love five weeks before coming south [60]), their work (one might think of the young women capturing and measuring penguins [42]), or their personal qualities (such as Lucia DeLeiris’s self-confidence [265]). As Nicoletta Brazzelli stresses in her chapter on Antarctic narratives, “Wheeler focuses on the people of Antarctica, past and present – the way they live now, the way they lived and died in the past, and how they respond to the physical

⁸³ “Marcher sur la neige, c’est ne pas supporter la virginité du monde. On commence par défoncer les blancs talus puis on éventre les Polonais” (Tesson, *Forêts* 45-46).

⁸⁴ Tesson refers to Robinson Crusoe on multiple occasions in his diary (*Consolations*, 79/109, 117/152, 161/206).

and psychological challenges of the most extreme environment in the world” (77-78). In other words, her text appears overall to be extrovert in tone.

Yet it is not innocuous to compare human presence to “specks of dust” (23) – essentially, dirt – as she does (23). In addition, readers may note that the epiphanies Wheeler reports are conditioned by the absence of human settlements on the continent. She explains that she experienced more intense transcendent emotions in the Antarctic than in the Chilean desert and attributes the difference in intensity to the fact that there has never been any settlement in the Antarctic (68). Her religious feelings hinge partly on the absence of any human history in the Antarctic, as exemplified by the following extract:

Later, I hiked over to the face of the Canada [Glacier]. When I sat on the ground and ran a handful of soil through my fingers, I half expected to find a flint arrowhead – some small sign of a human past. What I heard there was beyond quietness. It was George Eliot’s “roar which lies on the other side of silence”. . . . If Antarctica had something to teach me . . . it was not about humanity. The landscape drew my thoughts away from worldly things . . . I had found the place where, loosed from my cultural moorings, I could find the space to look for the higher power, whatever it was, that loomed over the snowfields. (67-68)

The silence that Wheeler praises is paradoxical. To describe it, she twists the statement of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*’s narrator, which alludes in fact to the insignificance of an individual’s sorrow at seeing their dreams broken, a disenchantment that happens so often that it cannot elicit much sympathy. As Eliot’s narrator says, if we became aware of all such ordinary sorrows, experienced by many at the same time, “[i]f we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (226). In other words, Eliot’s “roar” is a deafening multitude of sorrowful frequencies that humankind produces but cannot fully perceive or comprehend. By contrast, Wheeler’s silence seems to signal the peaceful existence of a divinity out there “over the snow fields” (*Terra* 68). Wheeler’s nonhuman silence is all the more paradoxical given that she fills Antarctica with the polyphony of past explorers’ accounts. Are their experiences not “worldly things” and are their books not “cultural moorings”?

Throughout Wheeler’s *Terra Incognita*, the readers’ attention is drawn to the recurring opposition between a “higher power” and “worldly things” (68), as if they were irreconcilable. Put side by side with the joyful inclusiveness of Walt Whitman, who claimed that every man, woman and animal were godlike in their daily attitudes, Wheeler’s conception of the divine appears exclusive. Even though she does not see the scientific research stations as a stain on the Antarctic, it seems that human life is still something she needs to be “away” and “loosed” from (68). In the following extract, she adumbrates once more the vision of a paradise free of human beings:

In Antarctica I experienced a certainty . . . It emanated from a sense of harmony. The landscape was intact . . . It was free of the diurnal cycle that locked us earthlings into the ineluctable routine of home. It didn't suffer famines or social unrest. It was . . . entirely untainted by the inevitable tragedy of the human condition. In front of me I saw the world stripped of its clutter: there were no honking horns, no overflowing litter bins, no gas bills – there was no sign of human intervention at all.

. . . it was the scale, the unownedness, and the overpowering beauty that made Antarctic different . . . I felt certain that a higher power exists, and every soul constitutes part of a harmonious universe . . . (94)

With words such as “intact”, “free”, “untainted” and “stripped”, Wheeler builds a discourse of toxicity that implies that humanity is a stain. The transcendent power of Antarctica is defined negatively, and springs first and foremost from the *absence* of humanity, rather than from the presence of a divinity, as suggested by the repetition of “no honking horns, no overflowing litter bins, no gas bills . . . no sign of human intervention”, which precedes her experience of a “higher power”.

The feeling of undergoing an authentic spiritual experience seems especially associated with the absence of material and financial concerns. The reiterated negative form of the passage quoted above evokes the *via negativa*, the monastic choice of material deprivation. As material elements are removed (bills, bins, cars), the landscape becomes more spiritual. Because she locates the authentic experience underneath some “clutter” that burdens her urban life (94), Wheeler’s discourse is also reminiscent of the traditional dualism that postulates that a core self exists underneath a superficial (cluttered) self. Wheeler seems to retrieve a sense of authentic experience by doing away with the superficial self who is in charge of paying bills and interacting with others in urban settings. While other writers may be able to summon up epiphanies from what Miles Orvell calls “antipoetic material” (249), as William Carlos Williams does with “the broken/ pieces of a green/ bottle” (“Between Walls”, v. 8-10), Wheeler’s epiphanies clearly exclude material elements of daily life. The authenticity she depicts seems to be preferably connected to the “soul”, the only human element that she admits as part of “a harmonious universe” (*Terra* 94).

Terra Incognita illustrates the idea that the authentic wilderness affords the return to a lost childhood. I side with Victoria Rosner, who interprets Wheeler’s rejection of responsibilities as a desire to return to a “never-ending primordial moment of childhood . . . joyful innocence and freedom from responsibility” (15). Wheeler herself admits to feeling as if she were in “Never-Never Land” (*Terra* 71). What she rejects in the human condition has to do the responsibilities of an adult life: money matters (which reminds us of Tesson’s rejection of consumerism), daily responsibilities and unpleasant social interactions. On the threshold of the book the readers are warned that she sought “a space of the imagination” (1), away from her urban home and everyday chores: “No cities, no bank managers, no pram in the hall” (1). She may be humorously alluding here to British writer and critic Cyril Connolly’s quip: “There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall” (127). When she writes that she experiences the landscape as a “cosmic symbol of harmony and of peaceful freedom beyond poverty, gas bills and unrequited love”, she gives further evidence that the burdens she escapes are linked to adulthood, responsibilities and certain interactions (*Terra* 283).

It is noteworthy that her Antarctica is characterised by its “unownedness”, the absence of “bills” and “bank managers”, and the fact that no money changes hands (94, 94, 1, 228). It conveys the impression that the authenticity of the journey depends on the traveller’s distance from economic matters. Because money is virtually absent from the travelogue, stress falls more prominently on her spiritual quest, which is legitimated by association with the good repute of “non-utilitarian travel”, a kind of journey that has been epitomised by pilgrims and opposed to the “utilitarian travel” of merchants since the Middle Ages (*Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* §5-6). By reiterating disdain for the financial topic, Wheeler follows in the footsteps of the explorers she reveres and remembers for their “spirit” rather than for their material gain (135).

Another aspect she rejects concerns certain human interactions. She never needs to negotiate with the strangeness of a foreign culture. The authenticity of her journey appears closely related to the absence of tensions caused by social interactions and to the absence of the feeling of disempowerment that they may cause. The human component of the Antarctic stations is very controlled: no risk of “poverty”, “famine” or “social unrest” there (*Terra* 1, 94, 94). I side with Maureen Mulligan, who puts Wheeler’s representation of the continent into perspective by comparing it with other travelogues in order to highlight the ethical issue that their representation of humanity raises:

We are forced to the uncomfortable conclusion that it is, in fact the presence of other people – of the native populations of foreign countries in particular – that make the travel experiences of so many recent writers into a kind of Calvary of suffering: they are robbed, cheated, threatened, lost, confused, stared at, unable to communicate, have to deal with strange food and customs . . . It is not Wheeler’s special relationship with the Higher Powers that makes her time in Antarctica so enjoyable; it is the lack of natives and foreign culture. (76)

Antarctica affords smooth interactions and enjoyable engagement with a carefully selected culture. First, the continent is only scripted with the myths of the past Western explorers that the writer knows well and that do not present a cultural challenge for her. Second, social interactions occur in a cosmopolitan utopia mostly inhabited by scientists doing fascinating work, save for the unfortunate episode at the British base, where Wheeler recounts putting up with misogynistic behaviour which, like the bothersome “prams in the hall” of her London apartment block (*Terra* 1), forced her to face expectations linked to her gender.

We could question Wheeler’s grim portrayal of humanity and her idealisation of Antarctica. She portrays humanity as “locked” in a kind of purgatory, as suggested by the words “inevitable” and “ineluctable” (94) – which implies that it is beyond saving, and that one had better get away from it. On the contrary, being essentially uninhabited, her Antarctica appears as a haven free from debt (“gas bills” [94]) and pollution (“honking horns”, “litter bins” [94]). We could challenge the separation between a doomed humanity and a pristine pole by adding nuance to it and pointing out the positive aspects of humanity that she silences when she depicts humankind as entangled in bills and poverty. We could also highlight that Antarctica may not be so much above the struggles of humankind as Wheeler hints, considering “the urgent political issues concerning

exploitation of the continent” that she marginalises, as Terry Gifford stresses (qtd. in Leane, *Antarctica* 137).⁸⁵

1.6. Alternative discourses and ethical issues of the “toxic taint”

Why is it a problem to depict nature as more authentic when it is free from the stain of humanity and to wish that humankind was a light-footed “troll who roam[ed] the moorland without leaving any tracks in the heather” (Tesson, *Consolations* 23/43)?⁸⁶ Precisely because humanity is not a light-footed troll, and because it is located within nature.

To put into perspective the “toxic discourse” found in the travelogues under study (Buell, *Writing* 30), we can compare this notion to other conceptions of nature that do not portray authentic nature as being separated from civilisation. For instance, the philosophers of Object-Oriented Ontology, and more specifically Timothy Morton, offer another way to think of humanity and nature. Morton argues that the environment is a viscous substance in which we are caught (*Hyperobjects* 32), which he illustrates by stating: “When I turn the key in the ignition of my car, I am relating to global warming” (20). He advises his readers to think of *Ecology without Nature*, which means, to simplify it, that he is in favour of a renewed representation of nature that would acknowledge the entanglement of humanity in it. We can clearly see that his idea conflicts with the “hyperseparat[ion]” of pristine wilderness and tainted civilisation that has, according to Kylie Crane, been traditionally associated with the notion of wilderness, and that is illustrated by the four case studies I have presented (15).⁸⁷ The all-or-nothing approach that comes with this “hyperseparation” raises issues. It conveys the impression that human presence is fundamentally incompatible with nature, and it denies the enmeshment of humanity in the environment, which makes any action to mitigate environmental damage seem pointless.

When the representation of nature denies the interconnectedness of humankind and the environment, several issues arise. Larry Lohmann points one of them out when he argues that the preservationist discourse that favours an utterly uninhabited kind of wilderness is actually detrimental to nature conservation, because it leads to conservationist policies that portray local populations as “encroachers” and dispossess them of their lands, to the benefit of “international conservation élites”, with unplanned catastrophic consequences for the wildlife (§21).

Greg Garrard raises another of these issues when he warns that the division between humanity and an uncontaminated nature erases the responsibility we have towards our

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Leane quotes Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, Routledge, 1999, 147.

⁸⁶ “L’idéal serait de traverser la vie tel le troll scandinave qui court sur la lande sans laisser de traces sur les bruyères” (Tesson, *Forêts* 43).

⁸⁷ To support her reflections on the hyperseparation of civilisation and wilderness, Kylie Crane points to the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and “Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism”, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, U of Georgia P, 1998, 652-690.

everyday lives.⁸⁸ If the travellers' daily life is dissociated from the paradisiacal nature they depict, reinventing an ecocritical "practice of daily life" becomes challenging, to borrow Michel de Certeau's famous phrase. As Garrard explains, when environmental damage is attributed to such weighty factors as "humanity" and "civilisation", it erases the possibility for action on an individual scale:

[T]he ideal wilderness space is wholly pure by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there. This model . . . exonerates us from taking a responsible approach to our everyday lives: our working and domestic lives are effectively irredeemable alongside this ideal, so the activities we carry out there escape scrutiny. (78)

Here, Garrard touches upon the question of the sustainability of our relation to nature. Considering the problematic implications of the "toxic discourse" at work in the corpus (Buell, *Writing* 30), we can wonder how the travellers under study fare after they return to their urban lives and we can doubt whether they achieve a sustainable "ethics of care" towards nature (Buell, *Environmental* 218). If we are to believe what Jamaica Kincaid hints at in *A Small Place* when she mocks the tourists who come to Antigua to escape the routine of home, travelling is fundamentally opposed to daily life. We could wonder whether it means that what the travellers learn or experience during their journeys is irreconcilably separated from the lives they lead at home.

Do travels impact the travellers' relation to nature at home? Is the authentic nature that one cherishes and contemplates necessarily located away from home? The travelogues I have studied and the interviews of their authors give evidence of the travellers' difficulty to maintain their newly acquired frame of mind and awestruck feeling once they are back in an urban setting. For instance, in an interview for the BBC, Thubron explains that a few weeks after coming home from a trip, he would generally notice that he had slipped back into his London routine, which he found "a little depressing" (BBC 4 Bookclub).

We could compare the lack of change he deplores to two events in Tesson's diary and Wheeler's travelogue. Three months after settling down at Lake Baikal, Tesson is forced to "return to civilization" to seek a visa extension (*Consolations* 129/168).⁸⁹ His diary condenses this nine-day period into a single, ten-line-long sentence, which recreates the tension he said he felt in the city. The passage hints that the serenity he found in the wilderness could not survive outside the woods. Wheeler also describes experiencing frustration at being forced back home between her first and second stays south – "[t]his brief re-entry into the real world had made me disorientated and irritable" (*Terra* 186) – and again between her second and third journeys – "[a]s I began to pick up the threads

⁸⁸ A decade before Garrard, Larry Lohmann wrote an essay called "Green Orientalism", in which he exposed this paradox in the following terms: "Just as traditionalists often view selected Southern peoples as a modernity-free cultural reserve to be fenced off and kept pure for future use, many Northern preservationists view nature as an industrial-free and therefore (they assume) human-free reserve whose separateness is, paradoxically, a condition for people's being able to be 'one' with it in the proper way" (§18).

⁸⁹ "[C]ontr[aint] à regagner la civilisation pour chercher une extension de visa" (Tesson, *Forêts* 168).

of my life [in London], the Frank Hurley quotation I had stuck on the kitchen wall loomed increasingly large in my imagination. ‘After life in the vastness of a vacant continent’, it said, ‘civilisation seemed disappointingly narrow, cramped, superficial and empty’” (253). If these travel writers evoke the problem of reconciling the wonders of travels and the trivialities of home and civilisation, they do not begin to address it seriously, except perhaps Tesson in his latest opus *La panthère des neiges*.

In this travelogue, Tesson swears that he will continue to practice “*l’affût*”, a kind of attentive observation of nature, even after he leaves the Himalaya. Chances are slim that his observation of the Parisian environment will be rewarded by the apparition of a panther, other than the feline of the *Jardin des plantes* that inspired Rainer Maria Rilke, but Tesson rejoices in the sighting of more modest animals near or in cities, such as badgers in Moselle and an owl in Chengdu (16, 165). This shift towards a more local and sustainable appreciation of wildlife suggests that the traveller adopts a more inclusive conception of authentic wilderness in *La panthère des neiges* than in *Consolations of the Forest*, and imagines sustainable behaviours that could be applied at a more local level.

It is worth looking at the works of other nature writers and critics who take this redefinition of the wilderness further. The American poet Gary Snyder, for instance, celebrates a kind of nature that is compatible with the urban settings in which urbanites are enmeshed:

[W]ildness is not limited to the two percent formal wilderness areas. Shifting scales, it is everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners. (11)

Snyder’s wilderness reunites nature with human presence and city settings and resolves the main ethical issue of “toxic discourse” (Buell, *Writing* 30). In addition, the outlook that he adopts allows for the re-enchantment of the everyday and the rediscovery of elements of the city that may have gone unnoticed. The conception of the wilderness as a local phenomenon encourages “vertical travel”, defined as “temporary dwelling in a location . . . where the traveller begins to travel down into the particulars of place either in space (botany, studies of micro-climate, exhaustive exploration of local landscape) or in time (local history, archaeology, folklore)” (Cronin 19). Such a local observation of nature favours the aesthetics of the “endotic”, that is, the minute description of one’s ordinary surroundings, over the “exotic”, sourced from elsewhere (Perec 210). It thus appears to reconcile dwelling in one’s urban home and paying attention to nature in all its forms. Vertical travel has attracted particular critical attention lately, with an issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* published on the topic in April 2022, not least because of the forced decrease in the scope of one’s travels during the covid-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, Charles Forsdick had already identified and surveyed a large array of French and British contemporary travelogues that featured slow or immobile travel and/or defamiliarised seemingly unremarkable urban settings, such as Julio Cortazar and Carole Dunlop’s *Les Autonautes de la cosmoroute* (1983), Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces* (*Espèces d’espaces*, 1974), Jacques Lacarrière’s *Le Pays sous l’écorce* (1980) and the edited volume *Mount London: Ascents in the Vertical City* (2014).

Compared with the potential for action contained in these alternative discourses, the political scope of the works of Wheeler, Tesson and Matthiessen appears very limited. They are hardly solution oriented. They largely set politics aside – albeit for fatalistic comments on environmental collapse by Tesson (*Consolations* 57/83) and Matthiessen (*Snow* 249), and on “the inevitable tragedy of the human condition” by Wheeler (*Terra* 94). The focus of their travelogues seems mostly aesthetic and the aim of their journey personal. They centre on the impressions and visions that nature inspires in them and relish their detachment from society, which they seek in no way to influence. Their texts seem to separate not only the wilderness from humankind, but also the travellers’ aesthetic experience of nature from the possibility of acting, inviting action or creating a sustainable ethics. We could question this double separation and wonder whether travel writers could not “go away to think” *and* come back to act, fuse “social engagement and reflective retreat”, as Scott Slovic advocates (15). Halia Koo expresses a similar concern, stressing that Tesson’s “art of disappearance” “raises the issue of the writer’s responsibility and commitment” (49).⁹⁰ Tesson is aware of the critics who have questioned his escapism, and replied that “it’s not that [he didn’t] care, but [he did] not have the spirit to fight” (Interview for *La Grande Librairie*, 00:10:43).⁹¹

Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s texts possess clear ecocritical potential that shows, for instance, when Matthiessen deplores the erosion of the soil and overhunting (*Snow* 31, 83) and when Tesson condemns deforestation and poaching (*Consolations* 57/82, 145/187) and says that we need to “fight for the preservation of this world” at the very end of the film *The Velvet Queen* (*La panthère des neiges*).⁹² It is also worth adding that Tesson has produced a documentary that denounces the ecological catastrophe that has befallen the Aral Sea, which has dried up due to the diversion of its sources of inflowing water to benefit cotton plants (Blum-Reid §1). To a certain extent, he is thus involved in raising awareness about the need to preserve the environment in more ways than through his travelogues.

Nevertheless, their warnings take the form of fatalistic comments mourning in advance of the death of landscapes that are still standing as they write, as if humankind had no agency in averting their disappearance. The combination of a pessimistic tone and a lack of political agenda is exhibited, for instance, by Tesson, who avows the elitist nature of his journey to Siberia, stating that it is not destined to be imitated by “the masses”:

⁹⁰ “L’exercice de la disparition pratiqué par Tesson . . . pose cependant le problème de la responsabilité et de l’engagement de l’écrivain” (Koo 49).

⁹¹ “[J]e m’en fiche pas, seulement je n’ai pas d’âme pour combattre” (Tesson, Interview for *La Grande Librairie*, 00:10:43).

⁹² “[L]utter pour que ce monde perdure” (Tesson, in *La panthère des neiges*, dir. Amiguet and Munier).

Retreating to the forest cannot be everyone's course. Eremitism is elitism. Aldo Leopold says as much in his *A Sand County Almanac*; . . . 'All conservation of wildness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish' . . . Life in the woods is no solution to ecological problems. . . . The masses, taking to the woods, would bring along the evils they'd hoped to flee by leaving the city. (29/50)⁹³

If readers had started to imagine themselves in Siberia with the adventurer, they are stopped in their tracks. One may read Aldo Leopold or Sylvain Tesson, but one is encouraged to do so at home.

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler and, to a certain extent, Thubron, build upon and endorse the "hyperseparat[ion]" of a pristine wilderness and a corrupting civilisation (Crane 15). Their conception of an authentic nature is modelled on the myth of the empty wilderness and on the pastoral ideal, and it endorses the discourse of toxicity that the ecocritics Buell and Garrard have identified across a wide range of nature writings. Each in their own way, these travellers depict humankind as a form of pollution that they seek to escape or from which they wish to be "cleansed" (Tesson, *Consolations* 25/46). They suggest that their experience of nature is authentic when it is free from such elements as technology, tourists and squalor. The type of wilderness they look for functions as a haven, the home they long for, and as a place where they can find their authentic self.

Thubron's wilderness, for instance, embodies permanence and acts as a sanctuary that provides relief from the horrors of history with which he relentlessly engages in *In Siberia*. Matthiessen's wilderness also resembles a shrine, but he seeks shelter from other aspects of civilisation. He depicts the Himalaya as a long-lost Eden where the animals do not fear human visitors (*Snow* 13) and where he can experience his true self, as long as modern technology, tourists and the responsibilities of family are out of sight. Overcoming the guilt of leaving home and surviving with little recourse to technology seem to be features of the travel-writing genre and trials that travellers need to overcome to prove that they are authentic adventurers. However, as James Stull points out, this conception of authentic travel is dated, gendered and questionable (qtd. in Ross-Bryant 93).⁹⁴ Counterexamples can be found in the journeys of Jamaica Kincaid and Robert Maynard Pirsig, who integrate their sons and the use of technology into their narratives, and thus

⁹³ "La partition du recours aux forêts ne peut se jouer qu'à un nombre réduit d'interprètes. L'éremitisme est un élitisme. Aldo Leopold ne dit rien d'autre dans son *Almanach d'un comté des sables* . . . "Toute protection de la vie sauvage est vouée à l'échec, car pour chérir nous avons besoin de voir et de caresser et quand suffisamment de gens ont vu et caressé, il ne reste plus rien à chérir? . . . La vie dans les bois n'est pas une solution aux problèmes écologiques. . . . Les masses, gagnant les futaies, y importeraient les maux qu'elles prétendaient fuir en quittant la ville" (Tesson, *Forêts* 50).

⁹⁴ Lynn Ross-Bryant quotes James Stull, *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction*, Greenwood, 1993, 120-121.

suggest that authenticity in travel does not require a strict separation of home and away, nature and technology.

The conceptions of authentic wilderness that underpin Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* also bear the mark of the travel-writing genre. His disdain for tourists, who do not fit well into the authentic life in the woods he wishes to experience, revives a *topos* of travel literature that we also encounter in the texts of Davidson, Gras, Lacarrière and many other travel writers. As I have shown, these unwanted visitors are described as trespassers on the virgin shores of Lake Baikal. They clash with the traveller's desire to return to a pre-technological Golden Age and withdraw from civilisation in a manner that is reminiscent of Rousseau, whom Tesson seems to parody. This conception of anti-tourist authenticity can and has been questioned due to its conventional, elitist and paradoxical nature, considering that voluntary nomads are complicit with the travel industry they allegedly hold in contempt, as Holland and Huggan remark (xi).

Tourists are hardly the main target of Wheeler's attacks in *Terra Incognita*, but her narrative still fosters a rhetoric of toxicity. Wheeler in particular praises the absence of unpleasant social interactions and financial down-to-earth matters. The uninhabited continent seems to enable her to reach spiritual certainties precisely because it is "untainted" by the earthly matters that are concomitant with permanent human settlements (*Terra* 94). We can criticise her representation of an authentic experience in Antarctica on the grounds that one of its prerequisites is the exclusion of an unredeemable humanity.

What these travellers see as authentic wilderness carries potentially harmful ethical implications. The "toxic discourse" they implicitly endorse makes it difficult to think about humanity and nature as a compound (Buell, *Writing* 30). By excluding from their wildernesses unwanted signs of their daily lives, they adopt a strict separation that cuts off their urban lives from their journeys and from the "ethics of care" they practised abroad (Buell, *Environmental* 218). The conception of authenticity as escape from the allegedly "toxic taint of humanity" that I analysed in this chapter raises ethical issues because, as Garrard puts it, it denies the possibility for action and environmental care within the framework of "our everyday lives" (15, 78). I have endeavoured to put this "toxic discourse" into perspective by providing examples of other conceptions of the wilderness, such as those proposed by Timothy Morton's philosophy and Gary Snyder's poetry.

As we shall see in more detail in **Chapters 2 and 3**, despite the escapist nature of their travelogues and their problematic rejection of civilisation, the travellers of the corpus fill their texts with reverence for the wild nature to which they journey. They revive and reinterpret the wonder-filled look that American Transcendentalists cast on nature, and they portray the authentic encounter with nature as poetic and non-anthropocentric.

CHAPTER 2:

Authenticity as a Neo-transcendentalist Quest for Epiphanies

Introduction

My main contention in this section is that the descriptions of nature found in the texts of Sara Wheeler, Sylvain Tesson and Peter Matthiessen are grounded on what I call a neo-transcendentalist conception of authenticity.⁹⁵ They re-enact and develop in their own way some principles that can be found in transcendentalist writings, and above all the idea that one of the most authentic relations one can have to nature is contemplative and epiphanic. The epiphanies of these three authors vary in nature: Wheeler's epiphanies have a Christian hue, Tesson's are triggered by animals, Matthiessen's quieten his ego. Nevertheless, all are sparked by natural sights, and share the common characteristics of "expansiveness", "mysteriousness" and "intensity" that Martin Bidney identified as defining traits of epiphanies (3).⁹⁶ The three writers' epiphanies expand beyond the scale of human life (Wheeler) and beyond the ego (Matthiessen); they afford a glimpse into the mysterious worlds of animals (Tesson) and celebrate the smallest of them with lyrical intensity.

These travellers derive from nature the spiritual fulfilment traditionally associated with authenticity. They seem to expect their contemplation of sublime landscapes and animals to "provide the spiritual substance of life" (Trilling 98), which was previously gained from contemplating auratic art and performing religious rituals according to Walter Benjamin and Lionel Trilling respectively. Their quests for epiphanies indicate that all three writers belong with contemporary travel writers who are dedicated to "recovering and renewing a sense of wonder" (Cooke 2). With the Age of Exploration long gone and tourism reaching the farthest corners of the globe, a wonder-seeking gaze is needed in order to avoid endorsing the "rhetoric of exhaustion" that pervades the travel-writing genre (Cronin 2). As Simon Cooke argues in *Travellers' Tales of Wonder*, "a process of 're-enchancement'" is at work in the writings of contemporary travellers who are intent on evoking what lies beyond the limits of knowledge (8). Like these travellers, the three wayfarers I have chosen to study suggest that, for artists with the right sensibility, the wilderness is an ever-renewed source of wonder. The authentic encounter with nature that their travelogues seek is encapsulated by their spiritual and lyrical way of looking at and writing about the nonhuman.

Wheeler, Tesson and Matthiessen revive the specific strand of awe embodied by the Transcendentalists. Like their literary predecessors, these travellers associate nature with

⁹⁵ To date, the term has been loosely used to refer to transhumanists, and various critics have dubbed some twentieth-century American writers "modern transcendentalists", but, to my knowledge, no clear consensus on the meaning of the word "neo-transcendentalist" exists, and it has not acquired a conventional use in literary academic research.

⁹⁶ Martin Bidney grounds this definition of epiphanies on Ashton Nichols' *The Poetics of Epiphany*.

unity (Matthiessen) and divine harmony (Wheeler), and they suggest that one should contemplate wilderness as do children (Matthiessen), saints and animals (Tesson), in order to be soothed by epiphanic moments.

I will first argue that Wheeler, in a manner comparable to Ralph Waldo Emerson's, looks at nature partly through the prism of her religious beliefs. We will see that she refashions Antarctica into the spiritual work of a divinity and grants it redemptive power. I will then turn to Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges*, in which he theorises and applies a specific "education of the eye" (Emerson qtd. in Atwood §17).⁹⁷ This brings to mind the self-discipline Emerson advocates in *Nature*, which he envisages will lead him to much-prized epiphanies. I will subsequently analyse how Matthiessen attempts to consign his ego to the background and focus on nature instead, effacing the 'I' in favour of the 'eye', in keeping with his Zen principles and in a way that is reminiscent of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" (*Nature* 4). Finally, moving on to the sense of immediacy that is key in the epiphanies that the travellers seek out, I will discuss the advantages of the diary form that enables Tesson and Matthiessen to recreate the impression of immediacy that is key in their conceptions of authenticity.

2.1. Sara Wheeler's spiritual Antarctica

Reading nature as God's book

Wheeler's epiphanies are of a subtly Christian nature,⁹⁸ which entails that spiritual enlightenment comes less from nature itself than from the divinity that she sees in it. Like Emerson, she seems to believe that the world of nature shows the mind of God and reflects a divine order, even though this is only stated obliquely (*Nature* 39, 24). For instance, her comparison of Antarctica with "the Bayeux tapestry" and "a Mozart Sonata" suggests that she sees design in nature (*Terra* 23). Her description of the *aurora borealis* she witnessed with her campmate, Lucia DeLeiris, also introduces the discrete presence of a designer:

⁹⁷ Sara Atwood quotes Emerson, "Country Life", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1904, 12.

⁹⁸ We can deduce that Sara Wheeler is a Christian from the passages describing her Sunday visit to the Chapel of the Snows at McMurdo (*Terra* 49), her soothing memory of a nunnery she visited (149-150) and her attendance of mass at St Mark's by Regent Park Canal in London, which has "always" been "one of [her] first ports of call" when she returns from her travels (186). Yet Christianity *per se* is not named in the narrative and seems to matter less to the traveller than the spiritual feelings that the landscape elicits in her, and in others, including atheists (170). The specific congregation, Church, and branch of Christianity with which she identifies is indicated neither in *Terra Incognita* nor in the secondary sources I used to cast light on this travelogue.

The sky was streaked with faint emerald shadows, splaying out in several directions to the horizon, changing shape, spreading, and bleeding into the darkness. Iridescent coppery beams roamed among the stars like searchlights, and soft ruby flames flickered gently above the glacier, sporadically leaping forward into the middle of the dark sky. Towards the east, a rich and luminous topaz haze rolled lazily back and forward like a tide. At one moment the whole sky was a rainbow, flaming with radiant mock suns.

'Heavenly music', I murmured. (280)

The sense of divine design is wrought from the personification of the southern lights. The rhetorical figure breathes life into the lights' "bleeding" colours, their "gently" flickering lights, and "lazily" rolling glow. The aurora transforms into a divine phenomenon when Wheeler transmutes the lights into precious stones and metal: "copper", "emerald", "ruby" and "topaz". Her transformation of the lights into jewels evokes the biblical New Jerusalem and its walls of jasper, its gates of pearl, and its path of gold (Book of Revelation 21:18, 21:21). The score played by the coloured beams also appears "heavenly" due to the cosmic scope it covers, as the writer plays with light and "darkness", with ice (the glacier) and fire (the "ruby flames"), with the "sky", the "tide" and "suns". The overall impression is one of an alien phenomenon that exceeds human perceptions.

As she portrays nature as a place that reflects her spirituality and where divinity dwells, her landscapes bring to mind the Benjaminian idea that the cult of beauty is a "secularized ritual" aimed at paying tribute to and benefitting from the spiritual power of the authentic object (17). The conception of authentic experience that seems to underpin her descriptions is not only epiphanic, but "founded on theology" in a way comparable to the cult of authentic art that Benjamin depicts (17). In other words, her natural sceneries convey the impression that the authentic object beheld (here, nature) will act as an intercessor between the beholder and transcendent powers, and that the beholder will be soothed by the authentic. For instance, the ice caves near the camp Wheeler shares with DeLeiris are invested with divine presence and conjure up a heavenly world:

The ice had formed arabesques like carvings in the slender windows of an old mosque, and through it the light fell, diffused throughout glimmering blue caverns. Walls burgeoning with delicate crystals glittered around smooth arching tunnels which opened into glossy domes fortified by rows of stalactites. Had it been rock, it would have been a landscape painted by Leonardo, the pinnacles yielding to glimpses of dreamy vistas of ice.

If our landscapes were canvases, they were conceived by a mind raised above the troubles which afflict the human spirit. (*Terra* 268)

Wheeler turns this cave into a temple carved and built with intent. The patterns and openings of the ice are compared to the windows of a mosque, the light that comes in is almost divine, and the extended metaphor transforms the "arching tunnels" of the cave into aisles. The "glossy domes" can be likened to the cupolas of cathedrals or the domes of mosques, and the "rows of stalactites" to pillars. The natural elements merge with features of man-made edifices through the word "pinnacles", which can refer both to rock formations and to a Gothic architectural ornament used in chapels and cathedrals.

The idea that these caves seem designed is strengthened by the mention of “canvases” and of Leonardo’s painting, which enables Wheeler to convey the feeling of a guiding hand without evoking the idea of God directly. As in the remainder of *Terra Incognita*, there is no direct evocation of the “soul” here, but I suspect Wheeler of toning down the Christian nature of her spiritual impressions by replacing the word “soul” – which she hardly ever mentions – with the words “spirit” and “mind” – omnipresent in the book.

In this extract, besides the presence of a designer, we can sense spatial progress towards a form of inner enlightenment, an impression created by the fact that, as the traveller walks into the cave, she is surrounded with “diffused” light, which is reflected on “glimmering” caverns, “glitter[ing]” crystals, and “glossy” domes. This passage mirrors the initiation and transformation Wheeler undergoes in *Terra Incognita*: as she enters the ice cave – the ultimate symbol of initiation – the description fills with the spiritual peace typically granted to the initiated. It is significant that the environment described in heavenly terms is a cave, a symbolically charged space often found in initiation quests and fairy tales, where it refers to the subconscious. We could thus interpret the steps Wheeler takes in this cave as steps in her inner journey.

Spiritual initiation in unearthly landscapes

Wheeler looks at Antarctica with a sense of wonder and conveys the impression that there is more to it than merely tangible and observable stretches of ice. The Antarctic continent seems conducive to the sense of authenticity felt through epiphanies because it looks unearthly and has an aura of the unknown.

Notwithstanding the melting of the ice caps, barely mentioned as “part of the natural cycle of renewal” (227),⁹⁹ the landscapes Wheeler beholds are characterised by their immobility and their permanence. The fact that they endure for millions of years makes them an excellent physical anchor for Wheeler’s belief that permanence may exist. Interestingly, this perceived permanence comes as a counterpoint to the migrant nature of Wheeler’s cheerless musings, which she calls her “Nomadic Thoughts” (92), as if the fact that the landscape was seemingly untouched by change helped her assuage a state of unhappy restlessness. Geologic time is often mentioned as a source of wonder in *Terra Incognita*, especially when it is associated with unfamiliar scientific work. For instance, Wheeler informs her readers of the miraculous existence of microbial life through the words of Imre, a Hungarian microbiologist: “‘In this quarter inch of rock’, said Imre, holding aloft a red splinter, ‘we have compressed version of whole rain forest canopy. [sic] The micro-organisms slice off rock layer by layer, like salami. One slice of salami takes 10,000 thousand years to cut. So you see here biological and geological timescales overlap’” (173). Imre then explains that life miraculously endures in Antarctica and may also exist on Mars, which strengthens the impression that the continent offers opportunities to reflect on ideas beyond the earthly scope. In Wheeler’s words: “It

⁹⁹ One must remember that her trip was undertaken in the early 1990s, a time when climate change was less centre stage than it is now.

seemed . . . that it would be almost impossible, in this landscape, not to reflect on forces beyond the human plane” (162).

The journey becomes an initiation into the mysteries of the earth, which Wheeler probes by discussing them with scientists. Interviewing researchers enables her to stress the extraordinary qualities of Antarctic geology, such as when she writes that “[t]o investigate the late Cretaceous to mid-Cenozoic history of the Ross Sea region, geologists from five countries were proposing to drill offshore rock cores which would yield information on millions of years of tectonic and climate change” (32). Scientists measure geological time through the observation of the continent and reflect beyond the small scale of human life. Thanks to them, Wheeler can observe phenomena normally inaccessible to human eyes, such as the inside of a sponge underwater (144), or “the guts of the earth” seen from a helicopter in the crater of Mount Erebus (268).

The unearthly impression and wonder-struck tone are conveyed with lyrical language and neologisms pertaining to scientific apparatus. She explores not only Antarctica, but also the foreign country that science is for her. Her readers would be at pains to find two similar words to describe the snow, sky and ice fields, as she strives to mirror the exceptional quality of the landscape with a unique wordscape. For example, to describe the clouds that form after a storm, she writes “[n]acreous clouds are the most dramatic manifestation of polar stratospheric clouds, but they are rare in the Arctic” (272). Under the pen of the travel writer, scientific vocabulary – “nacreous”, “stratospheric” – becomes poetic, “dramatic” and “rare”, just like the clouds her words refer to. The choice of the scientific idiom can be better understood with the help of the French novelist and academic Christine Montalbetti, who explains that neologisms and loans from a foreign lexicon are two strategies used by travel writers to try and express an unfamiliar reality for which there are no words in their native language (154). In *Terra Incognita*, Wheeler travels across the disciplines, from literature to science, using an exotic scientific lexicon to convey the impression that Antarctica is an object of wonder as well as a territory that is far from being completely understood.

Redemptive journey at the South Pole

In *Terra Incognita*, the unearthly landscape is endowed with the spiritual ability to cleanse the beholder. Wheeler’s text seems underpinned by a conception of authentic travel akin to that associated with pilgrims: if the pilgrims are transformed, then the pilgrimage was authentic.

Redemption supposes that someone has been saved from error or sin (in Wheeler’s case, fear and alcoholism), through expiation or sacrifice (which Antarctica’s painfully cold temperatures bring to mind). It also implies a clear cut between one life and another, as does her journey. Wheeler clearly identifies such a shift in her life, writing: “I felt certain that a higher power exists . . . For the first time in my life, I didn’t sense fear prowling around behind a locked door inside my head . . . It was as if a light had gone on in that room, and I had looked the beast in the eye” (94). With phrases such as “*tabula rasa*” and “clean slate”, we understand from the first chapter on that Wheeler conceives of the landscape as a place that possesses a redemptive power (2, 5, italics original). The heroic

martyrdom of the past British explorers she praises can also be read as examples of the redeeming power that she attributes to Antarctica: she hints that they are no longer men but myth. As Elizabeth Leane explains, Antarctica has often been represented as “a place that cleanses the mind, calms the spirit and corrects bad habits”, which she illustrates with the nonfiction of Catherine Hartley and the fiction of Liz Maverick (*Antarctica* 144).

What seems to matter most to Wheeler is the “response of the spirit”, a phrase she uses as a title for the eighth chapter of *Terra Incognita* which she borrows from Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World* (*Terra* 134).¹⁰⁰ Considering the nature of one of Wheeler’s deepest fear (losing her faith),¹⁰¹ we could interpret this “response” in a theological sense, namely as the response of people who either accept or reject faith and redemption at the moment when they think they have heard a call from God. This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that Wheeler describes herself as hearing a double call. She hears a “still, small voice” that comes from within her and grants her peace (249, 269), and she tells her readers: “the landscape spoke to me so directly that it no longer seemed to be made of corporeal ice” (283). In the following extract, she gives the landscape a voice and shrouds it in a veil of religious gauze:

In front of this scene shimmered the lake, sheets of cracked and rippled frosted blue, and ribboned crystals imprisoned in the ice glimmered like glowworms. It was swathed in light pale as an unripe lemon. The scene said to me, ‘Do not be afraid’. It was like the moment when I pass back the chalice after holy communion. (72)

Interestingly, of Wheeler’s inner *journey* we know little.¹⁰² We mostly learn about the changes undergone by her personality at the end of the book, when she reveals that she has found inner calm, has quit drinking (284), and has appeased her fear of depression (220), death and losing her faith (288-289). However, we know nothing of the intermediary steps of her psychological transformation. Through comments she makes about the acclaimed war reporter Martha Gellhorn in an interview with Tim Youngs, Wheeler reveals herself to be a writer concerned with the difficulty of expressing emotions in writing:

¹⁰⁰ Apsley Cherry-Garrard considers that what mattered most in Robert Falcon Scott’s Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole in 1910-1913 was “the spirit of the men, ‘the response of the spirit’” (qtd. in Wheeler, *Terra* 135).

¹⁰¹ Wheeler explains that she had been suffering from depression and anxiety since she was eight, which caused her to experience physical symptoms, as well as “far-reaching grief and paralysing fear” (*Terra* 92). She also provides details about the nature of her fear, explaining that it is triggered by the sight of poverty, incurable illness, and the inescapable distress they may cause to others, and that it crystallises around a deeper fear of “[l]osing . . . faith” (93). She concludes this passage with a description of the calming “certainty” that her stay at the South Pole had brought her (94), and she brings up this change again towards the end of the book, when she writes that Antarctica had “forced her to begin confronting her fear” (289).

Nobody wants to hear writers sort of going ‘blurg’ over the page and ‘I feel this and I feel that’. Who cares what you feel? But you know how to make the reader care about how you respond. Martha was at places like Germany at the end of the Second World War, so there was a lot of emotion and I really admire the way that she modulated that by not overdoing it. (75)

When she reflects on her own writing process, she appears equally wary of emotional outpourings stating, in the same interview, “I think the less I say about my own inner journey the better really for all concerned! I mean in the end there isn’t anything else to write about except yourself in the end [sic], but it’s a question of how we want to phrase it, because nobody wants to know the factual details about my own life. It’s boring” (78). Consequently, I would argue that Maureen Mulligan overstates her case when she argues that Wheeler’s inner journey is one of the central concerns of the book. Mulligan contends that the author is the kind of travel writer who chooses “hostile, apparently inhospitable regions which they visualise as embodying pristine emptiness” because such places “provide an appropriate symbolic setting for the inner landscape and interior adventures of the individual writer’s personal odyssey” (72). In fact, Wheeler appears more concerned with the presence of the spiritual power that she feels during her stay in Antarctica and the “response” it elicits from explorers, scientists and artists such as herself than with depicting her inner transformations step by step.

If the authentic journey presupposes a transformation of the self, as Wheeler suggests and as Tesson and Matthiessen also hint, we can legitimately wonder about the representation (or lack of representation) of their inner journey. Critics seem unanimous on the importance of the subjective journey of the travel writer in contemporary travel writing, as illustrated by the interviews of Wheeler by Tim Youngs and Thubron by Susan Bassnett, and the much-quoted introduction that Wheeler and Dea Birkett wrote for *Amazonian: The Penguin Book of Women’s New Travel Writing* (1998). Yet for all that has been said about the importance of the traveller’s inner explorations, in the corpus I examine, private matters such as family relationships and emotions are only briefly discussed. Admittedly, Thubron sometimes expresses frustration and Tesson contempt, but they write less about their psychological journeys than Matthiessen does, for instance. When Bassnett stresses that she has learnt little about Thubron after reading one of his books, he replies: “I sort of slightly forget myself . . . I make an effort . . . to subsume my own opinions or personality in the attempt to understand how another culture is working and that has the effect, I think, of making me rather opaque in the books very often” (150). As for Tesson, he claims in an interview with literary journalist Marie-Madeleine Rigopoulos that “not much happens inside [of him]”, and that he is more interested in what takes place *out there* than in the movements of his own consciousness (1:07:10).¹⁰³ The travellers I analyse share their personal interpretation of the places they visit, but they

¹⁰³ “[I]l se passe pas grand-chose en moi . . . j’ai un grand appétit pour ce qui se passe au-dehors de moi davantage qu’au dedans” (Tesson, interview with Rigopoulos 1:07:10).

do not try “to make their soul transparent to the reader, and to this effect . . . to make it so that no movement occurs there that he would not see” (Rousseau, *Confessions* 261).¹⁰⁴

The metaphor of the inner journey is used by critics to refer to various kinds of inner lives in different contexts. The interaction of the mind and the world that gives birth to the travelogue is often labelled an inner journey, even when there is little progression or transformation of the travellers’ personality or of their preconceptions about the world. Casey Blanton insists on the difference between “the object-bound journey accounts of sailors, pilgrims, and merchants” (3) and recent and more subject-oriented travel narratives such as Graham Greene’s *Journey without Maps* or V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*, which are articulated around “a mediating consciousness that monitors the journey, judges, thinks, confesses, changes, and even grows” (4). However, a clearer definition of what the inner journey presupposes is lacking.

Further studies comparing autobiographical conventions with travelogues, and a larger number of examples in the field of contemporary travel literature would be needed to better determine the kind of inner life that travel writers foreground in their texts. However, judging from the corpus at hand, we can already distinguish between travel writers’ “psychological journey” (seldom found in this corpus) and their personal “interpretation” of a place – a distinction made neither by Mulligan (72), nor by the other critics and travel writers I have mentioned in this study, with the exception of Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan. In *Tourist with Typewriters*, they point out “the relative lack of introspection and the tendency to present the self through an array of stock caricatural motifs” of some travelogues, such as those authored by Redmond O’Hanlon and Bruce Chatwin. Holland and Huggan see these works as “*antiautobiographical*” or “*pseudobiographical*” because they showcase a staged persona instead of exploring “the ‘real-life’ (traveling) writer’s personality” (17, emphasis original).

2.2. Sylvain Tesson’s contemplations and epiphanies

The wonder-filled look of saints, children and animals

Tesson and Matthiessen also turn their gaze outwards rather than inwards. The wonder-seeking gaze that they turn towards nature and implicitly portray as an authentic way to relate to it possesses some characteristics that I will presently examine in the light of transcendentalist writings.

Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s travelogues hint that, to induce epiphanies, one needs to pay close attention to the present and marvel at the seemingly unremarkable elements of nature. The gaze they cast on their destinations shares traits with what the Transcendentalists saw as optimum vision, which they attributed to children, saints and animals. Be it a child, a saint, or an animal, the model that Tesson and Matthiessen adopt is above all designed to assist them in their quest for an authentic relation to the natural

¹⁰⁴ “Je voudrais pouvoir en quelque façon rendre mon âme transparente aux yeux du lecteur, et pour cela je cherche . . . à faire en sorte qu’il ne s’y passe pas un mouvement qu’il n’aperçoive” (Rousseau, *Confessions* 261).

world. They seek to experience and recreate a sense of immediacy and their travelogues seem underpinned by the idea that the more unmediated or immediate an experience feels, the more authentic it is. Casting an authentic look at nature means seeing it afresh, freeing oneself from the inner library (Tesson) and from thoughts of the past and the future (Matthiessen), which prevent one from accessing the “vital present” (Matthiessen, *Snow* 227)¹⁰⁵ and the “truth” of experience (Tesson, *Consolations* 89/120).¹⁰⁶

As Christine Montalbetti stresses, filters separate travel writers from the extra-textual reality they try to recreate, and present a challenge inherent in the travel-writing genre. She underlines that these filters, composed of “representations in the broad sense, and one’s memory and inner library in particular, entail the threat of distortion: not only am I confronted with an object that, because of its singular structure, resists textualisation, but I also look at it through the screen of other utterances, which interfere with the immediacy of my relation to it” (5).¹⁰⁷ The travellers I study make a point of attempting to trade this filtered look for a gaze that comes closer to first-hand discovery.

The notion of the child as a paragon of direct access to the world is particularly helpful in understanding this conception of authenticity. Therefore, aided by Tony Tanner’s *The Reign of Wonder* (1965), I shall first list the characteristics of the child’s vision that the Transcendentalists admired (Emerson especially). In **Chapter 3** and **4**, I shall turn to the representation of animals and physical strain for the same reason I am now turning to the notion of the child – because they epitomise what the travellers perceive as an immediate and harmonious relation to the environment.

Tanner argues that the Transcendentalists strove to shape a new vision akin to that of a child filled with wonder. Emerson in particular praised the beholder of nature who had “retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood” (*Nature* 4). Tanner explains that for the Transcendentalists, the child was a passive recipient of sensations who felt rapture in the environment and enjoyed a superior mode of cognition: “Admiration (wondering at) rather than judging: that is one of the crucial romantic preferences. The very passivity of the child, his inability and disinclination to interfere with nature by mental inquiry, his reliance on a sheer feeling of ‘glory’, is a condition of his visionary privilege” (5). For Emerson, the beholder can feel “delight” if he experiences nature first-hand (*Nature* 5), which, as Tanner puts it, “explains his interest in the animal eye and the child’s eye – neither of which have been overlaid with the dust and dirt of custom and second-hand perception, both of which are free from the myopic interference of reason” (32).

¹⁰⁵ For the importance ascribed to the present moment, see also Matthiessen, *Snow* 127 and 264.

¹⁰⁶ Having read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Tesson declares: “There’s more truth in the blows of my axe and the cackling of the jays than in droning psychological explication” (*Consolations* 89). The French version reads: “Il y a plus de vérité dans les coups de ma hache et le ricanement des geais que dans les péroraïsons psychologiques” (*Forêts* 120).

¹⁰⁷ “Ces filtres, qui sont essentiellement constitués des représentations en un sens large, et de la mémoire de la bibliothèque en particulier, impliquent la menace d’une déformation: non seulement je suis confrontée à un objet qui, de par la singularité de sa structure, résiste à la formulation, mais encore je le considère, et je m’efforce de le dire, à travers l’écran d’autres énoncés, qui parasitent l’immédiateté de ma relation” (Montalbetti 5).

How does one “admire” rather than judge (21)? If we follow Tanner’s thought, wonder goes hand in hand with the repudiation of reason and analytical inquiry. One admires by “beholding”, looking passively, in a contemplative manner: “The word recurred in much transcendentalist writing. ‘Wisdom does not inspect but behold’ wrote Thoreau; while Emerson recommended for the ‘habitual posture of the mind – beholding’. Saints behold, and so do children. The way back into a divine nature was through the innocent eye” (21).

By drawing a parallel between the Transcendentalists and saints, Tanner also indicates the spiritual dimension of their contemplation. This aspect of the Transcendentalists’ vision is of particular relevance for our enquiry, considering that Tesson calls himself a hermit and frequently evokes solitary saints, that Matthiessen was an ordained Buddhist priest¹⁰⁸ in search of a form of enlightenment, and that both seek epiphanies. As we shall see in the following sections, their descriptions of nature reinvent the Transcendentalists’ reverence for nature. Matthiessen celebrates nature’s glory and attempts to get closer to the immersive and pre-reflexive experience he associates with children and Zen Buddhism, while Tesson foregrounds the personal responsibility of the beholders, who should educate their eyes to access epiphanies.

“The ruin is in our own eye” but it can be educated

Tanner points out that the eye of the viewer needs to be educated in order to achieve the contemplative state that the Transcendentalists desired (27). As I shall demonstrate, Tesson in particular shares this view with Emerson, who stressed that the beholder had to “put [him]self in the attitude of reception” to be granted “visions” (Emerson, “The Over-Soul” 228). In Tesson’s texts, it seems that epiphanies are facilitated if one educates one’s eye to perceive the beauty of the land.

Ideally, the impressions of the traveller should be first-hand, if we are to believe Tesson, who allegedly envies “people who see the world with eyes free of all reference, for whom memories of reading never come between them and the substance of things” (213/269).¹⁰⁹ We can understand that in a book suffused with intertexts, recreating the vivid eye of first-hand experience may require some effort. There is, therefore, a sense of personal responsibility in creating fresh beauty out of experience, which is suggested by a remark the traveller makes towards the end of *Consolations of the Forest*:

¹⁰⁸ See Matthiessen, *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals 1969-1982*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ “Les souvenirs de lecture n’interposent jamais leur écran entre ces êtres et la substance des choses” (Tesson, *Forêts* 269).

Addressing the young poet Franz Xaver Kappus, Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his letter of 17 February 1903: ‘If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it, blame yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches’ . . . We alone are responsible for the gloominess of our lives. The world is grey because of our blandness. Life seems pallid? Change your life, head for the cabins. In the depths of the woods, if life remains dreary and your surroundings unbearable, the verdict is in: you can’t stand yourself! (176/225).¹¹⁰

More than a “verdict”, the sentence seems like an indictment that condemns the traveller who is unable to find beauty in the sights he beholds. Tesson’s words echo Emerson’s, who thought that if one did not see the beauty of nature, the cause was to be found in one’s inner life. The American writer insisted on the correlation between the state of one’s soul – which, ideally, should be receptive to the divine – and what one perceived of the world – beauty or blandness: “The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. . . . The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself” (*Nature* 44).

Emerson’s educated eye helps us understand the gaze that Tesson favours, which combines a keen observation of the world, the ability to “see the miraculous in the common”, to borrow Emerson’s words (*Nature* 45), and a celebration of nature with a renewed language. According to Tesson, some writers need more external stimuli than others in order to experience beauty, but eventually it comes down to the way the writer makes external beauty resonate with his personal interpretation. In an interview conducted by Marie-Madeleine Rigopoulos, Tesson contends that some people may sit, look around, and turn time into “intensity” while gazing at bland landscapes, whereas others – like him, he claims – need to travel to conjure up novelty. His epiphanies are more easily ignited by movement; sitting still to conjure them up is a skill that he “had to learn” (00:10:00).¹¹¹

The type of contemplation that Tesson searches for requires a specific disposition of mind, and sometimes even of body. Travellers should possess the ability to sit still and observe what happens, and they should not expect beauty always to manifest itself in sublime guises. Rather, they should be able to extract beauty from seemingly unimportant events. Tesson engages in this kind of immobile observation in *Consolations of the Forest*, looking at Lake Baikal through the window and describing its changes as the hours pass, and in *La panthère des neiges*, where his days are spent lying in wait for the leopard’s apparition. Even the hermit in his hut, compelled to look upon the same landscape day after day, should be able to find and express the *genius loci*. This way of looking at the

¹¹⁰ “Rainer Maria Rilke, dans la lettre du 17 février 1903 adressée au jeune poète Franz Xaver Kappus: ‘Si votre quotidien vous paraît pauvre, ne l’accusez pas. Accusez-vous vous-même de ne pas être assez poète pour appeler à vous ses richesses’. . . . Nous sommes seuls responsables de la morosité de nos existences. Le monde est gris de nos fadeurs. La vie paraît pâle? Changez de vie, gagnez les cabanes. Au fond des bois, si le monde reste morne et l’entourage insupportable, c’est un verdict: vous ne vous supportez pas!’ (Tesson, *Forêts* 225).

¹¹¹ “[I]l y en a qui, quand ils se mettent devant un paysage, aussi monotone soit-il, réussissent à intensifier le temps . . . j’ai dû apprendre ça” (Tesson, interviewed by Rigopoulos 00:10:00, emphasis added to point out the part I translated above).

world is a faculty of the imagination, and, to quote Thoreau, even the eighteenth-century wife who hardly leaves the house may possess it: “the woman who sits in the house and sees is a match for a stirring captain. . . . We are as much as we see” (qtd. in Tanner 48).¹¹²

The kind of immobile contemplation Tesson practices at Lake Baikal is further developed in *La panthère des neiges*, where it becomes more purpose-oriented, while still retaining the incitation to educate one’s eye. In Siberia, Tesson tries to behold the landscape without desire or expectations (*Consolations* 132/171, 212/267). By contrast, in the Himalaya he makes it clear that he is expecting a particular apparition: “I wanted to see the leopard, I had come for her” (105).¹¹³ He calls this attitude “*affût*”, a term that contains the idea of lying in wait, as a hunter would, and being on the lookout in the hope that something will happen.¹¹⁴ It is a religious attitude, “a modest faith”, since this silent “prayer” is more likely to be answered, says Tesson, than one made in church (34, 57).¹¹⁵ Forests were already compared and preferred to cathedrals and church naves in *Consolations of the Forest* (52/78), which brings Tesson closer to the Transcendentalists, who would rather revere the divine in nature than indoors. The element of personal responsibility that was present in *Consolations of the Forest* reappears in *La panthère des neiges*, as evidenced by the following passage: “if nothing came, it was because we had not looked well” (162).¹¹⁶

It seems crucial to outline the limits of this conception of authenticity by remarking that achieving this contemplative look is greatly facilitated by favourable cultural and economic dispositions. By putting the beholders in charge of the beauty or blandness they see, the traveller dismisses the role played by the socio-economic conditions in which these beholders are enmeshed. As I have pointed out previously in the introduction, and when I addressed his contempt for tourists and the “*élitis[t]*” nature of his eremitism (in his own words) (*Consolations* 29/50),¹¹⁷ Tesson is a privileged traveller, which influences the conceptions of authentic travel and an authentic relation to nature that are found in his texts. The issue I am raising in relation to the emphasis he places on the personal responsibility of the beholder has previously been stressed by the journalist Natacha Polony, who criticised Tesson for implying in an interview that people should put themselves in the right mental condition to better endure the strict lockdowns implemented in France during the covid-19 pandemic. She reacted to a statement Tesson had made in a previous interview, in which he had advised that people read, cultivate a rich inner life and a love for solitude in order to better cope with being stuck at home, implying that it was up to them to turn their lockdown into a positive experience. In a

¹¹² Tony Tanner quotes Henry David Thoreau, *Complete Works*, vol. VII, Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Press, 1906, 247-248.

¹¹³ “Je voulais voir la panthère, j’étais venu pour elle” (Tesson, *Panthère* 105). Given that Tesson often personifies the leopard and writes that she symbolises his deceased mother and former lover, I have chosen a human pronoun.

¹¹⁴ First, “patience is a supreme virtue” of *affût*, which requires time spent immobile (ibid., 161).¹¹⁴ Second, *affût* contains the anticipation that something will occur, as one waits “in hope of an encounter” (17). In the French version we find: “J’avais appris que la patience était une vertu suprême” (161); “dans l’espérance d’une rencontre” (17).

¹¹⁵ “[U]ne foi modeste” (ibid., 34), “une prière” (57, 162).

¹¹⁶ “[S]i rien ne venait, c’est que nous n’avions pas su regarder” (ibid., 162).

¹¹⁷ “L’érémisme est un élitisme” (Tesson, *Forêts* 50).

humorous tone, Polony highlighted the fact that beholding the white curtains of your neighbour's window from your tiny Parisian flat was less glamorous than meditating on the meaning of existence at Lake Baikal, which a woman with home-schooled children, chores and remote work did not have the time to do anyway, wherever she was. Since Polony's article was published, Tesson has shrouded his statements with "socio-cultural caution", as he puts it in an interview with Philippe Minard (§6).¹¹⁸

Authenticity as "seeing the miraculous in the common" and deflating it with postmodern bathos

Tesson hints that if one "look[s] well" (*Panthère* 162),¹¹⁹ one will be able to notice the charm of a "small servant of beauty: a snowflake, some lichen, a tit" (*Consolations* 55/81).¹²⁰ His emphasis on personal responsibility in the creation of beauty may remind his readers of Emerson's statement: "the invariable mark of wisdom, is to see the miraculous in the common" (*Nature* 45). For Emerson, the "common" could be a day, a season, an encounter. For Tesson, joy surges when chickadees flutter at his window (*Consolations* 26/46, 33/55), "euphoria" accompanies "camping mornings" (123/161) and "[t]he sun's caress on the window pane approaches the sensual delight in the touch of a loved one's hand" (55/81).¹²¹ He remarks that variations are few in the landscape and that the same events set the tempo of everyday life week after week. Yet he abides by Emerson's statement: "To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again" (*Nature* 10). He attunes his perception to see subtler changes, so that something as delicate as "a fresh tint in the feathery foliage of the cedars or a glinting reflection off the snow becomes a considerable event" (*Consolations* 55/81).¹²²

The authentic relation to nature that is foregrounded in his travelogues is two-pronged: it is both a reverent look cast on nature and a self-conscious search for a renewed language to honour it. In this section, I shall show how the specific "education of the eye" that he advocates is expressed in his descriptions of the environment (Emerson, qtd. in Atwood §17).¹²³ I contend that the wealth and beauty he sees in nature is mirrored in the lyricism of the language he uses to depict it. I will examine the ways in which Tesson turns small nonhuman beings into grandiose spectacles. His ability to transform them in this way is evidence to the keen sense of observation he advocates and seeks to achieve. Their grandiose transformation in his writing also conveys a sense of "expansiveness" which, according to Martin Bidney (3), is felt during epiphanies.

¹¹⁸ "[D]es précautions d'usage socio-économique" (Tesson, interview by Philippe Minard §6).

¹¹⁹ "[S]i rien ne venait, c'est que nous n'avions pas su regarder" (Tesson, *Panthère* 162).

¹²⁰ "[U]n petit serviteur de la beauté: flocon, lichen, mésange" (Tesson, *Forêts* 81).

¹²¹ "[E]uphorie des matins de bivouac" (*ibid.*, 161); "La caresse du soleil par le carreau de la fenêtre se rapproche en volupté de la caresse d'une main chérie" (81).

¹²² "Une teinte nouvelle sur le plumeau des cèdres, un reflet dans la neige deviennent des événements considérables" (*ibid.*, 81).

¹²³ Sara Atwood quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Country Life", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1904, 12.

Simultaneously, his descriptions sometimes end with an anticlimactic twist that reveals the presence of the writer behind the portrayal of nature, and his awareness of the limits of language. The intentional bathos that pervades Tesson's travelogues and distinguish his outlook from the innocent eye of the Transcendentalists brings forth the idea that, in the postmodern era, one can better produce an effect of authenticity through self-conscious and self-critical writing.¹²⁴

I will first analyse mock-epic passages from *Consolations of the Forest* to show how Tesson turns the common into the miraculous and reflects on the affordances of language in the process. I will then suggest that Tesson draws inspiration from a mock-epic passage from Nicolas Bouvier's *Le poisson-scorpion* and argue that this intertextual link enables Tesson to celebrate both nonhuman nature and literature: the insects around him and his literary predecessor, who saw their beauty before he did. I shall subsequently highlight the bathetic character of Tesson's descriptions. Finally, I will focus on the lyricism of his descriptions and contend that it evidences his reverent and attentive observation of nature and his respect for its "radical Otherness", to borrow Lisa Isherwood and David Harris's concept (9).

Mock epics on insects and crustaceans

Tesson amplifies the small creatures he focuses on by casting them as characters in a mock epic, a genre that "adapts the elevated heroic style of classical epic poem to a trivial subject" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). For instance, when spring comes, Tesson pays close attention to insects like beetles and horseflies and empathises more particularly with the billion flies that hatch: "These rock flies . . . These poor creatures serve as fodder . . . they will vanish after a brief existence, sacrificed in the common biological interest . . . I like them so much that I almost sprain my ankles trying not to crush them on the rocky beaches" (190-191/242).¹²⁵ When he turns to beetles, his observations spin into half-parodic musings on Christian love, inviting readers to care not for their neighbours (as we have previously seen, he prefers to have none), but for the creatures most foreign to them:

¹²⁴ The *ODL* defines 'bathos' as "an effect of anticlimax created by an unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the trivial or ridiculous". For examples of the concept in travel writing, see Thompson, *Travel* 199.

¹²⁵ "Les mouches de roche. . . Ces pauvres insectes sont offerts en pâture. . . Ils auront connu une brève existence, sacrifiée à l'intérêt biologique commun. . . Ils me plaisent tellement que je me tords les chevilles à tenter de les éviter sur les galets des plages" (Tesson, *Forêts* 242).

The first Capricorn beetles have arrived. . . . I feel affection for these insects. . . . *Love thy neighbour as thyself*. Wouldn't real love be the love of what is irremediably different from us? Not a mammal or a bird, for they are still too close to our humanity, but an insect, a paramecium. . . . a sea sponge! A lichen! One of those tiny plants roughed up by the wind!
(170-171/217-218, italics original).¹²⁶

However much Tesson muses on the possibility of leaving humanity behind and embracing wilderness, he remains primarily a writer in search of a style. His empathy with small creatures is coupled with their transformation into epic characters. Through his words, insects do not remain insects but become armies and jewels:

Their soldiers are jewels. They wear varnished armour, golden carapaces, malachite tunics or striped livery. . . . Some of them spring from the imagination of a Jugendstil jeweller, inspired by nature's wonders and collaborating with a Faustian alchemist to bring brooches and enamels to life as they emerge from the oven. . . .
. . . Taking a passionate interest in the infinitely small helps guard against an infinitely mediocre life. For the insect lover, a puddle can be Lake Tanganyika.
(211/266)¹²⁷

Such a textual treatment certainly endows insects with value, and acknowledges the unsuspected wealth of the nonhuman world, but it also makes readers conscious that they are leaving the world of the concrete and entering the world of literature. With this sophisticated language, the travel writer places emphasis on his own artistic input and shows that the world and words are made of different substances, as Montalbetti stressed in *Le Voyage, le monde et la bibliothèque* (4). While Tesson cannot do much with actual insects, his literary beetles, which are made of words, can be wrought and moulded into something else, such as gems, for instance.

Tesson's writing thus appears self-reflexive. Due to the profusion of analogies and metaphors, and the co-presence of "a Jugendstil jeweller" and "a Faustian alchemist" in the passage I just quoted, the description seems pompous and affected, which creates the impression that irony, self-conscious writing, and meta-textual reflections on the limits of language are not far beneath the surface. This impression is accentuated by the accumulation of comparable descriptions throughout the book. For example, in the following excerpt, the nightlife of fish is fashioned into a mock epic:

¹²⁶ "Les premiers capricornes sont arrivés. . . . Je ressens de l'affection pour ces insectes. . . . 'Aime ton prochain comme toi-même'. L'amour vrai ne serait-il pas d'aimer ce qui nous est irrémédiablement différent? Non pas un mammifère ou un oiseau, qui sont encore trop proches de notre humanité, mais un insecte, une paramécie. . . . Mais une éponge! Un lichen! Une de ces petites plantes que le vent malmène!" (Tesson, *Forêts* 217-218).

¹²⁷ "Leurs soldats sont des bijoux. Ils portent armures vernissées, carapaces d'or, cottes de malachite ou livrées rayées. . . . Certains sortent de l'imagination d'un joaillier Jugendstil qui se serait acoquiné avec un alchimiste faustien pour donner vie aux broches et aux émaux à la sortie du four. . . .

. . . Se passionner pour l'infiniment petit précautionne d'une existence infiniment moyenne. Pour l'amoureux des insectes, une flaque d'eau deviendra le Tanganyika" (ibid., 266).

Down in this vault, a universe teems with creatures that slice, crush and devour. . . . Shells coil their spires, beating time to Time and creating nacreous jewels shaped like constellations. At the muddy bottom prowl silurids, monstrous catfish, while carnivorous fish migrate towards the surface in a nightly feast and holocaust of crustaceans. (40/63)¹²⁸

A kind of reversibility seems to be at work in the text: it affects the small, which becomes grandiose, and the grandiose, which is deflated through ironic pomposity. Such reversals introduce a perpetual uncertainty as regards the sincerity of the claims of the traveller: Is his representation of the grandiose sincere? Is he really in awe? Isn't his awe ridiculed through irony?

The passage above is reminiscent of ancient tales of travels that told of monsters and marvels. The mythical creatures that populated the travelogues of ancient explorers have been replaced by "monstrous" catfish and marvellous shells. The traveller refashions common sights into exotic extravaganzas. The cosmic proportions given to this underwater scene evoke tragedy and grandiose spectacle. The impression of tragedy comes from the multiple deaths, and the sense of spectacle is wrought from the disproportion of shellfish creating not mere pearls and nacre but "constellations", of "monstrous" catfish and carnivorous fish enjoying not a few but a "feast" of crustaceans that die in nothing less than a "holocaust". This scene also evokes opera with the orchestra of the shells "beating time". Safe from make-believe "holocaust[s]", the external observer of this spectacle can enjoy the delectation that emanates from the ternary piling up of deadly verbs ("slice, crush and devour"), which is crowned by a joyous "feast".

A comparable jubilation at imagined animal predation reoccurs in *La panthère des neiges*, when Tesson pictures the unseen kills that occur during the night (52). The traveller cannot see through the Himalayan night, nor can he be underwater at Lake Baikal to observe the scenes I quoted above, which raises the question of the novelistic skills he is expected to possess as a travel writer. In such passages, his exploration of animal life crosses from the realm of nonfictional observation to literary imagination, from literal to evocative authenticity.

This crossing over to fiction and the change of scale it enables, as the travel writer lowers his eyes to the microscopic level of insects and shells, and then inflates the proportions of this small universe so that it becomes grandiose, could be likened to an attempt at seizing the uncanniness of the animal world. With this writing technique, the difference between the observer and nonhumans is at once abolished (he has altered his vision to perceive their scale) and increased (the small creatures are defamiliarised through the sophisticated language).

¹²⁸ "Dans le caveau, un univers grouille de bêtes qui broient, dévorent et sectionnent. . . . Des coquillages enroulent leurs spires, battant la mesure du temps et créent des bijoux de nacre en forme de constellations. Des silures monstrueux rôdent dans les vasières. Des poissons carnassiers migrent vers la surface pour le festin nocturne et les holocaustes de crustacés" (Tesson, *Forêts* 63).

Tesson's double tribute to nonhumans and to the writer who captured their beauty: Nicolas Bouvier

Tesson's transmutation of the small into the grandiose and the grandiose into the small can be better grasped by comparing the techniques he uses to celebrate the beauty of nature with those of the Swiss travel writer Nicolas Bouvier, who shifts his gaze to microscopic levels. Tesson's text exemplifies the conception of authenticity that requires one to transform one's gaze to fit the scale of small nonhuman animals. This grandiose and yet anticlimactic gaze enables the writers to get closer to these nonhumans, while simultaneously preserving their "radical Otherness" through a defamiliarisation process based on epic and highly metaphorical language (Isherwood and Harris 9). At the same time, by turning seemingly insignificant creatures into a grandiose spectacle, they showcase the affordances of the literary medium, which can turn modest creatures into precious ones. The narrative techniques Tesson implements to portray insects and fish are close to those Bouvier deploys when he transforms the massacre of newly-hatched termites into a three-page epic in *Le poisson-scorpion*:

Jaws, muzzles, stingers, moustaches, mandibles vibrating or snapping with envy. Centipedes, nightjars, spiders, lizards, grass snakes, this fine team of assassins that I am beginning to know well is under high alert. Went down to see that hecatomb, a covered lantern in hand. . . . [T]he flying termites rose from the ground . . . ignorant of the society of thugs, gluttons and cutthroats gathered to welcome them for their first ball. . . . For those who fell back into the yard, there was no chance of escaping the patrols of red ants holding the whole area. Frenzied infantrymen of seven to eight millimetres framing bean-sized armoured soldiers which harvested these defenceless francés and stridulated away, brandishing in their claws a bundle of dead or mutilated victims. (771)¹²⁹

Going back and forth between this description and Tesson's passage about the insects that I quoted previously, many common traits can be noted, such as the accumulation of weapons (Bouvier) and murderous verbs (Tesson), and the amplification of death to the point of "hecatomb" (Bouvier) and "holocaust" (Tesson). The ground for comparison also includes the metamorphosis of some insects into "armoured soldiers" (Bouvier) and "soldiers" with "varnished armours" (Tesson),¹³⁰ and the death of other insects eaten up as soon as they have hatched in both Bouvier's and Tesson's travelogues.¹³¹

¹²⁹ "[M]âchoires, museaux, dards, moustaches, mandibules vibrant ou claquant de convoitise. Scolopendres, engoulevents, araignées, lézards, couleuvres, tout ce joli monde d'assassins que je commence à connaître est littéralement sur les dents. Suis descendu voir cette hécatombe, une lanterne sourde à la main. . . . [L]es termites volants montaient du sol . . . ignorant tout de la société de malfrats, goinfres et coupe-jarrets réunie pour les accueillir à leur premier bal. . . . Pour ceux qui retombaient dans la cour, aucune chance d'échapper aux patrouilles de fourmis rousses qui tenaient tout le terrain. Fantassins frénétiques de sept-huit millimètres encadrant des soldats cuirassés de la taille d'une fève qui faisaient moisson de ces francés sans défense et s'éloignaient en stridulant, brandissant dans leurs pinces un fagot de victimes mortes ou mutilées" (Bouvier, *Poisson* 770-771).

¹³⁰ Tesson, *Consolations* 211/266.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 190-191/242.

In view of the similarities between Tesson's portrayals of the insects and Bouvier's depiction of the termites, we could interpret Tesson's wonder-filled and mock-epic tone as a double tribute both to "the miraculous" in nature (Emerson, *Nature* 45), and to one of his most famous literary predecessors, who also paid attention to the small creatures around him and renewed language in the process. By drawing upon Bouvier to portray the beauty he sees in nature, Tesson also turns intertextuality to his advantage: rather than attempting to forget "the filter" of his "inner library" that impedes the fresh look he wants to cast on the world, to use Montalbetti's words (5),¹³² he draws upon this library to celebrate nature. Borrowing elements from such an eminent travel writer enables Tesson to reinforce the authenticity of his text thanks to generic congruence – a strategy I will explore further in **Chapter 5**.

The bathetic tone of Sylvain Tesson's self-reflexive descriptions

Analysing the bathetic endings that sometimes conclude Tesson's descriptions can help us cast further light on the kind of outlook he implicitly portrays as authentic. For all the glamour of his descriptions and the admonitory tone of his aphorisms, Tesson is not complacent about his own sophistication, which is never really allowed to take wing fully. Often, the soaring movement of lyrical description is abruptly deflated by a self-deprecatory remark, a simplified term, or mockery at the high-flown atmosphere. These bathetic endings can be interpreted as self-reflexive and meta-textual cues hinting at the limits of literature and the predominance of irony in postmodern aesthetics. By deflating his lyrical descriptions, Tesson suggests that ingenuous lyricism is no longer possible in the postmodern era, during which the writer appears more authentic when he acknowledges the ridiculous dimension of his rhapsodic passages. Tesson's descriptions often seem to undermine the beauty that they construct. Their bathetic character reveals the unresolved tensions that underpin the text, as the writer struggles with the difficulty of finding the right words to capture the incommunicable beauty of nature.

For instance, in *La panthère des neiges*, after the climactic and long-awaited apparition of the leopard and its lyrical description, the readers are left with: "Basically, a big spotted cat leaped out of nowhere and filled its landscape" (107).¹³³ Similarly, in *Consolations of the Forest*, after an elaborate metaphor comparing the moon to a salmon that "swims up the current of the night to go lay its single monstrous egg in a nest of clouds", Tesson rephrases the image and tones it down: "Simply put: there's a full and blood-red moon" (200/253).¹³⁴ At times, Tesson paints a magnificent portrait of nature, only to deflate it with a trivial ending because he is cold, "hungry" or "tipsy" (26/46; 19/26; 135/175).¹³⁵ Suddenly, metaphorical language is interrupted by literal language, and more specifically

¹³² "Ces filtres, qui sont essentiellement constitués des représentations en un sens large, et de la mémoire de la bibliothèque" (Montalbetti 5).

¹³³ "En somme, un gros chat avec des taches jaillissait du néant pour occuper son paysage" (Tesson, *Panthère* 107).

¹³⁴ "[U]ne lune couleur saumon remonte le courant de la nuit pour aller pondre dans un berceau de nuages son œuf unique et monstrueux. En termes plus simples, elle est pleine et sanglante" (Tesson, *Forêts* 253).

¹³⁵ "J'ai faim" (*ibid.*, 26); "je suis surtout un peu gris" (175).

the language of the body. Such abrupt, sylleptic endings shatter the immersive impression that lyrical description creates, reminding readers of the presence of the writer behind his text in a meta-textual gesture that can be considered postmodern.

Lyrical and literary epiphanies

The lyricism that suffuses the descriptions of nature evidences the wonder-filled look that is key to the conception of authenticity foregrounded by Tesson. He seems to have set himself the goal of finding an adequate language to enhance the beauty and mysteriousness of the animals he encounters. However, Tesson's extensive use of figurative language, personifications in particular, raises issues because it could conflict with the traveller's attempt to come closer to a non-anthropocentric perspective. I will examine his figurative language and this apparent paradox and argue that the defamiliarising lexicon he employs introduces a kind of auratic distance with the nature he represents, which is key in creating an effect of authenticity.

The conception of authenticity that underlies *Consolations of the Forest* resides at least partly in an attempt to adopt a nonhuman viewpoint or to shift away from anthropocentric rhetoric.¹³⁶ As mentioned earlier, Tesson expresses the wish to shift his perspective to empathise with nonhumans (171/218). In addition, he exhibits reverence for the environment and misanthropy for humankind as I showed in **Chapter 1**, and he conveys the impression that wilderness exists independently of human beings, who are only newcomers compared to snow leopards and wild yaks, whose species have existed for much longer than humankind (*Panthère* 69, 153). Tesson claims that nature is ungraspable and that we can only catch glimpses of its mystery. In the film *La panthère des neiges*, he reasserts the opacity of animals by stating that “no communication” is possible between humankind and animals, and that the latter belong to a “Golden Age” during which Gods, human beings and animals were equal. In *Consolations of the Forest*, he insists on the fact that animals afford a fleeting glimpse into hidden worlds, which he calls “*arrière-mondes*” – the “afterworlds”, or “worlds beyond”, which can denote ancient worlds, worlds behind the scenes and transcendent realities (*Panthère* 48, 165). As the French translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* uses exactly the same phrase as Tesson does, “*arrière-mondes*”, we can hypothesise that it is a loan. Nietzsche uses it as a title to the second section of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and it translates into English as “Afterworld”.¹³⁷ The philosopher employs this term to refer to transcendent and abstract worlds of ideas and perfection, which he finds misleading and to which he prefers tangible reality. By contrast, for Tesson, these afterworlds are a source of joy and epiphanies.

However, despite his predilection for non-anthropocentrism, Tesson frequently casts an anthropomorphising eye on nature or turns it into a metaphorical stand-in for something else. The paradox here is that anthropocentric and anthropomorphic

¹³⁶ I shall discuss Tesson's attempt to explore the nonhuman viewpoint in more detail in **Chapter 4**.

¹³⁷ See Henri Albert's translation of Nietzsche into French (1903) and Thomas Wayne's translation of the same work into English (2003). It is worth adding that Tesson brings Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to Lake Baikal and we can thus assume that he is well acquainted with this book.

descriptions may be at odds with the idea that animals will always remain enigmatic and outside the grasp of human understanding. In *Consolations of the Forest*, mountains, forests and lake become human: “The forest . . . is a buried army” (6/25) and “[t]he hardy *Rhododendron dauricum* gives off the smell of a very clean old lady . . . The forest is full of its own breath” (154/197).¹³⁸ The lake becomes a corpse: its “cadaverous cheeks” are brightened by the sunshine (4/23), it is wounded and “suffering” (31/52), it “has come down with sclerosis” (34/56); and in the spring Tesson can “watch the ice *die*” (151/194, emphasis added).¹³⁹ Personifications through metaphors are rather frequent. His vision of nature is alive with dancing mountains and whispering cliffs (39/63, 190/241) and animals are also personified. Ducks become “bourgeois” in *Consolations of the Forest* (211/265) and the local species of *La panthère des neiges* turn the mountains into a caricatured royal court: “The wolves attended to their territory as disloyal princes, the yaks turned into warmly dressed fat bourgeois, the lynx into musketeers” (100).¹⁴⁰ These examples drive Tesson’s animals back into the human fold, draw them closer to their peers from La Fontaine’s *Fables*, and further away from non-anthropocentric aesthetics.

Tesson’s non-anthropocentric stance as regards the animals’ otherness is also jeopardised when he turns the snow leopard into a symbol in *La panthère des neiges*. The leopard is considered a stand-in for Tesson’s deceased mother and departed lover. From the outset, it is presented as a fantasy closely related to Tesson’s life. Because of the metaphorical dimension Tesson projects onto the leopard, it becomes part of an anthropocentric representation articulated chiefly around Tesson as traveller. We may wonder, as Derek Ryan does in *Animal Theory* (76-77), whether animals in literature have to be symbols for something else, or whether they could not just simply be given attention as animals.

Contrary to what Tesson claims, his cabin is not the “realm of simplification” as far as language is concerned (24/18).¹⁴¹ In his writing, small creatures become human through methodical personifications or they become grandiose and turn into literary beings, adorned with comparisons and metaphors. At times, his representation of nature appears so miraculous and awe-inspiring that one might suspect the writer of masking the actual forest and animals with figurative language. One might wonder whether Tesson uses the natural world as an excuse for aesthetic experimentation, and whether his frequent anthropomorphising of nature conflicts with his wish to stress what I would refer to as its “radical Otherness” (Isherwood and Harris 9). Steve Baker directs a comparable criticism at Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, arguing that their animals “seem to operate more as a device of writing . . . than as living beings whose conditions of life were of direct concern to the writers” (95). In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway also reproaches these philosophers for failing to address “earthly animals” (28), and the same issue could be raised in relation to Tesson’s texts for two reasons. First, because at

¹³⁸ “La forêt . . . est une armée engloutie” (Tesson, *Forêts* 25); “Les rhododendrons de Daourie diffusent une odeur de vieille femme très propre” (18).

¹³⁹ “[L]a joue du cadavre” (ibid., 23); “Le Baïkal souffre” (52); “le Baïkal est atteint de sclérose” (56); “je regarde la glace mourir” (194).

¹⁴⁰ “Les loups vauquaient en princes félons, les yacks faisaient de gros bourgeois chaudement vêtus, les lynx des mousquetaires” (Tesson, *Panthère* 100).

¹⁴¹ “[L]e royaume des simplifications” (Tesson, *Forêts* 18).

first sight, anthropomorphising nature may appear to strengthen an anthropocentric rhetoric. Second, when his animals act as symbols, they are valued for their function as stand-ins for something else, and not for themselves.

To put Tesson's descriptions of nonhumans into perspective, we could compare them to the less anthropocentric representations that have been attempted by other thinkers and artists. For instance, the philosopher Thomas Nagel famously pondered the question of what it would be like to be a bat and the Dada artist Jean Arp tried to imagine what "Man Seen by a Flower" looks like (1958).¹⁴² To cite another example, rather than the otherness of a leopard, a mammal which we can relate to because of its beauty, the teams of the Okto-Lab research project studied the peculiarities of octopuses.¹⁴³ We might wonder about the ethical value associated with the personification of nature when there are so many other ways to represent the nonhumans.

Nevertheless, another way to consider the value of personifications would be to argue, like Lawrence Buell, that this figure is the literary form that our consideration for nature takes.¹⁴⁴ In the pastorals that Buell studies, this rhetorical figure connects a community to its environment, raises awareness about their symbiosis and invites an "ethics of care" for nature (*Environmental* 218). In the light of Buell's argument, Tesson's personifications of nonhumans and the poetic language he uses to depict them can be seen as devices that protect rather than erase the alterity of nonhumans. I would like to suggest that the refined language he uses to depict them acts as a protective layer sheltering the alterity of nature. In other words, his style appears to be a type of 'othering' language that helps preserve the alterity of nonhuman others.

If we look closely, we can see that the animals he depicts are not overwritten with symbols. He takes pains to point out that animals are ungraspable, and to maintain through his writing a distance that separates him from their world, which suggests once more that their "radical Otherness" is preserved (Isherwood and Harris 9). In fact, we could hypothesise that the epiphanies he experiences are conditioned by this distance. When Tesson acknowledges this distance and represents it, he creates a type of (literary) art that fulfils one of the defining criteria for authenticity that Walter Benjamin has set. As I mentioned previously in the **General Introduction**, for Benjamin, the aura of authentic art is partly conditioned by the presence of a distance that he does not define in detail (15). I interpret this auratic distance as the acknowledgement by artists that the artistic representations that they create cannot fully encompass the objects represented but only the "trace-presence of something no longer literally, physically present but nonetheless still shimmering", as Robert Kaufman puts it in his study of the Benjaminian aura (122). In a comparable manner, the distance between Tesson and nature and animals is acknowledged both by direct comments on their mysteriousness and by indirect defamiliarising strategies facilitated by figurative language.

¹⁴² The sculpture is an abstract form in golden metal. It possesses two melted legs and a head, all surfaces being smooth, full and without detail.

¹⁴³ The Okto-Lab is a research project by the University of Tasmania and the University of Kassel that looks into the aesthetics of the octopus.

¹⁴⁴ Lawrence Buell summons up Thoreau's relation to Walden Pond to support his argument.

His descriptions soar above profane language, evidencing the success of the “education of his eye” that he seeks (Emerson, qtd. in Atwood §17),¹⁴⁵ offering glimpses into the ungraspable, hidden worlds of nature and animals, and preserving their otherness. The wealth he deploys in terms of lexicon, with rare words such as “[h]ymenoptera” (201/254), “piscivore” (209/263) or “riparian forests” (215/270),¹⁴⁶ shows a deference for the beauty of nature and of language. The refinement with which he depicts nature demonstrates that he is attentive to the finest nuances, as shown by the following extract:

The sky has powdered the taiga, shaking velvety down over the *vert-de-bronze* of the cedars. Winter forest: a silvery fur tossed onto the shoulders of the terrain. . . . The forest, an ocean swell in slow motion. At every fold in the relief, black streaks darken the egg-white crowns of the trees. (19/37-38, italics original)¹⁴⁷

The attention paid to the texture does not only concern powdery, velvety, and furry snow, but it also concerns language, which becomes raw sound material. In the French version the root noun “*poudre*” rolls from the first sentence with “*saupoudré*” into the second with “*poudreuse*”, like a snowball down a slope. Alliteration on /v/ follows, which binds “*veloute*” to “*vert*”. Alliterations with /f/ and /ʁ/ then take over in a nominal sentence whose euphony intensifies with the mirror structure ‘noun/genitive: noun/genitive’ – “[f]orêt d’hiver: fourrure d’argent”. The meticulous care taken with word choice also shows in the second nonverbal sentence, a heptameter that has a tidal ring to it, due on the one hand to the liquid alliterations in /l/ with “[l]à”, “*houlé*” and “*lente*”, and on the other hand to the anadiplosis, the immediate repetition of a sound in a syntactic string, between “*houlé*” and “*lente*”. The lyrical tone of this description continues to build up in the last sentence, which relies on the sophisticated words “*albumine*”, a scientific word that points to egg white, and “*houppiers*”, a rare noun that refers to the crown of trees. This sentence illustrates the previous image of an “ocean swell” with black waves (the trees) edged with white foam (the snow), and the ebb and flow of three heptameters – “[à] chaque pli du relief/ l’albumine des houppiers/ s’assombrit de traînées noires”. One cannot but be struck by the wealth and condensation of images and textures as forest and snow turn into powder, silk veil, fur coat, ocean and egg within a single paragraph. Ultimately, Tesson’s lyricism seems to enhance and preserve the otherness of nature.

¹⁴⁵ Sara Atwood quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Country Life”, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Edward Waldo Emerson, Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1904, 12.

¹⁴⁶ “[H]yménoptère” (Tesson, *Forêts* 254), “ichtyophage” (263), “forêt ripisylve” (270).

¹⁴⁷ “Le ciel a saupoudré la taïga. La poudreuse veloute le vert-de-bronze des cèdres. Forêt d’hiver: fourrure d’argent jetée sur les épaules du relief. . . . La forêt, houle lente. À chaque pli du relief, l’albumine des houppiers s’assombrit de traînées noires” (ibid., 37-38).

2.3. Peter Matthiessen's "transparent eyeball"

Against reading The Snow Leopard as a self-centred narrative

Like Tesson, Matthiessen pays particular attention to nature. Even if Matthiessen's opus is a travel diary, and has, consequently, a strong autobiographical component, supposedly centring on the movements of his inner life, his descriptions of nature disprove the suspicion of a self-centred narrative. I would like to argue that his book is grounded on a conception of the authentic relation to nature that is in keeping with his Zen beliefs. These require reducing the space given to the ego and paying attention to the present in the hope of experiencing epiphanies.

In "The Geography of Hope and Despair", Peter Bishop argues that everything in *The Snow Leopard* is made to converge towards Matthiessen's inner life, allegedly the sole geography enhanced by the narrative. Bishop contends that the Himalayan peaks are a mere backdrop designed to bring Matthiessen's thoughts to the fore. He claims, for instance, that the dire town of Pokhara is a metaphor for the anxieties of the author, that his companions, the naturalist George Schaller and the Sherpa-porter Tutken, are flat character types that recur in his other wilderness narratives, and that the only purpose of Schaller's extraversion is to offer a counterpoint to Matthiessen's introversion (204-206, 208). All told, for Bishop, Matthiessen solely acknowledges his own mode of being in the Himalaya, and only occasionally glances around him to find elements in the environment that he can subsume under the story of his inner life. Bishop's points can easily be disproved. First, Schaller is not portrayed as an extrovert, but as a solitary and quiet man, like Matthiessen; second, the landscape descriptions are not so scarce as Bishop suggests, and they are often kept separate from Matthiessen's reminiscences or musings, as I will show. Above all, Bishop fails to see that these descriptions steer clear of the inner life of the traveller and exemplify Matthiessen's wish to forget himself and focus on nature instead. Wilderness in Matthiessen's text is not portrayed as a blank space whose sole value would be to reveal to the traveller his true self. Instead, it is a source of inspiration, where the traveller can forget himself and experience epiphanies.

In *La panthère des neiges*, which recounts his own journey in the Himalaya in search of a snow leopard, Tesson addresses a veiled criticism to Matthiessen comparable to Bishop's. He hints that if Matthiessen did not see any leopard, it is because he did not *look* properly, engrossed as he was in his own inner life: "Schaller had seen it [the leopard], but it had escaped Matthiessen, who had brought back a labyrinthine book, *The Snow Leopard*, that dealt as much with tantric Buddhism as with the evolution of the species. Matthiessen was essentially concerned with himself" (63-64).¹⁴⁸ The lack of connecting words between the sentences should not mislead readers: Tesson implies a cause-consequence connection between the elusiveness of the leopard and Matthiessen's self-centredness. The criticism seems undeserved because Matthiessen's book gives

¹⁴⁸ "Schaller l'avait bien aperçue mais elle avait échappée à Matthiessen qui avait rapporté un livre labyrinthique, *Le léopard des neiges*, où il était question du bouddhisme tantrique autant que de l'évolution des espèces. Matthiessen était essentiellement préoccupé par lui-même" (Tesson, *Panthère* 63-64).

evidence that in fact he paid close attention to the minute life of the mountains in a deliberate effort to practise a form of mindfulness.

(Zen) authenticity as immersive experience epitomised by animals and children

Matthiessen's travelogue suggests that he aspires to merge with nature, forget himself in the sight he beholds, and access what he calls the "true experience of the One" (*Snow* 52). Nature appears as a source of authenticity because it is a manifestation of the divine for Matthiessen, who writes that "[t]he Universe itself is the scripture of Zen" (42). Like Emerson before him,¹⁴⁹ Matthiessen sees unity in nature and muses on "the intuition" "that body, mind and nature are all one" (155). Thus, when his self-consciousness stops him from immersing himself in nature, it elicits in him a sense of failure.

To achieve this sense of unity with nature, he pays attention to the present and to his immediate surroundings and effaces himself from his descriptions of nature. It seems that, when he is immersed in the sight he beholds, when he is focused on the present and is free from reflective thoughts that would take him away from the present moment then he has reached what he conceives to be an authentic relation to nature.

Given that Matthiessen was a Zen Buddhist, I would like to argue that his idea of an authentic mode of being in nature is influenced by this philosophy. According to Zen (as described in his book), one should try to "pay attention even at unextraordinary times, to be of the present" (228), which can be achieved if one meditates and immerses oneself in the object one beholds (90-91).

Children, animals and nonhumans are presented as the epitome of this mode of being. Animals and mountains offer him an ideal model because they appear to him as undivided beings that do not reflect on the world, but are simply part of it: "The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself: the mountains exist simply, which I do not. The mountains have no 'meaning', they *are* meaning. The mountains *are*" (195, emphasis original). Animals are also taken as models because they embody the heightened conscience of the present that he seeks. Thus, he admires the "acute awareness" of "the moment-by-moment experiencing of the lammergeier and the wolf" and attempts to recreate this awareness through difficult climbs that require all his attention, as I will show in **Chapter 3** (228).

¹⁴⁹ *Nature* conveys the sense that Emerson sees unity everywhere around him and that elements of nature appear as proof of an overarching spiritual presence. For the Transcendentalist, ordinary events and creatures point to the general idea that nature originates from a divine hand and that it has been created for a divine "end" too (*Nature* 42). Animals and other natural elements matter only insofar as they point to this sense of unity: "When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and super-position of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity" (40). In "The Over-Soul", the focus on the idea of "the Unity of Nature" (25) is even stronger.

Natural descriptions as a return to the authenticity of childhood

I propose to contend that when Matthiessen's descriptions portray him as immobile at the centre of nature, they reveal his attempt to return to a child-like state that he portrays as more authentic. In this sense, he inherits a pre-Freudian and pre-Jungian conception of authenticity, defined as a return to an "authentic" child self "not yet corrupted by the pressures, competitiveness, and conformity of modern life" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). In his case, we could say that this child self is undivided rather than uncorrupted.

Childhood is evoked in the form of nostalgia and longing in Matthiessen's passages about his eight-year-old son Alex. What seems to fascinate him about childhood is the idea, theorised by Maria Montessori in *The Absorbent Mind* (1949), that children do not seem to need to make a conscious effort to know how to act, and that they enter experience more wholly and are less distracted by the world around them than adults, who also bring in the added filter of their previous experiences and culture.¹⁵⁰ Matthiessen praises childhood because he perceives it as a pre-reflexive state of "wildness" during which one can easily commune with the world and be free from crippling doubt and self-consciousness. Childhood affords the opportunity to be a part of nature, not just an outside observer, as illustrated by Matthiessen's description of his son:

In his first summers, forsaking all his toys, my son would stand rapt for near an hour in his sandbox in the orchard, as doves and redwings came and went on the warm wind, the leaves dancing, the clouds flying, birdsong and sweet smell of privet and rose. The child was not observing; he was . . . a part of things . . . (47)

This extract intertwines simple elements of nature – doves, redwings, leaves – with the child, to create a scene so innocent and Edenic that readers may doubt Matthiessen's good faith, and suspect that his vision of childhood is at best a literary device (the longing for a lost paradise that in fact never was), or, at worst, a blind eye turned to his own responsibility in his child's loss of "wildness".¹⁵¹ If we are to believe Matthiessen, we all

¹⁵⁰ There are grounds to believe that Matthiessen's perception of childhood is idealised. What is generally perceived as the brain's capacity to focus is located in the frontal lobe, which is the last part of the brain to reach maturity, when subjects are around twenty-five years old ("L'attention ça s'apprend!", MOOC organised by Philippe Lachaux, Program director in cognitive neurosciences at CRNL/INSERM). Professionals who work with children with attention deficit disorders would argue that concentration is acquired and not innate, and that small children do not have the neurological ability to deal with their emotions in a stress-free manner. See Catherine Guéguen's *Vivre heureux avec son enfant – un nouveau regard sur l'éducation au quotidien grâce aux neurosciences affectives*, Robert Laffont, 2015, and Adèle Faber and Elaine Mazlish's *Parler pour que les enfants écoutent, écouter pour que les enfants parlent*, éditions du Phare, 2021.

¹⁵¹ According to Matthiessen, at eight, his son had already "shut away the wildness of the world" following a natural process that we all undergo (*Snow* 47). This loss, however, might not be as natural as he believes and could equally well be explained by the fact that, at the time of Matthiessen's adventure, his son's mother had just died of cancer and he himself had decided to spend a few months on the other side of the planet. In an interview given in 2018 to *The Observer*, Alex Matthiessen, then aged fifty-three, recalls that time of his life in terms that may point to his father's possible responsibility in this "loss of wildness": "many friends, and even a few strangers, have harshly criticised my father for leaving me behind for three months so soon after my mother's death. I appreciate the solidarity, and don't entirely disagree with the sentiment, as those months he was away were sometimes bewildering for me" (§13).

lose the ability to commune with the world in adulthood, regardless of the events that befall us: “I lost it [the wildness of the world], too, in early childhood” (47). Nevertheless, in *The Snow Leopard*, many descriptions of nature are structured in a similar way as the passage above. Matthiessen appears in the centre of nature, and hints that he momentarily regains a sense of communion with the world thanks to nature-inspired epiphanies. Therefore, the loss of “wildness” does not appear to be as permanent as he suggests.

The passages describing the beauty of Himalayan nature bear a resemblance to Matthiessen’s description of his son’s infancy and may lead readers to see his journey as an attempt to return to a child-like state that he feels he has lost. It would appear that this child-like state correlates with the ability to find joy in seemingly unremarkable but potentially epiphanic sights. Matthiessen’s descriptions of epiphanic nature typically feature small plants, the sky, the clouds, birds and light, and sometimes children or comforting smells (24), which suggests that they correspond to his project of paying attention to the present and to the “unextraordinary” (228). Even though he claims that he has lost the wildness of childhood, his travelogue is dotted with epiphanic moments, such as the following one:

The track passes along beneath wild walnut trees. . . . [A] wildwood of children’s tales . . . brings on mild nostalgia . . . for lost innocence – the paradise lost that, as Proust said, is the only paradise. Childhood is full of mystery and promise, and perhaps the life fear comes when all the mysteries are laid open, when what we thought we wanted is attained. It is just at the moment of seeming fulfilment that we sense irrevocable betrayal . . . here, right now, . . . that is all there is. And surely this is the paradise of children, that they are at rest in the present, like frogs or rabbits.

. . . GS and I put down our packs and gather wild walnuts in the wood; soon the sherpas and porters come, and we run about in happy adolescence . . . (127)

This extract provides evidence that Matthiessen finds joy in modest sights or events, which momentarily recreate the “paradise lost” of childhood. In this passage, he informs us about his models of authenticity (children and animals), declares that the paradise of childhood has gone, and yet eventually recreates it through the description of gathering walnuts in the woods. We could interpret these “wild walnuts” metaphorically: as he gathers them joyfully, he retrieves pieces of the “wildness” that he has allegedly lost (47).

This description yields additional information as regards the nature of Matthiessen’s “paradise lost” and the strategies he devises to retrieve it throughout his journey. Here, he suggests that he favours the moment when “promise[s]” are hanging in the air, neither fulfilled nor broken. Readers may draw a parallel between the unfulfilled yet heavenly promise of childhood that he depicts here and the unseen yet epiphanic snow leopard around which the narrative revolves: as long as the leopard remains unseen there can be no “betrayal” of expectations, and the journey can be paradisiacal.

Matthiessen hints that, instead of looking to fulfil a major goal, the traveller should focus on what he experiences here and now. This heightened focus on the present is illustrated by the epiphanies that he depicts throughout *The Snow Leopard*, which are triggered more by unremarkable nonhumans (a lizard, a lammergeier or a sheep, for

instance) than by a snow leopard. The walnuts that he picks up in the passage quoted above could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the seemingly modest epiphanies that dot his path in the Himalaya. These repeated epiphanies belie his claim that the epiphanic state of childhood is a “paradise lost”.

Natural descriptions as literary meditations trading the ‘I’ for the ‘eye’

It seems that Matthiessen aims to achieve a more authentic relation to nature by focusing on the present and on the environment rather than on himself and on thoughts of the past and future. To reach this goal, he lays emphasis on nature, which becomes the object of his concentration in a manner that is reminiscent of meditation. In a passage about Zen meditation, he explains that “the student may displace the ego by filling his whole being with the real or imagined object of his concentration” (90). As we shall see below, in his descriptions of nature, the environment is placed centre stage and the presence of the ego is toned down, as if the description is meant to evoke the idea of this Zen meditative state.

I have argued against a self-centred interpretation of Matthiessen’s diary because his book attempts to relegate the ‘I’ to the background in favour of the ‘eye’ of natural descriptions. The descriptions of nature are mostly visual and suggest that Matthiessen turns himself into a “transparent eyeball” that is reminiscent of Emerson’s optimum vision: “I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (*Nature* 4).

For Matthiessen, it is of the utmost importance to pay attention to the present and to eschew thoughts of the past and of the future. When he fails to do so, he feels shame and guilt, for instance when he turns his mind to the future in worrying that bad weather will affect his journey: “To waste time in worry that the snow will trap us makes me feel ashamed” (*Snow* 192). Absorbing his attention in the scenery provides Matthiessen with comfort, because it anchors him back in the moment, as in the following extract:

I would like to reach the Crystal Monastery, I would like to see a snow leopard, but if I do not, that is alright, too. In this moment, there are birds – red-billed choughs, those queer small crows of the high places, and a small buteo, black against the heavens, and southbound finches bounding down the wind, in their wake a sprinkling of song. A lark, a swift, a lammergeier, and more griffons: the vultures pass at eye level, on creaking wings. (93)

First, Matthiessen records his desire to see the Monastery and the snow leopard, then he accepts that this wish may remain unfulfilled, and last, he turns to the animals that are present at hand. Inventorying each species of bird requires him to pay attention to the wealth that is offered by nature, which has the effect of counterbalancing the sense of emptiness he feels.

It seems that Matthiessen attempts to limit the space he gives to the part of the mind that intervenes in the form of streams of thoughts, memories and desires. Descriptions of nature are presented in self-contained paragraphs, separated from his musings on his life, as if to give the readers respite from his inner life and keep the focus on nature. When

the 'I' of the authorial observer reappears, after a long absence, it draws attention to itself, and conveys an impression of failure, as if the traveller had failed to forget himself in the sight he beheld:

The trail meets the Suli Gad high up the valley, in grottoes of bronze-lichened boulders and a shady riverside of pine and walnut and warm banks of fern. Where morning sun lights the red leaves and dark still conifer, the river sparkles in the forest shadow; turquoise and white, it thunders past spray-shined boulders, foaming pools, in a long rocky chute of broken rapids. . . . At the head of the waterfall, downstream, its sparkle leaps into the air, leaps at the sun, and sun rays are tumbled in the waves that dance against the snows of distant mountains.

Upstream . . . something is listening, and I listen too: who is it that intrudes here? Who is breathing? I pick a fern to see its spores, cast it away . . . the great sins, so the Sherpas say, are to pick wild flowers and to threaten children. My voice murmurs its regret, a strange sound that deepens the intrusion. I look about me – who is it that spoke? And who is listening? Who is this ever-present 'I' that is not me?

. . . Here in the secret of the mountains, in the river roar, I touch my skin to see if I am real; I say my name aloud and do not answer. (129-130)

This passage pertains to the light-filled descriptions of *The Snow Leopard*, with words such as “bronze”, “sun”, “sparkles”, and “spray-shined”. The soaring movement conveyed with “leap” and “high up” reinforces the impression that we are witnessing a moment of enlightenment.

Since the 'I' is withdrawn from the first paragraph, and the traveller abstains from any comments, we could hypothesise that Matthiessen applies principles of Zen meditation and attempts to drown his ego in the objects he beholds – “in the roar of the river” (130). Readers may recall that this roar reoccurs throughout the book, as the “roar of the river” (77, 130) and as the “noise” of a storm at sea during which he lost his sense of self and felt in harmony with the elements (48).

The narration then seems to resist the re-appearance of the 'I', seen as an intruder upon the beauty beheld. Repeated five times, the interrogative “who” conveys the impression of an unwanted presence. Then, when the traveller attempts to return to his contemplation of nature by picking a “fern”, he fails to do so, because picking it conflicts with unobtrusive contemplation, and it elicits an unpleasant feeling of “regret”. While the description of the rapids is full of light, evoking enlightenment, the second paragraph is full of doubt. The traveller stages the inner divide of his self, split between an 'I' who lives in the moment, contemplating the landscape, and an 'I' who reflects on the experience – an 'I' who breathes, speaks and listens, and an 'I' who looks at himself breathing, speaking and listening.

Matthiessen's wish to free himself (and his narrative) of his ego could explain why in such descriptions the 'I' is often inconspicuous and confined to a short clause that merely mentions the position from where he gazes at nature. The descriptions are frequently articulated around this discrete clause, which is surrounded by descriptive passages, and once the observer has indicated his position – on top of the mountain, on the river shores,

“in a niche of lichens” or “walking down” (101, 76) – his presence is toned down and gives way to the descriptive passage again.

The part of himself that is seen as an unwanted double reappears in other passages during the journey. It seems to symbolise the interpretive and reasoning intellect that Matthiessen wishes to forego in order to get closer to the mode of being he desires. According to the Zen principles Matthiessen adumbrates, one should avoid excessive self-reflexivity (disunity with oneself) in favour of contemplation (unity with the object beheld). These examples may explain why he yearns for “the happiness of pure uninterpreted experience” (47), which entails that one has ceased to be “self-conscious” (47) and that one has overcome the “fear of meaninglessness” (65). In passages that include several ‘I’s,¹⁵² one of them living the moment, the other(s) dwelling in the past or reflecting on the experience of the first-mentioned ‘I’, we can assume that he favours the part of himself that is living in the moment.

Bird flight as a metaphor for epiphany

Matthiessen’s desire to lose himself in the contemplation of nature and reach enlightenment is illustrated and symbolised by descriptions of bird flight. Like the epiphanies Tesson describes in *La panthère des neiges*, the moments of clarity that Matthiessen recounts crystallise around animals. These passages show that the traveller draws inspiration from these animals, which guide him towards a sense of spiritual fulfilment.

The association birds-enlightenment was earlier sketched in *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972), in which Matthiessen recounts the myth of a child who has glimpsed the reflection of a “brilliant” red bird in a pool in the desert, and spends his life looking for this bird, only receiving one of its feathers in his open hand when he dies (121). In the same narrative, Matthiessen later reflects that, instead of pursuing “some fleeting sense of Africa”, he should be “moving gently, in awareness, letting the sign, like the crimson bird, become manifest where it would” (150). The red bird can be seen as symbol of enlightenment, which Matthiessen believes he will not reach if he actively seeks it, but which he thinks he may reach if he pays attention to the present.¹⁵³

In *The Snow Leopard*, birds represented in light-filled depictions can be interpreted as godsends guiding the traveller towards enlightenment and to what he portrays as an authentic relation to nature, especially in the following extract where the lexical field of light shines through such terms as “golden”, “sparks”, “crimsoned”, “brilliant”, “sunny” (repeated twice), and “silver” (repeated three times):

¹⁵² See also *Snow* 46.

¹⁵³ Matthiessen writes: “I am not here to seek the ‘crazy wisdom’; if I am, I shall never find it. I am here to be here, like these rocks and sky and snow” (*Snow* 110).

From deep in the earth, the roar of the river rises. The rhododendron leaves along the precipice are burnished silver, but night still fills the steep ravines where southbound migrants descend at day to feed and rest. The golden birds fall from the morning sun like blowing sparks that drop away and are extinguished in the dark.

With the first 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.

. . . I sit back in straw and dung warmth against the sunny stones. A brilliant black-red beetle comes, and a husky grasshopper, rubbing its fiery legs. A crow flops to a cedar by the river, and the crow's wings, too, are filled with the hard silver light of the Himalaya. (*Snow* 77)

The natural description resounds with poetical repetitions, which evoke a sense of harmony, with assonance in /i/ (“still fills the steep ravines”) and with alliterations in /r/ (“roar of the river rises” and “rhododendron”), in /s/ (“precipice”, “silver”, “still fills the steep”, “cedar”, “sunny stones”), and in /b/ (“brilliant black-red beetle”). Once more, Matthiessen inserts himself as an inconspicuous observer into the centre of nature.

My reading of the birds as epiphanic comes from their association with light and the ascending movement and fleeting nature of their flight. In addition, the “golden birds” acquire a spiritual tint because they bring to mind the Garuda, a mythical creature of Buddhist and Hindu mythology that resembles an “eagle-like god” (211). The movement of their ascending and descending flight into the “dark” ravine mirrors the movement of the expedition, which has come up the mountain and is now “com[ing] down” into a “dark” forest. In a broader sense, we could interpret this movement as an anticipated nostalgia for the journey, which ends when the traveller comes down from the monastery, two weeks after this extract. As I have shown previously, nostalgia, evoked by “vague longing, sad emptiness”, is inherent in the traveller’s conception of paradise: “the paradise lost . . . is the only paradise”, he writes (127).

Numerous descriptions of nature follow the same pattern in Matthiessen’s travelogue: a soaring motion that draws one closer to light then eventually descends into darkness again, while the text lulls the reader with harmonious sounds. In the extract quoted above, light is borne upon the wings of “southbound migrants” (migratory birds), a “silver bird”, and a “crow”, and readers notice a brief soaring movement in the central paragraph, extinguished in a feeling of “longing”. These characteristics recur in Matthiessen’s description of other epiphanic moments. For instance, they can be found in his description of a storm at sea: “I was alone for eight hours in a maelstrom of wind and water, noise and iron; . . . I lost my sense of self . . . Afterwards, there was a pain of loss” (48). This passage, here shortened, is suffused with a sense of exhilaration gained from forgetting the self in the midst of physical exhaustion. The comparison of the soaring bird, whose flight leaves a sense of longing, with the traveller’s soaring exhilaration in the storm, which also ends with a sense of loss, may yield a key connection between physical exhaustion and natural descriptions. Both point to a desire to forget the self (in physical exhaustion or contemplation of nature) and reach enlightenment (the

apex of the soaring motion). The same motion and pattern can be found in the following extract:

[A] redstart comes to forage in the lichens, followed soon by a flock of fat rose finches. . . . suddenly all whirl away in a grey gust, and minutely I turn to see what might have scared them. On a rock not thirty feet away, an accipitrine hawk sits in silhouette against the mountains, and here it hunches . . . diving after unseen prey over the rim of the ravine. Then the great lammergeier comes, gold-headed and black-collared . . . it passes into the shadows between cliffs. . . . [T]he late sun shines on a green meadow, as if a lost world lay in that impenetrable ravine, so far below. The great bird arcs round the wall . . . Then it is gone, and the sun goes, the meadow vanishes, and the cold falls with the night shadow.

Still I sit a little while . . . And still I do not see. (107)

This extract repeats the movement of the previous excerpt I have analysed, with a soaring motion, followed by the disappearance of the vision, or, we might say, of the epiphanic moment, as the sun follows the lammergeier, appears and disappears with it, and once the bird is gone, the whole vision – the Edenic sun-filled meadow – is gone too. Once more, a by now familiar rhythm of interwoven alliterations lulls the reader with rimes in /əʊ/ (“meadow”, “below”, “shadow”), and alliterations in /f/ (“followed”, “flock of fat rose finches”), in /g/ (“grey gust”), in /s/ (“sits in silhouette”), and in /r/ (“the rim of the ravine”).

The polysemy of “light” gives further evidence that birds, light and revelation are interlinked. The lightness of the bird, the light of the sun and the enlightenment of the epiphany echo each other in Matthiessen’s text. Further proof of their interconnectedness can be found when Matthiessen dreams of letting go, being blown away “like that down feather on the mountain” (214), lifting up “like a kite”, which is also a type of bird (164). By rising up literally (by climbing the mountain), aesthetically (with euphonic descriptions) and by proxy (through his contemplation of birds), he follows the advice of his Zen teacher: “Be light, light, light – full of light!”, which also hints at the word’s polysemy (165).

Matthiessen looks for moments of clarity but also acknowledges that they are fleeting. In the extended passage I quoted above, an impression of missed revelation is evoked by the lexical field of sight: the hawk hunts an “unseen” prey, the traveller turns to “see” what has scared the finches and concludes with “I do not see”. We can see reflected here the theme of sight and vision that is pervasive in the book, titled *The Snow Leopard* after an unseen creature. It seems that the narrative is organised around the minute attention paid to the mountains, and, simultaneously, around the evocation of what the traveller cannot see – the snow leopard, but also a B’ön temple in the distance (209), and the inside of the Crystal Monastery (233). Matthiessen’s conception of an authentic relation to his environment seems to reside in this double movement: revering what is “here, right now” (127), and summoning up a fleeting form of spiritual transcendence that is not meant to be completely fulfilled (as the leopard is not meant to be seen), because then it would stop being “paradise” (127).

The celebration of simplicity through descriptions of nature

I have argued that, through the contemplation of nature, Matthiessen sought to anchor himself in the present, which I consider to be key in his conception of authenticity. The sense of immediacy he pursues is expressed both by epiphanic descriptions, some of which I have analysed, and with the help of unadorned language. His descriptions often possess an immanent, down-to-earth dimension, centring on nature's simplicity, and celebrating the tangible existence of the plants, rocks and other natural elements with which he is in contact. They suggest that the relation to nature that Matthiessen seeks consists in celebrating the simplicity of even the most unremarkable elements of the environment. We could see Matthiessen's undivided attention for rocks, birds and flowers as part of the Zen practice that informs his conception of an authentic relation to the world, and that consists partly in the ability "to pay attention even at *unextraordinary* times" (*Snow* 228, emphasis added).

Matthiessen writes that at a high altitude, "[d]warf rhododendron, edelweiss, blue gentian occur sparsely", but they do not occur sparsely in the text (*Snow* 101). Much textual space is dedicated to the small vegetal, mineral and animal others. Matthiessen often halts his narrative to concentrate on small nonhuman elements and marvel at them.

I have previously emphasised that Matthiessen yearned for a pre-reflexive state in keeping with his Zen beliefs. This mode of being is characterised by a perceived 'simplicity' embodied by animals and mountains, which "exist simply" (195), and from which the traveller tries to learn: "I am here to be here, like these rocks and sky and snow" (110). I would like to suggest that Matthiessen's admiration for simplicity manifests itself in the text through what Richard Mabey has called "direct" and "unadorned" language (xiii). The same few words are repeated throughout the narrative to describe natural elements: for instance, to point at "the sky", "the rocks", "the snow", Matthiessen uses precisely these nouns (110). They are hardly ever transformed into a metaphor, a personification or a comparison, and the colour adjectives used to characterise them remain simple – to quote only a few, "blue, gold, green and red" (113), "yellow" (130), and "silver" (26) reoccur throughout the book. His sparing use of words directs the attention of the reader towards his immediate physical surroundings and towards a moment that is limited in time. The unadorned lexicon he uses also sketches the image of an everyday phenomenon, and emphasises the phenomenon's concrete character.

The value ascribed to the embodied existence of natural elements ties Matthiessen to the transcendentalist literary tradition. In the introduction of *The Snow Leopard*, Richard Mabey points out that Matthiessen's focus on the 'here and now' reminds him of Thoreau's "epic climb of Mount Ktaadn" and of the statement the Transcendentalist made "about the absolute authority of the physical" (xii). For Mabey, Matthiessen's earthly descriptions of his environment can be seen as inherited from Thoreau, who wrote in *The Maine Woods* (1848): "Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature – daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact! Contact!*" (64, emphasis original). The concrete character of Matthiessen's style is even clearer when compared with the highly metaphorical style that Tesson uses, and that I have analysed earlier.

Recreating immediacy and celebrating nature through haikus

In his travelogue, Matthiessen frequently includes rhythmical clauses that resemble haiku, such as “[s]un in the wings of dragonflies, over a meadow still in shadow: a dove calls from the secret of the mountains” (34) and “[a] far cicada rings high and clear over the river’s heavy wash. Morning glory, a lone dandelion, cassia, orchids” (37).¹⁵⁴ I would like to argue that they contribute to recreating the sense of immediacy that is paramount to his conception of authenticity.

We can see the resemblance of these sentences with haiku at the prosodic, syntactic and thematic levels. Parataxis¹⁵⁵ replaces causal connections in haikus as it does in some of Matthiessen’s descriptions of nature. According to Makoto Ueda, the lightness of haikus comes in part from the absence of causal link and explanation between the verses: “The relationship between images does not have to be spelled out, for doing so would mean the imposing of logic upon a fresh, new insight” (163). By breaking the chain of subordination and coordination, parataxis shifts the focus from interpretation to mere observation, which corresponds to Matthiessen’s attempt to attain authenticity through presence (contemplation) rather than reflexivity (interpretation).

Matthiessen’s sentences also sound like haiku because of their non-rhyming ternary structure, built on two juxtaposed clauses that acquire depth when a third one, often verbal, cuts through them. This pattern can, for instance, be observed in the following example: “Greenfinches come, and a hawk flies down the valley. Asters and everlasting, lavender and white; the soft humming of a bumble-bee consoles me” (83). The same rhythm resounds intermittently throughout the book in sentences such as “[i]n the glory of sunrise, spider-webs glitter and greenfinches in October gold bound from pine to shining pine. Pony bells and joyous whistling; young children jump as if come to life” (75).

We can assume that Matthiessen was well aware of the codes of haikus (their brevity, their focus on nature and impersonal ethics), since he opens the third section of his book with a quote by Bashō (*Snow* 172). If we look into the principles of haiku writing, we can see that these poems also fall in line with the relinquishment of the ego that he seeks. If we are to believe Kenneth Yasuda (134), haikus also suppose a fusion of beholder and object beheld and thus conform to the goal Matthiessen seems to pursue through meditation.

I propose to argue that haikus play a part in the travel writer’s artistic transformation of his ego because according to theoreticians who discuss this poetic genre, haikus suppose a withdrawal of intense personal emotions and they address intuition rather than logic. In his analysis of the teachings of Bashō, Ueda explains that a successful haiku is grounded on a handful of notions, including impersonality, lightness, and a focus on nature, the seasons and ordinary life (152, 159). Yasuda hints that haikus require that readers immerse themselves in aesthetic contemplation in a disinterested way, free from strong emotions, which is strengthened by Ueda’s contention that haikus suppose a

¹⁵⁴ Most of the time, Matthiessen’s haikus are not stand-alone poems, but they have been incorporated into the descriptions of the landscape and villages. The only poems that stand apart and are presented outright as haikus are George Schaller’s (*Snow* 62, 223).

¹⁵⁵ The juxtaposition of clauses of equal function and/or nature, without indication of coordination or subordination.

“dissolution of personal emotion into an impersonal atmosphere”, which is generally “created by a natural landscape” (156, 154).

2.4. Recreating an effect of immediacy with the diary form

So far, I have argued that the travelogues of Tesson and Matthiessen were underpinned by the idea that the more immediate an experience felt, the more authentic it was to them. From this premise, it follows that recreating an effect of immediacy after the end of the journey is a primary concern of their travelogues. How can vibrant impressions retain their freshness when the journey is over and the writing process begins? How can the perceived immediacy of the experience be rendered in the text? The temporal gap between the journey and its record is an intrinsic issue of travel literature, perhaps even more for travellers like Tesson and Matthiessen, who are dedicated to focusing on the present. The diary form they both adopt offers clear advantages to reach this goal, which I shall now discuss.

As Zoë Kinsley remarks, diaristic literature has been widely used by all kinds of wayfarers with different aims, from members of scientific expeditions who wished to keep a factual-looking record of their discoveries, to nineteenth-century women travellers, who strategically chose a form that would grant them readerly acceptance (415, 419). For Tesson and Matthiessen, this form offers multiple advantages. First, it strengthens their credibility because it creates “intimacy” between the author and his readers (Stensvaag Kaasa, “Travel and Fiction” 483). Second, it helps them show that they are undergoing gradual metamorphoses, whether physical (Tesson, *Consolations* 42/66) or emotional (Matthiessen, *Snow* 112). Readers who have followed the daily exertions of the traveller over the course of several weeks will more easily be convinced that a change has occurred. The diary form enables writers to withhold information, which is necessary if the intention is that the reader should follow the *progressive* evolution of the traveller’s consciousness. This progressive evolution is also paramount in quest narratives, a form that Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s texts loosely adopt. Lastly, the diary form is suited to creating an impression of “immediacy” (Stensvaag Kaasa, “Travel and Fiction” 483), and adds weight to their claim that they value the present moment.¹⁵⁶

As Gérard Genette explains in his analysis of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, in first-person autobiographical texts, the author-narrators may choose, if they so wish, to give the impression that they possess less knowledge than they actually do. They can reproduce in the text the restriction of information they possessed when they were experiencing events at first hand (*Narrative Discourse* 198-199). Even though readers of travel literature know that there is a gap between the moment the travellers experience the journey and the moment they write and edit it, the diary form still conveys the impression that the events are recounted soon after they have happened. What sets diaries apart compared to other autobiographical narratives is the impression that little time has elapsed between action and inscription. In other words, they convey an impression of immediacy.

¹⁵⁶ For more on travel diaries, see Thompson, *Travel* 27, 103, 180.

Diaries are likely to be rewritten for publication long after the experience took place. For instance, Stendhal's *Tour through Italy* underwent several rounds of editorial changes. First written as a diary during his travels in the country in 1811, it was then rewritten in 1813 with elements Stendhal could not have known at the time of his journey. In addition, he edited the book further by dividing it into thematic chapters, added paragraphs to contextualise certain events, and framed the narrative with a fictional narrator called M. de Léry (Mariette-Clot §23-27). Nicolas Bouvier's *Le Vide et le Plein: Carnets du Japon, 1964-1970* offers another telling illustration of the heavy editorial work that diaries may undergo. Grégory Leroy explains that in 1967 Bouvier first published a travel narrative that was oriented towards history and was called *Japon*, before re-editing it and adding parts of his journal to it in 1988 for a new edition called *Chroniques japonaises* (6). Finally, in 2004, Hoëbeke published Bouvier's journals in their entirety. Nevertheless, in comparison with other modes of narration, the diary form still appears particularly suited to laying stress on the present, and is particularly conducive to recreating an effect of immediacy.

Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues are not, however, exclusively designed to create a sense of the present moment, as we can see from the lengthy essays on Buddhism, and the analepses and prolepses contained in *The Snow Leopard*, for instance.¹⁵⁷ However, the present tense remains dominant in both diaries, and prolepses that anticipate future developments of the stories are absent from Tesson's text and confined to parenthetical notes in Matthiessen's, as if to keep the focus on the present and avoid contaminating it with thoughts of the future (*Snow* 234).

Conclusion

This investigation into the representation of the encounters with nature in the travelogues of Wheeler, Tesson and Matthiessen has shown that they rekindle some principles found in the nature writing of the American Transcendentalists. The most significant finding to emerge is that their travelogues implicitly suggest that attentive contemplation, reverence and celebration of nature are authentic ways to relate to it. I have demonstrated that Wheeler and Matthiessen saw divinity in nature and expected to gain spiritual fulfilment from dwelling in natural places, and that, along with Tesson, they revered the wilderness around them and gazed at it in wonder. I have shown that Wheeler emphasised the mysteriousness of natural phenomena and Tesson that of animals. These travellers, in fact, convey the impression that nonhuman animals and environments are irreducibly *other*.

Tesson celebrates and recreates the alterity of nature with lyrical and metaphorical language, while simultaneously inviting his readers to reflect on the limits and affordances of literature. Along with Matthiessen, he pays tribute to nonhumans by being particularly attentive to even the most unremarkable *fauna* and *flora* in his path, such as beetles or

¹⁵⁷ Peter Bishop, who, for the sake of his argument, breaks down *The Snow Leopard* into a myriad of mini-essays, claims that “[t]he essays on Buddhism alone occupy over 50 pages from a total of 294” and that Matthiessen's reminiscences “of his dead wife, his children, his Zen teacher, his previous explorations and so on, probably take up in excess of 30 pages” (211). Bishop points out that in total, a third of the book focuses on events or notions outside the range of direct perception (211).

rhododendron, implementing the “education of the eye” that Emerson advocated in order “to see the miraculous in the common” (*Nature* 45). Tesson’s texts differ from Matthiessen’s travelogue insofar as the French travel writer employs a prominently figurative language to portray nature, and deflates grandiose descriptions with bathetic endings that draw attention to the literary medium and give a postmodern tint to his text. By contrast, Matthiessen places emphasis on the beauty he sees in “unextraordinary” events by using mostly a concrete and unadorned lexicon and haiku-like rhythmical sentences (*Snow* 228), which help him capture the sense of immediacy that he values.

All three travellers, Tesson and Matthiessen in particular, attempt to retrieve the fresh outlook that the Transcendentalists also strove for, and which they associated with the notion of the child and animals. The fantasy of achieving the kind of authenticity that is defined as a more direct access to the world crystallises around Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s focus on the present and on the sense of immediacy that epiphanies provide. Matthiessen in particular takes his idea of a child’s “wildness” as a model of an authentic relation to the environment (47). The traveller wishes to blend into nature and forget himself there. I have argued that, contrary to what Peter Bishop contended, *The Snow Leopard* is not a self-centred narrative. Rather, this travelogue evidences the traveller’s attempt to relegate his ego to the background. He seeks to dwell in the present moment and to become an ‘eye’ immersed in nature rather than an ‘I’ that stands outside of it.

With its emphasis on the present tense, the form of the diary is particularly suited to recreating the sense of immediacy that is key in the conception of authenticity at work in Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s travelogues. Coupled to the epiphanies that they recount, the day-by-day narration conveys the impression that they are enraptured in their present enjoyment of the wilderness. Alongside the notion of the child, animals also offer these travellers a model that they extol. I have now addressed the spiritual dimension of their relation to nonhumans in the wilderness, but the emphasis they place on the body, endurance and endangerment is still in need of further investigation, which I shall conduct in **Chapter 3**.

CHAPTER 3:

The Return to the Wild Man Within: Regenerative Authenticity of Endurance and Endangerment in Sylvain Tesson's and Peter Matthiessen's Travelogues

Introduction

In *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard*, Sylvain Tesson and Peter Matthiessen convey the impression, each in their own way, that the authentic self they are looking for is a wild man. Neither one explicitly indicates that their conceptions of authenticity revolve around this archetype, but they praise modes of engagement with the wilderness that are typically associated with the wild man. This archetype encapsulates the personality traits, physical characteristics, and ways of relating to the natural environment that fascinate them. In this chapter, I shall seek to demonstrate that their conceptions of the authentic self, of authentic travel and of an authentic relation to nature can be better understood in the light of this figure. I shall argue that, in their writings, physical engagement with the wilderness returns the traveller to a deeper self who resembles the figure of the wild man.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the archetype of the wild man and connects it to Tesson's and Matthiessen's narratives. I will then contend that the local people epitomise the ideal figure of the wild man and the authentic life that Tesson and Matthiessen aspire to live in nature. I will show that Matthiessen depicts some Tibetans and Sherpas as savages and initiators, while Tesson favours the Russian forest rangers and fishermen over the urbanites he usually keeps company with. To a certain extent, in these travelogues, the local people are turned into stereotypes in the service of the travellers' primitivism, which can be defined as the tendency to idealise behaviours, lifestyles, personality traits and even spaces that offer a stark contrast with the Western civilisations they flee.

I go on to demonstrate that the seemingly more authentic travel experience that the two wayfarers portray themselves living entails characteristics associated with the archetype of the wild man: self-sufficiency, physical endurance, and sometimes suffering and danger. Straining and potentially life-threatening situations are portrayed as conducive to or concomitant with an authentic engagement with the wilderness. This analysis leads me to argue that *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard* are partly underpinned by the "authenticities of endurance" and "endangerment" that Graham Huggan mentions in *Extreme Pursuits* (178). At first sight, these conceptions of authenticity may appear distinctly gendered (masculine). It is thus worth surveying the field of criticism focused on women travel writing, to begin investigating whether physical strain and potentially lethal situations are also key components of the conceptions of

authenticity that underpin female-authored travelogues, which I shall do at the end of the chapter.

I shall also argue that the two main travelogues under scrutiny in this chapter align with the convention of travel writing that places the (adventurous) traveller above the (safe) tourist, and, more broadly, they seem to be built on the idea that the authenticity of an experience is “ratified . . . by the evocation of feelings that are immediate and irrefutable” (Lindholm 1). These “immediate and irrefutable” feelings can be epiphanic, as I have argued in **Chapter 2**, or they can be felt through the body, as I shall point out in this chapter. In both cases, the travellers who seek out these sensations seem to be influenced by a conception of the authentic experience as an experience that feels unmediated. Even though all experience narrated by travel writers is *de facto* mediated, at least by the senses, and then by language, the myth of authenticity as immediacy endures. The quest for unmediated/immediate experiences seems to affect the travels of Tesson and Matthiessen, as it affected before them the journeys of authenticity-seeking tourists that Jonathan Culler describes (“Semiotics” 6), the “seekers of adrenaline” that Charles Lindholm mentions (48),¹⁵⁸ and the American Transcendentalists, who spoke highly of the uncluttered, first-hand, unmediated vision of the child.

The two travelogues under study endorse the idea born in the seventeenth century that postulates the existence of an authentic self underneath a social self.¹⁵⁹ Adrenaline-inducing and physically demanding situations are one of the two components that enable Tesson and Matthiessen to access the wilder, more authentic self that they seem to seek. The second component is wilderness itself. I shall thus examine the *topos* of the regenerative wilderness that the American Transcendentalists developed, and that Tesson and Matthiessen seem to revive. I shall argue that these two travellers endow wild nature with the power to return them to their authentic self, which can be defined as a pre-civilised self.

3.1. The archetype of the wild man

In the Western imagination, the wild man has often been portrayed as standing outside of civilisation, “reared by bears or wolves, living in isolation, possessed of enormous physical strength . . . and often without any language”, as Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak point out in *The Wild Man Within* (x).¹⁶⁰ Tesson and Matthiessen reshape and revive this myth by placing emphasis on the physical strain that their solitary journeys require, by focusing on the animals they behold, and by portraying the local people as wise silent people and fascinating outlaws. I contend that both travellers aim to come closer to the figure of the wild man partly because they seek to escape civilisation into a purifying wilderness, as I argued in **Chapter 1**, and partly because they attempt to come closer to the animals, as I shall show in **Chapter 4**. As we shall see in this chapter, physical

¹⁵⁸ See also Lois 121.

¹⁵⁹ On the birth of this conception of authenticity, see Trilling 19, 24.

¹⁶⁰ According to Jeff Wheelwright, this edited volume featured in the extensive book collection that Matthiessen possessed on the wild man (75).

strain plays a key role in their endeavours, bringing them closer to the ideal of the wild man, “possessed of enormous physical strength” (Dudley and Novak x).

This archetype is double-sided. It has been associated to two conceptions of nature and carries pejorative or positive connotations depending on the context. Hayden White indicates that the wild man has “gradually transformed from an object of loathing and fear . . . into an object of envy and even admiration” through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (*Forms* 22). On the one hand, the wild man takes on the aspect of a half-animal savage man living in a nature “shot through with violence . . . conflict and struggle” (White, *Forms* 27). On the other hand, he is portrayed as an uncorrupted Noble Savage living in Arcadian nature and untouched by the ills of civilisation (27).¹⁶¹ The wild man served many purposes in Western thought and typically “belonged to the region of the mind that treasured freedom over control, nature over art, passion over abstract reason” (Dudley and Novak x). There is kinship between the traits attached to this figure and the ideal life that Tesson and Matthiessen aspire to: a life free from mass surveillance for Tesson in *Sur les chemins noirs*, and for Matthiessen a life that complies with Zen principles and instinct rather than with the reasoning intellect.

Hayden White connects the modern admiration for this myth to primitivism, which idealises “any group as yet unbroken to civilizational discipline”, and archaism, which idealises “real or legendary *remote ancestors*, either wild or civilized” (25, emphasis original). The admiration for the wild man can thus be linked to the nostalgia of travellers such as Tesson and Matthiessen, who dream up a Golden Age that they oppose to modern Western civilisation and that they project onto foreign people, as we shall see presently.¹⁶²

It is also possible to view Matthiessen’s fascination for the figure of the wild man as the product of a specific literary context. At the time when he wrote *The Snow Leopard*, American poets Gary Snyder and Robert Bly, who also exhibited a deep interest in the figure of the wild man and the wilderness, published poetry collections which also spoke of recovering a lost wildness. Some of Bly’s poems revolve around the idea of reuniting a divided self and taking a journey to retrieve the wild child self (*Silence in the Snowy Fields*, 21, 31, 36), while Snyder reflected on the wildness of the body and of the mind, and on the value of living in nature and exploring one’s “inner wilderness areas” (17).

¹⁶¹ In *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men* (1754), Jean-Jacques Rousseau claims that human nature is inherently good and later corrupted by civilisation. Nevertheless, the figure of the Noble Savage seems to predate his text: “[Richard] Bernheimer dates the appearance of the Wild Man as Noble Savage and renewed interest in a presumed lost golden age in western Europe from the fourteenth century” (White, *Forms* 27).

¹⁶² Nostalgia for pre-modern and allegedly vanished or vanishing cultures and landscapes pervades Matthiessen’s and Tesson’s travelogues and plays a key role in their conceptions of authenticity, as I suggested in the **General Introduction** and in **Chapter 1**. In *Sur les chemins noirs*, Tesson laments the disappearance of traditional small-scale French agriculture; and in *Consolations of the Forest*, he describes the pollution of Lake Baikal, the destruction of the Siberian forests and the hunting and poaching of their fauna with the fatalistic tone of someone who has come to witness vanishing beauty. As for Matthiessen, he wrongly predicts the disappearance of wildlife in *The Tree Where Man Was Born* and prophesies the end of Tibetan culture in *The Snow Leopard*.

3.2. The fascination for local inhabitants portrayed as wild men

The local inhabitants of Tibet and Siberia that Matthiessen and Tesson meet serve as half-imagined models of the figure of the wild man and of the ideal relation to the wilderness that the travellers seek to arrive at. In the way they portray these people, Tesson and Matthiessen would seem to dream up a Golden Age that they can oppose to modern Western civilisation.

Their depictions of Russians and the Himalayan people are particularly indicative of what they regard as authentic about the self and about the way one relates to nature. In their own way, both travellers portray foreign others as holding a liminal position halfway between wild behaviour and civilised manners. They endow them with the following characteristics, typically associated with the figure of the wild man: unsophisticated, silent, mysterious, free from laws and social constraints, driven by instinct and possessed of some physical attributes that are reminiscent of animals. Thus described, the wild man can perform his role as the antithesis of the society that the travellers have left. He crystallises their exoticist fantasies as they attempt to imagine a life away from modernity, technology and the obligations of their social life.

To understand the conception of authenticity that underpins Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest*, one can look at how favourably he writes about the fishermen and forest rangers who live around Lake Baikal. "I always find peace in the company of Russian woodsmen", writes Tesson, as he shares "the ritual glasses" of vodka with Sasha and Yura (*Consolations* 49/74).¹⁶³ These "woodsmen" live a life that the traveller admires, seeks to emulate and implicitly portrays as more authentic. They elicit praise because they appear as almost self-sufficient, live on the threshold of civilisation, free from social constraints, in conditions that require physical endurance and that may prove dangerous (they sometimes fend off wolves with rocks [67/95]). Tesson adopts an appreciative tone to describe the indifference to danger of the Russians he meets, as stressed by this humorous passage, which describes a raft with three passengers drifting on the lake: "I contemplate this raft, so much like life in Russia: an unwieldy, dangerous thing on the verge of shipwreck, a slave to the currents – but aboard which you can always make tea" (216/272).¹⁶⁴ This raft is described as half wild ("dangerous") and half civilised ("you can always make tea"), which summarises well the liminal position that Tesson ascribes to the Russians he meets. Its passengers spark his interest because, like the figure of the wild man, they are free to make choices that are not governed by rational thinking – such as embarking on a dangerous raft. According to Halia Koo, the interest that Tesson shows in *Consolations of the Forest* for "the idealised figure of the rebel" is a reference to Ernst Jünger's *The Forest Passage* (*Der Waldgänger*, 1951), which alludes to the lifestyle of the outlaws who found shelter in the woods in mediaeval Scandinavia (Koo 39-40).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ "Je sers les verres rituels . . . Le contact des hommes des bois russes me procure toujours un apaisement" (Tesson, *Forêts* 74).

¹⁶⁴ "[J]e contemple ce radeau qui ressemble à la vie en Russie: une chose lourde, dangereuse, au bord du naufrage, soumise aux courants mais où l'on peut faire du thé en permanence" (ibid., 272).

¹⁶⁵ "[L]a figure idéalisée du rebelle" (Koo 39).

The way the local people are described makes their lives appear authentic in comparison to the “diktats” of Tesson’s Parisian life (95/128). Tesson conveys the impression that they embody a kind of authenticity that escapes language. The conversations that he has with them and includes in *Consolations of the Forest* contrast starkly with those he reports having in Paris. He laments that in Paris, one must “answer the telephone” and “have an opinion on everything” (95/128).¹⁶⁶ To him, as a rule, small talk and elaborate conversations have an “aggressive character” (212/267), and he would rather be free from the obligation to “always find something to say” (50/74).¹⁶⁷ By contrast, his encounters with Russians appear soothing. The rare and monosyllabic dialogues reported in the travelogue give evidence that Tesson appreciates the silence of his local guests.¹⁶⁸ These guests embody an idea that recurs throughout the travelogue, namely that the authenticity of experience can be better reached by other means than language.¹⁶⁹ As I argued in **Chapter 2**, epiphanies are one of those means; so is physical effort, as I contend in the present chapter. Considering that *logos* is one of the key characteristics that separates civilisation from ‘barbarity’ – which is etymologically linked to foreign people who did not speak Greek (Dubuisson 3) – lauding the Siberians for their quietness appears to be a way to praise their distance from civilisation. Lauding the silence of foreign others, however, raises issues: it reinforces the stereotypical binary essentialism of wild other/civilised self and strengthens the authoritative position of the travel writer as the dominant voice of the narrative. In addition, the alleged wisdom of silent natives stereotypes them and turns them into a literary device in the service of criticism directed at Western civilisation.

We can identify a comparable nostalgia for an imaginary pre-civilised wildness in the descriptions of the Tibetans in Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*. The traveller seems to envy the way they live – far from cities, with few material possessions, without technology – as though it were more authentic than his life in the United States. Analysing the way he describes them yields some answers about what he deems authentic in relation to himself and in relation to his engagement with nature. This analysis also uncovers certain issues in his conception of authenticity. As I shall point out, the fact that Matthiessen projects his fantasy of a return to a pre-civilised life onto the Tibetans is problematic. We could, for instance, question the parallel he invites between the Tibetans and children, their animalisation, and the fact that he casts one of them – Tutken – into the stereotypical role of the mysterious and wise initiator.

Admittedly, Matthiessen’s life and work give evidence that he held indigenous cultures in high esteem and that he rarely turned them into stereotypes. *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* exemplifies his activism in favour of Native Americans, *The Tree Where Man Was Born* contains clear anti-colonial discourse, and he generally paints a nuanced and informed

¹⁶⁶ “Tu auras une opinion sur tout! Tu répondras au téléphone!” (Tesson, *Forêts* 128).

¹⁶⁷ “[L]e caractère agressif d’une conversation” (ibid., 267), “cet impératif de trouver toujours quelque chose à dire” (75).

¹⁶⁸ Dialogues may also be monosyllabic because of Tesson’s “weak” Russian (*Consolations* 119/156).

¹⁶⁹ This idea is paradoxical, considering the linguistic research and refinement Tesson exhibits in his travelogues.

portrait of the cultures he encounters. Owing to his erudition, he seldom appears to be an exoticist, for exoticism is “praise *without* knowledge”, to borrow Tzvetan Todorov’s words (*Human* 265, emphasis added). Because of his knowledge, Matthiessen also avoids the fallacy of the “Ecological Indian” (Garrard 144),¹⁷⁰ which assumes that indigenous people always live in harmony with nature. Nevertheless, *The Snow Leopard* still contains passages that stereotype the local people and that require critical scrutiny.

First, it is noteworthy to recall that “wildness” is a personality trait that Matthiessen envies, one that he presents as an authentic way to relate to the self and to the world, and that he attributes to both children and Tibetans. I have argued earlier that he was fascinated by the “wildness” of children (*Snow* 47), which he perceived as a blissful state of communion with the world (see **Chapter 2**). He attributes this desired wildness to the Tibetans too: Saldang herdsmen and an old Tibetan lady weaving a blanket are called “wild” (193, 199), and so are the gaze and smile of his favourite Sherpa, Tutken (221, 248). Some of the Tibetans are thus admired for traits that draw them closer to children and to the figure of the wild man as Noble Savage. Matthiessen’s admiration is illustrated by a passage during which the porters and Sherpas, Dawa and Jang-bu, laugh after the former inadvertently drops the latter’s pack in a river, “although it meant wet clothes and a wet sleeping bag for the head Sherpa” (149). Comparing his sour mood to their good spirits, Matthiessen writes: “That happy-go-lucky spirit, that acceptance which is not fatalism but a deep trust in life, made me ashamed” (149). By contrast, on other occasions, what he sees as their kinship with children is frowned upon.

Even if Matthiessen’s use of the adjective “wild” connotes praise and/or fascination, the comparison that he invites between children and the Tibetans *via* the use of this adjective raises concern. Not only does he associate the Tibetans with children through the “wildness” they share, but he also infantilises them, presenting them as incapable of taking care of themselves. Thus, he recalls the frustration he felt when the porters and Sherpas sold the shoes they were given, failed to wear snow goggles, and consequently suffered from snow blindness and bloody feet, which slowed down the expedition (99-100). The Tibetans of the expedition are both disapproved of because of what he sees as their childishness, as well as admired for their spontaneity and good nature – their “wildness”.

Matthiessen’s admiration for this “wildness” is also problematic because it goes hand in hand with the animalisation of the Tibetans. He depicts some local people as nearly animals, as if they belonged to the unidentified dark age of myths, legends and banditry he often daydreams about. For instance, alone gathering fuel, Matthiessen meets “a wild-haired stranger”: “Demanding a smoke, he laughs loud in disbelief when I say that I have none, and raises his dagger toward my throat in demonstration of my fate, were he but given to low banditry” (190). Two lines below, the next paragraph opens with a reminder

¹⁷⁰ In *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard explains that the stereotype of the “Ecological Indian” has been contradicted by research. For instance, some animist beliefs had a destructive impact on the environment: “Among some Cree in Canada, belief in animal reincarnation meant that the more animals they killed, the more there would be, provided that the correct ritual preparation of the hunter and treatment of the carcass were observed” (144). For a thorough and nuanced analysis of this issue, the readers may turn to Shepard Krech III’s book *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (2000).

of the sheep being chased by wolves that Matthiessen witnessed a few days before, inviting a parallel between the “wild-haired stranger” and the wolves. This stranger happens to be part of a group of herdsmen from Saldang that Matthiessen subsequently pictures in pejorative terms, as “wild, rude, long-haired men, so many centuries away across the Himalaya”, on account of the fact that they stole a thermometer from Schaller (193). Once more, the paragraph that follows their portrayal centres on wild animals and Matthiessen weaves a link between the yaks and the herdsmen through the adjective “rude”, which he uses for both: “yaks have an appealing air, but they are shaggy brutes of a half-ton or better, with rude temperaments to match” (193). We can frame these descriptions with the archetype of the wild man, who is, like these men, an outlaw who elicits repulsion and who stands on the permeable threshold “between *physis* and *nomos*” to borrow the phrase Giorgio Agamben uses to describe the liminal life of the bandit (88-89).

The impression that the Tibetans perform the role of the wild man in Matthiessen’s narrative is strengthened by a brief survey of his other writings, which often seem to give a key place to this figure. Matthiessen’s fascination for wild men pre-dates *The Snow Leopard* and occurs largely in his fictional and nonfictional works. For instance, in *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, his interest focuses on the Hadza hunter-gatherers in Tanzania and the Kenyan Maasai.¹⁷¹ His novels are also suffused with “[a] shape-shifting wildness”, as his nephew Jeff Wheelwright points out: in *Race Rock*, the trigger-happy ex-marine Cady Shipman is filled with tumultuous feelings; in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, Lewis Moon, the half-Cheyenne protagonist, tries to join an Amazonian tribe; and in *Killing Mr. Watson*, the eponymous character mindlessly hunts down and exterminates wildlife before being killed (76). All are “uninhibited men relying on their instincts”, as Wheelwright puts it (76).

In *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen’s fascination with the mystery that wild men represent crystallises around Tutken, a Sherpa-porter with whom he develops close ties. The way he depicts Tutken raises objections because he sometimes animalises him and casts him into the stereotypical role of the mysterious initiator. Tutken is described, in turn, as an “evil monk with . . . yellow Mongol eyes and feral ears”, possessing a “gaze that he shares with the wild animals” and as a “leopard-eyed saint”, feared and respected by his peers (*Snow* 221, 221, 276). The animality he perceives in Tutken may explain why Matthiessen casts him in the role of the initiator, capable of providing the spiritual wisdom that the traveller is looking for: “Tutken has taught me over and over, he is the teacher that I hoped to find”, writes Matthiessen (287). Readers are entitled to wonder how much of this relation between teacher and disciple is a projection of Matthiessen’s own desire to find a spiritual guide. Nothing in *The Snow Leopard* indicates that Tutken actively took on the role of teacher. There is, instead, evidence to the contrary. The exchanges with Tutken and the other expedition members are limited – “we talk little here”, Matthiessen writes (213) – and it seems that his command of English and Matthiessen’s command of Nepali did not permit deep conversations. In a letter sent to

¹⁷¹ For more on Matthiessen’s African travelogues and novels, see John Cooley’s review “Peter Matthiessen’s Recent Work: Silence and Uncertainty”.

Kathryn O’Hehir, an American teacher who went to look for Tutken, Matthiessen wrote: “he [Tutken] spoke no English nor I Nepali” (O’Hehir 89).¹⁷² In addition, there is reason to believe that Matthiessen did not interact much with the other expedition members overall. As Richard Mabey stresses in the introduction to the Vintage 2010 edition, “[t]he party is twenty strong, including four Sherpas and fourteen porters. But Matthiessen strides clear of them immediately. . . . [Y]ou sense he wants to be alone with his thoughts” (x). Depicting Tutken as a spiritual guide is problematic insofar as it endows him with a function that is solely articulated around the needs and desire of the Western traveller. In the following extract, it becomes clear that Matthiessen superimposes the stereotypical figure of the wise native onto Tutken:

Without ever attempting to speak about it, we perceive life in the same way, or rather, I perceive it in the way that Tutken lives it. In his life in the moment, in his freedom from attachments, in the simplicity of his everyday example, Tutken has taught me over and over, he is the teacher that I hoped to find . . . ‘When you are ready’, Buddhists say, ‘the teacher will appear’. In the way he watched me, in the way he smiled, he was awaiting me; had I been ready, he might have led me far enough along the path ‘to see the snow leopard’. (287)

Describing Tutken as a character who was “awaiting” Matthiessen and who “appears” for him – like Vladimir Propp’s “helper” magically materialising to assist the hero on his quest – invites postcolonialist suspicion. First, Tutken is presented as readily available, as if his main purpose was to perform a function (that of ‘helper’) *for* the Western traveller. Second, it seems that Matthiessen would rather interpret the Sherpa’s smile and gaze as signs of spiritual wisdom than “speak about” them with him and discover that they might indicate something else (287). We could also question the aura of mystery that surrounds the Sherpa in Matthiessen’s eyes, because it gives evidence of a projected fantasy rather than of the respect one ought to pay to someone else’s “opacity” according to Édouard Glissant (189). For the sake of Matthiessen’s fantasy, Tutken’s enigma – is he “saint or sorcerer”? (*Snow* 86) – needs to be preserved, which is one of the reasons Matthiessen gives for not going to dinner with him when the trek is over (287). The mystery Matthiessen sees in him performs a specific function for the traveller. This projected air of mystery differs from the “opacity” that Glissant theorised (189), because it “create[s] [the other] afresh” to serve a stereotypical role in the Westerner’s quest (190) – more specifically, in this case, the role of the (wise) wild man, which, as we have seen, recurs across Matthiessen’s writings, with variations. One might wonder whether Tutken would have been presented in the same way (as a mysterious divine emissary), had he been an American mountaineer met on the trail, and not a local Sherpa.

Be they Russian “woodsmen” (*Consolations* 49/74) or Tibetan Sherpas, the local people Tesson and Matthiessen depict embody the travellers’ wish to return temporarily to a way

¹⁷² Kathryn O’Hehir formulates other hypotheses concerning Tutken’s English. As the members of previous expeditions reported that he was fluent in English, she suggests that he may have chosen to withhold his knowledge of English so as not to undermine the authority of Jang-Bu, the head Sherpa, as translator (98).

of life imagined as more authentic: a life of simplicity and spiritual enlightenment for Matthiessen, and a reckless and self-reliant existence, beyond *logos*,¹⁷³ for Tesson. The local people are cast into the roles of wild men, in the sense that they are fundamentally opposed to the societies that Tesson and Matthiessen have left behind. Through the portrayals of these people, the two travellers hint that authenticity seems to be located away from civilisation – or at least away from Western urban life.¹⁷⁴

3.3. “Authenticity of endurance”

Authentic travel as victory over nature in Consolations of the Forest

The desire to approach the figure of the wild man can be seen as the rationale behind the prominent position given to physical challenges in *The Snow Leopard* and *Consolations of the Forest*, considering that this archetype is typically endowed with “enormous physical strength” (Dudley and Novak x). Physical challenges take a significant portion of Tesson’s daily routine at Lake Baikal and may be partly interpreted as a statement of the self-sufficiency he yearns for, and partly as the conventional hardships the traveller must overcome. Such challenges give nature the aspect of a wild space “shot with . . . conflict and struggle” (White, *Forms* 27), and provide Tesson with the opportunity to prove himself an authentic traveller and to show that he can summon up the wild man within himself. Nevertheless, we shall see that the self-sufficiency and the conquest of nature that underpin this conception of authentic travel can be questioned.

Tesson’s attempts at a self-sufficient life, which take the form of cutting wood, melting ice for water and fishing, are in accord with his stated belief that sustenance thus acquired involves no “sin” against nature, contrary to the “[s]teak from Argentina . . . shipped across the Atlantic”, which is “tarred with infamy” (108/143).¹⁷⁵ However, on closer look, Tesson’s self-reliance would appear to be a tongue-in-cheek narrative stance, revealed when he admits being sometimes bad at fishing (93/125) and selective in his rejection of civilisation, from which he is happy to accept cigars and vodka (22/41). In addition, the invisible ties that enable his journey belie the independence that he sometimes claims. We can assume that he was reliant on the means of transportation that got him to the lake, on the advice of seasoned travellers concerning adequate equipment, and on the said equipment, which possibly travelled further than the infamous Argentinian steaks to reach his Baikal cabin. Tesson was most likely less self-sufficient than first appears, and we could say that he was “*playing at roughing it*” at Lake Baikal, to borrow the remark Donovan Hohn makes about Thoreau, who claimed self-sufficiency

¹⁷³ See, for instance, the passage I previously mentioned in which Tesson opposes the second-hand intellectual relation to the world literature affords him, and the first-hand physical authenticity he sees in the life at the cabin (*Consolations* 89/120).

¹⁷⁴ As I have pointed out previously (**Chapter 1**), Tesson and Matthiessen oppose signs of modern Western civilisation (technology and tourists) to the authentic experience of life in nature.

¹⁷⁵ “[L]e steak argentin . . . transporté à travers l’Atlantique . . . est frappé d’infamie” (Tesson, *Forêts* 143).

in *Walden*, yet sometimes took his laundry to his mother in Concord (§15, §3, emphasis added).¹⁷⁶

After his near-fatal fall in 2014, Tesson suffered long-term physical injuries that compelled him to rely on the assistance of his travel companions to carry some of his gear during his trip to the Himalaya. In the narrative he wrote about this journey, *La panthère des neiges*, the focus shifts away from the ideal of self-reliance that is promoted in *Consolations of the Forest*. Yet, this ideal remains at least partly upheld, since Tesson presents his dependence in woeful terms. We could question the conceptions of authenticity that encourage travellers to over-emphasise self-sufficiency and the ability to overcome significant physical obstacles, considering that it expresses an ableist view on (authentic) adventurous travel. Travel writers with physical disabilities may have a different story to tell, as Patrick Gray and Justin Skeesuck suggest in *I'll Push You: A Journey of 500 Miles, Two Best Friends, and One Wheelchair* (2017). In this narrative, Gray's voice alternates with that of Skeesuck as the two friends recount their travels from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago de Compostela, with Gray pushing and pulling Skeesuck's wheelchair along the routes of their pilgrimage. They must overcome considerable physical challenges to complete their journey, which is presented as a physical feat and complies with the "authenticit[y] of *endurance*" (Huggan 178, emphasis original). Their travelogue offers an enlightening counterpoint to Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest*, insofar as it promotes cooperation, solidarity, and achieving goals together, rather than self-sufficiency and solitary travel.

If we return to the main corpus I address in this study, we can see that for travellers like Tesson, who openly scorn tourists and their dependence on comforts, the authenticity of the journey seems to rest partly on the ability to face and overcome the physical challenges met in the wilderness. Debbie Lisle stresses that "The experience of overcoming hardships on the road" is a *topos* of travel writing intended to "mak[e] the travel writer more heroic" (92).

Tesson implicitly asserts his own authenticity as a traveller by presenting his physical feats as victories over nature. In June, for instance, after the ice melts, Tesson writes about the arduous assembling of his kayak, using a warlike lexicon: "The instructions say the assembly should take two hours. I put in five, and it's a major victory when I glide out onto the water this evening. With a few strokes of the paddle, I *reconquer* what the breakup of the ice had cost me: the possibility to see the mountain whole" (*Consolations* 175/223-224, the italicised word is my retranslation).¹⁷⁷ With words such as "victory" and "reconquer", Tesson turns the environment into a terrain of conquest. The following

¹⁷⁶ See also the article Rebecca Solnit wrote in defence of Thoreau on this question, "Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved", *Orion*, May 2013, 360-371. She encourages readers not to take Thoreau too literally, stating that "[t]he tiny, well-built cabin at Walden was a laboratory for a prankish investigation of work, money, time, and space by our nation's or empire's trickster-in-chief, as well as a quiet place to write. During his two years there, Thoreau was never far from town, and he was not retreating from anything" (362).

¹⁷⁷ Linda Coverdale's translation reads "I regain", while the original in French reads "*je reconquiers*", which conveys the meaning of a territory temporarily lost and then regained after battle, hence my retranslation "reconquer": "La notice stipule que c'est l'affaire de deux heures. J'en mets cinq et c'est grande victoire lorsque, au soir venu, je glisse sur l'eau. En quelques coups de pagaie, je reconquiers ce dont la débâcle me privait: la possibilité d'embrasser la montagne du regard" (Tesson, *Forêts* 223-224).

description of one of his hikes also conveys the sense of a feat accomplished: “I pass the ridge and a few sentinels of rotten granite looming up through the snow. I continue on the flank of the slope on the hard snow, occasionally tripped up by a stretch of dwarf pines. It takes me five whole hours of hard labour to reach the left bank of the notch cradling the waterfall” (96/129).¹⁷⁸ In this excerpt, the recalcitrant dwarf pines and the blocks of granite resembling “sentinels” convey the impression that the traveller triumphs over nature, portrayed as his opponent. The same hike is also explicitly portrayed as a “test” he must pass and an “ordeal” he must endure: “The forest awaits, clotted with snow: my real test. Two hours to get through a quarter mile of uneven terrain. . . After that, the ordeal of crossing a deep, narrow valley full of dwarf pines. I tumble into pitfalls three feet deep” (91/123).¹⁷⁹ This hike thus seems to function as a hurdle that the traveller must jump in order to ratify the authenticity of his journey. Later on during his stay, he describes another hike as equally demanding: “It takes me seven hours to toil up a crumbling ridge covered with dwarf pines, spongy lichens and flakes of schist to gain the summit that crowns my ‘white valley’ at 6,560 feet” (166/212).¹⁸⁰ The more hours he climbs, the higher the summit he reaches and the more exhausted he gets, the more valuable his experience seems to be to him, as suggested by the emphasis he places on the quantitative adjectives: the “seven hours” he spends toiling and the “6,560 feet” at which he climbs (emphasis added). These physical feats and towering position he reaches set him apart from the tourists who tour the lake by boat, and from the other inhabitants of the shores of Lake Baikal, as “[m]ost of them have never come here to take a look behind the ramparts of the fortress” (157/202).¹⁸¹ Compared to them he takes on the role of a conqueror of nature.

The implicit link between the conquest of nature and the authenticity of the journey raises some ethical issues. The passages I quoted above associate the elevated position of the climber to a victory over nature, which is described as an opponent. This overlooking stance, which could be compared to Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog”, could simply be a way to comply with the conventions of the travel-writing genre. For instance, this stance brings to mind Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, who scans his island from higher up and declares himself “king and lord” of the vale he surveys (Defoe 160). This towering position and the notion of conquest that pervades the descriptions of *Consolations of the Forest* that I quoted above were, according to Mary Louise Pratt (197), also widespread in Victorian imperialist travelogues.

Nevertheless, even if they reinforce generic congruence, in a twenty-first century travelogue, such passages appear somewhat antiquated and ascribe a problematic place to

¹⁷⁸ “Je passe l’arrête, quelques gendarmes de granit pourri percent la couche de neige. Je continue à flanc de pente sur la neige durcie. Parfois une coulée de pins nains ruine mes efforts. Je peine cinq heures entières avant d’atteindre la rive gauche de l’entaille fermée par la cascade” (Tesson, *Forêts* 129).

¹⁷⁹ “La forêt où s’accumule la neige me réserve son épreuve. Deux heures pour venir à bout des 400 mètres de dénivellation. . . Mais ensuite, calvaire pour traverser une combe encombrée de pins nains. Je m’écroule dans des chausse-trappes profondes de un mètre” (ibid., 123).

¹⁸⁰ “Il me faut sept heures de peine sur une arête en miettes, couverte de pins nains, de lichens spongieux et de schistes, pour gagner le sommet de 2 000 mètres qui couronne l’amont de ma ‘vallée blanche’” (ibid., 212).

¹⁸¹ “La plupart d’entre eux [les habitants des bords du Baikal] ne sont jamais montés jeter un regard derrière les herses de la place forte” (ibid., 202).

nature. The “monarch-of-all-I-survey scene”, as Pratt calls it (197), causes unease precisely because it once contributed to making natural space appear ready for conquest. In addition, read metaphorically these descriptions endorse the biblical notion that humankind has dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26-28), even more so as Tesson refers to the space around his cabin as “my ‘white valley’” (*Consolations* 166/212), with a possessive that suggests mastery and possession.¹⁸² According to Pratt, “[p]romontory descriptions” are problematic insofar as they reinforce “the relation of mastery predicated between the seer and the seen” (200). Throughout her study, Pratt has in mind the colonial conquest of foreign countries. However, her analysis is also applicable to the relation between the traveller as the seer and nature as the seen. In such scenes, nature is presented as momentarily subdued to man, who has proven his value by conquering it. This kind of vertical relation of dominance between man and nature goes against recent changes in the way nature is conceived. Climate change has spurred a re-assessment of the way nature is imagined: ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard and philosophers such as Timothy Morton have redefined the relations of humankind and nature in more horizontal terms and asserted that humankind should be considered enmeshed in its environment and not positioned above it. Although Tesson does not explicitly engage with these thinkers, most of the time his portrayals of nature in *Consolations of the Forest* are close to the way they theorised it. Thus, the towering descriptions of nature he includes in this narrative clash with the more innovative portrayal of the relation between traveller and wilderness that dominates the travelogue and that I shall examine in more detail in **Chapter 4**.

There is another reason why the implied relation between the conquest of nature and the perceived authenticity of the experience requires critical attention. This relation turns the journey into a rather conventional narrative of masculine self-assertion. By ‘masculine’ I aim to refer to a set of attributes and performances typically associated with male travellers but which female travellers also occasionally adopt or endorse, such as physical strength, endurance, and mastery over the natural world.¹⁸³ The impression that *Consolations of the Forest* is a narrative of masculine self-assertion is strengthened by the metaphors Tesson uses to turn the lake and the mountains into female lovers to be seduced or conquered (4/23, 63/90). As a result of these metaphors, each time the traveller tries his strength on the landscape, it conjures up a negative reading of nature as a feminine presence. The thought that associates women and nature has a long history and could be criticised on the grounds that it relies on an essentialist and reductive association of the female gender with a fixed set of conventional characteristics.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Nevertheless, the possessive of “my ‘white valley’” can also be interpreted as humorous, as it possibly refers to a ski slope in Chamonix, and connotes an expensive bourgeois holiday (*Consolations* 166/212).

¹⁸³ See Graham Huggan, who suggests that reckless travels are “an indirect reflection of residual masculinist anxieties” (*Extreme* 9) and also reflects on characteristics usually associated with male travellers (102-103).

¹⁸⁴ For recent and no less questionable expressions of this essentialism, see also Douglas A. Vakoch, “Introduction”, *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, Lexington Books, 2012, 12: “According to cultural ecofeminism, there is an innate connection between women and nature”.

This stark opposition of man *versus* the wild is also problematic because it reproduces the convention of travel writing that consists in defining one's identity against that of the foreign other, who becomes reduced to a mere tool in the service of the definition of the self. In this specific case, the wilderness plays the role of the foreign other. As Paul J. Cloke and Ron Johnston emphasise in *Spaces of Geographical Thought: Deconstructing Human Geography's Binaries*, "binary traditions" as a whole are reductive, exclusive and essentialist because they are "symptomatic of the logic and practice of domination of a whole list of those who are constituted as others in order to mirror the self" (18). It is worth noting that the representation of nature as an element to be conquered is restricted to certain passages in *Consolations of the Forest* and is not necessarily representative of the way nature is portrayed throughout the travelogue. Nevertheless, it is necessary to analyse such passages because they show that the conception of authentic travel as physically testing fosters narratives of self-assertion and can be correlated to the portrayal of nature as an entity that is dominated by humankind.

Enduring physical hardships to scour away the inauthentic self

In Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, physical efforts and even suffering appear paramount in retrieving a deeper self underneath the adornments of civilisation. A seemingly more authentic self is accessed after the traveller has been through pains and shed unwanted parts of himself, as suggested by Tesson's description of his life at the cabin: "Cabin life is like sandpaper. It scours the soul, lays bare one's being, ensavages the mind . . . but deep in the heart it unfolds the most sensitive nerve endings" (220/277).¹⁸⁵ Contained here is the idea that the hermit must suffer (sandpaper is hardly soft on the skin) in order to recover his 'bare' self and achieve a clarity of perception that will help him perceive nature in a more authentic way. The idea that the self contains both a core and a superficial veneer that needs to be worn away reoccurs throughout *Consolations of the Forest*.¹⁸⁶ At the beginning of the diary, for instance, Tesson portrays himself tearing out the linoleum to lay bare the original wooden floor of the cabin. Metaphorically, it can be interpreted as the desire to return to a stripped-down, less adorned version of himself. The new window Tesson installs in the cabin can be seen as an attempt to cast a fresh look at the lake, and as a promise that the traveller who is willing to transform himself will be rewarded with a transformed gaze. On the one hand, shedding off superficial matter (the linoleum of the cabin and the metaphorical wood evoked by the word "sandpaper" [220/277]) evokes the *via negativa*, the eremitic abandon of material possessions in the hope of approaching spiritual fulfilment. On the other

¹⁸⁵ "La vie en cabane est un papier de verre. Elle décape l'âme, met l'être à nu, ensauvage l'esprit . . . mais elle déploie au fond du cœur des papilles aussi sensibles que les spores" (Tesson, *Forêts* 277).

¹⁸⁶ The idea that the wilderness reveals the authentic self can also be found in the film *The Velvet Queen* (*La panthère des neiges*) when the photographer Tesson accompanies in the Himalaya, Vincent Munier, says that when he is in an urban environment he feels as if he were playing a role.

hand, it reinforces the tradition that associates authenticity with the type of travel that is uncomfortable, non-accumulative and seemingly detached from economic ties.¹⁸⁷

In a comparable manner, several statements contained in *The Snow Leopard* seem to stem from the idea that a more authentic self, purged of habits and unwanted emotions, can be recovered through physically demanding or even painful experiences. Matthiessen wishes to return to a version of himself unburdened with “residues of rage and pain” (*Snow* 52), “encrustations” (107), “self-conscious screens” (112), and “thorns and thickets of ‘ideas’, of fears and defences, prejudices and repressions” (49-50). He hints that one can shed these undesired parts of the self by steering clear of civilisation, as I have mentioned earlier (**Chapter 1**), by risking one’s life on Himalayan summits and with drugs, as he suggests when he writes that drugs enabled his wife to “let go of a life-killing accumulation of defences” (51). Such situations share a common denominator: they are described as painful but exhilarating, and gear the traveller’s attention towards the present moment, putting him in a state of heightened attention that he desires, as I argued in **Chapter 2**. We can hypothesise that Matthiessen’s travels, especially the dangerous ones, perform the same function that drugs once had for him: they act as limit-experiences, uproot false notions of safety and leave him in a state of wonder.¹⁸⁸

This dissociation of two selves – one authentic, the other one less so – can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his study, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling explains that around that time modern individuals realised that they possessed “internal space” independently of the social roles they performed (19), which gave birth to the idea that an individual was composed of both an authentic self and a superficial (social) self (24). This dualism can also be interpreted as a convention of travel writing that consists in uncoupling a social self in charge of the routine of home and a core self who is accessed through adventurous travel. Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s narratives indicate that they belong to the types of travellers who thought, like Nicolas Bouvier, that the aim of travel was to shed metaphorical weight, “to be fleeced, washed out, wrung out by the road until you become like the towels worn thin by so many laundries that they hand you in brothels with a piece of soap” (*Poisson* 748).¹⁸⁹ In a word, discomforts seem to enable them to reach a part of their personality that they deem more authentic.

¹⁸⁷ The preference for abandoning material comforts can be traced back to the hierarchy between “utilitarian” and “non-utilitarian travel”: travel undertaken in the hope of material gain and travel undertaken in search of scientific or spiritual gain, as I pointed out in **Chapter 1** in relation to the travels of Sara Wheeler. See *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, “Travel Writing” (§ 5-6).

¹⁸⁸ See Charles Taylor’s conceptualisation of the limit-experience: “an experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference” (*Secular* 6).

¹⁸⁹ “On ne voyage pas pour se garnir d’exotisme et d’anecdotes comme un sapin de Noël, mais pour que la route vous plume, vous rince, vous essore, vous rende comme ces serviettes élimées par les lessives qu’on vous tend avec un éclat de savon dans les bordels” (Bouvier, *Poisson* 748).

The wilderness's power to return the traveller to his authentic self

Wild nature is portrayed as the ideal locale to retrieve the part of the self perceived to be more authentic. In Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues, the wilderness possesses the ability to return the self to a state implicitly depicted as more authentic: a deeper, pre-social self that has overcome grief.

Tesson's travelogues are marked by mourning, loss and the need for recovery in nature. For instance, *Sur les chemins noirs* narrates his journey on the backroads of rural France as he attempts to recover from a traumatic fall that caused him to spend months in hospital. In *Consolations of the Forest*, loss takes a different form, as the last forty pages narrate the traveller's recovery from the break-up of a relationship said to have occurred during his stay at Lake Baikal. The soothing power attributed to nature is apparent in the English title of this book¹⁹⁰ and again in the title of the twenty-second chapter of *La panthère des neiges* – "The consolation of the wilderness" ("*La consolation du sauvage*"). Furthermore, at the start of his Himalayan journey, Tesson claims that seeing the snow leopard will enable him to summon up the image of his former lover and deceased mother, which suggests that nature is once more expected to help him overcome feelings of loss.

The comforting power attributed to nature can also be seen through the improvement of Matthiessen's frame of mind on his Himalayan trek. The self that is rejuvenated through the journey seems to elicit a greater feeling of satisfaction and thus appears more authentic. In *The Snow Leopard*, nature enables the wayfarer to come out of mourning and embrace a form of joy. The reader knows from the prologue that Matthiessen's departure for the Himalaya follows the death of his wife by a few months. According to Richard Mabey, Matthiessen felt he was "grieving too much" and sought to overcome this feeling (viii). Throughout the journey, reminiscences of his late wife are interspersed with cheerful descriptions of nature that dominate the overall economy of the book, which suggests that his mourning process is interwoven with a gradual return to the enjoyment of the present. We can observe the rejuvenating function of nature in the joyful descriptions of natural phenomena, which are particularly noticeable at the start of the journal entries. Matthiessen seems to make a point of framing his days with the positive feeling that nature elicits in him, especially in the first month of his journey. For instance, he begins the entry of September 29th with "[a] luminous mountain morning" (31); the entry of October 6th with "[d]aybreak brings pink-copper glow to aerial ferns along the oak limbs" (52); that of October 10th with "[i]n the glory of sunrise, spider-webs glitter" (75); and that of October 11th with "[i]n the clear night, bright stars descend all the way to the horizon" (76). "[G]low", "luminous", "clear", and "bright" all participate in emphasising the ordinary beauties that are present at hand.

The representation of the wilderness as a regenerating place can be seen as a legacy of Emerson's and Thoreau's writings. In *Nature*, Emerson writes that: "In the woods, . . .

¹⁹⁰ To date, Penguin editions have not forwarded my queries to Linda Coverdale, the translator of the book, who could have enlightened us about the potential involvement of the author in this translation choice.

a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and, at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth” (4). A comparable idea can be found in Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* (220/277) and in Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* (112), as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, and in other travelogues such as Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (181). Davidson uses precisely the same words as Emerson to describe her experience travelling alone in the Australian outback and mentions “the *sloughing off, like a snake-skin*, of the useless preoccupations and standards of the society [she] had left” (181, emphasis added). In addition, for wilderness to be rejuvenating, Thoreau states, it needs to be unwelcoming: “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest woods, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp” (*Walking* 32). The dangerous Himalayan ledges that Matthiessen climbs and the mountain Tesson hikes with difficulty could be considered as unwelcoming as Thoreau’s swamp, and as regenerating.

Wild and ungroomed bodies as proof of the authenticity of the journey

Proof that the allegedly more authentic self has been reached is given by the two travellers when they stage scenes of failed recognition and describe their altered bodies. The authenticity of the travellers’ experience is ratified by the marks their bodies bear. Ungroomed and tired, the body of the authentic travellers makes them look like wild men or wild women. The wayfarers portray this bodily transformation with triumph because it gives proof that they have not shied away from hard living conditions and that they have embraced the return to a wilder version of themselves. The torn clothes, unshaven face, unkempt hair and questionable hygiene reoccur as motifs through the travel-writing genre. Some of the travellers welcome these bodily marks as proof that they are ‘roughing it’ in the wilderness. For instance, after nine days travelling in the Himalaya, Matthiessen writes: “My knees and feet and back are sore, and all my gear is wet. I wear my last dry socks upside down so that the hole in the heel sits on top of my foot; these underpants, ripped, must be worn backward: my broken glasses’ frame is taped; my hair is tangled” (*Snow* 57). This stop in the ascent of the mountain is also the occasion to shed burdens, as he crops his hair, cuts off his wristband and removes his watch. Through these gestures and through the description of his torn clothes, Matthiessen shows that he relinquishes his superficial social self and that he is sincere in his quest for enlightenment. This quest seems partly fulfilled at the end of the journey, when he describes himself thus: “In the gaunt, brown face in the mirror – unseen since late September – the blue eyes in a monkish skull seem eerily clear, but this is the face of a man I do not know” (288). His “monkish skull” and “clear” eyes indicate that he has reached a form of enlightenment as a result of his transformation.

In a comparable manner, Tesson conforms to the conventional scene of the affected body. In *Consolations of the Forest*, he uses the following words to describe his state after a difficult climb with his dogs: “My clothes are in rags, my hair is every which way, I’ve got booze breath and jaundiced eyes, . . . Our bodies didn’t need to climb up almost 5,000 feet of crappy roadway today. I ought to have read Chateaubriand while drinking black

tea” (185/235).¹⁹¹ In this passage, the wild, reckless self is opposed to the civilised self who reads at home, which conveys the impression that two selves coexist in the traveller. Nevertheless, Tesson does not seem to place the wild self above the sophisticated self. His other works and interviews also suggest that he enjoys the coexistence of opposite poles: the city and the cabin, rest and adrenaline.¹⁹²

A quick survey of the rest of the corpus I selected shows that the physical signs of hardships also contribute to creating an effect of authenticity in Colin Thubron’s *In Siberia*. After a few weeks in the fishing village of Potalovo, he describes his surprise at discovering his altered traits in a mirror: “In a window of the children’s ward I catch sight of a man staring at me. His hair flies wild round a wind-burnt face. For a second I imagine him another village drunk. Then I realise it is not a window at all. It is a mirror” (*In Siberia* 143). The shabbiness of the fishing village has rubbed off on him. Nowhere does Thubron approach the dismal state of post-Soviet Russia so closely as during this scene of failed recognition. After weeks observing the wretchedness of the inhabitants from a distance and living in the same squalid conditions as them, he realises that he has come closer to their physical condition. In a way, Thubron has ‘gone native’ and the marks he bears give evidence that he was deeply immersed in Russia.¹⁹³

3.4. “Authenticity of endangerment”

Dangerous travel versus tourism

The conception of authenticity as physical endurance, suffering and victory over the natural elements takes on more or less extreme forms in Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s narratives. In *The Snow Leopard*, for instance, physically demanding situations range from the discomfort of a “cramped and ratty tent” (*Snow* 42) to a potentially lethal ascent on “flimsy scaffolding” and “round a windy point of cliff” (141). Unpleasant situations seem underpinned by “older-style authenticities of *endurance* that used to epitomize ‘the hard work of travel’”,¹⁹⁴ to borrow Graham Huggan’s words, while life-threatening experiences tend towards the “potentially self-consuming authenticity of *endangerment*” (*Extreme* 178, emphasis original).

I propose to argue that the importance the writers give to endangerment is linked to their search for authentic experiences and for means to display this authenticity to readers. In *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard*, dangerous situations are described as a

¹⁹¹ “Mes vêtements sont en loques, j’ai le poil en bataille, l’haleine éthylique et l’œil jaune. . . . Nos organismes n’avaient pas besoin de gravir 1 500 mètres de dénivelé aujourd’hui. Il eût fallu lire Chateaubriand en buvant du thé noir” (Tesson, *Forêts* 235).

¹⁹² “It is the coexistence of opposites that gives birth to a form of energy . . . on one side the slippers, on the other the motorcycle” – “C’est la coexistence des contraires qui fait naître une forme d’énergie . . . d’un côté les pantoufles et de l’autre la motocyclette” (00: 02: 12 interview for *La Grande Librairie*). See also the introductory statement of his book *Une très légère oscillation*, where he writes about the frenetic desire to alternate between “[o]ne day in a hut, the other in town” – “Un jour en cabane, le lendemain en ville” (1).

¹⁹³ I address the concept of ‘going native’ in more detail in **Chapter 4**.

¹⁹⁴ Graham Huggan quotes Gillian Kenny, “Our Travelers’ Out There on the Road: Lonely Planet and Its Readers, 1973-1981”, in *Jumping the Queue*, edited by Gabriella Espak, Scott Fatnowna, and Denise Woods, University of Queensland Press, 2002, 111-119, 119.

way to focus on the present, gain a sense of immediacy, and prove one's worth as an adventurer – three goals closely tied to the two travellers' conception of authentic travel.

The unnecessary risks Tesson takes can be seen as a way of proving that he is no armchair traveller. He recounts, for instance, planting his knife in the wood above his bed before going to sleep (20/38), and kayaking in icy water “more than a mile from shore, sitting in a canvas craft supported by a wooden frame [he] put together while taking a few liberties with the instructions” (177/226).¹⁹⁵ Other life-threatening situations recounted in the travelogue include encounters with bears and driving over crevasses. One might question the simplistic opposition Tesson draws between (desirable) life-threatening travel and (undesirable) safe travel or safe living, which is illustrated by the contempt he shows for the bourgeois who stay at home (192/243), for the Russians who never leave their valley (157/202), and for the tourists who occasionally land on his shore (38/61).

It would seem that, to set himself apart from tourists and stay-at-homes and to prove that his journey is authentic, Tesson is forced to play with the idea of death, if not with death itself. The proximity of death strengthens the impression that he is entirely committed to his project. In addition, it seems to be a way for him to stress that he is looking for intense experiences as opposed to the dull routine of home. A special place is reserved for the idea of death in *Consolations of the Forest*, as shown by the recurrence of hints of suicide. As early as the first chapter, Tesson mentions Henry de Montherlant and Yukio Mishima, both suicide writers, and frames his move to Siberia with the words of his friend Sergei: “This is a stupendous place to commit suicide” (8/27).¹⁹⁶ At the end of the travelogue, he remarks: “we are never so alive as when we are dead to the world!” (169/216).¹⁹⁷ This assertion shows that he associates temporary social death to a more intense life in the wilderness. The conception of authenticity at the base of such a statement hinges on the binary opposition between “the world”, understood as technological urban civilisation, which is presented as death-like, and the (dangerous) life in the woods, which is presented as authentic living. This binary opposition recurs in other works and interviews of Tesson. In an interview he gave after the publication of *Consolations of the Forest* and before his dramatic fall in 2014, Tesson is filmed strolling among the tombs of an alpinist cemetery. Better die while you are practising your passion (preferably a dangerous one, like rock climbing), he declares, as “it is less morbid than expiring slowly in the routine of an office” (“Une liberté” 40:00-40:35).¹⁹⁸ His words could be taken as bravado or as a nod to Thoreau, who penned a kindred thought, namely that shopkeepers “deserve[d] some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago” (*Walking* 7).

¹⁹⁵ “[J]e tire des azimuts entre les caps et me retrouve à plus de deux kilomètres de la rive, assis dans une embarcation de toile soutenue par une structure de bois que j’ai montée en prenant quelques libertés avec les instructions” (Tesson, *Forêts* 226).

¹⁹⁶ “Ici c’est un magnifique endroit pour se suicider” (ibid., 27).

¹⁹⁷ “[O]n ne se sent jamais aussi vivant que mort au monde!” (ibid., 216).

¹⁹⁸ “[C]’est moins morbide que de crever à petit feu dans la routine d’un bureau” (Tesson, interview with Laine, 40:00-40:35).

Danger as a means to reach heightened awareness

In *The Snow Leopard*, endangerment plays a slightly different role in the quest for authenticity. Dangerous situations and limit-experiences do not so much set Matthiessen apart from tourists as they help him focus on the present, as shown by the following passage:

My foot slips on a narrow ledge: in that split second, as needles of fear pierce heart and temples, eternity intersects with present time . . . What is exhilarating is to extend this acute awareness into ordinary moments, in the moment-by-moment experiencing of the lammergeier and the wolf, which, finding themselves at the centre of things, have no need for any secret of true being. (227-228)

As I argued previously, attention to the present is a key component for Matthiessen of an authentic relation to nature. Here, treacherous Himalayan ledges that require complete concentration give access to this kind of authenticity. In an article about “Danger-Zone Tourism”, Kathleen Adams calls the feeling such situations elicit “visceral authenticity” and stresses that it goes hand in hand with “the sense of heightened awareness (on a very physical level) experienced during endangerment” (qtd. in Huggan 189).¹⁹⁹ In the passage above, Matthiessen seems to reach this “visceral authenticity”, which is linked to the body, and which he describes as the preserve of animals. We can identify here a veiled desire to emulate the mode of being of “the lammergeier and the wolf”, which he endows with the ability to focus on the immediate present. Momentarily experiencing the world in an animal way – in a “visceral way” to use Adams’s words – returns the traveller to a wilder version of himself, straddling the human and animal realms.

Danger as a means to reintegrate nature as prey

In the travelogues under scrutiny, endangerment through proximity with animals seems to provide conditions particularly conducive to the experience of this “visceral authenticity” (Adams qtd. in Huggan 189). The two travellers assert the authenticity of their journeys and of their relation to the wilderness by describing situations in which they are the prey of wild beasts, or imagine that they are.

Matthiessen, for instance, recounts standing still as a lammergeier brushes his shoulder, the bird having taken him for a dead prey (*Snow* 212). Tesson, for his part, tells about his sudden fear of being eaten by silurid fish as he bathes in Lake Baikal (*Consolations* 146/19). In his subsequent narrative, he muses on children allegedly snatched by the snow leopard and on the corpses that are eaten by vultures (*Panthère* 46, 96). These scenes appear as fantasies re-integrating the travellers into nature as prey. For a moment, they imagine that they belong to the animal realm and no longer stand apart from nature.

¹⁹⁹ Graham Huggan quotes Kathleen Adams, “Danger-Zone Tourism: Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times”, in *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Peggy Teo, et al., Pergamon, 2001, 265-80, 275.

These situations might be fantasised, like those I mentioned, or they might be presented as real, such as when Tesson narrates his dangerous encounter with a bear (*Consolations* 160/206), and when Matthiessen recounts his perilous observation of a lioness in a tree in *The Tree Where Man Was Born*:

The front of the car stopped directly under the limb [the lioness's tail], with the cat's stiff whiskers and my whey face less than a lion's length apart; . . . we listened to the scrape of claws on bark and the hiss and spitting and the heavy thump of that hard tail against the wood . . . The intensity, the sun, the light were terrifically exciting – I hated it, but it was terrifically exciting. I felt unbearably aware . . . there is only a violent memory of lion-ness in all my senses. (116)

This hazardous scene in close proximity to a predator is depicted as an opportunity to access a pre-reflexive, immediate and visceral awareness. The passage thus reinforces the link between endangerment, fear, animals and the traveller's impression that he has come closer to experiencing the kind of authenticity that he seeks.

We could hypothesise that being prey to wild beasts is a *topos* frequently used by travel writers to confirm the authenticity of their journeys. In *Passage to Juneau* (1999), British travel writer Jonathan Raban offers us a telling example of this *topos* and of the purpose it can serve. In the course of his journey off the coast of British Columbia, he writes with delight about the colossal beings that hide in the depths of water, and recounts with thinly veiled delight being startled by killer whales breathing close to his boat (46). Such suspenseful twists distinguish him from mere tourists, who can only relish this thrill by proxy, as Raban hints when he comments on the fake fright created by the audio commentators aboard cruise ships sailing close to his boat:

'bear . . . wolf . . . mountain lion . . .' You wouldn't see much wildlife from a state-room window; but the near proximity of mammals capable of killing and eating humans was a cruise-feature that figured importantly in the brochures. The ship's naturalist was employed to fill the forest with creatures red in tooth and claw, so that passengers could invest the passing undergrowth with action sequences worthy of Discovery Channel. (316)

Raban's tone is ironic and disdainful of the tourists, whose experience appears somewhat less authentic because he describes the danger they are subject to as imaginary. The quote from Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H." – "red in tooth and claw" – seems to mock the pompous emphasis the commentator gives to the dangers of the wilderness. Unlike Raban, alone in his small boat, the tourists aboard the cruise ship appear safe: as long as they stay on board, they are at leisure to fantasise about wild beasts and safely "invest" the forest with imaginary projections. Raban seems to suggest that they might as well have stayed at home in front of "Discovery Channel".

Real and imagined situations of endangerment in the wilderness can be read as a narrative strategy asserting the authenticity of the traveller's experience in implied or explicit opposition to the inauthenticity of safe travel that the tourist epitomises. Alternatively, such situations can be linked to the scorn for modernity that pervades certain travelogues, as I have shown in **Chapter 1**. By foregrounding their encounters

with dangerous wildlife, Tesson and Matthiessen prove that they can survive in the wilderness like the mythic figure of the wild man, and in opposition to modern civilised man, who is no longer prey to wild beasts as he was 10,000 years ago. The positive light in which such encounters are described hints that they may be linked to the travellers' nostalgia for a pre-civilised self and a dreamt era when humankind was part of nature and could prove its value by facing the threats that nature posed.

3.5. The authenticities of endurance and endangerment in the travelogues of women

I propose to venture a first step towards addressing the gendered dimension of the “authenticities of *endurance*” and “*endangerment*” (Huggan 178, emphasis original), though this question merits a more thorough examination than can be undertaken here. What role does the set of traits and performances conventionally associated with male travel writing – physical strength, endurance, endangerment and conquest in the wilderness – play in travel narratives written by women? Factors other than gender may explain variations in the way female travel writers position themselves as regards these traits, such as their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, their individual literary and stylistic preferences, and the socio-historical and literary context around their journeys and their texts. Nevertheless, critics who have skirted the risk of essentialising their travelogues can help us move towards a nuanced answer.

Simply stated, it seems that some female-authored travelogues betoken the influence of the “authenticities of *endurance*” and “*endangerment*”, while others do not (178). Shirley Foster and Sara Mills observe antithetical strategies in imperial-era female travel writing in reference to the adventurer hero role, a conventionally masculine figure whose journey is characterised by “the risking of one’s life to perform heroic deeds . . . and the overcoming of physical difficulties and obstacles” (252). The two critics note that some female travel writers, such as Mary Kingsley, narrate accidents and setbacks with self-deprecating humour, whereas their male counterparts use such incidents to “display [their] strength and quick-wittedness” (255).²⁰⁰ Other travellers, such as Alexandra David-Néel, easily adopt the stereotypical “masculine” role of the adventurer hero (255). Finally, some alternate between self-mockery and self-assertion, as Isabella Bird does (255), or strategically choose to “portra[y] themselves in fairly stereotypical feminine roles” (255).

Susan Bassnett also draws attention to the intricacies of the female traveller’s self-portrayal. She argues that, “[a]lthough many [female travel writers] strove to create an image of themselves that emphasised their physical stamina and emulated the endurance of male counterparts, there is a clear assertion of femininity [in their travelogues]” (237). Her examples of travellers who accentuate their physical endurance include Ella Maillart,

²⁰⁰ We may object to this argument. The use of self-mockery to tone down potentially heroic deeds cannot be unproblematically associated with the female gender of the traveller, at least in contemporary texts. Male travel writers such as Sylvain Tesson and Eric Newby also employ self-deprecation, and the latter imbues the entirety of *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* with the humorous acceptance of his physical inadequacy.

“whose books reflect . . . physical strength”, and Isabella Bird, who “stresses the hardships she endures”, and recounts for instance how “she narrowly missed death on a mountain path overhanging a precipice, transforming herself into a heroine capable of extraordinary physical feats” (234).

There seems to be a consensus among critics in regard to the role that the context of production and reception played in the decision of nineteenth-century female travel writers to ascribe more or less conventionally masculine or feminine traits to their travelling personae. Critics such as Dúnlaith Bird and Foster and Mills suggest that the travellers who sought to appear ladylike in particular were catering to the expectations that their society placed on them, which can explain why, for instance, Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley “took [the] paradigms of upright Victorian spinsterhood to the point of parody” (Birkett 42). At that time, female travel writers were also writing for a specific pool of readers, critics and publishers (Foster and Mills 9-11; D. Bird 19). Convincing this readership that they complied with an ideal image of femininity may thus have been more important to these travellers than convincing their readers that they were authentic adventurers.

One may wonder what function physical strength, risk and pain perform in more recent female travel writing, given that all the scholars quoted above study mostly nineteenth-century travelogues. The British travel writer Christine Dodwell, who began travelling in 1975, appears unyielding when faced with a wide array of dangers and discomforts that include “‘tick-bite fever’, rabid jackals and a diet . . . of fresh blood-and-urine yoghurt” (Robinson 90). Her Scottish contemporary the mountaineer Myrtle Simpson, whose travelogues were published between 1964 and 1977, also seems to face danger with equanimity. For Jane Robinson, Simpson had a “passion for aggressive travel” (102), which is expressed in the words of the travel writer herself: “I do not run away from responsibilities and commitments, but perhaps from tin gods, like the television and artificial worries about what the neighbours think. I do not retreat, but advance into a world where to survive one must come to terms with the natural elements” (Simpson qtd. in Robinson 101).²⁰¹ The mountaineer and cinematographer Julie Tullis, who lost her life on a fatal expedition to K2, the second highest mountain on Earth, offers another example of a travel account where risk is in the limelight. In *Extreme Pursuits* (2012), Huggan takes *Into Thin Air* (1997), Jon Krakauer’s first-hand account of the ill-fated Mount Everest expedition, as the epitome of extreme travel, but it is worth comparing Krakauer’s book to Tullis’s *Clouds From Both Sides* (1986), which recounts her physically challenging climbs.

Physical achievements, near-death experiences and fearlessness in the face of danger are traits that critics and the media continue to use as standards to assess the merit of travellers today, regardless of their gender. The contemporary British author Ginny Dougary remarks that the newspaper reports that covered the all-female Arctic expedition she accompanied “were full of ‘Woman cheats death’ headlines and ‘My struggle for life, by Arctic adventure’” (25). In *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* (2004), Dea Birkett emphasises the physical challenges that pioneering pilot Amy Johnson had

²⁰¹ Jane Robinson does not provide the reference for this quote.

to overcome in the 1930s, noting that “[t]hroughout the flight[s], Johnson had to pump petrol regularly . . . to the main fuel tanks”, which meant about two thousand pump strokes a day (52). This remark can be compared to Bill Buford’s 1998 eulogy of the war reporter Martha Gellhorn, which associates fearlessness to praise. Buford reminds his readers that Gellhorn flirted her way onto a ship to witness the Normandy invasion first-hand. He comments on the incident in the following terms: “[she was] unintimidated by one of the most dangerous military operations of the war (and *so fearless in a male way*) and yet utterly capable of making men melt (devastating *in a distinctly female way*)” (“Martha” §7, emphasis added). Buford’s remark likens fearlessness in the face of danger to a male characteristic worth of praise, thus adding to the stereotype of the adventurer hero. In addition, he suggests that Gellhorn was all the more praiseworthy as she also embodied an ideal femininity, which echoes the contradictory demands placed on nineteenth-century female travel writers that I mentioned previously.

One of the questions that remains is whether female-authored travel literature points to a female equivalent to the figure of the wild man living secluded in the wilderness – a wild woman. Jane Robinson dedicates a chapter of her anthology *Wayward Women* to women who wrote about “Life in the Bush”, but she focuses on nineteenth-century settlers and emigrants to America and Canada rather than on adventurers and hermits (294). Contemporary Quebec writer Gabrielle Filteau-Chiba also remarks that finding examples of female writers who went to live in the woods alone is challenging. She raises the crucial issue of the literary legacy of contemporary female travel writers, who may choose to respond to the texts of their male predecessors and to use *topoi* conventionally associated with them, for lack of female role models with whom they could identify. Sylvain Tesson is the only travel writer that Filteau-Chiba mentions as having attempted a journey comparable to the one she undertook when she left Montreal to live a solitary life in the woods, with poachers for neighbours and no electricity.²⁰²

It would also be beneficial to bring the primary texts I have studied in this chapter into dialogue with the travel writings of women, to determine whether female travellers also represent physical effort and pain as means to retrieve a more authentic self underneath the adornments of civilisation. As I mentioned previously, *Tracks* contains scenes where Robyn Davidson describes her unwashed body, rejoices that it has been altered by extreme physical conditions, and suggests that these alterations helped her access a more authentic version of herself (181, 209). However, Dúnlaith Bird offers a different perspective on this topic in her study of female travel writing from 1850 to 1950, *Travelling in Different Skins* (2012). She argues that travelling allowed women to try on different selves and to shake off the social roles they played at home, which is quite different to retrieving a core self through pain. Taking the example of the Swiss explorer Isabelle Eberhardt, who “adopts not just male clothing but a male identity” during her travels to Algeria (72), Bird suggests that no “core identity does in fact exist” in

²⁰² Her stay near the river Kamouraska inspired her novels *Encabannée* (2018) and *Sauvages* (2019). Although they are not travel literature in a strict sense, Filteau-Chiba openly admits to the semi-autobiographical nature of these novels, stating that the protagonist is her “alter ego” (interview by Janssens 00:22:06).

Eberhardt's text, and that the traveller-narrator herself appears "unsure what substance, if any, lies behind her temporary performances" (74).

Making statements about contemporary female travel writing as if it were a homogeneous field is fraught with peril – even more so with such a limited sample of examples. Nevertheless, some of the female travel writers surveyed here seem to associate danger, self-sufficiency and physical endurance with the idea of authentically adventurous travel, just as their male counterparts do, which may indicate that this conception of authenticity cuts across gender. Other questions remain open that could be addressed by a more thorough investigation, regarding for instance the position contemporary female travel writers adopt *vis-à-vis* the wilderness and whether they portray themselves as conquerors of nature. Commenting on Alexandra David-Néel's travels in Tibet, Birkett writes that female travel writers "simply went and saw; they had no interest in conquering", but evidence is lacking to support her claim (52).

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that the conception of authenticity that underpins Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues is closely linked to the physical strain and danger experienced in the wilderness. These travellers place emphasis on physical effort and potentially lethal situations and convey the impression that they provide access to a more authentic relation to the wilderness, to a more authentic self, and to more authentic travel. Physically demanding experiences enable them to scour off unwanted parts of their identity and retrieve a more desirable self; they enable them to prove that they are authentic adventurers as opposed to safe tourists, and they give them the impression that they fit better into nature. A thorough investigation of a wider corpus is needed to determine whether these conceptions of authenticity are as pervasive in the travelogues of women, as I have pointed out.

The notion that a core self lies underneath a superficial social self can be questioned. Countering this conception of the authentic self is the notion that the self is composed of layers with no core, and it could also be pointed out that the social self, which is the product of society, education, and social interactions, is indivisibly part of the self. We could also remark, like Lionel Trilling, that, if there is such thing as a wild self underneath the embellishments of civilisation, it may not be desirable to bring it out, as it may resemble the literary figure of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Trilling 108).

Nevertheless, *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard* give evidence that the belief in a core self endures. The part of the self that Tesson and Matthiessen want to retrieve through physical strain and suffering and the kind of relation they wish to have with the wilderness can be summed up by reference to the figure of the wild man. This abstract figure possesses characteristics that the travellers praise, that fascinate them, and/or that they try to emulate: he is free from social constraints and better integrated into the natural environment.

Through the centuries, this abstract figure has been projected onto foreign indigenous people, as Dudley and Novak point out in *The Wild Man Within*. In Tesson's and

Matthiessen's texts, the model of the wild man is projected onto Russians and Tibetans. On a spectrum going from civilisation to wildness, the travellers describe these local people as closer to wildness and praise them for this reason. In Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest*, the Russians are described as "woodsmen" as if their current residence in the wilderness was an essential and not a circumstantial element of their identity (49/74).²⁰⁵ Tesson admires their silence and recklessness – mirrored in his own reckless deeds – which are traits typically associated with the figure of the wild man. In *The Snow Leopard*, the Tibetans are portrayed as possessed of "wildness" (47), a trait that is positively connoted because it refers to the spontaneity that, according to Matthiessen, we lost in childhood, and that he seeks to retrieve through mindfulness, meditation and dangerous climbs. The reasons behind his fascination with Tibetans raise certain questions. Some of them are described as behaving like outlaws and bandits and elicit fascination, fear and repulsion, as the figure of the wild man once did in the Western imagination. Others elicit wonder because they possess the "wildness" of children living in an Arcadian nature, in a manner similar to the Noble Savage. Describing these local people as children is evidently problematic. Lastly, one of the Tibetans, Tutken, fascinates Matthiessen for reasons that bring him close to the figure of the wild man: he is portrayed as mysterious, unpredictable, animal-like and wise. Local people are thus cast in the role of wild men, placed at the opposite pole to the civilisation that Tesson and Matthiessen have escaped, and they are expected to provide examples of the authentic self and of the authentic relation to nature that these two travellers pursue.

Tesson and Matthiessen's praise of the local people can be read as a variation of what Lawrence Buell calls "pastoral ideology", and which romanticises the "(re)turn to a less urbanized, more 'natural' state of existence" (*Environmental* 31). Traditionally, the pastoral ideal is epitomised by professions close to the land, such as shepherds, as Paul Alpers stresses (459), and farmers, favoured by Martin Heidegger (Adorno 59). In the travelogues under scrutiny, this ideal is embodied by Sherpas, forest rangers and fishermen.

²⁰⁵ "[H]ommes des bois" (Tesson, *Forêts* 74).

CHAPTER 4

Authenticity as “Becoming Other” with Plants and Animals

Introduction

Tesson and Matthiessen portray themselves as metamorphosing to fit better into nature, by contrast with earlier eighteenth and nineteenth-century travellers, who sought to dominate, appropriate or alter the environment. Therefore, I argue that *The Snow Leopard* and *Consolations of the Forest* suggest that an authentic relation to nature is immersive, relational, reciprocal and transformative.

As I have shown earlier, Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s engagements with Siberia and the Himalaya rely on a change of vision, to come nearer to the fresh sensitivities of a child, and on a transformation of the body, as they strain to climb the mountains. Through hardships, they aim to return to an imagined core self, better characterised as a liminal wild self or animal self, distanced from society and technology, focused on epiphanies, on physical sensations and on the sense of immediacy they afford. To reach this core self and what they portray as a more authentic relation to nature, the travellers observe animals, take them as models, and describe themselves blending into the wilderness and “becoming” plant or animal.²⁰⁴

With the help of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s chapter “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, [*Mille Plateaux*, 1980]),²⁰⁵ I will focus on the manner in which Tesson and Matthiessen narrate their enmeshment in nature. “Becoming-Animal” goes beyond the contemplation of nonhuman others that I have previously studied in **Chapter 2**. This concept implies that

²⁰⁴ The quotation marks aim to signal that I use the verb “to become” in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave to the term. I shall define this specific use throughout the chapter.

²⁰⁵ In this chapter, I shall examine Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s texts in the light of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “Becoming-Other” as it is theorised in *Mille plateaux*. In addition, I shall bring into play definitional elements found in Deleuze and Guattari’s opus *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (*Kafka, pour une littérature mineure* [1975]), when they shed additional light on the concept of “Becoming-Other”. However, the way in which I use this concept to analyse travelogues differs from the way Deleuze and Guattari use it to analyse Kafka’s novels. Looking at a wide range of texts by Kafka (his novels, letters and journals) to argue that his work as a whole tends towards “becoming-minor” (rather than solely “becoming-animal”), they analyse the function and path of various characters who seek or open “lines of flight” through their “becoming-animal”, often in order to “escape” a situation (*Kafka* 13/24). By contrast, I do not seek to draw general conclusions about the aims that Tesson and Matthiessen pursue throughout their entire bibliography. Instead, I focus on selected scenes of three of their travelogues where they picture themselves (and not others) as “becoming-animal”, “becoming-plant” or “becoming-imperceptible”. They do this not only to find or open “a way out” of their situations (even though, to a certain extent, both seek to flee civilisation as I have argued in **Chapter 1**), but also to bridge the chasm with animal kind, and to facilitate integrating themselves into the natural environment.

Matthiessen and Tesson attempt to see *with* the animals, rather than simply see them.²⁰⁶ I propose to argue that the process of “becoming” that they undergo requires not only the visual attention and physical adaptation that I studied in **Chapter 2** and **3**, but also the desire to blend in the environment, which is illustrated by the metaphorical transformation of the two travellers into an animal, a plant, or an imperceptible being.

Neither herborisers nor uncomplicated conquerors,²⁰⁷ Tesson and Matthiessen part with the positions travellers conventionally adopted in relation to their natural environment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially. The genesis of nature writing that Paul Smethurst outlines gives evidence that, until “new nature writing”²⁰⁸ devised strategies to portray human life as imbricated in wilderness (“Nature” 37), nature was seen as strictly separate from humankind. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, naturalists enclosed nature within typologies in an attempt at “totalising visions” that aimed to “accoun[t] for such global phenomena as the worldwide distribution of plants”, as exemplified by the writings of Carl Linnaeus, Comte de Buffon and Alexander von Humboldt (32). For their part, the English Romantics strove to express correspondences between sublime landscapes and their sensibility (33), while at the same time a “pastoral revival” movement began that lamented the loss of wild areas (34). Nature was also the object of conquest, control and management in alliance with imperialist expansion, as emphasised by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (8-9). A brief look at the encounters with animals in reports of Atlantic voyages from 1750 to 1850 shows that animals were also reified and collected as specimens “by crew and passengers alike”, as if they were exotic souvenirs (McAleer 14). Lastly, they were seen as a source of wonder, as illustrated by the British writer and traveller John Henry Grose, who wrote at length about the various types of fish that he encountered on his voyage to Bombay in 1750 (McAleer 11).

Tesson and Matthiessen inherit some of these conventions – a Romantic sensibility, lamentation at environmental damage and animals as a source of astonishment. Yet, they also go beyond these conventions and represent themselves as enmeshed in their environment. Their narratives bring them closer to nature by means of metaphors, and simultaneously preserve a sort of reverent distance from the wilderness. They acknowledge what I would call the “radical Otherness” of nature and animals, borrowing

²⁰⁶ At the end of his book chapter on “Theorizing Animals: Heidegger, Derrida, Agamben” Matthew Calarco proposes that we start thinking about this sort of co-vision as a new philosophical tool. After showing that some philosophers, such as Agamben, hinted that animals possessed the nearly philosophical ability to contemplate the world, Calarco proposed “a shared engagement in contemplation with other theorizing animals” which would consist in “contemplating, thinking, and seeing *with* other animals, *syntheoria*”, and which we can understand as a way to draw inspiration from animal modes of beings and visions, to try and look at the world differently (261).

²⁰⁷ As I have demonstrated in **Chapter 3**, we can find instances in *Consolations of the Forest* where Tesson casts himself as “the ‘seeing-man’ . . . he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess”, which is a figure that Mary Louise Pratt has theorised in relation to travelogues written in the age of imperial conquest (Pratt 9). Contemplating the landscape from a promontory after climbing up the mountain (*Consolations* 166/212), Tesson exhibits the traditional narrative stance of the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” that Pratt criticised for its imperialist and appropriative ambitions (197). Nevertheless, in *Consolations of the Forest*, Tesson also adopts a more horizontal stance in relation to nature. In addition, we can identify a shift between his sometimes-dominant position in relation to nature in *Consolations of the Forest* and the stance he adopts in *La panthère des neiges*: in the latter, there is hardly any trace of the conquering adventurer.

²⁰⁸ “New nature writing” is a term coined by Granta in 2008” (Smethurst, “Nature” 37).

the concept that Lisa Isherwood and David Harris crafted in the fields of sociology and feminist theology (9). In other words, in their travelogues, animals are not considered in terms of their resemblance with human beings, as metaphors for the travellers' psyche or as a reverse image of the human self, but they are given a role in the process of relational "becoming" that the two travellers go through.

The travel writers I study frequently voice their concern regarding mass extinction and unsustainable lifestyles,²⁰⁹ which leads me to posit that they discard the hegemonic stance of the travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²¹⁰ Rather, they seem to adopt an ecocritical and non-anthropocentric position and represent themselves as transformed by contact with "minor" beings – plants and animals (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 291/356).

Tesson and Matthiessen implement the generic expectation that travel should be transformative, especially in the case of pilgrimages and rites of initiation (Coleman and Eade 2). These are two subgenres with which *The Snow Leopard* and *Consolations of the Forest* share key traits as their protagonists seek epiphanies or enlightenment and overcome grief and loss through travel.²¹¹ Transformation supposes a certain openness to alterity that the eminent French travel writer Jacques Lacarrière, whose works Tesson often evokes, phrases as follows:

[T]ravelling this way [by foot] . . . is amassing alterity . . . You need to leave yourself behind – at least partly – if you are to become approachable and available to others. For to walk implies countless encounters, the same encounters which – whether human or animal (to catch a deer by surprise at the edge of the woods, or have one's calves bitten by an irascible dog!) . . . enlighten or cloud the meaning of the path.
(interview for *Chemins d'étoiles*, §2-3).²¹²

This openness to alterity is present in Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues, as the two travellers shed their social self and try to embrace the otherness of animals by observing them closely and taking them as models, by shrouding their otherness in sophisticated language (Tesson), or reproducing the simplicity they admire in nature with unadorned words (Matthiessen), as I mentioned in **Chapter 2**. We can understand the transformations of these travellers as a process of "deterritorialisation" in the Deleuzoguattarian sense of the word. This can be concisely defined as a "tendenc[y] towards change" rather than "stasis" (Adkins 49), or, put differently, as a disruptive and

²⁰⁹ Tesson, for instance, criticises the Chinese logging industry (*Consolations* 54/82), the importation of food across the ocean (108/143) and poaching in Siberia and the Himalaya (*Consolations* 145/187; *Panthère* 27). As for Matthiessen, he laments the disappearance of wildlife (*Snow* 83) and the erosion and overgrazing caused by herds of domesticated yaks, sheep and goat (187).

²¹⁰ See Smethurst, "Nature Writing" (37), Huggan and Tiffin (8-9), and Pratt (9), whom I quoted at the start of this chapter.

²¹¹ For more on the definition of pilgrimages, see my **General Introduction**; for epiphanies, see **Chapter 2** and for the two travellers' journeys from loss to recovery, see **Chapter 3**.

²¹² "[V]oyager ainsi, . . . c'est se charger d'altérité . . . Il faut se décharger de soi-même – du moins en partie – si l'on veut devenir accessible et disponible aux autres. Car cheminer implique sans cesse des rencontres et ce sont ces mêmes rencontres – qu'elles soient humaines, animales (surprendre un chevreuil à l'orée d'un bois ou se faire mordre les mollets par un chien colérique !) . . . qui illuminent ou obscurcissent le sens du chemin" (Lacarrière, interview for *Chemins d'étoiles*, §2-3).

creative movement between fixed states (“territories”) that has the ability to “redra[w] boundaries” (May 139).²¹³ The concept that Deleuze and Guattari devise gives clues to understanding the discourses that dissolve the boundaries between human subjects and their natural surroundings and it is thus particularly suited to the study of the travelogues at hand. I shall contend that a movement of “deterritorialisation” is at play in the travelogues each time Tesson and Matthiessen represent themselves as gradually leaving the dominating and self-contained state of the traveller. In the passages I shall study, they no longer journey *through* nature, they “become” transformed *with* nature, through a metaphorical process that entangles them in their environment.

The manner in which these travelogues represent nature and animals cannot simply be explained with fixed symbolic equivalences (for instance, the leopard as a stand-in for Matthiessen’s enlightenment). Nor can their representations be elucidated by theorising the animal solely as an object attached to the traveller, as Elizabeth Leane proposes in her typology of interspecies relations in travel narratives.²¹⁴ Rather, Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s texts compel us to seek analytical tools that will enable us to think of their relation to nature in more relational and reciprocal terms. It is my contention that, in their depiction of nonhuman others, these travelogues belong to the types of narratives that “bypa[ss] exploitative and hierarchical relations by seeking out new stylistics, unique grammars, fresh vocabularies and innovative structures for experiencing and writing travel” (Edwards and Graulund 9-10). With their “unique grammars”, they express dynamic and horizontal relations to nature and animals in a way that can be better enlightened by the concept of “Becoming-Animal” that Deleuze and Guattari elaborate.

Scholars in the expanding field of animal studies frequently draw upon Deleuze and Guattari’s chapter to decode non-anthropocentric representations of animals, circumvent psychoanalytical interpretations (of animals as symbols) and acknowledge the enmeshment of humankind in a web of interspecies relations.²¹⁵ The notion of “Becoming-Animal” possesses great potential due to its ability to conceptualise an open-ended process that unsettles fixed separations between categories such as humankind/animal kind. This theory can cast new light on the non-anthropocentric rhetoric of some contemporary narratives, such as those under scrutiny.

²¹³ “Deterritorialisation” is an inherently abstract term. For the Lacanian root of the term, and for concrete examples of its meanings in the realms of schizoanalysis and capitalist labour in the works of Deleuze and Guattari, see the introduction to Eugene W. Holland’s *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis*, Routledge, 1999, 18-24.

²¹⁴ “[T]he animal as *quest-object*; the animal as *instrument of travel*; and the animal as *companion*” (Leane, “Animals” 306, italics original).

²¹⁵ Nevertheless, to date, applications of the concept of “Becoming-Animal” to literary texts are lacking. For instance, when Susan McHugh draws on “Becoming-Animal” in her article “Cross-Pollinating” to elucidate Douglas Coupland’s *Generation A*, which centres on the lives of five adults who connect and form a superorganism after being stung by bees, she hardly engages with the theory, paraphrasing the novel instead. Other articles I encountered apply the concept or reflect on it in relation to societal events or hands-on experiments rather than narratives: Lucy Davis, for instance, looks at the relation of Singapore’s population to street cats; Undine Sellbach examines the disquieting and ill-fated attempt of the environmentalist Timothy Treadwell to “become” grizzly, and Brian Massumi scrutinizes Thomas Thwaites’s prosthetic transformation into a goat.

I shall first argue that the concepts of “going native” and “going primitive” can help us frame the relation between the two travellers and nature with the conventions of travel writing. However, I will contend that these concepts cannot account for the central role given to animals in Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges* and in Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*. The way Tesson and Matthiessen portray their relation to nature and animals is better enlightened by Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “Becoming-Animal”. I will single out the specific elements of Deleuze and Guattari’s chapter that are relevant to this analysis, before presenting close readings of the scenes of metamorphosis in Matthiessen’s and Tesson’s texts. I will start by scrutinising Matthiessen’s immersion in the Himalayan fauna, as the narrative turns him into a leopard and a sheep. I will then move on to investigate the way Tesson portrays his gradual transformation into a tree and a fish. Finally, I shall argue that the travellers’ integration in their environment reaches its apex when the animals return their gaze and when the travellers “Become-Imperceptible”, that is to say, when they go unnoticed in their environment and dissolve into it (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 280/342).

4.1. From “going native” to “Becoming-Animal”

“Going native” and “going primitive”

To a certain extent, the textual transformations of Tesson into a fish and a tree, and Matthiessen into a leopard and a sheep, can be interpreted as variations of the *topos* of the wild man that I have explored in **Chapter 3**. As I argued, Tesson and Matthiessen seem to favour certain modes of engagement with the environment and certain personality traits – physical exertion, recklessness, freedom from social constraints, proximity with animals – that are typically associated with the figure of the wild man. If we look a little closer, we can see that overall, the conception of authenticity that seems to underpin their travels appears closely linked to their ability to fit into the wilderness better. This can be further explained by the concepts of ‘going native’ and ‘going primitive’. I shall thus briefly explore the kinship between the travellers’ modes of engagement with the wilderness and these two concepts to assess whether ‘going native’ and ‘going primitive’ can be used to frame their texts. I aim to pinpoint the limits of these two concepts and show that the Deleuzoguattarian notion of “Becoming-Animal” can help us more rigorously conceptualise the two travellers’ wish to integrate into their environment.

Like the figure of the wild man, the concept of ‘going native’ was negatively connoted at first, being associated with savagery before it acquired positive connotations. Jessica M. Howell demonstrates that in the nineteenth century, “going native” was frowned upon by European societies because it meant “tak[ing] a step back into savagery” (173).²¹⁶ At

²¹⁶ The Victorians believed that Europeans who went native ran the risk of changing “racial and cultural allegiance” for good, to the detriment of their loyalty to the British Empire (Howell 173). Jessica M. Howell backs up this claim with Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995) and illustrates it with the British explorer Sir Richard Burton’s *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1855), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the written correspondence between a nurse and the Colonial Nursing Association in the 1930s.

the start of the twentieth century, the connotations associated with the phrase changed, as evidenced by the advice Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski gave his peers, encouraging them to “go native”, that is, to “take on the role of participants rather than observers”, so as to better study indigenous cultures (Howell 172-173). In *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard*, interactions with local inhabitants are scarce but the travellers cast themselves as “participants” in nature (173), by growing “root[s]” and developing “spores” in Tesson’s case (*Consolations* 82/113; 220/277),²¹⁷ and by adopting the attitude of a sheep to approach a wild herd, and of a leopard to find its trail in Matthiessen’s text.

However, considering the travellers’ desire to go *back* to a pre-technological relation to wilderness (see **Chapter 1**), their metamorphoses are more accurately explained by reference to Marianna Torgovnick’s concept of “going primitive” than they are by the concept of “going native”. According to Torgovnick, the “fascination with the primitive begins with the discontinuities separating human bodies, animals and inanimate things – and seeks to bridge the gap” (6). In other words, “going primitive” means wishing to return to a prelapsarian age perceived as more authentic because free of “discontinuity” between humankind and the natural world. The “utopian desire to go back” to a Golden Age that Torgovnick’s seekers of the primitive exhibit can help us understand Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s travelogues better (5). In *The Snow Leopard*, traces of this desire for osmosis appear when Matthiessen states that he longs for a form of “cosmic unity” (65) in which “body, mind and nature are all one” (47, 155). We can assume that his spiritual beliefs, inspired by Zen Buddhism, inform his wish to be one with the world, to reach what he calls “the true experience of the One” (52). As I have argued in **Chapter 2**, he only thinks he has reached an epiphany when he feels immersed in the world and when “there is no separate ‘I’”, as he puts it (105).²¹⁸

In Tesson’s *La panthère des neiges*, this desire takes a different shape and is mostly projected onto animals. They are described as divine beings linked to Edenic origins to which it would be desirable to return. Readers can thus sense a hint of regret when Tesson writes that “[a]nimals . . . belong to the origins biology had pulled us away from” (*Panthère*

²¹⁷ “Mon être s’enracine” (Tesson, *Forêts* 113) ; “La vie en cabane . . . déploie au fond du cœur des papilles aussi sensibles que les spores” (277). Linda Coverdale translated the “spores” as “nerve endings”, which does not convey the vegetalising process.

²¹⁸ There is reason to believe that the experience of merging with the environment that Matthiessen seeks in his encounters with animals cannot be fully accounted for by reference to his Zen beliefs. The importance he gives to animals seems to go against the place they are ascribed in certain Buddhist texts. In *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* (2017), Reiko Ohnuma explains that the Indian branch of Buddhism is predominantly anthropocentric, which conflicts with the representation of animals in Matthiessen’s text. It is possible that Matthiessen’s Zen Buddhism views animals differently from the branch that Ohnuma studies, but it is beyond the scope of the present work to scrutinise the differences in the representation of animals by various branches of Buddhism. Ohnuma’s point leads me to hypothesise that Matthiessen’s Buddhist beliefs alone cannot fully explain his ecocritical and non-anthropocentric stance. Ohnuma states that she uses “well-known Indian Buddhist texts in Sanskrit . . . dated prior to the sixth century CE” as her sources, most of which “derive from the mainstream Buddhist tradition” (5). She explains that the branch of Buddhism she studies associates animal rebirth with negative karmic causes because animals are “[c]onstantly engaged in preying upon one another and pursuing mindless sex and violence” (5), which is why animals need to die and be reborn as Gods or human beings to reach enlightenment (24). By contrast, for Matthiessen, they embody attentiveness to the present and integration in nature that he aims to reach.

163).²¹⁹ They “constitute a shimmer of the lost source” which the traveller can approach through observing them and living close to them (57).²²⁰ The existential question “why?” that Tesson asks in an imaginary dialogue between a wolf and his companion the photographer Vincent Munier also suggests that he laments this separation: ““Why did we split?”, asked Munier. ‘What do you want from me?’ answered the wolf” (37).²²¹

“Going native” and “going primitive” provide starting points to grasp the transformation of the travellers, but these concepts cannot account for the role that nonhumans play in this transformation in Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s texts. Deleuze and Guattari’s “Becoming-Animal” enables us to go further. I shall rely on this theory to argue that, through their metamorphoses, the travellers foreground hybridity and enmeshment as modes of authentic encounter with nonhuman others.

Deleuze and Guattari’s “Becoming-Other”

For Deleuze and Guattari, one cannot “become” other by way of imitation or identification, but only by way of “contagion” and proximity (239/302). Thus, it is not enough to bark *like* a dog (274-275/337), or run or neigh *like* a horse (305/375). Comparisons fall short of explaining Deleuze and Guattari’s concept because they are based on resemblance and mirroring. For greater clarity, the process of “becoming” can be likened to a glide inside a web of semantic relations that two elements share. Deleuze and Guattari explain that individual elements in the world (their examples centre on animals) do not exist primarily as individuals, but as nodes in webs of relations they call “assemblage[s]” (265/324).²²² For example, the horse is an assemblage “having eyes blocked by blinders, having a bit and a bridle, being proud” and cannot be thought of in isolation from these associated ideas (257/314-315). In order to initiate a process of “becoming”, one must insert oneself into the “assemblage” of the animal, for instance by eating the same food, using the props of the animal, such as muzzles or reins, or behaving as the animal would towards other creatures: “you can become-dog with cats” (274/335-336). The process of “becoming” may be primarily based on imitation, but only truly develops when there is a reinterpretation and appropriation of the characteristics of the animal – when one enters into its “assemblage”, or when one’s own “assemblage” enters into relation with that of the animal (305/375).

Deleuze and Guattari indicate that the human subject “becomes” animal first by relating to some of the abstract attributes that an animal species possesses (257/314-315), through a connection with the herd or pack (240/294), or with an extraordinary and unique representative of this species (243/297).²²³ It is worth adding that in *A Thousand*

²¹⁹ “Les bêtes . . . appartenait aux origines dont la biologie nous avait éloignés” (Tesson, *Panthère* 163).

²²⁰ “Chaque bête constituait un scintillement de la source égarée” (ibid., 57).

²²¹ “Pourquoi nous sommes-nous séparés?” disait Munier. ‘Que me veux-tu?’ disait le loup” (ibid., 37).

²²² “[A]gencement collectif” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 324).

²²³ “[Y]ou will also find an exceptional individual, and it is with that individual that an alliance must be made in order to become-animal” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 243); “vous trouverez aussi un individu exceptionnel, et c’est avec lui qu’il faudra faire alliance pour devenir-animal” (*Mille plateaux* 297). Deleuze and Guattari give *Moby Dick* as an example of this type of “exceptional being” (*Plateaus* 304/374-375).

Plateaus, the process of “becoming” is hardly ever complete, because in the examples used to illustrate it, the human subject often betrays their “becoming” by choosing resemblance over transformation, by regressing back to human behaviour, or by failing to explore all aspects of their new “becoming”. It is perhaps the destiny of “becoming” to remain a work in progress, never fully achieved.

4.2. “Becoming” leopard, sheep and prey in Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*

Zones of contact with the leopard

Matthiessen’s integration into his environment occurs when he comes into close contact with animals, when he observes them and when he adopts behaviour that is close to theirs. To paint a clearer picture of this integration process, I will pay particular attention to passages in *The Snow Leopard* that depict physical proximity and “contagion” between Matthiessen and the leopard, and between him and sheep, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s word (*Plateaus* 239/302).

In *The Snow Leopard*, the eponymous animal and object of the quest is the ideal candidate for the role of “exceptional individual” (243/297) that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, enables access to “becoming”.²²⁴ Throughout the travelogue, Matthiessen does not wish to see *a* snow leopard, but *the* snow leopard, which leads the readers to believe that there is only one such leopard living in the Shey valley. This illusion is broken when, at the end of the book, George Schaller’s letters inform Matthiessen that after his departure, tracks revealed that there were in fact two leopards and not just one (*Snow* 290). Yet, throughout the book, Matthiessen speaks of a single leopard that he imagines as unique.

He enters the “collective assemblage” of this imagined creature as he hikes in its territory, follows its tracks, and even eats its kill (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 265/324). When Matthiessen engages in these activities, he comes into a zone of proximity and “contagion” with the leopard. Matthiessen’s solitary behaviour can also be paralleled with the way of life of the leopard, given that he often walks ahead of the porters, goes his own way to explore the surroundings, and seldom speaks to his companions (*Snow* 213).²²⁵ The statement he makes about the lonely nature of the leopard could easily be applied to him too: “Almost always it is seen alone” (145). Matthiessen imagines that there is a special reciprocal connection between him and the leopard, and almost endows the animal with intentionality when he writes: “Last night, the snow leopard left tracks just outside the monastery, on the Saldang path that I shall take tomorrow; like the scrape found yesterday over my bootprint, it is hard not to read this as a sign” (231). Matthiessen’s reluctance to leave the Shey valley leads him to believe that the scrape was

²²⁴ “[I]ndividu exceptionnel” (*Mille plateaux* 297).

²²⁵ Admittedly, there could be other interpretations of Matthiessen’s solitary hikes: his solitude could be seen as a way to come closer to the enlightenment he seeks, as a way to process grief, or as a convention of travel writing, as travel writers often tone down or erase the presence of co-travellers.

made “as if in sign that [he] is not to leave” (228). After coming to Shey to see the leopard, and spending weeks following its tracks, Matthiessen suggests that the leopard is following his. The eyes that watch and the paths that cross asynchronously create a fantasised reciprocity that can be viewed as a “zone of indiscernibility”, which occurs as the end result of “becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 280/343).²²⁶

“Becoming” sheep

Observation of the sheep of the Shey valley also gives Matthiessen the opportunity to convey the impression that he becomes part of the Himalayan environment. Once Matthiessen and his companions have reached the Shey valley, where the naturalist George Schaller can fulfil the purpose of his trip and observe blue sheep (bharal), Matthiessen spends afternoons stalking the herd, getting as close as possible to it, monitoring the direction of the wind and finding cover, much like a leopard on the hunt would. His proximity to the sheep compels him to adopt animal-like behaviour (hiding, attending to the direction of the wind, etc.). At first sight, this is reminiscent of the leopard’s behaviour. Nonetheless, on second glance the reader can see that Matthiessen seeks acceptance as a member of the herd, rather than conflict as a predator. During an episode that spans over two pages, he momentarily “becomes” part of the mountain in order to be accepted in the midst of the sheep:

To be right among the sheep like this is stirring. I lie belly down, out of the wind, and the whole warm mountain, breathing as I breathe, seems to take me in . . .

[T]hey move downhill a little as they feed . . . When they reappear, they come directly towards the hummock where I lie. Suddenly, the creatures are so close that I must lower the binoculars inch by inch so as not to flare them, drawing my chin deep into the thin growth of the mountainside, hoping my brown hair may be seen as marmot. (*Snow* 198)

No longer an outsider, he can now observe them from within the herd. In order to keep this position, he has to try and fuse with the mountain. Since the mountain “seems to take [him] in”, we can say that he imagines becoming part of the natural surroundings, which goes beyond simply wanting to understand the animals by imitating them or empathising with them. As I have argued earlier, he favours instinctive feelings of osmosis over intellectual understanding, because, according to him, such understanding distances the observer from his object of enquiry (see **Chapter 2**). Here, the wish he often expresses in his opus – to no longer be separated from the world – is momentarily granted.

The episode reaches its climax when the sheep smell his scent and approach him: “In a jump, he [a ram] whirls in my direction . . . Boldly this ram steps forward to investigate, and the rest follow until the mountain blue is full of horned heads and sheep faces, sheep vibrations – I hold my breath as best as I can” (199). From this position, Matthiessen is initiated into a secret of the mountain, as he hears the voice of the blue sheep: “[the ram]

²²⁶ “[Z]one d’indiscernabilité” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 343).

whirls in my direction, . . . venting a weird harsh high-pitched whinny – *chirr-r-rit* – . . . so far as we know, the first datum on the voice of the blue sheep” (199).

His close proximity with the sheep reoccurs a second time when he lies down close to the herd, “chewing” bread while they chew grass: “The herd pauses for an hour or more on a flat ridge while I lie back snugly against my rucksack in a dense clump of honeysuckle, just above: . . . and as the sheep browse, I chew dry bread, in this wonderful immersion in pure sheep-ness” (219). The transformation of the sheep into “vibrations” (199) and “pure sheep-ness” (219) brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari’s theory for two reasons. First, because in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* they explain that animals that enter the process of “becoming” lose their shape to “become” “movements [and] vibrations” (13/24, emphasis added).²²⁷ Second, because in *A Thousand Plateaus* they contend that for the process of “becoming” to happen, the target animal also needs to “become” something else (237/290),²²⁸ to be reduced to abstract characteristics that can then be adopted by the human subject or to which the human subject can react. In more concrete terms, it means that animals “become” a herd or swarm, or that they are reduced to colours, impressions, or forms. The philosophers illustrate this metamorphosis with the example of Moby Dick, which “must simultaneously become an unbearable pure whiteness” at the same time as Captain Ahab “becomes” whale (304/374-375).

In *The Snow Leopard*, the sheep do not become “whiteness” but “sheep-ness”, in which Matthiessen immerses himself. This “sheep-ness” is a compound of the sight of the herd, of the environment he shares with it, of the chewing activity they perform simultaneously, and of the feeling of belonging that manifests through his joy as he calls the situation “stirring” (*Snow* 198). Consequently, I see him as entangled in the sheep’s “collective assemblage”, in Deleuze and Guattari’s phraseology (*Plateaus* 265/324). The “becoming” sheep of this scene of osmosis is nevertheless interrupted when he stops behaving like a sheep and acts like a shepherd, shooing the herd downhill (*Snow* 220).

“Becoming” prey

The proximity Matthiessen seeks out with the leopard and achieves with the sheep could point to an unstated desire to “become” prey, which I have already partly explored in **Chapter 3**, arguing that travel writers sometimes portray themselves as being endangered by predators to assert the authenticity of their journeys, in opposition to the safe travels of tourists. I would now like to suggest that “becoming” prey can also be interpreted as a method designed to achieve a deeper engagement with nature.

²²⁷ “To become animal is . . . to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, . . . to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. . . . There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 13). In the original: “Devenir animal, c’est . . . atteindre à un continuum d’intensités pures, où toutes les formes se défont, . . . au profit d’une matière non formée, de flux déterritorisés, de signes asignifiants. . . . Plus rien que des mouvements, des vibrations” (*Kafka, pour une littérature mineure* 24).

²²⁸ “[A] human becomes animal at the same time as the animal becomes... (Becomes what? Human, or something else?)” (*Plateaus* 237); “l’homme devient animal en même temps que l’animal devient... (mais devient quoi? Devient homme ou devient autre chose?)” (*Mille plateaux* 290).

What closer proximity to the lone leopard can there be than being its prey? I consider that such desire is precisely what underlies Matthiessen's description of the leopard in the following excerpt:

[I]t kills creatures three times its own size without much difficulty. It has enormous paws and a short-faced heraldic head, like a leopard of myth; it is bold and agile in the hunt, and capable of terrific leaps; and although its usual prey is the blue sheep, it occasionally takes livestock, including young yak of several hundred pounds. This means that man would be fair game as well, although no attack on a human being has ever been reported. (145)

The leopard is presented first and foremost as a predator, as evidenced by the lexicon of the hunt, the attack, the kill. Fantasy seems to take over as hyperbolic formulas accumulate: the leopard has “enormous paws” that help it take “terrific leaps” and attack prey whose considerable size and weight are stressed twice (145). When penned by Matthiessen, the feline acquires a legendary stature, since it is portrayed as a “leopard of myth” with a “heraldic head”, which places it alongside dragons and unicorns in the bestiary of mediaeval heraldry (145). Given that Matthiessen writes that “no attack on a human being has been reported”, we can read the hypothesis that “man would be fair game” as another compound of the fantasy surrounding the animal (145). This fantasised portrait of a man-eating leopard finds additional fuel when Matthiessen imagines how the leopard would appear to him. He does not picture the leopard quietly walking in the distance, but imagines it jumping in front of him, which can be seen as a predatory move: “If the snow leopard should leap from the rock above and manifest itself before me – S-A-A-O!²²⁹ – then in that moment of pure fright, *out of my wits*, I might truly perceive it, and be free” (235, emphasis original). As I have previously demonstrated, Matthiessen's stated aim is to relinquish the intellect in favour of a more instinctual experience of the world, which he seeks through frightful situations that free him of his worries concerning the past and the future and force him to pay heightened attention to the present (see **Chapters 2 and 3**). “Becoming” prey contributes to fulfilling this purpose, since it forces him to adopt a form of animality (instinctive fear) and leave behind that part of his humanity he finds burdensome (his analytical reasoning, or his “wits” [235]).

Matthiessen's desire to be reintegrated into nature through “becoming” prey also becomes apparent when he recounts being mistaken for a corpse by carrion birds:

Perhaps the Somdo raptors think that this queer lump on the landscape – the motionless form of a man in meditation – is the defunct celebrant in an air burial, for a young eagle, plumage burnished a heraldic bronzy-black, draws near with its high peeping, and a lammergeier, approaching from behind, descends with a sudden rush of feathers, sweeping so close past my head that I feel the break of air. (212)

This passage is placed directly after Matthiessen's description of Tibetan “air burial” rites that consist in setting the body of the deceased on a crag similar to the one he is sitting on, “to be rended and devoured by the wild beasts” (211), which suggests that he is

²²⁹ “*Sao*” is the Tibetan word for “leopard”.

playing at being a corpse and imagines being reintegrated into nature in this way. In the scene of encounter with the carrion birds, the enmeshment of Matthiessen in his environment approaches perfection, since he momentarily passes for a feature of the landscape in their eyes. I would venture so far as to say that Matthiessen hints that he wishes for a symbolic death and transformation of the self, which readers may sense in other parts of the book too, such as when he writes “I navigate [a point of cliff] on hands and knees, arriving a lifetime later – *but still in my old life, alas*” (141, emphasis added).

4.3. “Becoming-Imperceptible”

This fascination with the air-burial, followed by the traveller’s corpse-like immobility that draws the carrion birds to him, could also be understood as the desire to “Become-Imperceptible” by passing for a corpse or by dissolving into nature as a corpse (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 280/342). For Deleuze and Guattari, all “becomings” tend towards a “Becoming-Imperceptible”, because the aim of “becoming” is to blend in, to go unnoticed, to become nothing, to let the discernible boundaries that make an individual dissolve, like “the camouflage fish”, which “worlds with the lines of a rock, sand and plants, becoming imperceptible” (280/343).²³⁰

“Becoming-Imperceptible” offers a key benefit for Tesson and Matthiessen, who indirectly describe the presence of humanity in the wilderness as a stain. When Matthiessen fuses with the environment, “becoming” leopard, sheep or prey, “grow[ing] in these mountains like a moss” (*Snow* 212), he is no longer part of the “toxic taint” of humanity that he seeks to escape (Garrard 15; see **Chapter 1**). The desire to “Become-Imperceptible” and to no longer be part of humanity could also explain passages in Tesson’s texts. For instance, he imagines the disintegration of a corpse at the bottom of Lake Baikal: “The tiny copepods called *Epischura baikalensis* will clean the bodies within twenty-four hours, leaving only ivory bones on the lake bed” (*Consolations* 4/23).²³¹ The intricacy of the corpse with nature is even greater in the French version, with the homophony of “*os*” and “*eaux*” (“bones” and “lake bed”/“water”). Tesson plays with macabre fantasies too often – through risky behaviour, allusions to suicide and metaphoric transformations of the lake into a corpse –²³² for this passage to be dismissed. In addition, Tesson’s wish to be reintegrated into nature by “Becoming-Imperceptible” could also explain such musings as the following: “If I were God, I would atomize myself into billions of facets so I could dwell in ice crystals, cedar needles, the sweat of women, the scales of spotted char, and the eyes of the lynx” (93/126).²³³ This wish is reiterated in his other texts. For instance, in *Une très légère*

²³⁰ “[L]e poisson camoufleur . . . il fait monde avec les lignes d’un rocher, du sable et des plantes, pour devenir imperceptible” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux* 343).

²³¹ “Les petites crevettes *Epischura baikalensis* nettoieront les corps en vingt-quatre heures et ne laisseront que l’ivoire des os au fond des eaux” (Tesson, *Forêts* 23).

²³² See **Chapter 2** for an analysis of the metaphorical transformation of the lake into a corpse (*Consolations* 4/23, 31/52, 34/25, 151/194), and **Chapter 3** for Tesson’s risky behaviour (20/38, 177/226), and allusions to suicide (8/27).

²³³ “Si j’étais Dieu, je me serais atomisé en des milliards de facettes pour me tenir dans le cristal de glace, l’aiguille du cèdre, la sueur des femmes, l’écaille de l’omble et les yeux du lynx” (Tesson, *Forêts* 126).

oscillation, he writes: “I would like to be buried under a tree. The flesh, as it decomposes, would be absorbed into the ligneous organism, distributed through its fibres up to the ribs of its leaves” (qtd. in Koo 55).²³⁴

Finally, more than a fantasy, “Becoming-Imperceptible” and physically blending in appears a necessity if Tesson is to catch sight of the animals in the Himalaya. Authentic encounters with wild animals thus require his “Becoming-Imperceptible” in a literal manner. Therefore, he learns the art of stillness and dissimulation from the photographer who leads the expedition that he recounts in *La panthère des neiges*: “Covered in battledress, his lenses turbaned in khaki rags, Munier looked like one of these pine-tree-men, rock-men, wall-men” (112).²³⁵

4.4. “Becoming” tree and fish in Sylvain Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest*

Tesson breaks with a certain strand of philosophy that views animals as inferior to humankind. He is aware of the narrow field to which philosophy has traditionally confined animals up to the twenty-first century, as shown by the following passage:

Little dogs are ‘poor in world’, Herr Heidegger? No, only stripped down to the most accurate part of their knowledge, completely confident in the moment and careless of all abstraction. . . . Thousands of years of Aristotelian, Christian and Cartesian philosophy lock us into the conviction that an insurmountable divide separates us from beasts. (*Consolations* 166/213)²³⁶

By contrast, Tesson takes animals as muses and models (170/131), and gives them a key role in his transformation. To learn from nature better, he suggests that one first needs to “hone [one’s] senses” (113/148) and “increase the settings of one’s reception frequency” (*Panthère* 164).²³⁷ The traveller thus needs to be ready to transform himself in order to benefit from his stay in nature. In *Consolations of the Forest*, this transformation seems to happen in particular along two “lines of flight”, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s phrase (*Plateaus* 298/360). As I shall show, Tesson conveys the impression that he fits into nature better by metaphorically transforming into a fish and a tree.

²³⁴ Halia Koo quotes Sylvain Tesson, *Une très légère oscillation, Journal 2014-2017*, Équateurs, 2017, 173 : “J’aimerais bien me faire enterrer sous un arbre. La chair, se décomposant, serait aspirée dans le système ligneux, distribuée dans les fibres jusqu’aux nervures des feuilles. Je rendrais ainsi à la nature ce que je lui ai raflé”.

²³⁵ “Recouvert de ses treillis, les objectifs enturbannés de haillons kaki, Munier ressemblait à un de ces hommes-sapin, hommes-rocher, hommes-muret” (Tesson, *Panthère* 112).

²³⁶ “‘Pauvres en monde’, les petits chiens, Herr Heidegger? Non, mais rétrécis au plus juste de ce qu’ils connaissent, vouant parfaite confiance à l’instant et faisant fi de toute abstraction. . . . Des milliers d’années de pensée aristotélicienne, chrétienne et cartésienne nous cadénassent dans la certitude qu’une marche infranchissable nous sépare de la bête” (Tesson, *Forêts* 213).

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, published after a course given in 1929-30, Martin Heidegger sets human beings apart from animals, who are according to him “poor in world” because they are not aware of themselves and cannot reflect on their surroundings (qtd. in Ryan 101). Derek Ryan quotes Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana UP, 1995, 177.

²³⁷ “[I]l aiguise ses sens” (Tesson, *Forêts* 148) ; “augmenter les réglages de sa propre fréquence de réception” (*Panthère* 164).

*“Becoming” fish*²³⁸

Tesson’s metaphorical metamorphosis into a fish begins after a month of daily vodka intake and physical exertion in close proximity to the lake: “After a few days, I noticed the first changes in my body. My limbs are more muscular, but I’ve got the flabby abdomen and white skin of an alcoholic or a creature dwelling in a mud bank” (42/66).²³⁹ Three months later, he records the progress of this metamorphosis, which he attributes to a diet that consists for the most part of the omuls that he fishes for in Lake Baikal: “Months of devouring fish have produced a metamorphosis in me. My character has become lacustrine, more taciturn, slower, and my skin is whiter. I smell like scales, my pupils are dilated, my heart beats at a gentler pace” (141/182).²⁴⁰ Towards the end of his stay, he draws a connection once more between his diet and his transformation into a fish, writing: “A piscivore, drawing nourishment from a lake, undergoes a psychophysiological transformation. . . . his character absorbs the essence of the fish” (209/263).²⁴¹ More significant still is the fact that he recounts catching “eight chars” that day, much more than he usually did (209/263). Even though he juxtaposes the statement of his transformation and this fishing feat, and does not subordinate them with a conjunction, the link is easy to make: he implies that his metaphorical transformation into a fish means his perceptions are altered in such a way that he has become better adapted to surviving in the wild.

“Becoming” tree

Tesson’s metaphorical transformation into a fish and a tree occurs through a long exposure to the lake and to the forest, not by way of imitation or identification, but by way of “contagion” and proximity, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s word (*Plateaus* 239/302). He “becomes” a tree by conquering mountainsides strewn with dwarf pines (*Consolations* 91/123, 96/129), by retreating into the wooden cabin as though in a chrysalis, and by attempting to stay immobile – “[s]taying put brought me what I could no longer find on any journey”, he writes (xi/10).²⁴² Later, he assimilates himself to a tree through metaphors such as “I’m vegetalizing. My being is taking root” and “I want to *root*

²³⁸ I have published a first version of the two subsections that follow in an article titled “Echoes of the Past and Siberian Nature’s ‘Radical Otherness’: An Ecocritical Reading of Contemporary Travel Writing”, published in a special issue of *Revue canadienne de littérature comparée/ Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 47.4, March 2021.

²³⁹ “Au bout de quelques jours je remarque les premières transformations de mon corps. Les bras se gonflent, les jambes se musclent. Mais – caractéristiques d’animal de vase et d’alcoolique – le ventre se relâche et la peau blanchit” (Tesson, *Forêts* 66).

²⁴⁰ “À dévorer du poisson depuis des mois, je me métamorphose. Mon caractère est devenu lacustre, plus taciturne, plus lent, ma peau blanchit, je dégage une odeur d’écaille, ma pupille se dilate et mon cœur ralentit” (ibid., 182).

²⁴¹ “Un ichtyophage, nourri à la source d’un lac, subit une transformation psychophysologique. . . . son caractère s’imprègne de l’essence du poisson” (ibid., 263).

²⁴² “L’immobilité m’a apporté ce que le voyage ne me procurait plus” (Tesson, *Forêts* 10).

into the earth” (81, 51, the emphasised part is my retranslation).²⁴³ The heightened attention Tesson dedicates to the birds that appear at his window may also hint at his transformation into a tree where birds nest. In addition, considering that Tesson takes inert matter as a model of resilience and as a guide for the taming of one’s emotions (although this notion is not devoid of irony), claiming “[t]he sole virtue, in these latitudes, is acceptance. *Vide* the Stoics, animals or (even better!) simple stones” (47/72),²⁴⁴ it is fair to say that trees can be models too. On the same page, Tesson mentions Arto Paasilinna’s *The Howling Miller*, which gives further proof of his “becoming” animal or plant. Paasilinna’s novel centres on a good-natured miller who howls in the forest to vent his emotions, much to the dislike of the villagers, who have him committed. Eventually, along with his friend the postman, he escapes into the woods, and the last scene of the book suggests that they have turned into dogs and live happily in the wilderness, but sometimes return to their home to be fed by their wives. All in all, the novel shares some themes with Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest*: it opposes stifling civilisation (the conservatism of the villagers) to the healthy freedom of two characters who escape to the forest and turn into animals.

Concerning his metamorphosis into a tree, it is worth adding that Tesson spends six months inside a *wooden* cabin, which may be seen as the epitome of tree-ness, and as the “exceptional individual” that stands for otherness (‘tree-ness’ in this case) in Deleuze and Guattari’s theory (*Plateaus* 243/297). On several occasions, he associates the cabin with a womb and an egg – “[t]he cabin fulfils the maternal function”, he writes (74/104)²⁴⁵ – which suggests that after a six-month gestation between these walls, he may emerge transformed.

Vodka, which is mentioned in every chapter of Tesson’s diary, functions as the catalyst for his metamorphosis. I would like to suggest that it serves as a third term in between Tesson and fish, considering that the beverage and the lake share liquidity and transparency, and, for want of being immersed in the lake, like fish, Tesson drowns in vodka. Furthermore, the inspiration he gains from it (150/193), and the almost-vegetal apathy it brings him ease the shift from the human to the animal and vegetal realms. The vodka-induced torpid state that pervades the travelogue draws him closer to a tree’s lethargy and to the state of fish too, since it allows his mind to “buoy” (“*flotte[r]*”), as if he were floating on a lake: “A soft weight falls upon our brows, a sign of biological well-being. The vodka goes down. The spirit is buoyed, the body contented” (49-50/74).²⁴⁶ In addition, with vodka Tesson “becomes” figuratively wood, since he gets a hangover, that is, “*gueule de bois*” in French, which translates literally as “wood face” (26/46).

²⁴³ Linda Coverdale’s translation reads “I want to dig in”, which does not convey the impression of roots (“*racines*”) spreading in the earth contained in the original “*Je veux m’enraciner*” (Tesson, *Forêts* 76), hence my retranslation.

²⁴⁴ “La seule vertu, sous les latitudes forestières, c’est l’acceptation. Celle des stoïciens, des bêtes, mieux! des cailloux” (ibid., 72).

²⁴⁵ “La cabane remplit la fonction maternelle” (ibid., 104).

²⁴⁶ “Une barre cotonneuse pèse sur l’arcade sourcilière: manifestation du bien-être biologique. La vodka descend dans le ventre. L’esprit flotte, le corps est contenté” (ibid., 74).

Tesson's "Oedipal" animals

Tesson's "becoming" a tree and a fish is nonetheless undermined when he treats animals as pets. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the transformation is interrupted when an individual reverts to his initial behaviour (here, "human") and/or betrays the other (often, an animal). Tesson's efforts to tame the tits that flutter near his hut (98/132) and his unwillingness to practise immobility (most days are spent walking, hiking or rowing) could be seen as such betrayals of his "becoming" tree. When he is forced to stay indoors for two days because of a snowstorm, his mood is affected – "[t]rapped, I'm angry", he writes (116/152)²⁴⁷ – which evokes the impatience of an inveterate traveller rather than the discipline of a hermit-become-tree. Similarly, when he has to wait for the fish to bite, he insists on the fact that he does not simply wait, but *accepts* waiting, which denotes an effort to maintain immobility: "I'm *willing* to spend hours sitting still" (116/153, emphasis added).²⁴⁸ Thus, it seems that Tesson's "becoming" tree is compromised.

Tesson's general "Becoming-Other" is also hindered by the master-pet relationship he fosters with his two puppies. When they are given to him to warn him of the approach of a bear, he is told by forest rangers not to let them get too close to him (136/177). Yet he weaves affectionate links with them: "I'm the most pathetic dog trainer east of the Urals, incapable of forbidding Aika and Bek from bubbling over with affection" (136/177).²⁴⁹ If we return to *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can see that these dogs exist not on the mode of the wild "pack" or herd that makes "becoming" possible, but as "pets", that is, "Oedipal animals" – "my' cat", "my' dog" – closely associated with the self (Deleuze and Guattari 240/294). Deleuze and Guattari call "Oedipal animals" the pets that one holds dear and anthropomorphises, and the animals that psychoanalysis interprets as symbolic stand-ins for family members. This way of thinking about animals elicits Deleuzoguattarian criticism, because it reduces them to screens onto which the human psyche is projected. What characterises "Oedipal animals" further is that they are reassuring figures under the control of human subjects, with little leeway to unsettle the beliefs of the said subjects, or to transform them.²⁵⁰

Tesson may not be as much at ease with some elements of the wilderness as first appeared since he suppresses or wishes to suppress some of his pet dogs' animal instincts. At the end of the book, when his pet dog Aika kills six ducklings, Tesson shows disgust and regrets that he could not "intervene" (230/289). There is an unequivocal difference between his relation to the dogs, and the way the forest ranger Volodya thinks of these animals, as illustrated by Tesson's behaviour in this dog fight: "my too little darlings are set upon by Volodya's howling pack. I plunge into the mêlée, kicking furry flanks right and left to protect my puppies while Volodya yells at me over the barking to 'let them

²⁴⁷ "Coincé, j'enrage" (Tesson, *Forêts* 152).

²⁴⁸ "J'accepte de rester des heures immobile" (*ibid.*, 153).

²⁴⁹ "Je suis le dresseur de chiens le plus pitoyable à l'est de l'Oural, incapable d'interdire à Aika et Bék les débordements de leur affection" (*ibid.*, 177).

²⁵⁰ For more on Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of "Oedipal animals", see the analysis of their essay "The Interpretation of Utterances" by Derek Ryan in *Animal Theory: A Critical Introduction* (22, 29).

follow their fucking rules” (145/187).²⁵¹ The implications of Tesson’s trespassing upon the dog-world can be better illuminated by comparison with “A Refugee”, a short text in which Hélène Cixous’s narrator confesses to her own trespassing on her cat’s animal life. The cat has brought a wounded bird into its master’s flat, and it is meowing at her to admire its catch. The horrified narrator guides the wounded bird out, applying human ethics to the cat’s world, and denying it its animal right to kill (10).²⁵² She concludes that her main concern was not to rescue the bird, but to save her own sense of morality. In a similar fashion, when Tesson interferes in his dogs’ world, he rejects animal “rules” – to use the term of the forest ranger Volodya – and thus, he denies his pets “being” animal, and his own “Becoming-Other”.

4.5. Existing in the gaze of the nonhuman other

When the leopard and sheep gaze back in Peter Matthiessen’s The Snow Leopard

I would like to suggest that “becoming”, by definition an open-ended process, nears completion when there is reciprocity from the animal world. Brian Massumi’s analysis of *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human* by Thomas Thwaites (2016) offers an enlightening perspective on this reciprocity. In this autobiographical book, Thwaites records his step-by-step attempt at “becoming” a goat, first by registering the bodily difference between him and goats, then by creating prostheses that would enable him to walk on four legs and pretend to digest grass, and finally by spending time among the goats. According to Massumi, Thwaites succeeds in “becoming” other because he does not exert empathy (269), which is human, because he knows the animal’s bodily capacities from a biological point of view,²⁵³ and because he creates a third space (the liminal ‘goat-man’) that acknowledges the difference of goats.

As Thwaites follows the herd, a “breakthrough” moment occurs when the alpha male reacts to his presence as if he were a goat (270). Thwaites has made the *faux pas* of standing uplope from the male, which, in “goat society”, is a gesture of defiance towards authority (270). The alpha male takes offence and responds menacingly. Massumi interprets Thwaites’s “Becoming-Other” as successful when the animal reacts to him as if he were a goat, thus granting him a place in the animal realm:

²⁵¹ “[M]es deux petits chéris se font tomber sur le garrot par la bande hurlante de Volodia. Je fonce dans la mêlée et flanque des coups de pied dans les flancs poilus pour protéger mes chiots pendant que Volodia par-dessus le concert d’abolements me hurle de ‘les laisser faire leur putain de loi’” (Tesson, *Forêts* 187).

²⁵² “I committed a crime of species: I made a human law for mycat [*machatte*] ... As if my right were mightier than hers, I wronged mycat, I bombarded her right and denied her cat culture.’ I accuse myself. And in the name of which right? Between cat and bird I took a place, I judged, settled, deprived, decided, granted. I sided with the bird without name and without face against mycat my friend. I forbade death and the life that passes through death. I behaved in everything like a human being with power” (Cixous 10).

²⁵³ The same can be said of Tesson and Matthiessen. In *Consolations of the Forest*, Tesson reads “nature guides for birds, plants and insects published by Delachaux and Niestlé” (14/33) and, in view of his description of the sheep, Matthiessen seems to possess nearly as much scientific knowledge of the species as his companion the naturalist George Schaller.

He [the buck] looked upon Thwaites *as* a goat when Thwaites committed a faux pas *as* a goat would, and reacted *as* a goat would in that circumstance. . . . Goat and modified man enter a goatly mode of relation, across their differences . . . at a very precise *crossing point* between species. . . It inducts them together into the same event. (271, emphasis original).

The most remarkable element of this event is reciprocity. Massumi hints that the adventurer becomes fully integrated into nature when nature reacts to him not as a human predator to be feared, but as if he were a member of the herd. Looking at *The Snow Leopard* in the light of Massumi's analysis, the passages describing Matthiessen's immersion in "sheep-ness" and his encounter with carrion birds can be regarded as a successful, albeit momentary, achievement of his "Becoming-Animal", because he is transformed into an element of the landscape by the gaze of the animals. In the passage I have analysed earlier, the sheep of Shey valley, unaccustomed to being hunted, approach him with unease but not fear, as if he were a harmless animal. Contrary to Elizabeth Leane, I do not postulate that "sustained interaction [is] needed to . . . open the possibility of mutuality" between human and animal ("Animals" 310). Rather, based on the encounters with animals that Matthiessen describes in *The Snow Leopard*, it seems that a momentary exchange of gazes with wild nonhumans suffices to enable reciprocity. During such scenes, nature is no longer simply portrayed as the sight that humankind beholds, but as eyes gazing back.

Disquieting nonhuman gazes feature prominently in *The Snow Leopard* and unsettle or delight Matthiessen: the open eyes of a beheaded squirrel in a dream (89), the eyes of a lizard on a stone (208),²⁵⁴ the look cast by a pack of wolves (182) and by the sheep herd (199), and, above all, the unseen watchful gaze of the leopard (222-223).

The ability to look back at the human subject endows these animals with a form of agency. They are no longer merely *subjected* to the human gaze, they cease to be simply acted upon. In addition, they escape the control travellers might want to exert on them, because they do not appear when the travellers wish them to.²⁵⁵ The way the animal gaze is portrayed in Tesson's and Matthiessen's texts redefines the relation between human and nonhuman in less hierarchical terms. When the leopard gazes at Matthiessen without ever being seen, the traveller has to relinquish the dominant position of the observer and exchange it for the position of object in the eyes of a predator: "that leopard is right here right this minute, watching us" (222-223). The animal gaze seems to challenge the way we construct our knowledge of nature. When the animal (and with it, nature) looks back, it ceases to be a passive object of enquiry. "It has its point of view regarding me", writes

²⁵⁴ Considering Matthiessen's considerable erudition in theology and philosophy, I would like to suggest that, by focusing specifically on a lizard "with its rock", he may be alluding to Heidegger, who took the "lizard . . . lying on the rock" as an example to illustrate his theory about animal worlds (Heidegger qtd. in Ryan 102). While Martin Heidegger's lizard epitomised the limitation that made animals somewhat inferior to humankind, Matthiessen's lizard embodies attentiveness to the present and triggers a fleeting awareness of "eternity": "The lizard is still there, one with its rock, flanks pulsing in the star heat that brings warmth to our common skin; eternity is not remote, it is here beside us" (*Snow* 208). Derek Ryan quotes Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana UP, 1995, 198.

²⁵⁵ As Elizabeth Leane puts it, "the agency of a sought-after animal may be evident in its elusive behaviour" ("Animals" 310).

Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (11), pondering the look his cat casts on him.

Unseen eyes in Sylvain Tesson's La panthère des neiges

The impression of being under the gaze of unseen eyes seems to be a decisive factor in the creation of what Tesson presents as an authentic encounter with animals in *La panthère des neiges*. At the same time as he practises “*affût*” (*Panthère* 17), a kind of patient waiting for animals (see **Chapter 2**), Tesson imagines the nonhuman gazes that surround him: “I now know that we wandered among wide open eyes in unseen faces” (48).²⁵⁶ He lauds the painters who possess the ability to represent this gaze, such as Séraphine de Senlis, who painted trees and flowers with eyes, and Jérôme Bosch, who “titled one of his wooden engravings *The wood has ears, the field has eyes*” (48),²⁵⁷ which suggests that representing these unseen eyes may be one of his own aesthetic aspirations.

Beyond “becoming” part of nature, what is at stake in this reciprocal gaze is an authentic encounter with the nonhuman, which, when achieved, elicits Tesson’s joy: “There was an ecstasy in knowing that you were unknowingly examined” (49).²⁵⁸ This encounter results in a voluntary re-evaluation of the traveller’s position with regard to nature: he portrays himself on a par with it, rather than as an outside observer above it. By representing himself in the position of the observed, he circumvents several pitfalls of the representation of otherness typically found in travel literature. He cannot cast a “consuming” gaze on his surroundings as according to John Urry tourists do (1), because in the wild (as opposed to inside a zoo, for instance) animals are not readily available for visual consumption; they may or *may not* appear. In addition, given that he aims for epiphanies rather than knowledge, he also avoids the falsely innocent gaze of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writers and naturalists who asserted their hegemony over foreign lands while pretending to pursue a seemingly “disinterested” quest for erudition (Pratt 7, 18).

In Tesson’s Himalayan and Siberian travelogues, nature is portrayed as an entity that exists outside of the knowledge and dominion of humankind. Tesson prefers a poetical to a scientific approach to nature, and hints that preserving nature and lauding it matters more than gathering data about it (*Panthère* 40). He also contends that “[m]an will never improve on” the Siberian mountain ranges (*Consolations* 224/282).²⁵⁹ Thus, his approach to nature contrasts sharply with that of the travellers of the “anti-conquest” that Mary Louise Pratt theorises, since these travellers only saw the wilderness as passive land that was awaiting its classification in typologies and that was “available for improvement” (Pratt 60).

²⁵⁶ “Désormais je saurais que nous déambulions parmi des yeux ouverts dans des visages invisibles” (Tesson, *Panthère* 48).

²⁵⁷ “Jérôme Bosch, Flamand des arrière-mondes, avait intitulé une gravure *Le bois a des oreilles, le champ a des yeux*” (ibid., 48).

²⁵⁸ “Il y avait une jouissance à se savoir scruté sans rien soupçonner” (ibid., 49).

²⁵⁹ “L’homme ne les bonifiera jamais” (Tesson, *Forêts* 282).

There seems to be a connection between the unknowable character that Tesson attributes to nature and the joy and epiphanies it brings him. His travelogues seem to suggest that the most authentic relation to nature consists in approaching it with a sense of wonder. Bringing in Lisa Isherwood and David Harris's concept of "radical Otherness" (9), I would like to suggest that Tesson's text is innovative in comparison to the travellers of previous centuries that I mentioned, insofar as he embraces the alterity of nature, without trying to reduce it to something he can understand, as illustrated by the following passage from *La panthère des neiges*: "Munier [the photographer who leads the expedition] and I understood that we did not understand. It was enough to make us happy" (165).²⁶⁰

The idea that the gaze of wild animals can ascertain the authenticity of the travellers' experience can be found in other narratives and theories. On the one hand, this conception of an authentic encounter with nature can be seen as the legacy of European imaginings that ascribed mysterious powers to the animal gaze. In "The Gaze of Animals", Philip Armstrong thus explains that folklore is full of malignant animals with fiery eyes that inspired literary works such as William Blake's "The Tyger" (1794) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843) (184). On the other hand, the veiled nostalgia found in Tesson's and Matthiessen's texts and their desire to be reintegrated into nature can also be seen as a legacy of prior representations of animals.²⁶¹ Quoting Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Garden of Eden* (1980) and David Herbert Lawrence's novella *St. Mawr* (1925), Armstrong explains that "[a]mongst the modernist writers who were the literary successors of the Victorians, evocations of the animal gaze were most often elegiac, expressing mourning for a lost, primeval authenticity" (188). More recently, this nostalgic longing for a Golden Age has resurfaced in the often-quoted work of John Berger, *About Looking* (1980). Berger presupposes that there once was a deeper connection between human beings and animals that was lost in industrial capitalism, intensive farming and urbanisation (1-11). We could draw a parallel between his pejorative view of technological modernity and Tesson's and Matthiessen's rejection of modern civilisation. Nevertheless, Berger explains that despite the marginalisation of animals, who "ha[d] been emptied of . . . secrets", and perhaps because of it, animals were reconceptualised as innocent beings and started being associated with "a kind of nostalgia" around the time of Comte de Buffon (10). He goes on to argue that in the twentieth century, nature became a "value concept . . . opposed to the social institutions which strip man of his natural essence and imprison him" and "the life of the wild animal bec[ame] an ideal . . . internalised as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire" (15). In the context that Berger sets, the gaze of the wild animal (as opposed to pets and animals in zoos) crystallises the modern nostalgia for an authentic relation to nature and animals. When Tesson and Matthiessen evoke and praise pre-modern lifestyles and rejoice at being

²⁶⁰ "Munier et moi comprenions que nous ne comprenions pas. Cela suffisait à notre joie" (Tesson, *Panthère* 165).

²⁶¹ As I have pointed out previously, Tesson and Matthiessen reject elements of modern civilisation (**Chapter 1**) and as I suggested in the present chapter, Tesson in particular summons up a mythical time when humankind and animals were not separated (*ibid.*, 37).

reintegrated into nature through the gaze of wild animals, they draw upon a conception of an authentic relation to nature comparable to that which Berger describes.

Conclusion

By metamorphosing themselves in their narratives to appear better embedded in the wilderness, Tesson and Matthiessen suggest that an authentic relation to nature entails the self-transformation of the traveller. Once he has “become” a plant or an animal, the traveller ceases to be a stranger in the wilderness, and momentarily repairs the state of fragmentation that befalls humanity, as it stands cut off from nature. Their narratives foster the “myth of a world where biological life is not yet perturbed by the traumatic presence of otherness”, to borrow the words Undine Sellbach uses to describe the endeavour of Timothy Treadwell, otherwise known as the ill-fated “grizzly man” (46).

This horizontal and transformative representation of one’s relationship to nature opens new avenues to think about nonhuman others and about the purpose of travel. On the one hand, Tesson and Matthiessen reject previous notions of sovereignty over and apartness from nature and contribute to the recent philosophical and ecocritical developments that advocate a conception of humanity as embedded in its environment.²⁶² On the other hand, their travels appear “nomadic” in the sense that Syed Manzurul Islam has given to the term, that is to say, the wayfarers are aware that other worlds co-exist alongside theirs, and they are willing to undergo metamorphosis through contact with these worlds (qtd. in Forsdick, et al. 4).²⁶³ Considering Tesson’s and Matthiessen’s metaphorical metamorphoses, we could also say that they advocate a type of travel akin to that which Jacques Lacarrière described in an interview: “To travel is not only to move, but to alter yourself, to initiate yourself as you move” (*Chemins d’étoiles* §3).²⁶⁴

Through the regard they show for the alterity of animals, Tesson and Matthiessen invite us to think about nonhuman others as a renewed source of wonder rather than as a mystery to be solved. In Tesson’s *La panthère des neiges*, animals are a distant “shimmer” that cannot be fully captured in writing (*Panthère* 165).²⁶⁵ In Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*, nonhumans are just as elusive. Epitomised by the unapproachable leopard, nature appears as a *koan*, that is to say “a paradoxical anecdote or riddle without a solution, used in Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and provoke enlightenment” (*ODL*). Because they escape scrutiny, the elusive animals of these travelogues evoke the creatures that lie beyond our senses and cognition, the “countless

²⁶² See, for instance, object-oriented ontology, and more specifically Timothy Morton’s argument about our embeddedness in “hyperobjects” such as globalisation, plastic and oil, and his recommendation that we stop thinking of ourselves as apart from “nature” or “the world” (*Hyperobjects* 1).

²⁶³ Charles Forsdick, Corinne Fowler and Ludmilla Kostova quote Syed Manzurul Islam, *The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka*, Manchester UP, 1996, 11.

²⁶⁴ “Cheminer, ce n’est pas seulement se déplacer, c’est avancer en se modifiant, en s’initiant” (Lacarrière, *Chemins d’étoiles* §3).

²⁶⁵ “Nul verbe pour les traduire, nul pinceau pour les peindre. Tout juste pouvait-on en capter un scintillement” (Tesson, *Panthère* 165).

animal species” that elude description, classification and study “by living and dying out before man set eyes on them” (Freud qtd. in Ryan 24).²⁶⁶

The representation of animals as opaque and unknowable beings brings to light the limits of the literary medium, which cannot bridge the “abyss of non-comprehension” that opens between animal kind and humankind (Berger 3), and which cannot fully translate the wonder felt by the travellers either. In the travelogues under scrutiny, the animals enable the two travellers to approach a kind of authenticity that lies outside of language: in epiphanies, physical sensations and encounters with wildlife. By musing on animals, who according to Elisabeth de Fontenay possess a form of silent grace (21-22),²⁶⁷ Tesson and Matthiessen indirectly spur a questioning of the ability of language to grasp and express the experience of a journey. In the next chapter, moving beyond representations of nature, I shall investigate in more detail other strategies that my chosen travellers devise to test and acknowledge the limits of the literary medium.

²⁶⁶ Derek Ryan quotes Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated by David McLintock, Penguin, 2004, 15.

²⁶⁷ When they attempt to reach beyond *logos*, and represent silent animals, Tesson and Matthiessen make a gesture that can be better understood in the light of *Le silence des bêtes, La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (1998) by Elisabeth de Fontenay. In this opus, she seeks to question the foundational gesture of metaphysics that cuts and separates animality and rationality, and wishes to go back to and reflect on the moment when they are not yet separated (20, 25). Like the two travellers under study, de Fontenay describes encounters with animals as joyful and almost divine (22), and she points out that animals exist at the edge of our thoughts, language and representations (18) and can help us redefine our humanity.

CHAPTER 5:

The Postmodern Authenticity of Parodic Intertextuality, Failed Quests and Limited Historical Understanding

Introduction

The travellers I have focused on so far do not position themselves above their object of study – be it nature, as I pointed out in the last chapter, or foreign others, as I shall show presently. They reflect on their own authority and question their ability to represent their experience with novelistic coherence, originality and fidelity to the complex realities they encounter in the field. Their texts show that they are writing in “an age of lost innocence”, namely postmodernity (Eco, “Correspondence” 2-3).

Tesson’s and Thubron’s representations of their travels and of human and nonhuman others are strongly marked by a multifaceted self-reflexivity that I consider postmodern. Consequently, to identify the conceptions of authenticity that underpin their texts, it is necessary to go beyond the investigations I have carried out so far, as I sought to identify what authentic travel, authentic wilderness and an authentic relation to this wilderness meant for them. To more accurately account for the representational choices they make, it is crucial to make hypotheses regarding their conceptions of authentic writing.

I shall argue that Tesson’s and Thubron’s narrative choices contribute to creating a type of authenticity that aligns with postmodern aesthetics. To support my claim, I will analyse the answers they offer to the following three questions: How can travel writers be authentic (true to the limited scope of their experience) when they draw conclusions about a country that they visited for a small amount of time? How can their texts appear authentic (original) when many before them have written about the country they visit? How can they represent their fragmented experience in an authentic way and respond to the need to tell a well-rounded story at the same time?

I aim to show that the answers they give to these questions are consistent with postmodern aesthetics, even though their texts offer little in terms of formal innovation, compared for instance with postmodern fiction or with postmodern travelogues such as W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) or Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* (1977).²⁶⁸ On the one hand, Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* is in line with the postmodern distrust of originality and conventional plot patterns. Tesson registers the existence of previous intertexts with parody and playfulness and his text encourages us to reflect on the facticity of the transformational arc that shapes many travel texts. On the other hand, Thubron’s *In Siberia* invites us to face the “scars and damage and disruption” of history (Jay 29) and to contemplate the end of the kind of metanarrative that used to give meaning to this

²⁶⁸ W. G. Sebald and Bruce Chatwin have been called postmodern by John Zilcosky, among others (Zilcosky 6, 7, 9).

history. Thubron also reflects on his nostalgia by foregrounding the unresolved tension that builds up between his expectations and the reality he encounters in Russia. He suggests that wayfarers can no longer complete their quests and acquire sound knowledge about foreign others.

As I pointed out in the **General Introduction** to this study, some of the characteristics I call ‘postmodern’ were already present in modernist travel texts, but I side with the critics who assert that some contemporary travel texts can be called ‘postmodern’ nevertheless. Tesson’s and Thubron’s travelogues can be considered postmodern in the light of the definition of postmodern travel writing that Alison Russell gives in *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature* (2001).²⁶⁹ She defines as “postmodern” the travelogues that “evidence a post-tourist playfulness, a recognition that the writer-traveler cannot evade his or her role, or, to varying degrees, an acknowledgment of the artificial and constructed nature of various boundaries” (11). For Russell, some travel writers also “create new hybrid literary forms that function simultaneously as accounts of journeys and as self-conscious explorations of the ways language constructs the world through which one travels” (11).²⁷⁰

Framing this investigation with Russell’s definition, I shall first examine the “playfulness” of Tesson’s intertextual rewritings before addressing his “acknowledgment of the artificial and constructed nature” of the transformational arc that shapes *Consolations of the Forest* (Russell 11). I will then study Thubron’s “self-conscious explorations” of his cultural assumptions (11). I shall argue that these narrative traits can be seen as various expressions of postmodern authenticity in travel writing. The analyses I shall offer will enable me to further refine Russell’s definition of “postmodern” travel writing by means of examples and with the help of other theoreticians of postmodern aesthetics (such as Linda Hutcheon) and postmodern travel literature (such as Carl Thompson).

²⁶⁹ I rely on the definition of postmodern travelogues that Alison Russell adumbrates, rather than on the definition implicitly outlined in John Zilcosky’s and Caren Kaplan’s volumes, because the travelogues of Tesson and Thubron that I study do not focus on ‘displacement’, which is central to Zilcosky’s and Kaplan’s definition of postmodern travelogues. In Zilcosky’s edited volume *Writing Travel: The Poetics and Politics of the Modern Journey* (2008), three out of four chapters dedicated to “postmodernism” identify disorientation, deterritorialisation, temporal disjunction and cyber-space as central concerns of post-1970s literature about travel. A decade before, in her theoretical opus *Questions of travel: postmodern discourses of displacement* (1996), Caren Kaplan pinpointed comparable traits in “the discourses of displacement that ar[o]se in the cultural production of Euro-American criticism in postmodernity” (143). The field of postmodernist theories that Caren Kaplan delineates and discusses centres on such notions as displacement, cosmopolitanism and transnational capitalism, and she particularly highlights the impact of such concepts as Iain Chamber’s “migrancy”, Fredric Jameson’s “hyperspace”, Deleuzoguattarian “deterritorialisation”, and Dean MacCannell’s authenticity-seeking tourist.

5.1. Finding authenticity in the subversion of intertextual models in *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges*

Intertextuality offers Tesson the opportunity to claim the authenticity of his travelogues in the crowded field of travel writing. Intertexts strengthen the authenticity of his texts in three ways: they enable him to “stand on the shoulders of giants”,²⁷¹ avert false claims of originality, and show how his texts differ from previous ones. As Maria Lindgren Leavenworth explains in *Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps* (2010), some contemporary travellers emphasise the innovations they bring to the literary field by first relying on intertexts and positioning themselves in relation to them: “The overtly expressed connection with an earlier work, the awareness of the tradition, the different forms of subversion, and the attempts to repeat experiences and situate them in new contexts, are all different strategies used to renew the genre of travel literature as well as to claim originality for the individual authors” (14).

I shall argue that *Consolations of the Forest* is authenticated as the narrative of a solitary stay in Siberia thanks to the generic conventions which the writer borrows from the intertexts, and which readers will recognise and easily decode. To put it differently, the text is authenticated by models. At the same time, I interpret the intertextuality of Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges* as an attempt to resolve a question that has become more urgent in the postmodern context of mass travel and more widespread travel writing: how can a traveller’s text be authentic, that is to say unique and self-defining, when others have written about similar experiences and/or destinations? Such postmodern concerns related to the possibility of producing original works are especially relevant in relation to travel literature, which has been suffused with a “rhetoric of exhaustion” that laments the end of geographical exploration (Cronin 2). Parody, typically identified by Linda Hutcheon as a postmodern trait, offers an answer to this issue (*Poetics* 11).²⁷² By subverting his models, the travel writer displaces innovation from the geographical to the literary field and shows that, if both are well-trodden, he can at least renew the field of literature. In other terms, he evidences the originality of his text by asserting his “separation and autonomy from authorities” – one of the most common aims of intertextuality according to Mary Orr (17).

²⁷¹ The expression is notoriously attributed to Bernard of Chartres, but, according to Umberto Eco, it goes back to the Latin grammarian Priscian (see Eco’s foreword to Robert K. Merton’s *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Post-Italianate Edition*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, xiv).

²⁷² “Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11). For the sake of concision, I shall rely on the definition of parody given by Oxford English Dictionary, Lexico: “An imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect”. For an in-depth study of parody, see Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody*.

“Standing on the Shoulders of Giants”

In view of the *topoi* shared between *Consolations of the Forest* and past French Siberian travelogues, we can question Tesson’s explicit rejection of these intertexts. He remarks: “I already knew that one must never travel with books related to one’s destination; in Venice, read Lermontov, but at Baikal, Byron” (13/32).²⁷³ Nevertheless, even if Tesson does not claim the debt, the nexus of previous French Siberian travel writing helps to legitimise his text by means of generic congruence, situating it on a “horizon of expectations” (Jauss 13).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a set of recurring characteristics began to emerge in French travelogues on Siberia – some of which can certainly be found in the reports of travellers from other countries as well. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Siberia was regarded as a punitive destination for war prisoners and criminals (Rjéoutski 80-81). Although spring there was frequently portrayed as a fantastic rebirth (Guyot, “Sibérie” 140-141), the roads were renowned for being uncomfortable and dangerous (Guyot, “corps” 4) and travellers reported harsh physical conditions (2).

Tesson revives these *topoi* in *Consolations of the Forest*: physical challenges form part of his routine, spring is depicted as an “explosion of life” (160/205),²⁷⁴ and the roads as potentially lethal, as we can see when the forest ranger who drives him to his cabin uses a block of ice as a bridge to cross a rift in the ice (129/167). Tesson also plays with the image of Siberia as a prison when he claims that he is living “in a cabin”, since another meaning of the French “*vivre en cabane*” is ‘to be in jail’ (11/29).

Even his description of Siberia as “paradise” can be seen as an inheritance of past cultural imaginings (xi/9). Indeed, Enlightenment writers already fantasised Siberia as a spiritual Eden, drawing upon the ancient myth of the Hyperboreans, “pious and fair men” believed to be dwelling in the northernmost part of the world (Dion 156).²⁷⁵ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Siberia was already imagined as the locale of spiritual improvement. There, physical pain helped “purify the soul” (Stroev 114),²⁷⁶ and indigenous people lived a life worthy of admiration (Chapin 107). Carole Chapin also explains that Europeans “f[ou]nd moral and philosophical salvation in exile” there, and often opposed Siberia to a Parisian Court, which they pictured as decadent (107).²⁷⁷ We could interpret Tesson’s praise of hermit isolation and his criticism of Parisian social life as a humorous reinterpretation of this *topos* (*Consolations* 95/128, 50/74).

²⁷³ “Je savais déjà qu’il ne faut jamais voyager avec des livres évoquant sa destination. À Venise, lire Lermontov, mais au Baïkal, Byron” (Tesson, *Forêts* 32).

²⁷⁴ “[L]es événements des derniers jours ont libéré la vie” (ibid., 205).

²⁷⁵ “[H]ommes pieux et justes” (Dion 156).

²⁷⁶ “Les souffrances du corps purifient l’âme” (Stroev 114).

²⁷⁷ “La pureté de ces mœurs attire l’europpéen qui trouve dans l’exil un salut moral et philosophique” (Chapin 107).

Averting false claims of originality

Besides the unacknowledged intertextuality with past travel writing centred on Siberia, *Consolations of the Forest* contains a plethora of overt references that frame Tesson's thoughts and experiences. These references can be interpreted as Tesson's acknowledgment that, to a certain extent, he cannot escape the repetition of the journey and of the text. Instead of pretending to be the first to write about a solitary retreat, Tesson shows the discourses that pre-date and guide his own. He engages with a postmodern redefinition of creativity that takes into account past works and views their existence "as a liberating challenge to a definition of . . . creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought", to borrow the words Hutcheon used to describe postmodern artworks (*Poetics* 11).

To show that his path is in fact well trodden, he openly relies on intertexts that chart the emotional terrain rather than the geographical one. In *Consolations of the Forest*, diary entries frequently unfold according to the same pattern: Tesson's hardships and his praise of life in nature are followed or preceded by the citation or summary of a similar situation found in literature, and the journal entry eventually ends with a synthesis of the two. For instance, when he struggles with solitude, forced immobility and the fear of bears, he finds solace and advice in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, as illustrated by the following passage: "In case of anxiety, think only of the last pages of Robinson Crusoe . . . 'The bear was walking softly on, and offered to meddle with nobody'" (161/206).²⁷⁸ As emphasised by Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, intertexts may sometimes be substituted for first-hand feelings, "instructing the traveller how to feel" (57). Paradoxically, relying on the intertexts to identify the most suitable emotional response belies both Tesson's stated preference for a sense of immediacy (see **Chapters 2 and 3**), and his wish to listen to his own "inner life" (*Consolations* 17/36).²⁷⁹

At first sight, when the traveller borrows the feelings and thoughts of others, it can seem incompatible with a notion of authenticity understood as a unique and personal outlook. In addition, these intertextual echoes conflict with two of Tesson's central concerns: his emphasis on unmediated physical contact with nature, implicitly portrayed as more authentic than readings (*Consolations* 89/120-121), and his fear that reading will dull his senses (213/269). However, on second glance, bringing intertexts into focus as he often does in *Consolations of the Forest* can be seen as a way to acknowledge the existence and the limits of the medium, and also nuance the claim of originality and immediacy. I see this narrative choice as expressing the "postmodernist tendency towards self-consciousness and self-reflexivity – the tendency to let the machinery show", as David Cowart phrased it (1). To a certain extent, we can consider as postmodern travel writers who openly acknowledge that their travelogues are literary constructions and that they are influenced by previous texts. By incorporating some intertexts in a very conspicuous manner, Tesson shows that the "filter" of the "library" comes between him and

²⁷⁸ "[E]n cas d'inquiétude, se pénétrer des dernières pages de Robinson Crusoe . . . : 'L'ours se promenait tout doucement sans songer à troubler personne'" (Tesson, *Forêts* 206).

²⁷⁹ "Je vais enfin savoir si j'ai une vie intérieure" (ibid., 36).

‘immediate’ experience (Montalbetti 54).²⁸⁰ He thus allays the suspicion that hollow claims of originality would raise, and he regains control over the literary background on which he writes, or, to use Laurent Jenny’s expression, he “retains the leadership of meaning” (262).²⁸¹

Walden as *hypotext* of Consolations of the Forest

Tesson does not simply reverberate past literature uncritically, he also claims authenticity (understood as originality) for his text by undermining the intertexts he conjures up. For instance, Tesson builds on Thoreau’s *Walden*, yet he also keeps it at a mocking distance. By borrowing motifs from *Walden*, and then inviting readers to laugh at him as he enacts a Thoreauvian life, Tesson indirectly causes a humorous reconsideration and re-reading of *Walden*.²⁸²

My contention is that Tesson asserts the authenticity of his text by building on the canon *and* subverting it. This double gesture is at the heart of postmodern aesthetics according to Linda Hutcheon, who argues that “contradiction is what characterizes postmodern art, which works to subvert dominant discourses, but is dependent upon those same discourses for its very physical existence: the ‘already-said’” (*Poetics* 46). Her observation, and my analysis of Tesson’s strategy, are supported with a point that Umberto Eco raises in relation to intertextuality when he observes that postmodern writers cannot escape the discourses of the past and can only express their ideas by first signalling their awareness of previous intertexts in an ironic tone (“Correspondence” 2-3).²⁸³ To paraphrase Eco, Tesson’s texts suggest that one can no longer unproblematically claim to write an original travel account, because the geographical and literary terrain has already been mapped out. What one can do is quote and borrow from the literary pioneers, effect “a critical revisiting” of their work, enter into “an ironic

²⁸⁰ “[L]a bibliothèque exerce sur mon texte un pouvoir de modélisation. En ce sens elle constitue un filtre entre ma plume et le monde” (Montalbetti 54).

²⁸¹ “[I]ransformation et assimilation de plusieurs textes . . . par un texte centreur qui garde le leadership du sens” (Jenny 262). Carl Thompson developed the same idea when he wrote that “attempts to decentre and diffuse the narratorial self in travel writing, by the use of extensive quotations, multiple narrators and so forth, do not necessarily undermine significantly an author’s controlling presence in his or her text. As James Clifford has noted, ‘quotations are always staged by the quoter’, whilst the interweaving of different voices often still involves, and implies, a ‘final, virtuoso orchestration by a single author’” (qtd. in Thompson, *Travel* 128). Thompson quotes James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority”, *Representations*, no. 2, Spring 1983, 118-146, 139.

²⁸² As Germaine Brée puts it, “[i]ntertextuality, in one interpretation (Julia Kristeva’s) of the much-used term, is the power of the written text to impose a reorganization of the corpus of texts that preceded its appearance, creating a modification in the manner in which they are read” (qtd. in Orr 10). Mary Orr quotes Germaine Brée’s “The archaeology of discourse in Malraux’s *Anti-memoirs*”, in *Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Criticism*, edited by J. P. Plottel and H. Charney, New York Literary Forum, 1978, 4.

²⁸³ “For me the postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a woman who is intelligent and well-read: he knows that he cannot tell her, ‘I love you desperately’, because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that that is a line out of Barbara Cartland. Yet there is a solution. He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would say, I love you desperately’. At this point, he has avoided the pretense of innocence, he has clearly affirmed that no one can speak in an innocent mode; but he has still told the woman what he wished to tell her – that he loves her, but in an age of lost innocence” (Eco, “Correspondence” 2-3).

dialogue with the past” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4), and show the extent to which one’s work renews the literary field.

With the help of Gérard Genette’s notions of “hypotext” and “hypertext” I shall presently demonstrate that *Consolations of the Forest* can be seen as a hypertext of Thoreau’s *Walden*. Genette devotes much attention to intertextuality defined as “the relation that links a text B”, which he calls “hypertext” “to a previous text A”, or “hypotext” (*Palimpsestes* 11).²⁸⁴ Among various hypo/hypertextual links that Genette identifies, transformation through imitation is the relationship that best defines the connection between *Consolations of the Forest* and *Walden*. According to Genette, the writer who seeks to imitate and transform text A must “first constitute a model of generic characteristics” that he can borrow from in order to write his own text B (13).²⁸⁵

Thoreau’s *Walden* acts as a foundational text for all subsequent tales of isolation in a cabin, but Tesson’s debt to this book is particularly substantial. *Kirkus*’s collective review of *Consolations of the Forest* notes that “[c]omparisons to *Walden* are inevitable and, to an extent, justified” (170) and Hannes De Vriese remarks that “[t]he genre, themes and general structure of Tesson’s text suggest commonality with Thoreau’s *Walden*” (235). I intend to go further and identify the generic traits Tesson borrows from Thoreau.

The protagonists of both narratives share a love of solitude, believe that society is a source of corruption and that happiness can be found in self-reliance and in communion with nature.²⁸⁶ Thoreau went to the woods to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” and run counter to the frenetic appetite for the progress of a nation which “lives too fast” (*Walden* 194, 196). Tesson too went to the woods to “tame time” and “slow it down” (*Consolations* xi/10, 20/40) in a cabin described as the “realm of simplification”, where “life is reduced to vital gestures” (24/43).²⁸⁷ They both feel satisfaction when they develop their manual skills and perceive freedom to be the goal and reward of their retreat. Neither Tesson nor Thoreau will hunt (*Consolations* 19/38; *Walden* 370). Thoreau is keen to eat mostly the berries and vegetables he has picked or grown, which can be compared to Tesson’s “happiness of having on [his] plate the fish [he has] caught” (*Consolations* 96/130).²⁸⁸ Both seek to retrieve a pre-modern age when man travelled by foot and grew, fished or killed his own food instead of buying it at the supermarket or grocer’s. While Thoreau starts his book with a list of supplies needed to build a hut, Tesson enumerates the survival equipment he has brought with him. Both

²⁸⁴ “[L]’hypertextualité”, “J’entends par là toute relation unissant un texte B (que j’appellerai *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A (que j’appellerai, bien sûr, *hypotexte*) sur lequel il se greffe” (Genette, *Palimpsestes* 11, emphasis original).

²⁸⁵ However, I apply Genette’s concept loosely. He designed it to analyse intertextual relations that were *explicitly* acknowledged by the author of hypertext B, which is not the case with Tesson, who borrows without claiming the debt. The French reads: “l’imitation est sans doute aussi une transformation, mais d’un procédé plus complexe, car . . . il exige la constitution préalable d’un modèle de compétences générique” (*ibid.*, 13).

²⁸⁶ *Walden* begins with a man parting with a society whose members are “crushed and smothered” (74). See **Chapter 1** for examples of Tesson’s misanthropy, **Chapter 2** for examples of his reverence for nature and **Chapter 3** for examples of his praise of self-sufficiency.

²⁸⁷ “[A]pprivoiser le temps” (Tesson, *Forêts* 10); “le ralentir” (40); “La cabane, royaume de simplification. Sous le couvert des pins, la vie se réduit à des gestes vitaux” (43).

²⁸⁸ “Le bonheur d’avoir dans son assiette le poisson qu’on a pêché” (*ibid.*, 130).

tell their readers of their experience baking bread or blinis (*Walden* 154; *Consolations* 98/131). Thoreau recounts making parts of his furniture himself; Tesson builds a table (*Walden* 158; *Consolations* 111/147). Both dedicate long and lyrical descriptions to the sound of the ice breaking on Walden Pond (456) and Lake Baikal (18/36), and both portray at length its melting and the awakening of nature in Spring (*Walden* 494; *Consolations* 147/189). Lastly, both conspicuously question the value of literature: Tesson when he drops *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to cut wood (*Consolations* 89/120-121), Thoreau when he writes "I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans" (*Walden* 226).

Nevertheless, the two books also differ on some key points. For *Kirkus's* reviewers, "what makes Tesson's work so refreshing is its freedom from Thoreauvian moralizing" (170), but for Hannes De Vriese, Tesson's lack of political engagement is not "refreshing". Rather, it makes *Consolations of the Forest* a "watered-down version of Thoreau's retreat" (De Vriese 246). De Vriese presupposes that "Tesson models his retreat and story on the writing of the man considered by many to be the founding father of ecological thought in America" (237). In other words, De Vriese assumes that Tesson has chosen the Thoreauvian model with the intention of emulating its political dimension.²⁸⁹ For the scholar, it follows that "[a]s an attempt at ecological commitment, Tesson's project appears to be a failure in many respects" because it proves more "ecopoetic" than "ecocritical" (246).²⁹⁰

However, Tesson's avowal of the personal and non-reproducible nature of his project makes it clear that he does not intend to offer a model to follow (*Consolations* 29/50), as I have remarked earlier, when I addressed the ethical issues raised by this position (see **Chapter 1.6**). In opposition to De Vriese, I would like to argue that the formal loans from *Walden* suggest that Tesson chose it as a model mostly for its pioneering and canonical position in the literary field of (travel) nature writing, rather than for its position in the field of "ecological thought" (De Vriese 237).

I will now turn to the iconoclastic irreverence that accompanies Tesson's homage to Thoreau, which De Vriese fails to address. This irreverence gives *Consolations of the Forest* a parodic dimension that contributes to shaping its authenticity. When he first mentions the Transcendentalist writer, Tesson states: "I find his sermonizing a touch wearing" (13/32).²⁹¹ The harshness contained in the original is absent from the English translation. In the French version, Thoreau is called a "*parpaillot*" (a derogatory term for a Protestant), "*comptable*" (an accountant, who counts and lists his expenses), who proselytizes a sanctimonious twaddle ("*son prêchi-prêcha*"). Three blows that have been concisely toned down by Linda Coverdale's translation to one word: "sermonizing". What is clear here is that Tesson rejects both the religious legacy of the Transcendentalist writer, and his attempt to offer and preach a model that could be imitated by others.

Tesson's irreverence goes further than this initial statement on Thoreau. Once we have established that *Consolations of the Forest* is a hypertext of *Walden*, we begin to suspect

²⁸⁹ De Vriese does not use the terms "hypo/hypertextual" to describe the links between the two texts.

²⁹⁰ Throughout his article, De Vriese describes ecocriticism as political engagement and an invitation to action, and contrasts it to "ecopoetics", which to him "emphasises the aesthetic and formal dimensions of literary and artistic representations of nature" (235-236).

²⁹¹ "Thoreau . . . son prêchi-prêcha de parpaillot comptable me lasse un peu" (Tesson, *Forêts* 32).

that each time Tesson undermines himself, Thoreau is undermined by proxy. When Tesson mocks behaviours that are his own, but that have been or could have been those of the American writer, such as self-isolation and self-reliance, I interpret it as an invitation to approach both *Consolations of the Forest* and *Walden* critically. Tesson's text possesses the parodic dimension that according to Genette is often found in hypertexts (*Palimpsestes* 15). For instance, the traveller demystifies his eremitic life when he calls himself a "drunk" (202/256) and a "coward" (153/196), presents himself as a clumsy ice-skater (39/62), and an unskilful fisherman (93/125) who burns his blini and eats Chinese noodles instead of relying solely on his catch (98/131).²⁹² As I have previously pointed out in **Chapter 1**, he also mocks his own misanthropy, implicitly inviting a parallel with Alceste, the protagonist of Molière's *Misanthrope*, who dreams about escaping into the desert, and, like Tesson, asks the woman he loves to join him, in vain (Molière v. 141-144, 1803-1805, 1771-1773). Using self-mockery, Tesson positions himself as heir to the "long tradition of self-deprecation and playful self-ironising" that Carl Thompson identifies in the field of literary travel writing as a whole (*Travel* 126). But above all, he signals the originality of his text by emphasising self-reflexivity and humour more than *Walden* does.

Tesson's parodic revisiting of the canon signals the postmodern character of his text, considering that postmodernism can be seen "as a tendency to playfulness and parody, born of a desire to subvert both the conventions and the authority traditionally associated with many Western genres, disciplines and discourses" (Thompson, *Travel* 126). This playfulness goes beyond the parody of *Walden* and runs through *Consolations of the Forest* in the form of a pervasive disharmony between the ascetic and romantic intertexts on the one hand, epitomised for example by Rousseau, René Chateaubriand and Thoreau, and decadent intertexts on the other hand, exemplified by Giacomo Casanova's *The Story of My Life* and Marquis de Sade's *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue* (13/33). Tesson's frequent and diligently recorded inebriation also contributes to neutralising the asceticism of the Transcendentalists²⁹³ and the sainthood of the Desert Fathers he often mentions. With vodka, Tesson comes closer to the artificial paradises of the decadent intertexts of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Charles Baudelaire, whom he also reads at Baikal.

As a result of this discordance, his text and project appear unstable, being built on the foundations laid by past hermits, and at the same time being intent on undermining these foundations.²⁹⁴ Readers are faced with the "continual ontological uncertainty" that is a feature of postmodern narratives (Malpas 25), as Tesson cultivates the postmodern traits of "change, mobility, open-endedness [and] instability" (Eagleton 34). We can therefore look at *Consolations of the Forest* as a "destructive-constructive" text, to borrow the concept

²⁹² "[I]vrogne" (Tesson, *Forêts* 202/256) and "couard" (153/196).

²⁹³ Thoreau described a man's body as a temple (*Walden* 384).

²⁹⁴ Even if the structure of the diary and Tesson's uncontested voice unify his experience, the contradictions the diary overtly displays put readers in a position of uncertainty regarding the meaning of his eremitic project. This instability may be read as a statement concerning the limits of literature, considering that he is openly critical of the ability of any text to represent reality: Arthur Schopenhauer's and Martin Heidegger's statements on animals are put to the test (*Consolations* 166/213, 167/214), Rousseau's *Promenades* cannot resist the intrusion of modernity (25/45-46), D. H. Lawrence holds less truth than woodcutting (89/120-121), and "American nature writers" do not even contain "one-tenth of the emotion that fills [Tesson] before th[e] shores" of Baikal (35/57).

Julia Kristeva develops in her theory of intertextuality (52).²⁹⁵ She explains that, within a single text, other texts intersect and sometimes neutralise one another in a creative, dynamic and productive movement that helps this text constitute itself (52, 89). My contention is that the originality of *Consolations of the Forest* derives precisely from this oscillation between the Transcendentalists' asceticism on the one hand and decadence on the other, that is to say, from a Janusian gesture of construction and subversion.

Mirroring and mocking The Snow Leopard in La panthère des neiges

A comparable process of self-legitimation through subversion of intertexts seems to be at work in Tesson's latest travelogue to date, *La panthère des neiges*, which can be read as a rewriting of Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. By borrowing from and, above all, by mocking the travel-writing canon, Tesson claims space for his travelogue in the crowded field of travels to the Himalaya. However, with this new rewriting, he appears more intent on criticising this canon than he was in *Consolations of the Forest*. In my view, what is at stake in Tesson's antagonistic engagement with Matthiessen's opus is best described as authenticity by iconoclasm. In other words, he carves out a space for his own travelogue and legitimises it by first undermining the text of his literary precursor.

Tesson criticises Matthiessen head-on multiple times (whereas it happens only once for Thoreau) and parodies his spirituality in an unforgiving manner. As I have previously mentioned in **Chapter 2.3.**, Tesson first mentions his predecessor halfway through *La panthère des neiges*, remarking that Matthiessen had written "a labyrinthine book, *The Snow Leopard*, which dealt as much with tantric Buddhism as with the evolution of the species" (63-64).²⁹⁶ In addition, Tesson hints that if Matthiessen had not seen the leopard, it was because he "was essentially concerned with himself" (64).²⁹⁷ From the outset, the American writer is presented as a self-centred traveller and a mediocre travel writer rather than a model. Tesson reiterates the attack twice. He accuses Matthiessen of bad faith by comparing him to Jean de La Fontaine's fox, which "shows contempt for the grapes when he realises that they are inaccessible" (*Panthère* 160).²⁹⁸ Tesson also disbelieves the American writer's reaction to the absence of the leopard:

During his stay in Nepal in 1973, Peter Matthiessen never saw the leopard. To whoever asked whether he had met her, he answered: 'No! Isn't that wonderful?' Truth be told, *my dear Peter*, it is not 'wonderful'. I could not fathom how one could be pleased over disappointments. It was a way to wriggle out of the situation. I wanted to see the leopard, I had come for her. (*Panthère* 105)²⁹⁹

²⁹⁵ "Le texte . . . est redistributif (destructive-constructif)" (Kristeva 52).

²⁹⁶ See note below.

²⁹⁷ "[E]lle avait échappé à Matthiessen qui avait rapporté un livre labyrinthique, *Le léopard des neiges*, où il était question du bouddhisme tantrique autant que de l'évolution des espèces. Matthiessen était essentiellement préoccupé par lui-même" (Tesson, *Panthère* 63-64).

²⁹⁸ "Ainsi procède le renard de La Fontaine: il méprise les raisins quand il comprend leur inaccessibilité" (Tesson, *Forêts* 160).

²⁹⁹ "Au cours de son séjour au Népal en 1973, Peter Matthiessen n'avait jamais vu la panthère. A qui lui demandait s'il l'avait rencontrée, il répondait: 'Non ! N'est-ce pas merveilleux ?' Eh bien non *my dear*

Even though he disavows Matthiessen's book, reading the two books side by side shows that there are various similarities that could be regarded as borrowings, starting with the title of Tesson's opus, as *La panthère des neiges* is a direct translation of *The Snow Leopard*. Other similarities can be found. Matthiessen, for instance, pictures the mountains as a mirror of his inner self and as a long-lost home, writing "[s]now mountains . . . serve as a mirror to one's own true being" and "[i]n another life . . . these mountains were my home" (*Snow* 162, 213). So does Tesson, who remarks: "I felt at home in these glacis. . . . [I]his flat geography reflected the state of my soul" (*Panthère* 82).³⁰⁰ Matthiessen then recounts being "quickly out of breath" (*Snow* 92), contrary to the well-adapted animals: "in fifteen minutes, in a single glide, the great vulture could go where we have gone in ten hard hours" (82). In a comparable manner, Tesson complains about the lack of oxygen and envies the ease of animals: "Royal eagles, saker falcons, blue sheep intersected . . . How annoying they were, these animals frolicking at an altitude of nearly 5,000 meters. My lungs were on fire" (*Panthère* 62).³⁰¹ The travellers recount further similar experiences: they spot wolves early on in their journey, which elicits their wonder (*Snow* 182; *Panthère* 37), and both come across a yak killed by a leopard (*Snow* 264; *Panthère* 132-133). In addition, both spin fantasies about a snow leopard that *could* kill men (*Snow* 145) or allegedly does so (*Panthère* 96).

Rather than acknowledging the debt, Tesson focuses on upending *The Snow Leopard* with ironic rewritings, which I interpret as a way of asserting the originality of his own text. This irony shows, for instance, when he writes about air burial, a Tibetan ritual during which a corpse is exposed to carrion birds. In *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen presents it in a positive light, as a ritual that reintegrates the deceased into nature: "Thus all is returned into the elements, death into life" (212). In *La panthère des neiges*, Tesson revisits the ritual using a humorous tone. At first, he pretends to fantasise it as poetic metempsychosis, as the following passage shows:

If my mother had instructed us to do so, I would have liked us to lay her body to rest in a recess of the Kunlun Mountains. Scavengers would have torn her to shreds before exposing themselves to other jaws, and spreading in turn to other bodies – rat, lammergeier, serpent – offering an orphan son the opportunity to see his mother in the flutter of wings, the undulation of scales, and the tremor of fleeces. (*Panthère* 46)³⁰²

Peter! Ce n'était pas 'merveilleux'. Je ne comprenais point qu'on puisse se féliciter des déconvenues. C'était une pirouette de l'esprit. Je voulais voir la panthère, j'étais venu pour elle" (Tesson, *Panthère* 105).

³⁰⁰ "[J]e me sentais chez moi dans ces glacis. . . . ces aplatissements géographiques reflétaient mon état d'âme" (*ibid.*, 82).

³⁰¹ "Aigles royaux, faucons sacres, chèvres bleues s'entrecroisaient: bestiaire médiéval dans les jardins glacés . . . Ils étaient vexants ces animaux à batifoler à près de 5000 mètres d'altitude. J'avais les poumons en feu" (*ibid.*, 62).

³⁰² "Si ma mère l'avait dicté j'aurais aimé que nous allassions déposer son corps dans un repli des Kunlun. Les charognards l'auraient déchiqueté avant de se livrer, eux-mêmes, à d'autres mâchoires, et de se diffuser en d'autres corps – rat, gypaète, serpent –, offrant à un fils orphelin d'imaginer sa mère dans le battement d'une aile, l'ondulation d'une écaille, le frémissement d'une toison" (*ibid.*, 46).

Given that the beasts specifically mentioned who receive the reincarnated soul are animals of ill repute (rat, carrion bird and serpent), the readers can question the seriousness of Tesson's wish, and begin to wonder if he is not simply mocking mysticism, as he does in other instances. This suspicion of mockery is further confirmed when he witnesses the dismemberment of a dead yak by vultures and effects a U-turn so swift that it becomes humorous: "the reddened necks and the fury of feathers muffled the desire I had to have my body thrown to the vultures. When you have seen the birds driven mad by blood once, you realise that a square of chrysanthemums in an Yvelines cemetery has, after all, its charm" (151-152).³⁰³ The atrocious sight shatters the fantasy and reveals that it was no more than a parody of spiritual musing. The irony of both passages is further enhanced by the use of the archaic word "*forjetât*" ('to throw') and by the use of the imperfect subjunctive – "*que nous allussions*", "*qu'on forjetât*" ('to go', 'to throw') – which has fallen out of use and now connotes humorous intention in French.

Tesson also highlights the difference that separates his text from Matthiessen's by rejecting the spiritual musings that occupy a prominent space in *The Snow Leopard*. Engaging with the spirituality of the land seems to be an unavoidable *topos* of travel writings that centre around Tibet. As Laurie Hovell McMillin argues, the "Tibetan epiphany" can be found throughout the texts and films about this region (66). Yet, as we have seen with *Consolations of the Forest*, which undermines the Desert Fathers by reference to the Decadents, Tesson prefers to keep "spirituality . . . at an ironic distance", as De Vriese puts it (245). Undermining Matthiessen's text enables Tesson to both retain this distance and engage with what Peter Bishop termed the much-travelled "imaginative route" of "Occult Tibet" (Bishop 208).³⁰⁴ In other words, Tesson builds on a *topos* and subverts it by toppling Matthiessen's text – thus, he reiterates the postmodern double gesture that is characteristic of his text.

As I have previously shown, in *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen repeatedly longs for a form of "cosmic unity" in which "body, mind and nature are all one" (65, 47). In *La panthère des neiges*, Tesson mocks this idea: "Can your soul embrace unity?" asked the tenth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*. That question was an excellent sedative" (67).³⁰⁵ When Tesson reflects that we all came from the bacterial "soup" (55),³⁰⁶ and when he conflates Heraclitus and the *Bardo Thodol*, we can read it as a humorous rewriting of Matthiessen's syncretic passages. As Richard Mabey (ix), Peter Bishop (211) and Alex Matthiessen have stressed (Adams §13),³⁰⁷ Peter Matthiessen frequently argues that philosophies and

³⁰³ "[C]es cous rougis et ces furies de plumes atténuèrent mon envie qu'on forjetât un jour mon corps aux vautours. Quand on a vu une fois les oiseaux devenir fous de sang on se dit que finalement, un carré de chrysanthème dans un cimetière des Yvelines a son charme" (Tesson, *Panthère* 151-152).

³⁰⁴ Peter Bishop mentions "Alexandra David-Neel, Govinda, Snellgrove, Evans-Wentz, Roerich" as writers who "contributed to building the myth of the Himalayas and Buddhism" (208).

³⁰⁵ "Ton âme peut-elle embrasser l'unité?" demandait le dixième chapitre du *Tao-tö-king*. Cette question était un excellent soporifique" (Tesson, *Panthère* 67).

³⁰⁶ "[L]a soupe" (ibid., 55).

³⁰⁷ Richard Mabey jokes that when reading Matthiessen's essays on Buddhism he is "in need of some spiritual porters" (xi). For Peter Bishop, these essays are "laced with a froth of erudition, and with tantalizing obscure cross-references, for example . . . between the urbane French writer Proust and the twelfth-century Tibetan hermit-mystic Milerapa" (sic) (211).

religions pertaining to very different contexts point to the one same truth, a notion that makes little sense to them. For instance, Matthiessen argues over three pages that the “animistic kinship” of the Gurung of central Nepal, the Chukchi and the Tungus of Siberia, and the Native Americans “differs little in its spirit” (*Snow* 58) and that “the same pattern of Shamanistic practice [can be found] not only in Asia and the Americas but in Africa, Australia, Oceania, and Europe” (59). In short, he stresses unity at the expense of difference.

When Tesson revisits this notion of unity, readers can sense humour: “The *Bardo Thodol*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, said the same thing as Heraclitus and the philosophers of flux. Everything passes, everything flows, everything runs its course, donkeys gallop, wolves chase them, vultures soar: order, balance, full sunlight” (45-46).³⁰⁸ The humorous tone comes from the vagueness and carelessness of the word “everything” and the utter lack of nuance in assimilating *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Greek philosophers. The triple ternary structure at the end also gives the impression of a hastily drafted list (processes, animals, elements) that combined in this way take on a trivial aspect. The last ternary section – “*ordre, équilibre, plein soleil*” – can be read as a parodic echo of a famous couplet from Charles Baudelaire’s poem “L’invitation au Voyage”: “*Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme et volupté*” (v. 13-14).³⁰⁹ However, Tesson stays mockingly down-to-earth with “*plein soleil*”, which connotes a day spent in a deckchair and suggests his parodic intentions: he imitates Matthiessen’s syncretic style and Baudelaire’s lyricism with a twist to produce a comical effect.

To summarise, in *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges*, Tesson builds on the canonical narratives of the past and subverts them. His travelogues are authenticated by means of generic congruence. At the same time, their subversive and parodic contents place them within the context of postmodern aesthetics and help their author prove that he can renew the field of travelogues on Siberia and the Himalaya and produce authentic (original) travelogues about these destinations.

In addition, the omnipresent intertext of *Consolations of the Forest* acts as an acknowledgment of the gap between word and world and thus points towards what I have called postmodern authenticity. With references and rewritings, the traveller openly recognises the inescapable repetition of both travel and text, and more specifically the existence of the personal library that filters out his experience. Once he has foregrounded this repetition, he can go beyond it, and assert the originality of his work.

Alex Matthiessen admitted in an interview that, “for a young reader it [*The Snow Leopard*] is quite dense – there are a lot of what you might call technical descriptions of Zen Buddhism, so I enjoyed it, but it was of limited value to me”. He added that he re-read the book later on and “the Buddhism sections still had less import than the descriptions of people and culture and land” (§13).

³⁰⁸ “Le Bardo Thödol, Livre des Morts tibétain, disait la même chose qu’Héraclite et les philosophes de la fluctuation. Tout passe, tout coule, tout s’écoule, les ânes galopent, les loups les pourchassent, les vautours planent: ordre, équilibre, plein soleil” (Tesson, *Panthère* 45-46).

³⁰⁹ “There’ll be nothing but beauty, wealth, pleasure, /With all things in order and measure” (“Invitation to the Voyage”, Roy Campbell’s translation).

5.2. Incomplete quests and non-transformational arcs

One of the key traits found in postmodern literature is a metatextual reflexivity that invites readers to consider the limits of the literary medium. The reflection on these limits takes various shapes in contemporary travel writing. I have argued that a postmodern conception of authenticity emerges in the travelogues that give evidence of this self-reflexivity, for instance by engaging with previous intertexts. I shall now explore this self-reflexivity by discussing travelogues that are structured in a way that undermines the traditional basic plot patterns of the “quest” and of the “voyage and return” (Booker 5). After discussing briefly a handful of travelogues that epitomise the incomplete quest, I shall focus on Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* to argue that its parody of the transformational arc exemplifies the postmodern challenge against well-established narrative patterns.

Critical literature that attempts to theorise basic plot patterns in storytelling often proves inadequate or deficient when it comes to framing the structures that travel writers have employed so far to give shape to their journeys. These studies focus mostly on the plot patterns of myths – for instance, Joseph Campbell studies the monomyth of the hero – and on fiction, as E. M. Forster does in *Aspects of the Novel*. However, in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004), two of the basic plots that Christopher Booker defines – the “quest” and the “voyage and return” (5) – are well suited to describing common structures of travel texts.

According to Booker, these two plot patterns generally end with the questers and travellers fulfilling their quests and returning home after having reached “some priceless goal” (69). This type of ending seems at odds both with postmodern aesthetics that favours fragmentation over wholeness, and with specific demands of the nonfictional travel-writing genre. As Christine Montalbetti stresses, travel writing has to address the disorganised nature of reality, which conflicts with the meaningful reorganisation of experience that occurs in writing. According to Montalbetti, fiction and nonfiction are essentially separated by the degree of order and wholeness of the world they describe: “On the one hand, the text of fiction proposes an ordered and complete world . . . on the other hand the referential text reports on the diverse and the contingent, it must deal with the plural, the diffuse, the randomly concomitant, and the successive without necessary cause” (46). How can travel writers give shape to their journey and still stay faithful to the disorganised nature of their experience? Some travellers seem to opt for an in-between stance, adopting conventional plot patterns, especially the “quest” and the “voyage and return” (Booker 5), but altering them to make their limits apparent.

Deficient quests

For Booker, the basic plot of the quest is exemplified by the *Odyssey*. It “centres on the hero’s long, difficult journey towards some distant, enormously important goal” and “the story remains unresolved until the objective has been finally, triumphantly secured” (5). Eventually, “the story ends on a great renewal of life, centred on a new secure base,

guaranteed onto the future” (83). If we turn towards travel writing more specifically, Tim Youngs remarks that the quest “is probably the single most important organising principle of travel writing” (qtd. in Leane, “Animals” 307).³¹⁰ According to Robert Fraser, this form is typically found in travelogues from the imperial era, which feature “an onerous journey across uncharted regions, the reaching of the goal, the conquest, a withdrawal” (qtd. in Leane, “Animals” 308).³¹¹

Once a key convention of travel writing, the quest appears to malfunction in some contemporary travelogues. The sense of harmonious closure it offers if we follow Booker’s definition seems at odds with postmodern aesthetics, which advocate “change, mobility, open-endedness, instability” (Eagleton 34). I call failed or half-hearted quests the pursuits of goals that are missed, unconvincingly fulfilled, defined as elusive from the start, or in need of re-evaluation at the end of the journey. There are, of course, travelogues narrated utterly outside this structure. For instance, W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, often misleadingly described as a walk taken in Suffolk, actually follows the melancholic stream of consciousness of the traveller, who incorporates pictures and journal clippings and lingers on topics as varied as Joseph Conrad’s upbringing, the Taiping Rebellion and Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*.

Other travelogues, however, start as quests and then undercut the structure. Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* could be considered the paragon of this type of narrative (Thompson, *Travel* 127). The book starts as a quest inspired by the loss of a piece of “Brontosaurus” (in fact *Mylodon*) skin that the traveller-narrator’s grandmother kept in her curiosity cabinet and that fascinated him as a child. As the item is imagined as *dinosaur* skin, readers suspect from the start that the traveller goes in search of something that does not exist. As he collects stories heard on the journey and thus composes his own curiosity cabinet, the importance of the skin as a structuring device diminishes. As Peter Hulme explains, “Chatwin’s quest is constantly ironised, frequently forgotten, and only finally fulfilled in a distinctly unheroic and almost surreal fashion” (“Travelling to Write” 91). For John Culbert, the ironic and unheroic dimensions of Chatwin’s quest, “alerts us . . . to the complex treatment of causes in narrative”, and more specifically to “the vexing tendency in secular texts of all kinds, including travelogues, to ground their representations in reassuring but ultimately deceitful narrative forms” (156). When Culbert hints that the quest is a “deceitful narrative form” (156), he raises the more general issue of the semi-novelistic nature of the travel-writing genre. In other words, if we follow his reasoning, travel writers who reshape their journeys to fit the plot of the quest introduce, with this structure, an element of deceit.

In the travelogues under study, the quest structure is disrupted by Matthiessen, who never attains his goal (seeing the leopard), by Thubron, who must eventually re-evaluate his initial objective (locating the core of Siberia and its new faith), and by Tesson, who allegedly looks for peace and claims to have found it, but whose parodic tone may make his readers doubt this claim. Their narratives indirectly question the ability of the quest

³¹⁰ Elizabeth Leane quotes Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, Cambridge UP, 2013, 87, 101.

³¹¹ Elizabeth Leane quotes Robert Fraser, *Victorian Quest Romance: Stevenson, Haggard, Kipling, and Conan Doyle*, Northcote House, 1998, 5-6.

to describe their travels faithfully. The deficient quests that they stage point to the fragmented nature of their experiences travelling and to the limits of the quest narrative as a literary form.

The non-transformational arc of Consolations of the Forest

The second basic plot pattern that is used but undermined in the travelogues under study is what Booker calls “voyage and return” (5). Booker defines this structure as a journey undertaken by a hero and his companions, who “go through a succession of terrible, often near-fatal ordeals . . . alternating between phases of life-threatening constriction followed by life-giving release”, most often in a “wild, alien and unfriendly terrain” that puts them in peril (73). Eventually, the hero returns changed due to the lessons learnt on the journey. The most prominent feature of this plot is a transformational arc: the protagonist grows as the journey proceeds and returns home wiser. We can identify this structure in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century journeys of pilgrims and Grand Tourists, since pilgrims were expected to return changed after experiencing moral improvement and Grand Tourists were expected to be more erudite.

In the corpus under scrutiny, Tesson’s *Consolations of the Forest* offers a deficient example of this arc. By framing his journey with a rather unconvincing transformational arc, Tesson draws attention to the existence and to the limits of the literary medium that compels him to reshape his experience into a well-rounded story of self-transformation. At first sight, his travelogue follows the familiar pattern of exposition, disruption, peripeteia, transformation and resolution that provide a sense of wholeness and closure. However, the motives (disruptions) Tesson gives for leaving Paris seem to be given in jest, the peripeteia is unmotivated and does not appear to be “a terrible ordeal” (Booker 73), and the peace he allegedly finds at Lake Baikal is short lived. As a result, the transformational arc and the plot pattern of the “voyage and return” (Booker 5) appear artificially superimposed on Tesson’s journey.

Tesson gives various reasons for his journey: he wished to pay attention to his “inner life” (17/36), to master time and assuage a feeling of meaningless (xi/9) and to avoid the empty conversations he had to deal with in Paris (95/128, 212/267, 50/74). Later on, he rewrites this initial list and gives it a parodic dimension, stating, among other things, that he left Paris because the cabin at Baikal is “better heated” than his Parisian flat, and because he was “tired of running errands” (87/118).³¹² This second list undermines the credibility of the reasons he gave before, and suggests that no specific disruptions spurred him to leave Paris.

The plot pattern of the “voyage and return” is further challenged when Tesson interrupts his narrative with a peripeteia that appears contrived (Booker 5). Towards the end of his stay, his lover sends him a break-up message that acts as the most challenging ordeal of the narrative. However, the twist provided by the lover’s text message seems unmotivated, because she is hardly mentioned before. Up to the moment of the break-up,

³¹² “C’est mieux chauffé que chez moi, à Paris/Par lassitude d’avoir à faire les courses” (Tesson, *Forêts* 118).

readers are not made to feel that she plays a significant role in the traveller's adventure. She thus appears more as a structuring device than as a character. Her presence in the story seems to answer the needs for peripeteia that the traveller would overcome to earn the serenity that he allegedly seeks. We might even wonder whether Tesson is simply paying tribute to the eminent travel writer Nicolas Bouvier, who interrupts his narrative *Le poisson-scorpion*, mid-way in the same fashion with his former lover's telegram announcing her marriage to another (769).

In addition, this episode does not function as an effective ordeal. Tesson's reaction to the text message is ambiguous and suggests that it did not have such a disruptive effect on his sojourn as he claims: "I dream about a little house in the suburbs with a dog, wife and children, protected by a row of fir trees. For all their narrowness, the bourgeoisie has nevertheless understood this essential thing: we must give ourselves the possibility of a minimum of happiness" (191/242).³¹³ His lament appears unconvincing because the accumulation of "small", "narrowness" and "minimum" conveys the idea that maximal happiness lies elsewhere, and that the "minimum happiness" that he has just lost is unimportant, or worse, a trap. In the French version, the house he describes is protected by a row of "*sapins*", a type of tree that was previously used to make coffins and that currently bears deadly connotations, as illustrated by the idiomatic expression "*sentir le sapin*", which is a way of saying that something "announces death". The choice of the word "*sapin*", instead of a 'white picket fence', or a row of '*sapinettes*' or '*laurières*' ('spruce trees', 'bay trees'), brings to mind the idea that the suburban life Tesson allegedly regrets is death-like. Consequently, he does not appear to truly regret missing out on the opportunity to live a sedentary suburban life with the lover he has just lost, and losing her appears to be less disruptive than it first seemed.

Finally, the narrative ends not with the "peace" that was promised by the preface but with "the taste of death" after Tesson's dog Aika slaughters six eider ducklings (231/290).³¹⁴ This killing echoes the grievous text message of the lover, as both episodes consist in the unexpected and destructive gesture of a female (a woman and a female dog) that disrupts the traveller's enjoyment of Siberian beauty. As Halia Koo puts it, "the narrative ends on a feeling of helplessness" (41).³¹⁵ Such an ending makes the preface's claim that "in the end" the traveller "knew peace" appear hollow (*Consolations* xi/9). This impression is reinforced by the title of the preface that opens the book, "A Sidestep" (xi/9), which suggests that the six months spent in Siberia occur outside of the traveller's life and have little bearing on it.

By mocking his own reasons for leaving Paris, by minimising the importance of the seemingly most important ordeal of the narrative, and by ending the narrative with the tragi-comic death of ducklings instead of with the peace that he promised in the preface, Tesson invites us to reflect on the necessity of emplotting travel narratives and of shaping the journey into a transformational arc.

³¹³ "Je rêve d'une petite maison de banlieue avec chien, femme et enfants protégés par une haie de sapins. Dans toute leur étroitesse, les bourgeois ont tout de même compris cette chose essentielle: il faut se donner la possibilité d'un bonheur minimum" (Tesson, *Forêts* 242).

³¹⁴ "La matinée a un goût de mort, le goût du départ" (ibid., 290).

³¹⁵ "[L]e récit se clôt sur un constat d'impuissance" (Koo 41).

Consolations of the Forest draws attention to a type of aesthetics that is noticeable throughout my corpus, which contains quests with goals that are uncertain, elusive, or unattainable. For instance, in *La panthère des neiges*, Tesson searches for the image of departed women, and in *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen looks for one of the most elusive felines.³¹⁶ They dispel the illusion that all journeys have to be transformative, acquisitive, accumulative and goal-oriented, and they redirect readerly focus to the *experience* of the journey. If their texts appear to be failed quests, they do not appear to be failed journeys, as evidenced by the many joyful and fleeting epiphanies they describe. By framing rich journeys with failed or deficient quests, Tesson and Matthiessen may be suggesting that the success of a journey lies in relinquishing the idea of appropriating the object of the quest. As I shall now show, a comparable idea can be found in Thubron's *In Siberia*.

5.3. Colin Thubron's *In Siberia*: between nostalgia and acknowledgment of postmodern fragmentation

After a journey in Russia during the Brezhnev era (*Among the Russians*, 1983), and in the former Socialist Republics of Central Asia in the 1990s (*The Lost Heart of Asia*, 1994), Thubron travels across Siberia after the fall of the Soviet Union, with the following question in mind: "What, I wondered, had replaced Communist faith?" (*In Siberia* 3). The journey, however, never really answers this question and foregrounds rather the struggles of the traveller as he tries to come to terms with the destitute state of the towns, cities and abandoned mines he visits. Despite initially formulating the rationale of the journey as an essentialist quest, Thubron soon admits: "I was trying to find a core to Siberia, where there seemed none. . . . *I could not imagine* a Russia without faith" (84, emphasis added). As this last sentence suggests, the quest gives way to self-reflexivity and the journey gives him the opportunity to interrogate his own imaginings.³¹⁷

I propose to argue that, when Thubron exposes the discrepancy between the Siberia he hopes to find and the Siberia he encounters, he tailors his narrative to a postmodern authenticity. This authenticity consists in registering the "scars of damage and disruption" of history (Jay 29) and in reflecting on the limits of the traveller's ability to understand otherness and translate it for his readers. In contradistinction to imperial narratives of Grand Tourists who "helped gather and centralise knowledge in the West" (Levin 3), *In Siberia* highlights the subjective and partial nature of the traveller's perception. Instead of reporting the knowledge he acquired, Thubron ultimately maps out the extent of his ignorance. *In Siberia* seems to fit within the literary context that Casey Blanton describes

³¹⁶ Peter Matthiessen's nephew Jeff Wheelwright explains that Matthiessen also looked for the mythical Sasquatch or yeti during his travels, which reinforces the impression that he pursues unattainable goals (74).

³¹⁷ Colin Thubron was well aware of the sometimes contrived character of the narrative form of the quest, as shown by one of his latest interviews with Tim Hannigan: "One of the big problems – not just the authorial problems – of a travel book is that . . . a reader wants a theme, in a way, or they want a sense of an objective, of a goal; they want to feel like they're going somewhere, not that they're just wandering about. However good a writer you may be – say Patrick Leigh Fermor – you still want a sense that there's some purpose, there's some object, I think. And that's led many travel writers into all sorts of convoluted things" (9).

in the following terms: “the most persistent characteristic of late-twentieth-century travel writing is the refusal of the authors to admit to knowing anything for sure” (95).

Nevertheless, *In Siberia* is not entirely turned towards a postmodern authenticity. It also relies on a more traditional conception of authenticity as the belief in the ability of the past to provide meaning. As Stacy Burton has stressed, Thubron, “better versed in geography and history than many among whom he travels, repeatedly juxtaposes an easy Western misreading that would produce romantic spectacle with the uncertain confusion of life on the ground” (112). Starting from this observation, I propose to determine how the traveller negotiates the tension between his nostalgia for a half-imagined past, and his acknowledgement of the fragmented nature of his present experience. This case study will give us the opportunity to scrutinise the narrative expressions of two types of authenticities. The first one is closely related to tradition and nostalgia and consists in ascribing high value to the past. This conception of authenticity has kinship with the Benjaminian notion that an item derives its authenticity from tradition and accumulated layers of duration (13). Walter Benjamin tailored this definition of authenticity for artworks, but I would like to suggest that it also applies to foreign countries and their cultures insofar as travel writers sometimes grant more authenticity to monuments and customs that they perceive to be traditional and deeply rooted in the past.

By contrast, the second type of authenticity found in Thubron’s text does not seek to recreate or retrieve a lost sense of wholeness that would be situated in the past. The way he engages with Russia shifts, as he acknowledges, the limits of the historical erudition and metanarratives³¹⁸ with which he was probing the land. The postmodern authenticity that underpins the text consists precisely in recognising that multiple versions of history coexist. Thubron abides by the postmodern principle that recommends that one acknowledges fragmentation. He draws attention to the coexistence of multiple local narratives that do not necessarily form a coherent whole that one could call the “core” of Russia (*In Siberia* 84).

*Nostalgic engagement with Siberian history*³¹⁹

When he travels to Siberia, Thubron steps into a devastated world, as I have shown in **Chapter 1**. Because the ruins conflict with his desire to retrieve what he calls “the essential Siberia” (*In Siberia* 137), he partly engages with the land in a nostalgic way, fantasising bygone splendour. For instance, disappointed by Krasnoyarsk, he asks “where, you wonder, is the town admired by Chekhov, the spacious city of gold merchants?” (109). This question is reminiscent of a problem Lévi-Strauss raises in *Tristes Tropiques* when he writes:

³¹⁸ Especially the belief in the progress, meaning and linearity of history.

³¹⁹ I have published a first version of the subsections that follow in an article titled “Echoes of the Past and Siberian Nature’s ‘Radical Otherness’: An Ecocritical Reading of Contemporary Travel Writing”, *Revue canadienne de littérature comparée/ Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 47.4, March 2021.

I should have liked to live in the age of *real* travel, when the spectacle on offer had not yet been blemished, contaminated, and confounded; then I could have seen Lahore not as I saw it, but as it appeared to Bernier, Tavernier, Manucci... There's no end, of course, to such conjectures. When was the right time to see India? At what period would the study of the Brazilian savage have yielded the purest satisfaction and the savage himself been at his peak? (Atheneum edition, 44; Plon editions, 44, emphasis original)³²⁰

Thubron does not go as far as raising this issue directly, as Lévi-Strauss did, but his text implicitly invites comparable reflections. It seems that for Thubron, the right time to see Siberia was in the past, which leads me to argue that his text is imbued with a sense of nostalgia. As Frederick Garber explains, nostalgia is based on a “*nostos*”, the desire to perform the “act of return” to “a point of origin, the place where we used to be” – a place that is, in fact, a fiction (444, 445). In his explorations, Thubron sometimes seems to presuppose the actual existence of a “point of origin” at which Siberia would have been “at its peak”, to borrow Garber’s (445) and Lévi-Strauss’s words (45/44). The traveller seems to be looking for sound origins on which to ground his Siberia: he skips the Soviet era and takes readers back to the Czarist Empire (7, 32), the conquests of the Cossacks (32, 205), and of Genghis Khan (79, 203), or even further back, to the time of semi-nomadic herdsmen (79), to the legends spun by Herodotus about the Scythians (86) and to the geological time of fossils. He also dedicates two pages to the mammoth in the Yakutsk Museum (256) and goes out of his way to visit the site of the *keurghans*, the “underground tomb-chambers” built in the Altai Mountains between the third and sixth centuries B.C. (86). In addition, his description of Lake Baikal takes readers away from present-day Russia and into the suspended time of “[s]ponges and primitive crustaceans [that] survive[d] almost unchanged” for millions of years (157), as I have noted in **Chapter 1**. Overall, he conveys the impression that the Soviet era was an apocalyptic anomaly at odds with Siberian history, the meaning of which is to be found in older times.

The descriptions of the cities point to the importance Thubron gives to this pre-Soviet past and suggest that his historical erudition is his primary mode of engagement with the land. When a new city appears in Thubron’s path, the reader must cross a historical threshold before being admitted into the city of the present day. For instance, before writing about the “[s]plendour and rusticity [that] still mingle in the street façades” of Irkutsk, Thubron goes back to its foundation in 1652, detailing the city’s history over two pages (162). His descriptions of Albazin, “[f]ounded by Cossack renegades” and then become “the spearhead of Russian colonisation on the lower Amur” (210), and of Khabarovsk, “founded in 1858 by the belligerent governor Muraviev-Amursky” (243), follow a similar pattern.

³²⁰ I quote two different editions and translations of *Tristes Tropiques* in this study, choosing each time the translation that conveys the idea of the original in the most faithful manner. It is worth noting that these translations differ greatly. The original reads: “Je voudrais avoir vécu au temps des *mais* voyages, quand s’offrait dans toute sa splendeur un spectacle non encore gâché, contaminé et maudit; n’avoir pas franchi cette enceinte moi-même, mais comme Bernier, Tavernier, Manucci... Une fois entamé, le jeu de conjectures n’a plus de fin. Quand fallait-il voir l’Inde, à quelle époque l’étude des sauvages brésiliens pouvait-elle apporter la satisfaction la plus pure, les faire connaître sous la forme la moins altérée?” (Plon editions 44, emphasis original).

We could interpret these halts at landmarks of pre-Soviet history as a “way of attempting to overcome the discontinuity of modernity, of incorporating its fragments into unified experience”, to borrow a remark Dean MacCannell made in a different context to describe the experience of tourists (13). As Thubron puts it himself, he “wanted some unity or shape to human diversity” and he was seeking some sense of “purpose” that could explain Siberian history (*In Siberia* 137, 47). The metanarrative of linear history can provide some comfort because it holds the promise that the devastation will eventually become part of a larger narrative of progress. Recounting pre-Soviet times can be read as a way for the traveller to reassert this larger narrative and thus assuage the fear of meaninglessness that comes from visiting the ruins of the Gulag.

The impression that nostalgia drives his quest is strengthened when Thubron seeks to find minor communities that thrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The conception of authenticity that underpins the nostalgic passages of *In Siberia* gives more value to cultural practices that are imagined as traditional and are extinct or nearly extinct at the time of his journey. Thubron, who claims he is looking for the new “faith” that animates the country (3), proves to be looking mostly for lost faiths. On this point, I beg to differ with Stacy Burton, for whom Thubron “reads hints of Islamist futures” and displays “curiosity about the future-in-the-making” (21, 88). It may be true of some of his other travelogues, but *In Siberia* contains very little talk of the future, and instead gives the impression that history has come to a halt. The Siberians he encounters do not “turn their backs on history, look to the future, and whistle a hopeful tune” (108), contrary to what Mark Rotella wrote in his review of the book. Or if they do “turn their backs on history” (108), it is in a different sense than that intended by Rotella. Their rejection of history is manifested by their refusal to commemorate the dead.

Thubron writes in what James Clifford has described as a nostalgic rhetoric that portrays authentic cultures as vanishing and sets out to redeem chosen aspects of their history (*Predicament* 13). For instance, Thubron looks for shamans, even though “[t]he death of shamanism, Siberia’s ancient and intrinsic faith, was announced decades ago” (*In Siberia* 99); he searches for Old Believers who “belonged in Russian folk-tale” (192) and for the Jewish community that settled in Birobidzhan in 1934, but who are “all gone”, their sacred scrolls stolen, their town “desert[ed]” (218).³²¹ In these moments, his narrative builds on the trope of fading authenticity that grants value to the most endangered populations and landscapes, the “beauty in decay” (Brennan 180). While all around him seems to be frozen in a decaying past, Thubron conveys the questionable impression that he is the only person in Russia who can escape this state of dereliction by moving on and carrying on with his journey.

His nostalgia is nonetheless more than simply the fantasy of bygone times or the plaintive expression of the “sense of belatedness” that pervades post-war travelogues (Cooke 23-24). His systematic historical contextualisation also appears to be a way to preserve the memory of the victims of the Gulag, lest they die a second death through oblivion. The preservation of the past seems to be a key concern of the book,

³²¹ Old Believers are “member[s] of a Russian Orthodox group which refused to accept the liturgical reforms of the patriarch Nikon (1605–81)” (*ODL*).

which starts with the bulldozed house of the Czar, who had “disappeared from history”, and whose memory is momentarily revived by Thubron’s words (8). Deficient memories affect the nation as much as individuals, as the traveller recounts meeting or hearing about Russians who suffer from memory loss after accidents (201), trauma (272) or due to old age (212). But above all, his frustration at the lack of redemptive commemoration is targeted at the Russians’ collective memory, as exemplified by remarks such as: “Why, I wondered, was there so little Russian outrage at the Gulag?” (153).

It seems that, in his view, for history to follow a linear progression, bloodshed must elicit a feeling of repulsion expressed in fits of anger. When the Russians do not echo back the anger and bewilderment that Thubron feels before the ruins and the horrors of the Gulag, their silence is worse than material devastation, because they are not loyal to what he sees as their responsibility to remember. He only moderately engages with the near impossibility of speaking out as a witness of horrors when one lives under a dictatorship. He seems to believe that it behoves him to compensate for this lack of remembrance and to give a voice to history and extricate from the rubbles of mines horrendous details of the convicts’ lives, as exemplified by the following passage: “This country of Kolyma was fed every year by sea with tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly innocent. . . . They died in miners’ tunnels from falling rocks and snapped lift cables, from ammonal fumes and silicosis, scurvy and high blood pressure, spitting up blood and lung tissue. In winter, . . . [they] were dead of pneumonia or meningitis within a month” (266).³²²

Accepting fragmentation by displacing it onto nature

In Siberia is not solely a nostalgic text. It also foregrounds the gradual process of acceptance Thubron goes through. The nostalgic authenticity that looks to the past gives way to a postmodern type of authenticity that consists in acknowledging the ruins and horrors that history leaves behind. In some of the passages describing nature, Russia is no longer overlaid with Thubron’s expectations. Rather, he seems to be facing and accepting the resistance of Russia’s otherness, and more particularly, of the incommensurable horror of its past.

The environment, both visibly impacted by Soviet history and undisturbed, mediates what Thubron perceives as the Russians’ indifference and allows him to register it, if not to accept it, by means of hypallage and pathetic fallacy.³²³ These figures seem to serve the

³²² The systematic incorporation of snippets of history could also be read as a way to uphold Thubron’s reputation as a journalist. Tim Youngs cites Thubron as an example when he remarks that “[m]uch contemporary travel writing has been written by journalists who have a deep investment in maintaining their credibility” (*The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* 6).

³²³ The term “pathetic fallacy” was first coined by John Ruskin as a derogatory way to indicate the deceptive transfer of human traits onto inanimate objects (Abrams 203) and it is now used to describe “the ascription of human traits to inanimate nature” (204). Thus, it alludes to a transfer with a specific direction: from the human to the nonhuman. Hypallage is also the result of a transfer, but in a broader sense and without a definite direction. It is defined as “a transposition of the natural relations of two elements in a proposition” (*ODL*). When hypallage occurs in combination with a personification, as is the case in Thubron’s text, it may be redefined as a transfer of a feeling, capacity, or trait from a human subject who is present in the enunciative situation onto a nonhuman element. When analysing a text, one may thus ask:

specific purpose of overcoming nostalgia and reconciling his expectations and preconceptions with Siberia's unexpected resistance to these expectations. For instance, the reader may draw parallels between the description of the plant life that has blossomed in a former camp that mined mica and the death of the convicts who once worked there:

[I] walked up valleys towards a ruined Stalinist labour-camp. The forest shed a *sunless quiet*. There was *no wind*. But *the falling* of the birch leaves sent up a *collective, near-silent murmur*. Their trees made golden *columns* against the mountains. Sometimes I pushed across a pulpy undergrowth of rotted trunks, whortleberries, blackened fungi, but emerged always into this *melancholy* descent of leaves – *millions of them* – drifting through the aisles of the forest. . . . [The] doors and windows [of the log barrack] made *ghostly* frames on the undergrowth. Sixty years of forest had turned this Gulag to an opera-set, *cruelly* idyllic. Its ruins spread tree-sown above the river. Hell had been landscaped. (151-152, emphasis added)

The “millions” of leaves can be read as Thubron's attempt to comprehend the dizzying numbers of the dead. These leaves shape an extended metaphor merging the dead and the landscape through pathetic fallacy. The leaves fall, like the dead; the trees form columns, like the convicts brought to the camps; and the “collective, near-silent murmur” could be that of the ghosts that haunt Thubron's journey. The silence, the absence of sun, sound and wind, and the description of the paths in the forest as “aisles” may remind us of the aisles of a church or the path between rows of gravestones in a cemetery. The escape that Thubron sought in lyrical descriptions of nature meets a dead end as this bucolic place is built on “Hell”. Thubron resents the indifference, the silence, the beauty of the place, as shown by the personification of nature, which is described as cruel according to a pathetic fallacy that is also an oxymoron – “cruelly idyllic”. Thubron's emotions also show through the descent of leaves, which, by means of a hypallage that transfers Thubron's melancholic feeling onto the land, becomes “melancholy”.

Such reconciliations through personification create an aesthetic continuum encompassing Thubron's cultural expectations (a commemoration of the dead) and the land's otherness (the apparent indifference of the Russians and the “cruel” natural beauty that covers mass graves), which must however be nuanced. Contemplating the scenery sometimes brings him back to the indifference and hopelessness he sought to flee, without alleviating these bleak emotions as in the following example:

As we breasted the frontier pass the rain turned to sleet. Then, as if winter had come suddenly, in the first days of autumn, the sky was thick with snow. It fell incongruously, like manna. It . . . gusted across the road in small, *angry* flakes. On one side of us the cliffs threw down *icy* waterfalls, on the other the road *dropped into space*. Then we were over the pass and descending *cold-lit* foothills. We seemed to be entering *a deeper wilderness*. Above the gleam of bronze and amber undergrowth, the pine forests were *dying*. Still wrapped in killer moss, the trees *fell* all of a piece, their roots wrenched up like old cog-wheels, and spread a *ghostly* litter over the hills. (97, emphasis added)

is nature ‘sick’ because the narrator/a character in the passage is sick (hypallage), or is nature sick because the narrator ascribes human ‘sickness’ to it (pathetic fallacy)?

At first, the depiction of the snow falling “like manna” seems to provide relief from the forsaken state of Shushenskoe, the town that Thubron has just visited. Yet as the bus follows its route, the landscape appears “angry”, “icy” and “cold-lit”. We can sense a resistance to escapism in this description, which functions neither as a relief from the dereliction of the land, nor as a link between its beauty, Thubron’s anger and the horrors of the Gulag. Rather, Thubron seems to enter a disquieting and “deeper wilderness”, which is continuous with the decay of Shushenskoe. The authentic relation to Siberian nature and history that Thubron foregrounds does not only consist in escaping into a pre-Soviet past he imagines to be more authentic, it also consists in facing, processing and representing the present-day damage that the grimmest parts of this history have left.

Acknowledging the unknowability of the other

Contrary to what Gayle Feldman has written in her review of *In Siberia*, I do not myself think that Thubron eventually “find[s] some unity or shape to human destiny” (66). On the contrary, his travelogue stages the erosion of the metanarrative of linear history that initially seems to guide him. According to Simon Malpas (43), abandoning the metanarrative of historical progress is one of the key characteristics of postmodernism, and we can thus say that Thubron’s travelogue acquires a postmodern dimension when he begins to acknowledge that the passing of time can no longer be equated with “progress”. The travel writer also gives up univocal narratorial authority by giving space for the stories of survivors of the Gulag camps and their descendants. The concept of a unique (hi)story (his own), that he learnt second-hand prior to his journey, gives way to other competing stories told by the Russians he meets. To borrow the words Iain Chambers uses when he develops his postmodern concept of migrancy, in *In Siberia*, “History gives way to histories” (5).

Thubron goes beyond his nostalgia for an imagined past by showing that Siberian history can be approached from a multiplicity of viewpoints, some of which conflict with his expectations. In other words, he eventually recognises that there is no original Siberian “core” to go back to (*In Siberia* 84). The local narratives he incorporates in his text can be seen as the expression of postmodernism, which postulates that “nothing can be known for sure and anything which is known can be known in a different way”, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it (6).

I agree with Ken Kalfus when he writes that “Thubron’s history is never didactic or potted” (13). Rather, it is fraught with unresolved tensions. According to Casey Blanton, such tensions are typically found in the texts of “post-Viet Nam travel writers” who “ultimately acknowledge the impossible task of gathering self and world into what ethnologist James Clifford calls ‘a stable narrative coherence’” (26-27).³²⁴ We could also point out that, like the writers that Blanton analyses, Thubron exhibits “self-reflexivity”

³²⁴ Casey Blanton quotes James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard UP, 1988, 173.

and “expose[s] the arbitrariness of truth” by nuancing his understanding of history with the understandings of others (26-27).

For instance, in a stand-alone subchapter of six pages, Thubron lets an unnamed camp survivor tell her own story, although he strongly disagrees with her. She has remained a member of the Communist Party, and she insists that he should write about “the good things, the everyday things” that formed part of the convicts’ lives (*In Siberia* 47). Her words offer a counter-narrative in which “[t]he Party was not guilty” and the convicts “smiled a little, danced and sang a little. Because people must live in hope” (47). The technique Thubron adopts in his travelogue could be compared to the strategies that Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich implements in her polyphonic narrative on the disintegration of the Soviet Union, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (*Время секонд хэнд*, 2013).

Thubron’s viewpoint is entirely opposed to the camp survivor’s, as we can see with the historical snippets and personal thoughts he inserts in between her sentences. These snippets darken her narrative, such as when he writes: “The female politicals, the ‘roses’, were tormented by the criminal ‘violets’, some of whom were slightly insane” (45). As a result, the passage conveys the impression that Thubron sometimes tries to draw her understanding of history (‘the convicts sang’) closer to his own (‘they mostly suffered’). Thubron’s nostalgia for pre-Soviet times influences his description of this survivor as he tries to imagine the youthful looks that she previously had, yet he still acknowledges the horrors of the Gulag when he describes her husky features as the result of hard labour in the camp.³²⁵

Thubron sometimes goes so far as to question his own assumptions, as well as his legitimacy as scribe and judge of Siberian history, as illustrated by a passage in which he listens to the witness account of Agripina Doroskova.³²⁶ A former schoolteacher, she still has the red star on her gate and refuses to “indict Stalin”, claiming: “Sixty million dead! Now the archives are opening, you’ll find the numbers are less, far less than he [Solzhenitsyn] says. . . .” (212, 213). Thubron’s viewpoint differs starkly from hers, which he nevertheless still views as legitimate: “I frown at her, and don’t answer. I have not inhabited these horrors as she has. It is those who have inhabited them who may measure, mitigate, even excuse them. Twenty million dead, to Agripina Doroskova, is far more forgivable than sixty million. To me both figures bulge towards the unimaginable” (213).

Thubron appears far from the imperial travellers who once contributed to the “European knowledge-making apparatuses [that] . . . constru[ed] the planet” (Pratt 29).³²⁷

³²⁵ As a general rule, Thubron gives the speech of his addressees in direct quotations, and his own responses in indirect speech, hinting that he did not share his thoughts with them at the time. This discrepancy limits the sense of reciprocity in his text. Choosing indirect speech for his own thoughts could indicate that Thubron expects more understanding from his English-speaking readers than he did from his Russian addressees. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a journalistic strategy designed to give more space to them, as suggested by the following remark Thubron makes in *Among the Russians*: “Ever since crossing the Polish border I had privately resolved not to argue, but to listen” (187). Nevertheless, such passages also suggest that the traveller does not expose his viewpoint to the criticism of his addressees.

³²⁶ We can suspect her to be no other than the anonymous camp survivor that I have mentioned above, considering that they are the exact same age – eighty-seven.

³²⁷ From Thubron’s interview with Tim Hannigan, we learn that Mary Louise Pratt is one of the critics of travel writing that Colin Thubron is familiar with (§10).

By contrast, he foregrounds the limits of his knowledge by sometimes framing his assumptions with statements such as “I say, not knowing” (*In Siberia* 277), “I never knew” (*Among the Russians* 104), or “I felt light-years from knowing” (241) and “[t]hat’s impossible’, I said, not knowing” (102). Tim Hannigan explains that for Thubron, “[t]he old, informational approach of a writer going off into the wilds and bringing back knowledge of places quite unknown to his readership – the approach most likely to raise the ire of hostile scholars, with its obvious colonial parallels – *was* likely to fade away” (14, emphasis original). *In Siberia* shows a different approach that consists in first probing the land with historical erudition, and then questioning this erudition and mapping out its limits.

By giving his text a polyphonic character and interrogating his own assumptions, Thubron addresses the question of reciprocity that is crucial for the ethics of postmodern travel writing. The last page of *In Siberia* offers what is perhaps the most telling example of the way he represents the disharmony between his understanding of history and the Russians’. Walking in the ruins of the uranium mine of Butugychag with Yuri, a young geologist whose grandfather slaved in the camps, Thubron struggles to comprehend the past horror. He tries to re-establish the pre-eminence of linear history when he writes: “I say, not knowing: ‘You’ll never go back to that’” – to which Yuri replies: “We’re not the same as you in the West. . . . With us, time still goes in circles” (*In Siberia* 277). Thubron then recoils and summons up Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to emphasise his lack of understanding: “I don’t want to hear this, not here in the heart of darkness. I want him to call this place an atrocious mystery. I want him not to understand it” (277).

On the one hand, summoning up *Heart of Darkness* implicitly puts Thubron in the authoritative position of Marlowe, guide and narrator, who witnessed the horrors of colonisation but remained sane. On the other hand, Thubron includes versions of history that compete with his own, which mitigates his authoritative stance. Choosing the terms “I want” instead of ‘they should’, Thubron appears aware that his interpretation of Russia is subjective and relative. This turn of phrase re-appears throughout the book, for instance when he writes: “I want her [Agripina Doroskova] to be angry”, “I wanted that tormented earth quietened, the past acknowledged and shriven”, “I wanted them to have faith” and “I wanted unity” (45, 54, 93, 137). In an interview with Susan Bassnett, Thubron explains that he sees the knowledge acquired during travel as subjective and relative: “Somebody *else* doing precisely the same journey may have encountered an utterly different reality, whatever we mean by this word reality. . . . All the baggage that you take with you, . . . your historical knowledge . . . is unique to you, *so* it’s absurd to think that you’re really being objective” (152, emphasis original). Thubron is well aware of his own bias, and we could interpret his decision to include the voices of others as a way to correct this bias.

The limitations of his understanding are particularly clear when he invokes the Conradian intertext. The reference to *Heart of Darkness* shows that the Russians remain “opaque” to him in the sense that Édouard Glissant has given the term, that is to say, they “subsis[t] within an irreducible singularity”, which is free of “hierarchy” and

“reduction” (Glissant 190/204).³²⁸ At the end of his Siberian journey, the traveller is liberated from the “old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures” (190/204).³²⁹ “The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths”, Glissant writes, and it precludes “the preconceived transparency of universal models” (192/206-207), and thus seems particularly suited to describing Thubron’s narrative choices, as they preserve the “opacity” of others.³³⁰

Thubron tries to understand the Russian approach to history, but he also admits the limits of his endeavour, and he hardly ever simplifies the Russians’ understanding of history to make it more palatable to him. In an interview with Tim Hannigan, he explains that he envisions travel writing as “an attempt at understanding, and empathy” (14). He correlates the self-effacement of the traveller-narrator in his texts with “an intense concentration . . . in trying to understand people, trying to make that contact, that breakthrough to the other” (8). When he incorporates foreign voices that dissent with his own and that he does not understand, we could say that he foregrounds this “*attempt* at understanding” (14, emphasis added). He generally does not try to level up the differences between his interpretation of history and the Russians’ – or when he does, he also presents this approach as inadequate.

Overall, *In Siberia* seems partly underpinned by a postmodern conception of authenticity, as Thubron acknowledges the limits of his understanding and does not try to end his narrative by claiming that he has acquired sound knowledge about the travelleses.³³¹ This travelogue suggests strategies in line with postmodern aesthetics that preserve the “opacity” of others (Glissant 193), give space to the vision they have of their own history, and interrogate the limits of the traveller’s authority.

Conclusion

I have argued that a postmodern conception of authenticity underpins the travelogues in which travellers reflect on the limits of the literary medium and on the limits of their own understanding. I contended that in the postmodern era, self-reflexive travel writers had to find answers to a set of issues that includes averting false claims of originality when writing in a well-trodden literary field, refashioning conventional narrative structures that may no longer be suitable to translating travel writers’ experiences into text, and preserving the complexity of the foreign reality they encounter. Focusing on Tesson’s

³²⁸ “[L]a substance dans une singularité non réductible”, “sans hiérarchiser”, “commuer toute réduction” (Glissant 204).

³²⁹ “Renoncer, pour un temps peut-être, à cette vieille hantise de surprendre le fond des natures” (ibid., 204).

³³⁰ “La pensée de l’opacité me distrait des vérités absolues” (ibid., 206), “la transparence préconçue de modèles universels” (207).

³³¹ The “travellee” “refers to a person who is travelled to or indeed over, a passive rather than active entity, observed rather than observing. For Mary Louise Pratt, who coined the term, ‘travellee’ is analogous with ‘addressee’ or ‘narratee’, and refers to ‘receptors of travel’. As with other binaries found in critical theory, that of traveller/travellee illuminates systemic forms of authority and agency” (Smethurst, “Traveller/Travellee” 269).

and Thubron's travelogues, I have shown that they find postmodern answers to these postmodern concerns.

Tesson builds *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges* on intertextual foundations that he undermines and that enable him to create a triple effect of authenticity: he legitimises his texts and averts false claims of originality by linking them to past intertexts (especially Thoreau's *Walden* and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*) and he evidences the originality of his travelogues by taking a humorous stance to these intertexts. The strong presence of these intertexts in *Consolations of the Forest* also draws attention to the literary nature of the text, to the limits of the literary medium, and to the influence that travellers' inner libraries can have on their experiences and on their texts.

As I highlighted in the general introduction of this study, travelogues are located at the confluence of nonfiction and the novelistic. Travel writers have to both turn their journeys into stories and translate the fragmentation and disorderly nature of their experience without flattening it out. The conflict that sometimes arises between these two requirements is manifested in the corpus under study when the travellers undermine the quest and the transformational arc that are conventionally used to shape travel writings. For instance, on the one hand Tesson sketches a "voyage and return" plot pattern to frame his journey to Siberia and prefaces it with the promise of a transformational arc (Booker 5), yet he undermines the plot and leaves the promise unfulfilled. On the other hand, Tesson, Matthiessen and Thubron do not complete their quests, the very objects of which are so elusive that we might wonder whether these quests were ever meant to be completed.

Their deficient quests can be seen as postmodern, insofar as they introduce a metatextual dimension in their travelogues by pointing out the artistic work of travel writers, who reshape their experiences into stories. The travellers I have studied draw attention to the limits of basic plot patterns, which may no longer be suited to describe travel experiences perceived as too fragmented, open-ended or equivocal to fit this type of narrative.

The incomplete quest of Thubron's *In Siberia* also deconstructs the expectation that the country visited and the culture encountered should make more sense at the end of the journey. Thubron foregrounds the tension between his nostalgic vision of pre-Soviet Siberia and the unexpected reality he encounters there. Instead of trying to resolve this tension, he includes it in the text by incorporating the viewpoints of local people that conflict with his own. He also points out the limits of his understanding of Siberian otherness and interrogates the legitimacy of his position as a traveller passing through a country and trying to pin down its identity. In other words, he constructs his text on a postmodern conception of authenticity that consists in acknowledging the limits of the traveller's ability to circumscribe the reality he encounters.

CONCLUSION TO PART I

These five chapters have shown that age-old conceptions of authenticity with problematic undertones endure but compete with other authenticities closely linked to the postmodern shift. The travelogues of Sara Wheeler, Sylvain Tesson, Peter Matthiessen and, to a certain extent, Colin Thubron convey the impression that the authenticity of one's experience in nature is conditioned by nature's wildness and emptiness. I have shown that technological civilisation, daily responsibilities, tourism, poverty and ruins that bear witness to the horrors of history were generally represented as obstacles to their authentic experience of nature, or as undesired elements that they fled in order to enter a natural environment akin to a sanctuary. We have seen that, for them as for the Transcendentalists before them, wilderness possesses the ability to return the self to its authentic being, relying on the questionable belief that a core self exists beneath a superficial social self.

I have argued that their Rousseauist rejection of civilisation and the fatalistic "toxic discourse" at work in their texts were ethically problematic (Buell, *Writing* 30), because they denied human embeddedness in nature and thus repudiated human agency against eco-catastrophes. I have sought to put this "toxic discourse" into perspective by comparing it with various other ways of portraying nature, exemplified for instance by Gary Snyder's "back porch" wilderness (11), Georges Perec's "endotic" (210), Scott Slovic's committed retreat (15) and Michael Cronin's "vertical travel" (19).

I have defended the idea that Wheeler, Matthiessen and Tesson re-enacted and reinterpreted some principles found in American Transcendentalism, and above all the idea that the most authentic relation one could have to nature was contemplative and epiphanic. In their texts, nature is seen as a sacred place, and the epiphanies it enables channel a kind of spirituality that is perceived as unquestionable and authentic by the travellers, which may be explained by the theological origins of the concept of authenticity that Charles Lindholm and Walter Benjamin have highlighted. The travellers locate authenticity in dazzling epiphanies, which they attempt to represent by staying at the margins of language through physical exertion and encounters with animals and by using metaphors and haikus. I have shown that the notions of the child and the animal epitomised the direct access to the world that some of the travellers of my chosen corpus wished to emulate. Tesson and Matthiessen in particular strive to pay attention to the small and unremarkable animals, plants and minerals around them. They attempt to increase their awareness of their immediate surrounding by actively seeking "the miraculous in the common", as Emerson put it (*Nature* 45). In Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest*, this education of the eye translates into mock epics that amplify small creatures by means of poetic and sophisticated figurative language, whereas in Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, the writer strikes lyrical sparks from the common and the everyday by using paratactic syntax and unadorned vocabulary.

I have explained that the conceptions of authenticity that underpinned natural descriptions in Wheeler's and Matthiessen's texts could also be connected to their faiths. Wheeler sees the work of a "higher power" in the beauty of nature (*Terra* 94), and for Matthiessen, whose travels are guided by Zen beliefs, an authentic relation to nature

requires that one forego the interpretive and reasoning intellect, which we can see in *The Snow Leopard* through the efforts he makes to relegate the “I” to the background.

My investigation of the travellers’ spiritual epiphanies has led me to conclude that a sense of immediacy was key to their conception of authenticity. This emphasis on immediacy could perhaps be seen as an attempt to “perceive” the land afresh, and as a statement of their difference from tourists, considering that “tourists have been criticized for failing, somehow, to see the sights they visit, exchanging *perception* for mere *recognition*” (MacCannell 121, emphasis original). This search for a sense of immediacy explains why Tesson and Matthiessen shun the mediation of technology, of the inner library (Tesson) and even of the reasoning mind (Matthiessen).

Instead, they welcome physical exhaustion and the mediation of the senses. Tesson praises what Kathleen Adams has called the “visceral authenticity” of the body (Adams qtd. in Huggan 189),³³² and Matthiessen contrasts this authenticity with excessive self-consciousness, doubts and worries. Physical strain and danger help them increase their attention to the present and create the conditions conducive to experiencing a feeling of immediacy. Then, when it comes to recreating an effect of immediacy in their texts, to give the readers some guarantees that their experience in the wilderness was authentic, the travel writers I study rely on various generic and literary forms, such as the diary and the haiku. Their shifting between these forms could perhaps be explained by the difficulty they face when attempting to stay in contact with the authenticity of their immediate experience during the journey.

Tesson and Matthiessen convey the impression that physical exhaustion and risky situations guarantee the authenticity of their journey and grant them access to a more authentic relation to nature and to themselves. They praise and seek to emulate the archetype of the wild man by overcoming physical hardships and playing at being self-sufficient. They also questionably project this archetype onto the local people they meet, who are described as wilder (and thus more authentic) than the urbanite traveller, and who act as models of authentic life in the wild. The emphasis the travellers place on danger and on the body suggests that their travelogues are underpinned by the “authenticities of endurance” and “endangerment” that Graham Huggan discusses in *Extreme Pursuits* (178). If we try to put their focus on physical strain into perspective and replace it in the context of the travel-writing genre, we can approach it as an inheritance of pilgrims’ accounts of self-transformation, masculine narratives of conquest, and rites of passage opposing a male explorer to the wilderness. In addition, when Tesson and Matthiessen court danger and stress their efforts and discomforts, they also revive the conventional disdain for tourists.

In their attempt to blend into nature better, Tesson and Matthiessen portray themselves as metamorphosing into plants and animals. The extended metaphors that integrate them into the landscape give evidence that they see an authentic relation to nature as immersive, transformative and above all non-anthropocentric. I analysed examples of Matthiessen’s “becoming” leopard, sheep and prey, and of Tesson’s “becoming” tree and fish. The former blends with his environment by coming into close

³³² Graham Huggan quotes Kathleen Adams, “Danger-Zone Tourism: Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times”, *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Peggy Teo, et al., 2001, 265-80, 275.

contact with the sheep, observing and imitating their behaviour, as well as the leopard's. The latter metaphorically "becomes" a fish and a tree by close proximity with the forest and the lake. Through these "becomings", and especially when they fantasise the reciprocal gaze that unseen wild animals cast them, the travellers fulfil their wish to return to nature. Examining *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard* in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's chapter "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" (*A Thousand Plateaus*), has revealed the wider ethical implications of these metaphors: these travellers cast aside the notion that human beings stand outside and above nature. Instead, their texts suggest that one can learn from animals, and that it is desirable to be transformed by close contact with nature.

If we look at the ground covered in this investigation, we can see that in the corpus authenticity is closely linked to a nostalgia for an often fantasised and allegedly decaying past. On the one hand, Wheeler, Tesson and Matthiessen brush aside technology and/or urban life to dream up the return to unadulterated nature, which possesses, in their texts, the ability to return them to their authentic self. On the other hand, Thubron blends historical facts and legends to recreate a pre-Soviet Siberia in order to both explain an ungraspable post-Soviet Russia and to compensate for his inability to find the authentic core of the country – what he calls "Siberia's essence" (*In Siberia* 137).

However, despite this nostalgia for an imagined past, and despite the desire for an unmediated experience that some of these travellers seek in epiphanies and physical exhaustion, we can also notice that they sometimes reflect on their own preconceptions, and thus paradoxically acknowledge that their experience is necessarily mediated by the books they have read and the preconceptions they have developed about the country they explore. For instance, Tesson foregrounds, builds on and subverts the authority of previous intertexts such as Thoreau's *Walden* and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, while Thubron exposes the limits of his historical erudition, which he attempts to use as an epistemological tool, but which eventually falls short of explaining the horrors of the Gulag.

It is my contention that postmodern aesthetics spur these writers to reflect openly on the construction of their texts and on the limits they reach while trying to describe reality. This self-reflexive tendency alters the notion of the authentic, initially defined as something that possesses an unquestionable "authority" that was conferred upon it by a person who had the legitimacy to do so.³³³ Thus, I interpret Tesson's parodic rewritings of canonical texts and Thubron's questioning of his own legitimacy as challenges to the authenticating authority of the author. They willingly jeopardize their own authority by mocking their predecessors and themselves (Tesson), and by mapping out the limits of their ignorance rather than the amount of the knowledge they acquired (Thubron).

Their texts display postmodern authenticity by acknowledging the multiplicity of voices that emerge from the intertexts on which they write (Tesson) and from listening to the dissenting voices of the local people (Thubron). They thus show that neither their text nor their experience is 'self-defining' – that is to say 'authentic' according to the traditional definition of the word.³³⁴ Simultaneously, they meet the standards that

³³³ See the definition of 'authenticity' in the French dictionaries *Litttré, Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* and *Le Trésor de la Langue Française*.

³³⁴ See the "Etymology" section of the **General introduction** to this thesis.

postmodernism set for authenticity: self-reflexivity, open-endedness, the questioning of conventional plot patterns and of the metanarrative of linear history, and the acknowledgement of the limits of the literary medium. For instance, the deficient transformational arc of Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* invites readers to wonder whether this kind of plot pattern is still suited to describing the experience of a traveller. In a comparable manner, Thubron undermines the expectation that travel will bring about an increase in knowledge and refuses to subsume unexpected sights and discourses under his sole authorial perspective. Because their texts accommodate fragmentation and difference, they escape the general criticism that Debbie Lisle addresses to contemporary travel literature.

For Lisle, when contemporary travel writers are confronted with the “heterotopia” of their destination, that is to say, with something that resists the utopian image they seek, they often fail to question the filters and assumptions through which they perceive these foreign lands (195). She condemns the impulse of these writers³³⁵ to “re-territorialise” foreign countries – in other words, their attempts to reframe small resistances and subsume them under the control of their fantasies (195). However, texts like Tesson's and Thubron's do not fit her binary classification of travel writing, as they neither “recal[.] the assurances of empire” (3) nor seek to “embrac[e] the emancipatory possibilities created by an interconnected ‘global village’” (4). On the contrary, they question their own authority and ask the questions that Lisle hoped travel writers would ask: Tesson does use parody and intertextuality to engage with the question “[w]hat, indeed, is the point of yet *another* journey . . .?”, and Thubron does wonder: “What right have I to speak for others?” (Lisle 269).

³³⁵ Debbie Lisle directs her criticism at Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer and Bruce Chatwin, among others.

PART II

AUTHENTICITY

IN

THE TRAVELOGUES OF SEMIOTICIANS

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

Up to this point, I have explored five travel narratives that depicted authentic travel and authentic relations to nature as residing in the wilderness, provided that it was unadulterated and peopled only by animals that could guide the travellers to an epiphanic state of osmosis with nature. I have also established that, aided with intertextuality and self-reflexivity, some of these travellers attempted to find ways to write about their travel experiences in a postmodern context in which traditional notions of authenticity – such as the authority of the author and the originality of the text – are questioned.

However, studying these journeys to natural locations cannot account for other types of authenticities that persist or emerge in travelogues centred on locations marked by consumer culture and the dissemination of media images. To gain a broader understanding of the concept of authenticity in contemporary travel literature, it is also necessary to analyse the forms it takes in travel writings that focus on artistic practices and foreign cultures – not just nature.

I have previously argued that some travellers who journeyed to natural places looked for unmediated experiences, which they deemed more authentic (**Chapter 2-3**). Yet, paradoxically, influenced by a postmodern context, they also acknowledged the mediation of the literary medium and reflected on its limits (**Chapter 5**). Pursuing my inquiry into postmodern self-reflexivity in travel texts, I will now turn to travellers who interrogate more directly the mediation of signs (including words and artistic representations).

For this purpose, I have selected the essay-like travel books of three semioticians and cultural critics who reflected on American and Japanese cultures: *Empire of Signs* (*L'empire des signes*, 1970), which stages Roland Barthes's ecstatic immersion in Japan's exoticism; *America* (*Amérique*, 1986), by Jean Baudrillard, who explores American artificiality; and "Travels in Hyperreality" ("Nel cuore dell'impero: viaggio nell'iperrealtà", 1975), in which Umberto Eco visits American theme parks and kitsch collections. Michel Butor's *Mobile* (1962) and Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988) will also be studied in support of my arguments.

As with the previous travelogues I investigated in the first part of this project, I will focus on what the writers explicitly or implicitly present as authentic (specifically in relation to signs), I will make hypotheses regarding the genesis of their conceptions of authenticity, and I will show how these conceptions can be questioned.

The shift of focus of this semiological corpus – away from natural environments and towards systems of signs and objects of culture and consumption – requires a different angle of approach. In addition, the formal characteristics of Eco's, Barthes's and Baudrillard's texts demand that the method of analysis be readapted to study not only the style and rhetoric they use but also the arguments they defend. As I shall show in more depth in the next three chapters, their travelogues have more in common formally with the genre of the philosophical essay than with the travel-writing genre. These texts hinge on a central proposition or argument that their authors made in the theoretical works they published earlier. They explore and defend this central argument through their

descriptions of the countries they visit. In Barthes's and Baudrillard's travelogues especially, the style, rhetoric and composition indirectly support these arguments.

To understand these travel essays better, one needs to look at them through the lens of Eco's, Barthes's and Baudrillard's respective theories in cultural criticism, literature and semiotics, because, as David Scott aptly stressed, "fundamental issues relating to semiotics that underlie their writings in general take a particular turn in their travel texts, in which they are made more explicit or defined in a more memorably graphic way" (15). Scott makes this remark about Barthes and Baudrillard, but the same could be said about Eco.

We can therefore better understand where the abstract impressions conveyed by their travel texts come from, and why these texts have seldom been studied as travel literature: it is because they are, in fact, semi-theoretical essays. Instead of describing the United States and Japan, they discuss semiotic issues by superimposing them upon these two countries. The issues they discuss revolve around aesthetics, language, and more specifically, *mimesis*, understood as the "representation or imitation of the real world in art and literature" (*ODL*), and *semiosis*, that is, the way meaning is created, communicated and received through systems of signs. To study the authenticity that these texts reflect on, we first need to redefine it as referentiality, that is to say, the ability of signs (objects or words) to refer to reality.³³⁶

My goal is twofold. First, I aim to determine the conditions required, according to Eco, for an artistic reproduction (a painting or a statue) to be considered authentic in a hyperreal context. In **Chapter 6**, I will argue that Eco deconstructs the basis on which hyperreal art attempts to build its own authenticity. He highlights the inauthenticity of this art by criticising the attempts of exhibition curators to evoke a sense of authenticity by accumulating signs of the past and by claiming that their reproductions achieve a perfect visual resemblance to the originals. For Eco, these art collections mostly evoke the material accumulation of consumer society. I shall also draw attention to the ambivalent position Eco adopts with regard to auratic art, as he sometimes mocks the originals, and sometimes seems to endorse the idea that they are sacred. Investigating Eco's text will give me the opportunity to define the concept of 'hyperreality', and to point out the influence that his cultural bias may have on his conceptions of authenticity. In **Chapter 7**, I will pay particular attention to the role that interpretive distance plays in the production of authenticity according to Eco. I will demonstrate that Eco is particularly critical of hyperreal places that curtail the visitors' interpretive freedom and I will show that he denounces the totalitarian nature of hyperreality that Baudrillard also

³³⁶ I use the word "referent" as a metatextual tool to analyse Eco's, Baudrillard's, and Barthes's texts, even though it was not part of Eco's theoretical apparatus. In **Chapter 6** and **7**, I employ it to designate the original art pieces and models to which the hyperreal artworks and collections refer, as well as the notions they sometimes seek to evoke (for instance, 'the past'). In **Chapter 8**, I will use "referent" to speak about the extra-textual countries to which Barthes and Baudrillard travelled – Japan and the United States.

theorised.³³⁷ Art that shows its artificial nature is portrayed by Eco as more authentic than art that tries to hide it, because it restores an interpretative distance between the original artwork and its reproduction. When enough distance is restored between the two, Eco suggests that it is even possible to view simulacra as authentic.³³⁸ This distance can be restored by curators in the way they display hyperreal art, and it can also be restored by visitors who interpret this art in a critical manner, as he does himself by means of irony, parody and “aberrant decoding” of the artworks (Eco qtd. in Munteanu 230).³³⁹ Lastly, taking Pico Iyer’s *Video Night in Kathmandu* as a case study, I will propose that the reflections Eco invites on simulacra can be used as tools to explore the representation of transcultural simulacra in other travel texts.

My second goal is to investigate extreme examples of words detached from their referents in the abstract Japan and United States that Barthes and Baudrillard seek to create in *Empire of Signs* and *America* respectively. I shall show that Barthes and Baudrillard reflect on the (in)ability of linguistic signs to refer authentically to extra-textual experiences. In **Chapter 8**, in the light of such theoretical writings as Barthes’s *New Critical Essays* (*Nouveaux essais critiques*, 1953) and Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (*Simulacres et Simulation*, 1981), I will analyse *Empire of Signs* and *America* and question the liberation of the travel book from the reference to the country travelled. If in postmodern times authenticity means that art should openly claim its representational nature, it seems that for Barthes and Baudrillard in particular it entails that literature should not even attempt to represent life, which is, in any case, unrepresentable. They suggest that literature should rather construct abstract literary worlds that exist in parallel to reality. Through close readings of their texts, I shall first analyse the way they convey the impression that their concepts of Japan and America do not refer to actual countries. I shall then show that their attempts at building non-referential literary countries are jeopardised by the exoticism that marks their texts.

³³⁷ As we shall see, the curators and managers of hyperreal museums and theme parks design these places in a way that is deceptive insofar as they wish the signs (fakes) they create to be taken as the real things (Eco, “Travels” 7). They revive the utopia of a world in which signs and objects are unquestionably (rather than arbitrarily) linked. The side-effect of their attempt is that there is little space left for multiple interpretations of signs. A parallel can be drawn between these hyperreal destinations and the primitive civilisations that allegedly possessed a communication system based on the sacred link between the words and the things they referred to. For Baudrillard, these civilisations exerted a fierce control on the way signs were interpreted. The utopia of the sacred connection between signs and things was thus correlated to an extreme dystopian control by authorities over the way signs were used. See Scott 25, who bases his analysis on Baudrillard’s *L’échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, 1976, 78.

³³⁸ A simulacrum is the reproduction of an artwork that is twice removed from the real model.

³³⁹ According to Cristinel Munteanu, Eco coined the expression “aberrant decoding” in an essay he first wrote in Italian in 1965, which was later translated as “Towards a semiotic inquiry into the TV message”, and published in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, University of Birmingham, n. 3, 1972, 103-21. I shall define this term in more detail in **Chapter 7**.

CHAPTER 6

The Inauthenticity of Hyperreal Art Collections in Umberto Eco's America

Introduction

In this chapter and the next, I shall study the conceptions of authenticity that Umberto Eco implicitly and explicitly endorses in “Travels in Hyperreality” in relation to the art that he encounters during his journey in the United States.³⁴⁰ I will first examine what he considers to be inauthentic in hyperreal museums and art collections, before moving on, in the next chapter, to what he considers to be authentic in relation to the production, display and reception of hyperreal art.

Because of the essayistic and argumentative form of Eco's text, the types of analyses that I will present in this chapter and the next will differ from those I apply to the corpus of texts discussed in **Chapters 1-5** and **8**. “Travels in Hyperreality” is a rather short essay in cultural criticism, exploring American hyperreal art as a pop culture phenomenon. Eco proceeds by means of examples, describing and mocking garish hyperreal art collections, wax museums, theme parks and zoos, and occasionally drawing on pop culture (films and comics). His essay is journalistic in style, argumentative and inquisitive in form, as he raises questions about our conception of the hyperreal as well as authentic art. Therefore, I shall emphasise his arguments and the questions he raises in relation to art rather than the formal and stylistic features of his text, which I shall only comment on occasionally, for instance by interpreting the effects he creates with lists and the purpose that his mocking tone serves. The cultural gap between Eco and his destination plays an important role in the way he describes it, as in other travel texts, and it also has a bearing on his conception of authenticity. Nevertheless there will be little occasion to study his text in the light of theories on the travel-writing genre, because, as Terry Caesar points out, Eco “scarcely mentions whether he drives or flies . . . At times it seems he hasn't moved at all” (§9). Even though Eco's essay does not meet the criteria of conventional travel writing, I have chosen to include it in this study because Eco explicitly addresses a wide range of issues linked to authenticity, such as the value placed on tradition and the spiritual fulfilment that authentic items are expected to provide. In addition, he addresses these issues with the cultural distance and inquisitiveness of a traveller who has journeyed to a very unfamiliar country, whose signs he attempts to interpret.

Eco also endorses the postmodern conception of authenticity that I identified in other travelogues and analysed in **Chapter 5**, and thus gives us an opportunity to explore it further. Finally, he engages actively with the concept of simulacra and the way we perceive them. Reflecting on this concept is key if one wants to understand and question the

³⁴⁰ Parts of **Chapter 6** and **Chapter 7** have been previously published in a book chapter titled “I Object to Your Position: Hyperreal Decontextualizing of Objects”, in *Context in Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Jakob Ladegaard and Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen, London, UCL Press, 2019, 172-189.

conceptions of authenticity that prompt some travellers to look askance at foreign cultures that reinterpret and hybridise objects and habits that originate in a dominant culture.

Eco hints that curators of hyperreal museums and the artists who craft hyperreal fakes devise certain strategies in order to convey a sense of authenticity to the museum visitors. In this chapter, my aim is to show how Eco dismantles these strategies with the intention of exposing their flaws. I will proceed in two steps in each section. I will first explain the conceptions of authenticity of the curators and artists concerning the hyperreal museums Eco visits, and how they try to recreate authenticity in their garish and fake collections. I will then examine the objections Eco raises to these conceptions of authenticity and demonstrate that he presents the curators' strategies as deeply inauthentic.

To better grasp the conceptions of authenticity that Eco embraces, it is crucial to analyse his own cultural bias, which will be the first step of my demonstration. I shall compare his bias to the Eurocentrism of Jean Baudrillard, who also made a major contribution to the theorisation of 'hyperreality'. I shall argue that they both oriented this concept to match their critical and slightly contemptuous attitude towards the United States. To understand the conceptions of authenticity that Eco encounters and criticises in hyperreality, it is also necessary to define the key traits of hyperreality. I shall do so by examining the way Eco and Baudrillard define it in their theoretical and travel essays.

I shall then turn to three conceptions of authenticity that Eco identifies in hyperreal museums, and that he mocks and criticises. First, I point out that the curators of hyperreal museums that he describes seem to value the authenticity of tradition. In other words, the way they display their art collections conveys the impression that, for them, an object is authentic when it has roots in a long-gone past. Eco mocks their attempts to recreate this "historical" authenticity ("Travels" 16), claiming that the United States "plunder[s]" European history because it has precious little of its own (23), and that its plundering is pathological and grotesque. According to Eco, the curators of these American museums fail to evoke "historical" authenticity and only succeed in evoking the material accumulation of consumer society.

Second, I stress that the curators, patrons and artists who design hyperreal wax museums seem to aim for a kind of "visual" authenticity (16), which is based on the belief that a reproduction is more authentic if it has an iconic resemblance to its model.³⁴¹ However, the emphasis they place on this visual resemblance is deeply inauthentic for Eco, because it is deceitful: its purpose is to make the visitors forget that they are looking at a copy. In other words, these wax reproductions are condemned by Eco because they do not acknowledge the distance that exists between an artwork and its model.

³⁴¹ I call 'iconic signs' the wax statues and dioramas that resemble their model visually (when these models are real, such as Lyndon Johnson) or claim to do so (when they are fictional, such as Dr. Faustus). I am here partly drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the icon. Eco himself might not have applied the term "icon" to these objects, considering that, as his "Critique of Iconism" suggests (*Theory* 195), he preferred to work with a typology of modes of sign production/reception, rather than with Peirce's typology of signs (that classifies them into the categories of icons, indexes and symbols).

Third, I underline the fact that curators of hyperreal art collections hope that the art they display will elicit a feeling of devotion, just as authentic art does. I will retrace the theological roots of the concept of authenticity in order to explain why Eco humorously presents some hyperreal copies as “Satan[ic]” artefacts in need of “absolution” and “exorcis[m]” (12, 28, 29). I will argue that Eco adopts an ambiguous attitude regarding the idea that authentic art should be revered: on the one hand, he condemns hyperreal art as a kind of sacrilege, which presupposes that he sees the originals as sacred, and on the other hand, he seems to denounce uncritical devotion to art, be it authentic or hyperreal.

6.1. Umberto Eco’s and Jean Baudrillard’s critical and Eurocentric perspectives on American inauthenticity

“Travels in Hyperreality” and *America* are particularly suited to a study of authenticity in travel literature because they stand out in the field of travel writing: Eco and Baudrillard chose destinations that they deemed deeply inauthentic, by contrast with the travellers who went off the beaten track to avoid tourist routes. In his search of “The Absolute Fake” (“Travels” 35), Eco takes his readers across the United States – mainly the West Coast – to museums where kitsch copies and authentic art cohabit, and to zoos and theme parks, that is to say, to places that Daniel Boorstin called “Tourist Meccas” (102), the sole purpose of which is to attract and entertain visitors.

In *America*, Baudrillard drives his readers across the United States, occasionally stopping to describe deserts, cities and traffic, or to comment on cultural and sociological phenomena such as rap, jogging and religious cults, through which he reflects on the highly “inauthentic”, “hyperreal” and simulacral nature of the country (104/101).³⁴² He opposes “the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces” that he explores to “the deep America of mores and mentalities” that he avoids (5/10).³⁴³ Since encounters with Americans are virtually absent from his travelogue, we can interpret the “deep America” that he eludes as the America of social interactions.

Even though they follow the beaten path, neither Eco nor Baudrillard seem to be tourists in the belittling sense that Dean MacCannell, Daniel Boorstin and others before them have given to the term. Rather, Eco presents himself as the narrator of a parodic pilgrimage. Stopping at landmarks visited by millions, he replaces “the spirit of devotion or repentance” usually observed in pilgrims (*DAF*) with his own “spirit of irony and sophisticated repulsion” (“Travels” 35).³⁴⁴ As Sharon Lebell stresses in her review of *Travels in Hyperreality*, Eco “views his topics with the eyes of a semiologist, meaning he

³⁴² “Oui, la Californie (et l’Amérique avec elle) . . . est d’une vitalité hyperréelle, elle a toute l’énergie du simulacre. C’est le lieu mondial de l’inauthentique” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 101).

³⁴³ “J’ai cherché l’Amérique . . . de la vitesse désertique, des motels et des surfaces minérales, jamais l’Amérique profonde des mœurs et des mentalités” (ibid., 10).

³⁴⁴ “Pèlerinage: voyage entrepris dans *un esprit de dévotion* ou de pénitence vers un lieu sacré où se célèbre un culte, un rite particulier, où sont déposées des reliques, où a vécu un saint personnage, où Dieu a choisi de se manifester à l’homme par une apparition, des miracles” (*DAF*, I have added emphasis to the words I quoted above).

interprets signs, be they words, images, social behavior, political acts or artificial landscapes” (292). Eco and Baudrillard both go beyond the mere enjoyment of hyperreal spectacle that Eco calls “the savage taste for the amazing” (“Travels” 25). They actively use their journeys in the United States to define their own identity as Europeans and reflect on issues related to semiotics, representation and authenticity. Instead of the ingenuous delight typically associated with tourists, the authors adopt a position of superiority in relation to their objects of study: Eco examines tourist sites with “sophisticated repulsion” (“Travels” 35), and Baudrillard focuses on America, which he describes as “primitive” (7/12), “naive” (63/63), “uncontrolled” (97/95) and “stupid” (23/28), to implement complex theories concerning simulacra.³⁴⁵ In other words, they present themselves as keepers of good taste (for Eco) and intelligence (for Baudrillard), venturing into a less refined destination to assess its deficiencies.

Both Eco’s and Baudrillard’s texts are written from the viewpoint of European travellers looking down on American artificiality. When we encounter the pronouns “we” or “us” in Eco’s essay, it is worth keeping in mind that we are reading an Italian scholar mocking the United States’s treatment of art – not least of all Italian art – for a well-read and primarily Italian readership. Essentially, as Stuart Klawans remarks in his review of the essay collection, Eco “is writing explicitly for ‘cultivated’, perhaps Americanized, Europeans and for ‘Europeanized Americans’” (667).

There were certainly examples of kitsch, fake and hyperreal art in Europe where Eco could have toured, such as Bran Castle in Romania (also called Dracula’s Castle) or The Swallow’s Nest in Crimea, a Neo-Gothic castle built in 1912. In fact, Eco admits that the bad taste he sees in America also exists in Europe (the castle of King Ludwig of Bavaria, for example, is utterly fake in his eyes) and that it is partly inspired by European museums such as Munich’s Deutsches Museum (“Travels” 34, 14).

Yet, Eco and Baudrillard relocate hyperreality, fakery and simulation on the other side of the Atlantic, which reveals the European bias of their conceptions of authenticity, and suggest that they may see Europe as more genuine. This bias is targeted by the American reviewer Sharon Lebell, who points out Eco’s “critical European smugness”, and warns her readers that “his journey did preselect for some of America’s most garish monuments and institutions” and yet “hint[ed] at the existence of a unified American Character, of which these cultural shrines were supposed to be emblematic” (293). Stuart Klawans addresses the same criticism at Eco: “What’s missing from *Travels in Hyperreality* is reality itself – that is, ‘ordinary, day-to-day reality’” (668).

Eco himself admits to this bias when he writes: “we had to exclude examples of correct, philological art collections, where famous works are shown without any manipulation” (“Travels” 31). Thus, he does not claim to give an account of a tendency pervading the entire world of American art, but to report a phenomenon that he identified as typically American, as Sharon Lebell also highlights when she writes that “[h]yperreality is Eco’s name for what he believes to be a distinctive feature of the American

³⁴⁵ “L’Amérique réalise tout et elle procède pour cela de façon empirique et sauvage. . . . [E]lle est naïve et primitive” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 95) ; “Nous sommes désespérément en retard sur la stupidité . . . de cette société” (28).

imagination” (292). The title of the original publication – “Nel cuore dell’impero: viaggio nell’iperrealtà” (“At the heart of the empire: travels in hyperreality”) – confirms that he sees hyperreal representations as a core feature (the “heart”) of American identity. This interpretation is also evidenced each time he extrapolates generalisations about the whole United States from his reflections on one single hyperreal place. For instance, “the craving for opulence” that he notices in the Madonna Inn, a motel of “disarming pop vulgarity” in San Luis Obispo, California, becomes a feature of the entire country, “a trademark of American behavior” (24, 25).

Eco reinforces the impression that the United States is inauthentic and fictional by framing his descriptions with references to fiction. For instance, he starts his essay by describing features of the “Fortress of Solitude” in the *Superman* comics (4), which he later uses to frame his description of museums (5, 6). In a comparable manner, he starts the section dedicated to Hearst Castle by associating the mansion to Xanadu, and he later fuses the two by calling the mansion “the Castle of Citizen Kane” (23), which creates confusion as to whether what follows is a description of the film’s décor or of the actual collection. All in all, by blending real locations and cinematographic references, Eco mimics the hyperreal museums that blend real and fake works, which strengthens the impression that his destination is inauthentic.

In Eco’s and Baudrillard’s travelogues, the United States sometimes appears as a dependent and distorted mirror image of Europe, as its “parody” even (*America* 104/101).³⁴⁶ Europe thus remains the standard against which they evaluate the “New World” (*America* 104/101), often contemptuously. This bias is connected to the fact that they focus primarily on the assimilation and reinterpretation of European culture by the United States, not the other way around. Their travelogues follow a convention of travel writing that consists in shaping the identity of the self by opposing it to the other. The New World is valued for its ability to cast new light on the Old, as suggested by Baudrillard, for whom the United States offers “the key to Europe” (104/101), and by Eco, for whom American “shrines of the Fake” are instrumental in “call[ing] the European sanctuaries of the Genuine to assume their share of guilt” (“Travels” 39).

6.2. Defining hyperreality with Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard

It is necessary to delve deeper into Eco’s and Baudrillard’s conceptualisation of hyperreality in order to better grasp how traditional notions of authenticity are revealed or subverted and how new ones emerge in a hyperreal setting. Contrary to common belief, Eco’s hyperreality pre-dates Baudrillard’s: “Nel cuore dell’impero: viaggio nell’iperrealtà” was first published in Italian 1975 in *L’Espresso*, the weekly magazine of the newspaper *La Repubblica*, for which Eco was a weekly columnist (Thomson, “Umberto” §15).³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ “[L]a clef de l’Europe n’est pas dans son passé révolu, mais dans cette anticipation parodique et délirante qu’est le Nouveau Monde” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 101).

³⁴⁷ The first publisher of this essay was *L’Espresso*, as indicated inside the third Italian edition of Tascabili Bompiani’s *Dalla periferia dell’impero, Cronache da un nuovo medioevo* (“From the margins of the empire, chronicles of a new medieval age”, more often translated as *Travels in Hyperreality* or *Faith in Fakes*), dated 2004. This essay was then republished in the collection of essays called *Dalla periferia dell’impero, Cronache da*

Eco's essay was thus published before Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981). It was then translated into English and distributed as "Travels in Hyperreality" in 1986, the same year Baudrillard issued *Amérique* in French.

Eco's and Baudrillard's travelogues construct relatively similar notions of hyperreality, even if they differ in the way they approach it (i.e. as a tangible or abstract phenomenon) and in the examples they give. While Eco studies hyperreality by means of concrete examples such as holographs, theme parks and wax statues of presidents, Hollywood stars and fictional characters, Baudrillard theorises it in a more abstract manner, and postulates that it is everywhere in the United States.

As defined by Eco and Baudrillard, the hyperreal is a simulated reality deprived of origin, which is substituted for the authentic reality and claims to pass as authentic. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan explain that both authors were fascinated with "the possibility of Absolute Fakery – with the construction of perfect models that then supplant what they once copied" (24). For Eco and Baudrillard, the disappearance of reality is the (material or abstract) consequence and condition of this substitution. For Eco, hyperreal museums and art collections contain "antique pieces plundered from half of Europe" (23), and thus contribute to depleting European collections, which can be seen as a form of disappearance of authentic art in favour of hyperreal collections. For Baudrillard, "hyperreality" is defined as the "disappearance of objects in their representation" (*Simulacres* 72).³⁴⁸

According to Baudrillard, reality existed once, but has now been replaced by "simulacra" (*Oublier Foucault* 70).³⁴⁹ What Baudrillard means by "simulation" can be better understood in the light of Steve Redhead's comment: "The process means for Baudrillard that the real can no longer be thought separately from the image" (11). In my view, when Fredric Jameson writes that the power of signs comes from the projections and fantasies we invest in them, he also gives us clues to understand Baudrillard better (qtd. in Watt 136).³⁵⁰ I seek neither to ascertain nor to disprove Baudrillard's claim concerning the destruction of 'reality' and its substitution by simulation. I aim, rather, to study the way

un nuovo medioevo by the Bompiani publishing house, where Eco worked as a nonfiction editor until 1975 (Thomson, "Umberto" §13).

³⁴⁸ "[L]a disparition des objets dans leur représentation même: *hyperréel*" (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 72, italics original).

³⁴⁹ Meghan Morris remarks that the "nostalgia" that pervades Baudrillard's works "assumes that there was once a stable exchange between meaning and the real, when both had their designated 'place'. . . . Baudrillard makes it clear that there was once such a thing as 'meaning, properly speaking'" (197). To support this claim, Meghan Morris quotes Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York, 1983, 96, and also relies on Baudrillard's *De la Séduction*, Paris, 1979, 123-124 and *Simulacra and Simulations*, New York, 1983, 41. She does not provide the publishing houses.

It remains to be seen how literally Baudrillard's claim concerning the disappearance of reality should be taken. Albert Borgmann embraced this claim as a prophetic warning (163), and Meghan Morris also seems rather uncritical of Baudrillard, whom she repeatedly calls a "magician" (190). Richard Allen, however, rightfully wonders from which standpoint Baudrillard could truthfully comment on the disappearance of reality if simulation was everywhere (80).

³⁵⁰ Stephen Watts quotes Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", *Social Text* 1, Winter 1979, 132: "Acknowledging his indebtedness both to Baudrillard and Guy Debord, Jameson maintains that we consume less 'the thing itself, than its abstract idea capable of the libidinal investments ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising'" (Watt 136).

he applies this theory to the description of the United States, turning this real country into a simulation (see **Chapter 8**).

For Baudrillard, the term “hyperreal” is equivalent to “simulation”, as we can see when he writes that “[the simulation] is the creation by the models of a Real without origin or reality: hyperreal” (*Simulacres* 10).³⁵¹ Hyperreality offers a more intense version of reality; partly visual and partly virtual, it is a “hallucination” (184). An example of the emphatic style hyperreality uses would be Disneyland’s castle, which both semioticians comment on. We recognise it as a castle, although it has little in common with Heidelberg Castle, Versailles or Cardiff Castle. It is in fact the physical embodiment of a fictional, ideal and spotless castle that draws upon and exceeds them all. As it does not clearly refer to anything but itself, it can be considered self-referential. Other hyperreal items, such as the wax statues Eco beholds, are more clearly related to a model. Nevertheless, because they “tr[y] to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely” (“Travels” 43), they illustrate hyperrealism rather than realism.

Hyperreality is a fictional reality that is artificially constructed through representations, and whose ambition is not to resemble reality but to improve upon it. Both Eco’s and Baudrillard’s works hint that this “resurrected” (hyper)reality was born from the circulation of technologically produced images and information (*Simulacres* 17), and disseminated by media such as television, photography, films and advertisements, for purposes linked to consumerism and capitalism.³⁵² To resurrect reality, which often takes the form of a European cultural object or concept in Baudrillard’s and Eco’s works, hyperreal objects and events need to convey an impression of authenticity. In this chapter, I shall focus on the way, according to Eco, the curators of hyperreal exhibitions attempt to give this impression. In his view, hyperreal objects often fail to evoke authenticity because they leave little room for interpretive distance. This is due to the fact that hyperreality aims for “total control” over the resurrected reality it generates (*Simulacres* 179), as Baudrillard notes, taking the example of the Beaubourg Museum (Pompidou Centre) – “the mall of culture”, the “retotalisation in a homogeneous space-time of all the dispersed functions of the body and of social life (work, leisure, media, culture)” (102).³⁵³ Although he does not phrase it in such explicit terms, Eco addresses and condemns this aspect of hyperreality because it threatens the ability of museum visitors and more generally of the recipients of the images, messages and signs to decipher them critically, as we shall see in more detail in **Chapter 7**.³⁵⁴

Even though Eco and Baudrillard coined the term “hyperreality”, the concept of “pseudo-events” that Boorstin developed in *The Image* (1962) prefigured some of the key characteristics of their hyperreality, such as the self-referentiality and intensity of hyperreal art and images, the total control exerted by hyperreality over the information it

³⁵¹ “Elle [la simulation] est la génération par les modèles d’un réel sans origine ni réalité: hyperréel” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 10).

³⁵² I borrow the idea of a “resurrected” reality from Baudrillard’s *Simulacres et simulation* (“ressuscité” 17, 71, 101), but Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality” is redolent of the same notion.

³⁵³ “[H]yperréalité, visée de contrôle total” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 179), “Beaubourg ‘hypermarché de la culture’ . . . : retotalisation en un espace-temps homogène de toutes les fonctions dispersées du corps et de la vie sociale (travail, loisirs, media, culture)” (102).

creates and the idea that it is an American phenomenon. Boorstin argued that “pseudo-events” manufactured by the media used images that were “more vivid, more attractive, more impressive and more persuasive than reality itself” (36) – in a word, more intense. According to him, these events referred to something they created rather than to a reality that predated them (12), that is to say, they were self-referential. They were also designed in such a way as to be very easily “intelligible” (39), which foreshadows the “total control” that Eco’s and Baudrillard’s hyperreality seeks to exert over the way it is interpreted (*Simulacres* 179).

6.3. Hyperreal museums evoking authenticity by evoking the past

Eco points out that the curators of some hyperreal art collections aim to evoke a sense of authenticity by pointing towards the European past. The idea that authenticity resides in bygone centuries seems to be at the core of these collections. Through his descriptions, Eco hints that it does not matter to curators whether the objects on display are real or fake antique as long as they successfully evoke the past. In other words, the authenticity aimed at by curators is the ability of the objects to function as *signs* of the past. For instance, the monumental mansion of William Randolph Hearst, which served as a model for *Citizen Kane*’s Xanadu, exhibits a collection that seems incongruous at first, as it contains objects of unequal financial, artistic and historical value. However, on second glance, we notice that many of these objects are connected to the European past. Eco points ostensibly to this connection, as if to hint that it is central in the claim of authenticity that the curators make through these objects. His description of the castle is worth quoting at length to gain a sense of the importance given to the European references, and to grasp the emphasis Eco lays on the material and symbolic accumulation inside the mansion:

Hearst bought, in bits or whole, palaces, abbeys, and convents in Europe, had them . . . shipped across the ocean . . . An incontinent collectionism, the bad taste of the nouveau riche, and a thirst for prestige led him to bring the past down to the level of today’s life . . .

Amid Roman sarcophagi, and genuine exotic plants, and remade baroque stairways, you pass Neptune’s Pool, a fantasy Greco-Roman temple peopled with classical statues including (as the guidebook points out with fearless candor) the famous Venus rising from the water, sculpted in 1930 by the Italian sculptor Cassou, and you reach the Great House, a Spanish-Mexican-style cathedral with two towers (equipped with a thirty-six-bell carillon) . . . The floor of the vestibule encloses a mosaic found in Pompeii, . . . the door into the Meeting Hall is by Sansovino, the great hall is fake Renaissance presented as Italo-French (Hearst’s agents sought the scattered pieces through various European dealers), the tapestries are seventeenth-century Flemish, the objects – real or fake – date from various periods, four medallions are by Thorvaldsen . . . (“Travels” 22-23)

The geographical and temporal contexts evoked by the objects seem to matter more to the collector than their degrees of authenticity. Upon closer examination, the geographical and temporal origins attached to the objects are not necessarily the contexts from which

original objects have been extracted, but the contexts evoked and connoted by the objects, whether these are “real or fake”. Historical *connotation* and *evocation* – that is, the ability to signify and refer back to something (anything) past – replace what we could call historical authenticity – that is to say, the fact that art pieces have been produced in the past, in the eras to which they refer.

Other museums and collections illustrate this predilection for the European past, such as the Ca’ d’Zan palazzo in Florida, which contains “Flemish and English tapestries, French trumeaux, art-nouveaux sculpture, Empire chairs, Louis XV beds, Carrara marbles”, etc. (27). The reconstitution of a 1906 home in the Museum of the City of New York also exemplifies the attempt to evoke authenticity by conjuring up the past. This reconstitution merges fake and original objects (10), which provides evidence that their degree of authenticity matters little to the curators. The curators appear more concerned with successfully evoking a *notion* of the past and with offering an uncritical immersive experience to the “nonchalant” visitors, who can thus “gras[p], at least to a certain extent, the idea of the past” without wondering whether the items displayed are real or fake (11).

Eco chooses to jam the message of authenticity that hyperreal collections are sending. First, he shows contempt for Hearst’s “incontinent collectionism” and “bad taste” (“Travels” 22), for the architect of the Ca’ d’Zan palazzo, who “deserves (in the sense that Eichmann does) to go down in history” (27), for the Ringling dynasty who ordered its construction “to make posterity think how exceptional the people who did live there must have been” (27), and for the “naïve” visitors of the Museum of the City of New York (11), whose approach to culture differs greatly from the active and critical attitude that Eco advocates, as I will show in **Chapter 7**.

Second, refusing to accept what he humorously calls the “original sin of ‘the leveling of pasts’, the fusion of copy and original” that the collections encourage (9), Eco reintroduces the notion of authenticity understood as a quality possessed by an object produced as an original, or during a specific era that it epitomises. He mentions the degrees of authenticity and inauthenticity of items in Hearst Castle, in the Ca’ d’Zan palazzo, and in the Museum of the City of New York. Authenticity was clearly not the criterion that defined which objects came to Hearst Castle, yet, in the passage I quoted above, Eco reintroduces it as a criterion and invites his readers to assess the value of the items based on their position on a scale of authenticity: “genuine”, “remade”, “fantasy”, “fake”, “real or fake” (22-23).

Third, Eco hints that authenticity is lost when objects are displaced and displayed outside of their context.³⁵⁵ He suggests that real European antiques could evoke a sense of authenticity better when they were in Europe, and he questions the possibility that authenticity could be “shipped across the ocean” alongside European art pieces (22). The act by which American curators and art collectors acquired European antiques is provocatively and satirically called “plundering” (23), which means that they are presented as thieves and that the art they display in the United States does not belong there. Eco,

³⁵⁵ In that sense, Eco can be compared to Daniel Boorstin, who argued that the decontextualising of artworks and their gathering in the same location passed on an “inevitably factitious” image of a country’s culture (101), and gave museums an “unreal, misrepresentative character” (102).

and Baudrillard too, suggest that the United States is the epitome of inauthenticity because, contrary to Europe, it cannot draw upon a stock of “primitive accumulation of time”, because it has “no past and no founding truth” (Baudrillard, *America* 76/76).³⁵⁶ All the United States can do is appropriate the European past with “voracity” and “gluttony” and replace the accumulation of time it lacks with an accumulation of objects (Eco, “Travels” 23, 31, 9).

The idea that authenticity comes from the past can be seen as the legacy of the understanding of authenticity that Walter Benjamin delineated in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”. In this essay, Benjamin discusses many aspects of the changing conditions of the production and politics of art following the emergence of technologically assisted art, such as film and photography, and the advent of mass (re)production of art by technological means. Although it is beyond this study to discuss all aspects of his essay, his argument linking auratic authenticity to tradition and historical duration can help us understand Eco’s text better. For Benjamin, authentic art is partly defined by its links to tradition, its ability to aggregate duration, and to express the *zeitgeist* of the era that has produced it:

The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the history to which it testifies. Since the historical testimony is based on the physical duration, the historical testimony of the thing, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which physical duration has been withdrawn from human activity. . . . what is really jeopardized thereby is the authority of the thing, the weight it derives from tradition. (14)

The conceptions of authenticity that the curators of hyperreal art collections embrace might be traced to the conception of authenticity endorsed by Benjamin. As I have pointed out, Eco indicates that curators attempt to evoke a sense of authenticity by evoking the notion of the past, which suggests that they believe in the link between the past and authenticity. Even though, as I have shown, Eco undermines their attempt to evoke authenticity in this way, he also seems to uphold this conception of authenticity (albeit in a different way), since he opposes Europe (which he criticises moderately) to the United States (which he criticises repeatedly) on the grounds that Europe has a history, whereas the United States allegedly does not. With the help of Benjamin, we can better grasp why Eco hints that hyperreal fakes try to evoke the past – it is a condition of authenticity – and why they fail to do so – they have been produced recently and have not yet aggregated duration, and they attempt to refer to the era of the original works instead of referring to the spirit of their own era.

³⁵⁶ This notion is not new. Henry James’s book of literary criticism *Hanthorne* (1879) contains a comparable argument. He connects the alleged lack of history of the United States to the alleged scarcity of high art there: “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, . . . it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature . . . American civilization has hitherto had other things to do than to produce flowers, and before giving birth to writers it has wisely occupied itself with providing something for them to write about” (§3).

6.4. Hyperreal museums evoking inauthentic material accumulation

Eco presents hyperreal collections as accumulations of shapeless matter, which conveys the impression that they are deeply inauthentic. If we return to the previously quoted description of Hearst Castle, we can see that, because of the saturated context in which they are embedded, the objects contained in the Castle lose their unique artistic value and become stock mass-produced by the mansion. Eco seems to indicate that the collector fails to dazzle the visitors with his collection because they do not have the time to picture the splendour of the Pompeii mosaic as they are already faced with Flemish tapestries that require just as much attention.

Through this description, Eco conveys the impression that the Castle affords quick visual consumption instead of slow contemplation. If we look once more at Walter Benjamin's essay, in which he argues that authentic art allows "free-floating contemplation" and partly draws its authenticity from it (19), we can conclude that Eco strengthens the impression of inauthenticity by suggesting that Hearst Castle invites a different type of receptive attitude.

Eco conveys the impression that each collection he visits seems too exhaustive and heterogeneous to be fully grasped. The oppressive fullness of Eco's destinations takes the form of lists wrapped up in sentences that stretch over half a dozen lines or more. As John Simon remarked in his review of the essay collection, Eco gives the impression that "nothing delights him more . . . than making up lists" (596). Considering that lists are the time-honoured device of the epic genre, Eco's listing of grotesque or garish hyperreal items could be seen as a parody of the epic, designed to imitate and mock the sensationalistic tone of hyperreal museums. Such lists could also be interpreted as an attack on material accumulation and consumerism.

As shown by the passage cataloguing the contents of Hearst Castle, Eco flattens out the artworks with a sequence of coordinate clauses. No object stands out; they are all homogenised by his description. Even the original objects, drowned in a new context made of a multitude of items, no longer succeed in referring properly to the original contexts from which they have been extracted – to high art, or to past beauty. Instead, for Eco, they refer to the wealth of their present owner, to his possible hoarding disorder – hinted at through the use of the symptomatic words "incontinent collectionism" (22) and "obsessive" (23) – and more widely to capitalism as a pathology.

Eco suggests that the accumulation of objects in hyperreal places is a poor attempt to hide the absence of authenticity. The accumulation of references to geographical and temporal contexts in Hearst Castle – "Roman", "baroque", "Flemish" ("Travels" 22) – can be read as an attempt to compensate for and cover up the absence of these remote contexts, or even the absence of America. Raúl Rodríguez-Ferrándiz explains that, for Eco, "unrequested emphasis or prolixity is almost incriminating" in itself and indicates deceptive signs (176). We can deduce that, in Eco's eyes, hyperreal places are particularly deceiving when they contain an accumulation of objects that are supposed to convey an impression of authenticity.

If we look at these collections through the lens of Baudrillard's theory of simulation, we reach the same conclusion, namely that the accumulation of signs of authenticity covers up the absence of authenticity. According to Baudrillard, we live in a global simulation that has replaced a now dead reality and that tries to make us believe that reality is still alive. To do so, simulation produces signs of life that lead us to think that reality is still here; in other words, it presents us with a seemingly resurrected (but actually dead) reality that masks the absence of reality (*Simulacres* 17, 71, 101). For Baudrillard, "economic accumulation" and the "accumulation of time, value, the subject" belong to a "gigantic illusion" of accumulation that tries to dissimulate the fact that we live in simulation (*Oublier* 56).³⁵⁷

In the light of Baudrillard's theory, the accumulations that Eco describes can be seen as vain attempts to cover up an absence. When Eco underlines "the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something" (23), he stresses the fact that the art pieces he discusses are supposed to act as hypersigns, reviving "strong referents"³⁵⁸ – to borrow Baudrillard's notion – such as Rome and Ancient Greece, which evoke ideas of grandeur and civilisation. However, this accumulation of signs of authenticity creates hyperreal simulation rather than authenticity, and it reveals the fear of the collector. We could interpret the "*horror vacui*" that "haunt[s]" Hearst Castle as the collector's fear that the original referents are not merely absent from his castle because they are located in a remote time and space (23), but also because they are no longer able to refer to grandeur, art, etc., or because they were already arbitrarily chosen and invested with these meanings and thus questionable from the start, as Baudrillard theory of simulation would suggest.

Through his critical descriptions of the accumulations of hyperreal collections, Eco encourages his readers to reflect on authentic art collections too. First, because if piling up objects from Rome and Ancient Greece fails to conjure up authenticity, one might begin to question the value of these referents in collections of hyperreal *or* authentic art. Second, because the European art museums that hold high art are also accumulative, and therefore suspected of the same cover-up as American hyperreal collections. In *The Infinity of Lists*, Eco contends that large collections such as the Louvre's are rather "incongruous" (169), and resemble "poetic lists" that can potentially extend to infinity (165), which brings to mind his descriptions of hyperreal collections in "Travels in Hyperreality". For Eco, authentic museum collections, which are often the spoils of war, are "voracious by definition" (*Infinity* 170), which also brings them closer to the "voracity" he sees in American hyperreal collections ("Travels" 23).³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ "[L]’accumulation économique – gigantesque leurre que celui de l’accumulation, l’accumulation du temps, de la valeur, du sujet, etc." (Baudrillard, *Oublier* 56).

³⁵⁸ "[R]éférentiels forts" (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 70).

³⁵⁹ As shown by the date of the first publication of "Travels in Hyperreality" (1975), Eco based his criticism of museums on visits that occurred before museology fully developed in the 1980s. At the time Eco reflected on fake and real art collections and criticised them, museums had not yet started questioning their assumptions (such as exhaustiveness) and the way they curated art. Therefore, the criticism that Eco directs at the museum as an institution may have less validity now than it did then.

6.5. Hyperreal waxworks evoking authenticity through visual resemblance and Umberto Eco's criticism of their iconism

According to Eco, the curators and craftsmen who have created the hyperreal exhibitions that he visits attempt to reach a “visual” authenticity that he criticises (16). This “visual” authenticity is based on the idea that a reproduction is more authentic if it has an iconic relation (visual resemblance) to its model (16). It seems that, for Eco, these objects are deeply inauthentic because they conceal their nature as signs and try to make visitors forget that signs are arbitrarily and/or conventionally connected to the objects they refer to, and are not ‘naturally’ connected to them. According to him, these statues aim to achieve “perfect likeness” and to hide the gap that separates them from their models (4). Compared to other artistic representations that reflect on their nature and limits, he hints that these wax statues are deceptive.

By focusing on museums that combine wax statues representing both real and fictional figures “with anatomical precision” (14), Eco draws attention to their deceptive nature and jeopardises the impression of authenticity that they try to give. For instance, in the Movieland Wax Museum, in California, he describes a space where historical and fictional characters are gathered:

When you see Tom Sawyer immediately after Mozart or you enter the cave of *The Planet of the Apes* after having witnessed the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus and the Apostles, the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds has been definitively undermined. . . . at the end of the visit, the senses are still overloaded in an uncritical way; Lincoln and Dr. Faustus have appeared reconstructed in the same style, similar to Chinese socialist realism, and Hop o’ My Thumb and Fidel Castro now belong forever to the same ontological area. (“Travels” 14)

While the statues of Lincoln, Mozart and Fidel Castro refer to historical figures, Dr. Faustus refers to a myth and Hop o’ My Thumb to a fairy tale. Both the latter two have no models to which they could be compared to measure accuracy. They do not resemble a model; they exhibit signs that point to the idea of a model and make them recognisable (perhaps Dr. Faustus is placed next to the Devil and most likely Hop o’ My Thumb is relatively small). This anaphoric operation has been repeated for decades using the same signs until they eventually became conventions pointing to certain referents.³⁶⁰ Yet, placing side by side statues that refer to fictional or mythical characters and historical figures, all “reconstructed in the same style, similar to Chinese social realism” is problematic, because it may create the momentary illusion that they all *resemble* real models (“Travels” 14).

Eco’s criticism of “absolute iconism” can be better conceptualised in the light of *A Theory of Semiotics* (“Travels” 16). For him, fakes and representations of fictional characters confirm the existence of signs and conventions, as he shows using the example of “a classical painting representing mythological heroes” (*Theory* 257). Such a painting may

³⁶⁰ As Eco puts it in *A Theory of Semiotics*, kitsch is the “result of a millenary overcoding” (279).

successfully refer to these heroes, even though they do not exist. It is based not on resemblance but on conventions. For Eco, it is crucial that representations do not deceive their recipients about their nature. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, giving the example of the “images of Mr. Pickwick”, Dickens’s fictional character, Eco criticises the kind of iconic representations that “try to assert that something exists, which actually *looks like* the expression item, when this is not the case at all” (257, emphasis added).³⁶¹ Eco derides imposture in all its forms, and frowns upon false claims of visual *resemblance* in particular.

Eco counterbalances the “uncritical” sensationalism of the wax statues by indirectly drawing attention to the operation of resemblance and, more broadly, to the conventional nature of representation (“Travels” 14). In the example of the Movieland Wax Museum I gave above, the blending of fictional and historical figures spur Eco’s readers to wonder what Dracula and Lincoln may have in common, and to reflect that neither exactly reproduce their models (since there is no ‘real’ model for Dracula, of course) – contrary to what the museum would have them believe – and that both reproduce the most conventional and consensual idea of these models. In short, Eco’s description encourages us to see all representations not as natural but as arbitrary, conventional and constructed, which suggests that he favours art that acknowledges its artificial nature.

By means of irony, Eco dispels the deceptive impression of naturalness these statues convey, and he turns their visual resemblance against them. The iconic connection between these statues and their models, which was supposed to convey an impression of authenticity, is described by Eco as a factor that increases their inauthenticity. For him, these statues are self-defeating because they damage the model from which they are supposed to derive their authenticity. It is important to note that some of these statues differ from mere icons because they aim to improve upon the originals they refer to. The supposed improvements they add to their models consist exclusively of visual enhancements: paintings are reproduced in three-dimensional waxworks and limbs and colour are added to incomplete antique statues reproduced in wax. Two statues in particular illustrate the derision Eco directs towards this hyper-iconism: the reproductions of Peter Stuyvesant and Van Gogh.

Peter Stuyvesant’s statue exemplifies the potentially farcical aspect of the copy that Eco seeks to stress: “[it] shows us a three-dimensional statue, which reproduces Peter Stuyvesant as portrayed in the painting, except that in the painting, of course, Peter is seen only full-face or in half-profile, whereas here he is complete, buttocks included” (9). The reader may assume that this grotesque dimension was unintended by the curator and the artist, and ponder on the damage done by this copy to the ridiculed original. The trivial dimension added by Eco’s analysis of the copy of Peter Stuyvesant is provocative and affects the way the onlookers will gaze at the original painting. Instead of benefiting from and enhancing the sacred aura of the original, the copy, combined with Eco’s irony, damages it.

³⁶¹ To simplify, the “expression item” can be understood as a representation “expressing” (referring to) a referent (be it real or fictional, like Mr. Pickwick).

In a comparable way, Eco mocks Van Gogh's wax statue for its failed attempt to refer to both the man and his work: "the striking thing is the face of the great lunatic: in wax, naturally, but meant to render faithfully the rapid, tormented brushstrokes of the artist, and thus the face seems devoured by some disgusting eczema, . . . and the skin is flaking, with scurvy, herpes zoster, mycosis" (20). The effect achieved is neither resemblance to the man nor to his art, but a parody of both. Worse, the statue suggests the idea that the viewer's notion of the original risks being contaminated by the waxwork's diseased appearance.

6.6. 'Satanic' fakes and sacred originals

The curators of the hyperreal art collections that Eco visits also seek to evoke authenticity by drawing upon the feeling of reverence that original art elicits. Eco undermines their attempt to reroute this reverence, but his position regarding the sacrality of original art is ambiguous. As I pointed out earlier and as I shall continue to argue in **Chapter 7**, he seems to condemn uncritical devotion to museum items – whether real or fake – and he favours critical reception over reverence. However, some aspects of his essay also suggest that he still places authentic art above hyperreal art, which he occasionally presents as morally wrong.

The curators of hyperreal art collections hope that their collections will benefit from the aura of the originals – "for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized", writes Eco (19) – and that the copies will elicit the same religious awe in visitors. Thus, the recorded voice that guides visitors in one of the museums assures them that they "have been touched by the thrill of artistic greatness" and that they "have had the most stirring spiritual emotion of [their] life" (18). At the same time, the purpose of these reproductions is to replace the original, to "establish [themselves] as a substitute for reality, as something even more real" (8). Since these statues seek to be worshipped like the originals, and in place of them, we can thus hypothesise that Eco calls them "Satan's Crèches" partly because they act as idols (12).

On the one hand, Eco's tendency to turn the waxworks into parodies that undermine the sacrality of the originals suggests that he is not particularly anxious to re-establish a religious reverence for authentic models. In addition, he explains that his aim is not only to attack hyperreal museums but also "to call the European sanctuaries of the Genuine to assume their share of guilt" (39). We can interpret his criticism of European museums as an attack targeted at the venality of those who sold art to American hyperreal collections, causing it to be taken out of the European context that gave it its authenticity, but we can also interpret Eco's words as a criticism of the theological dimension of authentic art that both American and European museums endorse.

On the other hand, Eco seems to revive the reverence for the sacrality of authentic art by presenting hyperreal art as morally inferior. The subsection of "Travels in Hyperreality" that contains the grotesque waxworks I described above is called "Satan's Crèches" (12), and it is followed by a section called "The Monasteries of Salvation" (31), which includes, among other things, the authentic art of the J. Paul Getty Museum in

Malibu. In these subsections and throughout his essay, Eco makes abundant use of the lexicon of religion. For instance, he mocks the “unholy fusion of copy and original” of some exhibitions (9) and the “will to expiatory sacrifice . . . [and] desire for posterity’s absolution” of the Ca’ d’Zan villa (28). He also claims that hyperreal art collections are “redolent of contamination, blasphemy, the Black Mass” (23) but that they can be “redeem[ed]” under certain conditions (30). As Eco defines himself as a non-believer (Cox 3),³⁶² and uses irony and mockery throughout the essay, the title of these subsections should not be taken too literally. However, throughout the essay, he also adopts the position of a ‘theologian’ of art who can declare some museums to be satanic and others to be saved, which establishes a hierarchy between evil copies and sacred originals.

When Eco passes a moral judgement on these waxworks, we can say that he is adopting the Platonic system of representation, albeit with some critical distance, as his humour suggests. A swift look at Plato’s *Republic* and a detour through Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (*Différence et répétition*, 1968) can help us lay out the stakes of the Platonic approach to simulacra. Deleuze reminds us that the hierarchy that organises artworks from original to simulacra goes back to the myth of Plato’s cave. According to this foundational text, simulacra are further away from the ‘truth’ of the real objects than representations are. At the same time, in *The Republic*, Plato explains that simulacra are particularly duplicitous because they are taken as real objects (273). We can thus understand Eco’s attack on wax statues that “ai[m] to be the thing” as a Platonic stance (“Travels” 7). In Eco’s view, like in Plato’s myth, the simulacra become duplicitous the moment they are portrayed or taken as ‘the real thing’. For Deleuze, Plato’s hierarchy postulates that the ‘real’ object outside the cave is synonymous with the ‘True’ and the ‘Good’, which explains “the moral origin of the world of representation” (341).³⁶³ In the Platonic system, simulacra are “condemned” (*Différence* 341) because they only reproduce an appearance (166), which can explain why Eco derides and criticises waxworks that try to achieve a perfect visual likeness to their models.³⁶⁴ According to Deleuze, simulacra are also denounced in the Platonic approach because they “challenge the notion of model and that of copy at the same time” (341), which some waxworks that Eco describes also do. For instance, in the Palace of Living Arts, a wax Venus complete with arms is presented with the caption “Venus de Milo brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown Greek sculptor” (“Travels” 20). The curators who created this caption seemed to wish that this Venus be directly compared to the idea of the real-life model, and they wished to bypass the hierarchy of the revered original as opposed to the inferior copy. According to Deleuze, “we should not understand the simulacrum as a simple imitation, but rather as the act by which the very idea of a model or of a privileged

³⁶² Harvey Cox informs us that, “[b]y his own account Eco was a practicing Catholic until the age of twenty-two. But he is not an angry, antireligious ex-Catholic. He even seems at times to speak about his lost faith with a hint of regret, and suggests that the solid sense of morality that underlies his life and his writing may well have derived from his earlier Catholic formation” (3).

³⁶³ “Origine morale du monde de la représentation” (Deleuze, *Différence* 341). This interpretation of Plato is supported by Eco, who traces back to the antique philosopher the notion passed down by the Scriptures that the Good and the Beautiful are one: “The theory that the beauty of the world is an image and reflection of Ideal Beauty is Platonic in origin” (Eco, *Art* 17).

³⁶⁴ “Ce qui est condamné dans le simulacre c’est . . . toute cette malignité qui conteste et la notion de modèle et celle de copie” (Deleuze, *Différence* 341).

position is challenged, overturned” (95).³⁶⁵ Thus, simulacra undermine the hierarchy that exists between model, original and copy, which is at the heart of the notion of authenticity inherited from Plato. Consequently, for the Platonists, “the simulacrum is precisely a demonic image” if we follow Deleuze’s thinking on this matter (167).³⁶⁶

A brief look at the origins of the concept of authenticity will help us understand this theological dimension better. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”, Benjamin traces the origins of auratic authenticity back to religious rites and contends that “the cult of beauty” that developed during the Renaissance was a “secularized ritual” (16). At this time, the technological reproducibility that eroded auratic authenticity freed art from its “parasitic subservience to ritual” (17). Yet, the curators of Eco’s museums seem to revive this subservience, since they seek to elicit a “spiritual” feeling with the copies they present (“Travels” 17).

Some hyperreal objects also resemble the cultic items and relics that were the prototypes of authenticity according to Charles Lindholm. In his anthropological study *Culture and Authenticity*, Lindholm explains that authenticity was initially a property of cultic items and relics, and creating fakes was a “sacrilege” (13). Cultic items were sacred by virtue of their use in collective rituals and relics by virtue of their closeness to the saintly figure to whom they had belonged. The former were “legitimized by the collective act of worship” (46) and the latter were granted authenticity by the institution of the Church and by their ability to work miracles. Some hyperreal objects that Eco describes can be seen as cultic items, considering the millions of visitors who, like Eco, go on a pilgrimage to the museums that hold these items and expect their contents to provide spiritual fulfilment. Other hyperreal objects can be considered relics. For instance, the museum dedicated to Lyndon Johnson contains the wedding dresses that his daughters wore (6), and the Ripley’s museum contains “the living statue [of] Hananuma Masakichi” made with the sculptor’s actual hair, teeth and nails (15). By giving such a disturbing example, Eco brings to the reader’s attention the “macabre” nature of *all* relics, whether real or hyperreal (5).

Conclusion

So far, what emerged from this investigation of “Travels in Hyperreality” is that the curators and artists who created the hyperreal collections Eco visits adopted various strategies to evoke a sense of authenticity. They hoped that their exhibitions would elicit the same reverence as the original art pieces, they amassed objects that acted as signs of the past, and they displayed waxworks that claimed to have achieved a perfect visual likeness to their models. Nonetheless, Eco’s decoding of these exhibitions undercuts their message of authenticity and reveals their nature as systems of signs based on conventions.

Eco hints that historical authenticity is less vital to the curators of hyperreal museums than the *evocation* of the past through (real and fake) conventional signs. However, I have

³⁶⁵ “[P]ar simulacre, nous ne devons pas entendre une simple imitation, mais bien plutôt l’acte par lequel l’idée même d’un modèle ou d’une position privilégiée se trouve contestée, renversée” (Deleuze, *Différence* 95).

³⁶⁶ “Le simulacre est précisément une image démoniaque” (ibid., 167).

argued that there are major hindrances to the referential function of these signs. On the one hand, Eco suggests that the saturation of signs, especially in Hearst Castle, brings to mind uncritical material accumulation rather than the authenticity of the past. In addition, this saturation reveals rather than covers the absence of these objects' initial context (often located in Europe), and thus jeopardises their ability to refer to this context and to the authenticity that is associated with it. On the other hand, Eco emphasises the inauthenticity of wax statues that conceal their nature as signs under an excessive visual resemblance to their models.

Objections, however, could be raised to Eco's criticism of material accumulation and the blending of real and fake objects in hyperreal exhibitions. He presents them as inauthentic, but, if we follow Miles Orvell's argument, there was a time and a place when accruing fakes was not frowned upon. In *Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture*, Orvell explains that such accumulations were regarded as evidence of the "healthy functioning" of society in Victorian America (46). There and then, according to Orvell, "the arts of imitation and illusion were valorized" (xv), and neither accumulation nor imitation were associated with the negative notion of inauthenticity. It is thus worth reiterating that Eco's conception of authenticity is influenced by his cultural bias.

I have also argued that the conception of authenticity that emerges from the religious lexicon Eco used is ambiguous. At first, it seems that hyperreal collections give him the opportunity to question the uncritical worship of both hyperreal copies and authentic masterpieces. Yet on second glance, Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality" consistently establishes a hierarchy between blameworthy and acceptable museums displays – "Satan's Crèches" (12) and "The Monasteries of Salvation" (31). As I shall argue in the next chapter, in "Travels in Hyperreality", Eco suggests that authenticity is a quality possessed by artworks that are self-reflexive, that acknowledge their nature as representations and/or signs, and that are displayed in a context or with captions that invite critical reception.

CHAPTER 7:

The Role of Critical Distance in the Creation of Authenticity in Hyperreality

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall continue to focus on Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality" and more specifically on the type of critical outlook Eco advocates as he describes hyperreal museums, theme parks and zoos. I shall argue that Eco presents as more authentic the art collections that are designed to encourage the creative interpretation of the art they contain. In other words, the implicit conception of authenticity I identify in Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality" is conditioned by the presence of critical distance as far as the reception and/or production and display of artistic fakes is concerned. This conception of authenticity is questionable insofar as Eco postulates an ideal visitor of hyperreal exhibitions who would react in the way he imagined.

My analysis is based on the assumption that the fakes Eco comments on function in the same way as signs and can therefore be studied in the light of Eco's theory of semiotics. At this point it is worth noting that Eco "define[d] as a sign *everything* that, on the ground of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*" (*Theory* 16, emphasis original). Cultural objects such as hyperreal artworks can thus be taken as signs. Eco's conception of the sign is deeply indebted to Charles Sanders Peirce ("Intellectual" 21). This means that, for Eco, interpretation has a key role to play in the creation of meaning. For him, by definition, "[i]n a semiotic relationship between the sign and its meaning . . . there is room for interpretation" (24). He explains it by means of an enlightening example:

If I say 'rose' my interlocutor can decide to react with 'do you mean a scented, red flower?' or 'you have uttered the past participle of the Italian verb *rodere*' . . . or again 'are you referring to the white rose in *The Divine Comedy*?' This space for interpretation is the one in which there occur phenomena of understanding, of interpretive freedom, of ambiguity or misunderstanding and successive interpretations . . . ("Intellectual" 25)

In Eco's view, there is no equivalence between *signifier* and *signified*; a sign cannot simply be exchanged for meaning. As the example above shows, the word-sign "rose" can be interpreted in various ways. In between the sign and its meaning, there is space for more than one interpretation.

Eco's definition of a sign can explain his disapproval of some artistic fakes and some theme parks. He is particularly critical of signs that are designed to be taken as equivalent to what they refer to – for instance, the reconstruction of the Oval Office ("Travels" 7) – and of signs that are created with the intention of being exchanged for a univocal meaning. Because they claim to be something that they are not, and because they restrict

the interpretive freedom that Eco sees as necessary to the functioning of the sign, these hyperreal signs are deceptive – that is to say, inauthentic to him.

In this chapter, I shall first point out that throughout his works as a semiotician and cultural critic, Eco adopts and encourages the critical interpretation of signs and messages coming from the entertainment industry, mass media, popular culture, novels and art. Examining Eco's stance will enable us to understand better why uncritical hyperreal art becomes the target of his criticism. We shall see that he takes issue with hyperreal artwork and waxwork collections, zoos and theme parks that have been created and arranged in a way that discourages their visitors from interpreting their contents critically and creatively. Eco's descriptions of these destinations dovetail Baudrillard's portrayal of hyperreality as an oppressive environment (see **Chapter 6.2.**).

However, we shall see that Eco resists the control that museum curators and theme park creators seek to have over his experience. By means of irony and scepticism, he reintroduces at the point of *reception* the critical distance that is paramount to him, and key in the creation of authentic reproductions, as "Travels in Hyperreality" suggests. This distance can also, in Eco's view, be restored at the point of the *production* of artistic fakes. He hints that, when distance is restored by the people who produce, display or receive the hyperreal art, a new kind of authenticity emerges. Eco's essay opens up the possibility of seeing some simulacra – traditionally regarded as the most inauthentic type of representations – as new originals, which renews the concept of artistic authenticity. He indicates that when certain conditions are met, some copies can possess authenticity, which ceases to be a quality that only original items have.

I shall examine this simulacral authenticity further, first in Eco's essay, and then in Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu*. I contend that the revaluation of the simulacra that Eco's essay suggests, and the shift in the definition of authenticity that it invites, can help us offset some of the cultural hierarchies that we find in contemporary travel writing. Through a commentary on the simulacra and copies that Iyer describes in *Video Night in Kathmandu*, I shall propose that transcultural reinterpretations of Western items by other countries can be seen as emancipated simulacra rather than as poor copies of Western products.

7.1. The freedom of interpretation in hyperreality

Having previously discussed the characteristics of hyperreal copies and museum collections, which are designed to evoke the past, reach perfect visual resemblance and even improve on the originals (with little success, according to Eco), I will now analyse the status given, in Eco's opinion, to the visitors of these places and the space given to their interpretations of these copies. This analysis will lead me to stress the importance of critical reception for Eco, and to argue that it conflicts with the regulation of interpretation, emotions, and imagination by museum curators and zoo and theme park managers. We shall see that, following Eco's views, visitors, as well as all recipients of signs in general, need to be granted freedom of interpretation lest they be reduced to passive consumers who are unable to read signs critically.

The importance of critical reception for Eco

It is useful to situate “Travels in Hyperreality” within the context of Eco’s work in order to understand better the critical standpoint he adopts in relation to American hyperreality, and to start sketching his conception of authenticity. Based on this context, I shall argue that the notion of authenticity implicit in his essay is closely linked to the act of critical reception and interpretation that the authentic artwork enables and which inauthentic hyperreal objects deny.

Throughout his writings as a novelist, an academic, a semiotician and as a critic of popular culture, Eco developed a reception theory that emphasised the role of readers over the intention of the author and stressed the importance of their activity as they decoded the text. In Eco’s view, which he expressed in the 1983 postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (*Il nome della rosa*, 1980), the author should be excluded from the dialogue that takes place between text and reader (529). In the introduction to the French edition of *Lector in Fabula* (*Lector in Fabula*, 1979) that Grasset published in 1985, Eco explains that, as a cultural critic and semiotician writing in the 1960s and 1970s, he was especially interested in the way the addressee (or receiver) made sense of a message or text (6).³⁶⁷ This shows us that he placed firm emphasis on the reception of a message rather than on its production. He dedicated his work to theorising and analysing the way various kinds of messages were received. At the start of his career, he focused on the way society interpreted messages channelled through mass media before shifting his focus to the reception of narrative texts by a model reader (6). In the introduction to *Lector in Fabula*, he suggests that his aesthetics of reception could also apply to artworks (7), which is especially relevant to our study of his descriptions of hyperreal art.

In his essays on popular culture, such as “Travels in Hyperreality”, Eco advocates the critical analysis of the messages that surround us, not least of all those coming from the entertainment industry. It is crucial for him that the recipients of these messages know how to receive them critically, how to subvert and disrupt them, instead of passively consuming them, as he shows throughout his essay “Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare” (1967)³⁶⁸ and reiterates in the preface to the 1986 American edition of *Travels in Hyperreality* (xi). His disapproval of the passive reception that hyperreal destinations prompt thus fits within a larger intellectual project promoting “the virtue of skepticism”, (“Intellectual” 3). According to Eco, mass media submit us to a “bombardment of information” (136), which we can counter by interpreting messages critically, and by endowing them with unexpected meanings, a practice he calls “aberrant decoding” (qtd. in Munteanu 230).³⁶⁹ “Aberrant decoding” means that the recipient of a message “does not necessarily interpret the message in the way its sender . . . intends it to be decoded, or assumes it will be” (M. Caesar 44). Eco argues that it is possible to “restore a critical

³⁶⁷ Eco mentions Roman Jakobson’s communication model.

³⁶⁸ This is the date of the original publication in Italian, the original name of which could not be retrieved.

³⁶⁹ Cristinel Munteanu quotes Eco, “Towards a semiotic inquiry into the TV message”, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, University of Birmingham, n. 3, 1972, 103-21.

dimension to passive reception”, provided that the recipients of the message sent *via* mass media use the “residual freedom” they have left: “the freedom to read it [the message] in a *different* way” than that intended by these media (“Guerilla” 144, 138). The same applies to the waxwork and artwork collections Eco visits in the United States: their curators intend them to have a certain meaning (to evoke art, beauty, the past, etc.) but visitors can interpret them in a different way (as Eco does). “[S]ince you have no power to transform media, try to change every day the way people receive the messages”, Eco writes in an interview for *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* (58), which confirms the goal that he sets for himself as a semiotician and cultural critic. He puts this method into practice in “Travels in Hyperreality”, sidelining the messages intended by curators and collectors in hyperreal museums, and reinterpreting the artworks ironically. Eco thus takes issue with the inauthentic art that restricts critical distance and he suggests that authenticity can be reintroduced by museum visitors who interpret this art critically. However, critical reception is not facilitated in the hyperreality that he portrays, as we shall presently see.

Saturated contexts hinder the free interpretation of art objects and limit visitor experiences

At times, hyperreal objects fail to convey an impression of authenticity because the collections that contain them are too saturated. Overwhelmed by the material accumulation of art objects, visitors are unable to reflect on the artworks they see, which therefore cannot function well as signs, as I briefly mentioned in **Chapter 6.4**. Eco draws attention to the lack of intermediate space between the artworks in several of the museums he visits, thus emphasising that visitors are not encouraged to take a step back and reflect on the art and waxwork collections. For instance, in the Movieland Wax Museum, “[t]he scenes unfold in a full continuum, in total darkness, so there are no gaps between the niches occupied by the waxworks, but rather a kind of connective décor” (“Travels” 13). In the Museum of the City of New York, “the original object and the wax figurine mingle in a continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher” and “fakes . . . serve as connective tissue”, ensuring that the immersive experience of the visitor is uninterrupted (9, 10). In the Ca’ d’Zan villa, once more, “what prevails is the connective tissue, totally reconstructed with arrogant imagination” (27). In Hearst Castle, the curators also seem keen to ensure that the immersive experience of visitors remains unbroken since “the artificial tissue *seamlessly* connects fake and genuine” (23, emphasis added). These villas and museums are as saturated as Disneyland, which “also has no transitional space; there is always something to see” (48). The curators of these exhibitions appear to aim for what Disneyland achieves: “total” “involvement” and “impossible” “detachment” (46).

One of the adverse effects of the immersive experience created by these hyperreal settings is that critical analysis is not encouraged, as illustrated by the Movieland Wax Museum, which causes an “uncritical” “overload” of the senses (14); by the Ripley’s Museum, which is portrayed as the “uncritical accumulation of every curious find” (16);

and by the Museum of the City of New York, which does not “invite” its visitor “to decipher” the principles that guide the reconstructions (9).

The way Eco structures his essay strengthens the impression of a saturated environment. He evokes more than a dozen museums, curiosity collections, zoos and theme parks within a mere fifty-eight pages, and he jumps from one to the other, only once very briefly mentioning the intermediate space that exists outside of these museums (18). His journey could only be represented on a map as a series of disconnected dots marking the location of his stops in a manner reminiscent of jet tourism that only includes top sights, and no empty space in between.

The impression of saturation that Eco stresses seems to have a negative impact on the ability of ideal visitors to interpret what they see. What Eco describes as the symptom of a disease rife in Hearst Castle – “the *obsessive* determination not to leave a single space that doesn’t suggest something” – is partly a failure (23, emphasis added). Signs require readers, and in the collections Eco describes they are too numerous to be read properly. As I have previously argued, Eco’s depictions of collections such as Hearst Castle convey the impression of unhampered material accumulation. By shaping his descriptions of the displays into uninterrupted lists, Eco emphasises the fact that visitors have no time to reflect on the objects they see or appreciate their value, which reduces the objects to stock items. In Hearst Castle especially, the signs-objects cease to have individual meanings and merge into a single impression: that of a crushing monumental art piece. Thus, Eco’s portrayal of Hearst Castle invites a comparison with *Citizen Kane*, in which the wife of Charles Foster Kane appears as overwhelmed by Xanadu as Eco is by Hearst Castle. She is crushed under the weight of Xanadu’s accumulated items and complains of merely being one more object among them, which seems to be a fate shared by the visitors of hyperreal places in Eco’s text.

Visitors are turned into passive consumers

In most of the hyperreal museums and theme parks Eco comments on, visitors are given the role of passive consumers who are expected to take seemingly unproblematic signs at face value. He invites us to wonder whether their experience as museum visitors could be authentic if it is limited to the uncritical acceptance generally expected from consumers. Eco seems to criticise the inauthenticity of phenomena linked specifically to capitalism. We can see this through his assessment of kitsch art and of theme parks.

For the semiotician, kitsch art, which prevails in American hyperreality, is a commodity intended for a public of consumers, a mere “ersatz” that he disfavours (qtd. in Tajani §10). As Ornella Tajani explains, for Eco, kitsch works are inherently uncritical and do not lead in any way to increasing the erudition of the viewer (§10). They target a passive audience of consumers to whom they offer simplified art that can be effortlessly

understood and that does not trouble the mind, contrary to art that offers critical perspectives on daily life (§10).³⁷⁰

There is only a short gap between consumers of art and consumers of entertainment that Eco bridges when he moves on to exploring zoos and theme parks. Nowhere are Eco's ideal visitors of hyperreality as passive as in these places. Taking the examples of Disneyland and Redwood City's Marine World, Eco suggests that entrance into hyperreality is possible on the condition that the subject relinquishes his critical thinking and creativity, and becomes a mere consumer. In Disneyland, which for Eco "is really the quintessence of consumer ideology" ("Travels" 43), visitors' freedom is limited to their ability to choose between several commodities: "Disneyland is a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative" (48). In Redwood City's Marine World, "the visitor isn't on the side of the human master, but on the side of the animals; like them, he has to follow the established routes, sit down at the given moment, buy the straw hats, the lollipops, and the slides that celebrate wild and harmless freedom" (51-52).

Not only are the visitors of hyperreal settings manipulated, they are also dehumanised, turned into "robots" or performing "animals" (52, 48). Eco seems to encourage his readers to question the complicity between hyperreality and capitalism, as suggested by his descriptions of unhampered material accumulation in private collections like Hearst Castle, added to the dehumanising metaphors he directs at the consumers of zoos and theme parks. Eco's criticism of these hyperreal places brings to mind some ideas that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer voiced in their criticism of "the culture industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung, 1944)*. Like Eco, they criticised the cultural products that manipulated audiences and readers into thinking like consumers (142), products that "le[ft] no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience" (126), that discouraged creativity by "exclud[ing] the untried as risk" (134) and obstructed critical thinking by avoiding "[a]ny logical connection calling for mental effort" (137).

Interpretations of artworks are signposted

Eco suggests that the creators of hyperreal settings seek to exert control over visitors by signposting their emotions and interpretations. For instance, he shows that the curators of some museums construct a scenario in which a voice heard over loudspeakers or the layout of the exhibitions indicate to the visitors the emotional script they should follow.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Ornella Tajani quotes Eco, *Apocalittici e Integrati*, Bompiani, Milan, 2008, 69: "Ersatz, facilmente commestibile, dell'arte, è logico che il Kitsch si proponga allora come cibo ideale per un pubblico pigro che desidera adire ai valori del bello e convincersi di fruirne, senza perdersi in sforzi impegnativi". We might translate this as: "An ersatz of art, easy to digest, then, Kitsch logically proposes itself as an ideal food for a lazy public who wishes to adhere to certain values of beauty and convince themselves that they are enjoying it, without engaging in extra effort".

³⁷¹ This technique is not the exclusive domain of Eco's hyperreal museums. It is still widely employed in guidebooks, for instance; editors tell tourists that they will feel certain emotions at certain spots, and suggest that these emotions are guaranteed if one follows the route indicated by the guidebook.

Thus, in wax museums, as a rule, “[t]he moment you enter you are alerted that you are about to have one of the most thrilling experiences of your life” (“Travels” 12-13). In a comparable way, when visitors behold copies of *The Last Supper*, they are expected to experience spiritual feelings: “the voice has warned you that the original fresco is . . . unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimensional wax” (18). It is clear that Eco criticises the limitations imposed on the visitors’ freedom to experience hyperreal art in their own way. He suggests that the emotions signposted by the curators discourage individual experience and turn the visitors into a mass public. However, on second glance, we might object that Eco may be ignoring the variety of emotions that the visitors might be experiencing there. In other words, the assumptions Eco makes on the uniformity of the visitors’ experience contribute to turning them into an anonymous mass.

As we have seen, theme park creators expect visitors to follow a uniform route, and some museums recommend a predefined range of emotions. In addition, we can observe that, according to Eco, the curators of some exhibitions seek to impose a single interpretation of the artworks and waxworks, which contributes once more to the idea that hyperreality is associated with the manipulation of the reaction of visitors. Signposting emotions and interpretations raises concern because it hampers the kind of creative reception that Eco advocates. Such signposting can be found in the Palace of Living Arts, for instance, where interpretations are already given by the curators, conjuring up Baudrillard’s definition of hyperreality as a context where “total control” is imposed over the simulations created (*Simulacres* 179; see also **Chapter 6.2.**). Little seems to be left for the visitors to do or think. In this museum, three statues in particular epitomise the lack of leeway for interpretation:

They are a Dying Slave and a David of Michelangelo. The Dying Slave is a great hulk with an undershirt rolled up over his chest and a loincloth borrowed from a semi-nudist colony; the David is a rough type with black curls, slingshot, and a green leaf against his pink belly. The printed text informs us that the waxwork portrays the model as he must have been when Michelangelo copied him. Not far is the Venus de Milo, leaning on an Ionic column against the background of a wall with figures painted in red. I say ‘leaning’, and in fact this polychrome unfortunate has arms. The legend explains: ‘Venus de Milo brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown Greek sculptor, in approximately 200 B.C.’
 (“Travels” 20)

The simulacra claim to be David “as he must have been”, and worse, the Venus “as she was”, without modal or conditional, thus foreshadowing the end of imagination in hyperreal representation. Furthermore, they skip over the original representations – the ancient Greek Venus and Michelangelo’s marble – and claim to reproduce the living models directly. In other words, they deny the gap that exists between the world and its representations, which makes these statues “Absolute Fake[s]” (31), and the target of Eco’s mockery.

We can see that Eco resists the interpretation provided by the museum and reintroduces critical distance by mocking the “semi-nudist” Dying Slave, the “pink-bell[ied]” David and the “unfortunate” Venus, and by pointing out that they downgrade masterpieces to “a great hulk” and “a rough type” (20). By deriding these statues, Eco reminds readers that they do not have to attribute to these objects the preferred meaning provided by the legend next to them. They can understand them differently.

7.2. The recreative process of authentic simulacra

Eco reintroduces critical distance through mimicry and parody

To a certain extent, Eco’s use of irony reintroduces the critical distance that hyperreal places lack, and with it, ushers in some form of authenticity in between the signs (the artistic fakes) and their meanings. It is my contention that Eco’s humour is a crucial component of his conception of authenticity. His ironic stance exemplifies how one can be critical of hyperreality. In addition, through mimicry and parody, which are in themselves thoughtful imitations, he counterbalances the *uncritical* imitations that fill hyperreal museums.

Eco subverts the strategies that curators devise to guide visitors’ experiences by mimicking them. At times, he takes on the role of the voice guiding the visitors towards signposted emotions. For instance, he describes parts of his experience at the Movieland Wax Museum from the perspective of the second person “you”, which suggests that he plays at narrating the experience for his readers, who are put into the position of passive museum visitors: “you enter a snowy steppe where Zhivago is getting out of a sleigh, followed by Lara . . . You experience a certain emotion, you feel very Zhivago” (13). He adopts the same humorous tone to mimic the emphatic voice that guides the visitors of some museums over loudspeakers: “But when it comes to spiritual emotions nothing can equal what you feel at the Palace of Living Arts” (18). Naturally, the promise of “spiritual uplift” is ironic (17), as indicated by the grotesque descriptions of the wax statues of Van Gogh, Venus de Milo, David and the Dying Slave that follow.

Eco submits the hyperreal destinations to an “aberrant decoding” (Eco qtd. in Munteanu 230).³⁷² Instead of feeling the “spiritual uplift” the museum curators suggest he should feel (“Travels” 17), he presents himself as detached, amused and sceptical. His “aberrant” reinterpretation of some copies, which were not, of course, initially designed to be received in this way, reintroduces a degree of critical reflexivity into hyperreality. I would like to suggest that, with this added reflexivity, these copies become parodies – especially the statues of Van Gogh, Venus, David and the Dying Slave. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon defines parody as follows: “Parody is . . . repetition with critical

³⁷² Cristinel Munteanu quotes Eco, “Towards a semiotic inquiry into the TV message”, published in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, University of Birmingham, n. 3, 1972, 103-21.

distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6).³⁷³ In the light of this definition, Eco’s description of the wax statues can be considered parodic, insofar as he stresses their flaws and their dissimilarity with the originals rather than their resemblance. His irony makes these copies (now parodies) more acceptable from the viewpoint of postmodern aesthetics, because it transforms them into a form of art that acknowledges its constructed nature, its limitations and its indebtedness to past works.³⁷⁴ If critical reception and self-reflexivity make artistic fakes less misleading and therefore more authentic, as Eco seems to suggest, it follows that the fakes he has turned into parodies can be seen as authentic.

The authenticity of learned and self-derisive simulacra

I have argued that the conception of authenticity that underpins Eco’s analysis of hyperreal artworks is based on critical distance, which museum visitors can adopt at the point of reception, for instance through irony. In addition, Eco suggests that this distance can be introduced by curators and craftsmen who create and display fakes, provided that the art shown offers *interpretations* of the originals, and/or acknowledges their limitations as reproductions and the fake nature of their art. When these conditions are met, Eco hints, craftsmen and museum curators can produce simulacra that possess their own authenticity.

For Eco, “Satan’s Crèches” are “redeem[ed]” when they are self-derisive and acknowledge their own limits (12, 30) and when fake and real objects are kept separate. For instance, in New Orleans’ wax museum, which focuses on the history of Louisiana, “[t]he sense of history allows an escape from the *temptations* of hyperreality” (30, emphasis added). This redeeming “sense of history” comes from the self-reflexive nature of the exhibition, which contains “explanatory panels [that] have an undertone of skepticism and humor” (30).

He also deems the reconstructed Villa of the Papyruses in the J. Paul Getty Museum more acceptable than the collections of Hearst Castle and the wax Venus of the Palace of Living Arts (33). He sets this villa apart because there is “nothing makeshift or ingenuous” about it (33), since it was constructed by archaeologists who did not seek to deceive visitors, and who built it with the help of their historical knowledge. It finds favour with Eco because “J. Paul Getty’s archeologists worked from drawings, models of other Roman villas, learned conjectures . . . and they have reconstructed the building as it was or at least as it ought to have been” (32). In other words, the archaeologists offered a learned interpretation of the “incomplete, still buried” original villa (32). Eco compares

³⁷³ Linda Hutcheon reformulates her definition of parody in a way that makes the link I draw between her theory and Eco’s viewpoint even clearer: she writes that “it [parody] is imitation with critical *ironic* distance” (37, emphasis added).

³⁷⁴ I concur with Irmtraud Huber, who notes that “irony and self-reflexivity” are “two hallmarks of postmodernism” (4). Eco also seems to associate postmodernism with irony and reinterpretations. In his view, “postmodern artists were trying to liquidate the rejection of the past tradition, returning to a sort of classical heritage that they revisited and retold through ironical quotations in many forms” (“Intellectual” 47).

this villa to the reconstructed temple of Cybele in the same museum, the authenticity of which is also guaranteed by the archaeological knowledge behind its recreation, since “the museum archaeologists have made sure that it would look the way a little Roman temple must have looked when just finished” (34). The archaeologists who designed this temple did not duplicate an existing place but *imagined* one based on their knowledge of Antiquity. We can thus conclude that these simulacra find favour with Eco because they are based on the archaeologists’ critical reflections on, and reinterpretations of, originals. A clear interpretative gap separates them from their models.

This gap can be likened to the auratic distance that conditions authentic art: it makes authenticity possible. As I have previously mentioned in several instances, Benjamin defines the “aura” partly as “the unique appearance of a *distance*, however near it may be” (15, emphasis added). He indicates that this distance is created at the point of production and reception of an artwork when certain conditions are met.³⁷⁵ However, this distance, which he does not explain in more detail, could also be interpreted as the acknowledgement by art that it cannot make the object it captures fully present, but can only point to the “trace-presence of something no longer literally, physically present but nonetheless still shimmering” (Kaufman 122). Interpreted in this way, Benjamin’s auratic distance can help us understand why the reconstructed villa and temple find favour with Eco. Their creators did not have the intention to achieve a “perfect likeness” and to hide the gap that separates these constructions from their models (“Travels” 4). In other words, these simulacra were not made with the intention of deceiving museum visitors.

In addition to interpretive distance, Eco seems to value self-reflexivity, as illustrated by the Cybele temple, which is reconstructed in a way that shows that it is merely a hypothesis about the original temple:

The Getty Museum leaves the statues white (and in this sense is perhaps guilty of European-style archeological fetishism); but it supplies polychrome marbles for the walls of the temple, presented as *a hypothetical model*. We are tempted to think that Getty is more faithful to the past when he reconstructs the temple than when he displays the statue in its chill incompleteness and the unnatural isolation of the ‘correct’ restoration.
 (“Travels” 34, emphasis added)

Not only is there self-reflexivity in the way this temple is constructed and presented to visitors, but the visitors are also invited to reflect on their own conception of the past by contrasting two interpretations of antique art: one habitual but inaccurate (‘authentic statues are white’), and one unusual but accurate (‘the marble was originally coloured’). Through these examples, Eco stresses that the way we define authenticity in art is context-bound and changes with time: in the twentieth century, white statues were considered authentic, but in Antiquity, we can assume that colourful ones were deemed the norm.

One might question the choice of examples Eco uses to make this point. It is surprising that he did not use the wax Venus with arms to show that authenticity is a

³⁷⁵ In short, for Benjamin, unique, non-reproducible handmade art that people will enjoy contemplatively in a single location possesses this distance.

concept that changes depending on the era and depending on what we are used to considering authentic. As I showed earlier, Eco criticised this wax Venus partly for having arms (20), and thus transgressing the rule of “minimal intervention” that characterises current art restoration. This rule would prohibit the addition of limbs to a damaged work and more generally would “prevent the undertaking of potentially unnecessary interventions with the object beyond those that are strictly necessary for either its continuation to exist as an art object or its aesthetic appearance” (D. A. Scott 4).³⁷⁶ But if we look closer we can see that Eco’s idea of an authentic Venus (one without arms) is comparable to the (false) idea that antique statues were white. Both ideas are habitual but inaccurate, since the original Venus had arms that were lost. A reproduced Venus with arms might thus incite visitors to reflect on their conception of authenticity in a manner comparable to the coloured marbles of the Cybele temple.

The absence of the original artworks in “Travels in Hyperreality”

Eco invites a reflection on the very concept of authenticity by suggesting that it is an imagined and unattainable idea. He conveys this impression by structuring his essay in a manner that highlights the absence of the originals that inspired the copies he observes. He lays emphasis on the absence of authenticity in hyperreality, rather than on its presence elsewhere – in European museums for instance. As I have shown, he also counters curators’ attempts to convince visitors of hyperreal exhibitions of the (relative) authenticity of the art they are beholding. Considering that, for Eco, signs by definition point to something that is “absent” (*Theory* 250), and that signs (such as wax statues) that pretend the contrary, are misleading, I propose to argue that, by pointing out the absence of authenticity, Eco abides by the postmodern conception of authenticity that requires that the limits of art be acknowledged.

Eco often describes hyperreal art in a way that makes his readers forget about the original artworks. He suggests the possibility of a world from which the unique original that would normally serve as a standard is absent. Instead, simulacra are assessed individually or in relation to each other, with little or no reference to the original. The structure of Eco’s travels invites his readers to compare hyperreal spaces and artworks to each other, rather than to originals. His journey does not start with stops at European museums or a description of the original works they contain. If he had included such destinations first, it would have encouraged the readers to assess the American copies that he commented on next based on their (lack of) resemblance to the originals displayed in Europe. Instead, he paints the portrait of a world of independent hyperreal representations. The emphasis is on the way the replicas differ from each other: their

³⁷⁶ See David A. Scott’s *Art: Authenticity, Restoration, Forgery*, the Cotsen Institute Press, UCLA, 2016, for more on the concept of authenticity in relation to forgery and restoration in art. In this volume, Scott presents various viewpoints of seminal art philosophers on issues linked to authenticity, such as “[t]he riddle of the indistinguishability of works of art”, that is to say whether “forgery that produce[s] the same aesthetic effect as a genuine work of art” is authentic (153, 122), and why we can challenge the notions that wax statues (142) and sculptures moulded from living models are inauthentic (151).

scale, the era they were made in, the material they are made of, etc., as exemplified by Eco's description of "seven wax versions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*":

Each is displayed next to a version of the original. . . . [I]f compared to the original, the three-dimensional creation might come off second-best. So, in one museum after the other, the waxwork scene is compared to a reduced reproduction carved in wood, a nineteenth-century engraving, a modern tapestry, or a bronze, as the commenting voice insistently urges us to note the resemblance of the waxwork, and against such insufficient models, the waxwork, of course, wins. ("Travels" 16-17).

Eco gathers up all these reproductions in a single paragraph, linking them to each other by means of difference (some reproductions are in wood, others in bronze, etc.), rather than comparing them to the original, which makes the absence of the original more noticeable. I suggest that Eco's description of these *Last Suppers* spur us to reflect on the (in)ability of art to represent something outside of itself, and more broadly on the idea that all representations are arbitrary and point to the absence of what they supposedly evoke.

Eco's *Last Suppers* embody various interpretations that the idea of the authentic original could inspire. Leonardo da Vinci's original *Last Supper* is not part of Eco's description, which conveys the impression that this original is an idea rather than a physical painting located on the wall of the dining room of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. We can hypothesise that, by distancing the fakes from their European models, Eco conveys the impression that authenticity in art is a distant, imagined and inaccessible idea.

We could interpret the multiple copies that Eco describes, in the passage quoted above as well as throughout "Travels in Hyperreality", in the light of his concept of "unlimited semiosis" (*Theory* 68). Unlimited semiosis describes the fact that access to the referent or object *via* signs is forever delayed³⁷⁷ because we interpret and understand signs by means of other signs.³⁷⁸ In the case of the self-standing network of *Last Suppers*, referral to the authentic item is delayed by the abundance of its reinterpretations, and ultimately made difficult by the absence of this original, which is located on another continent. The authentic original would thus seem to be an inaccessible idea.

The (in)authenticity of transcultural simulacra in Pico Iyer's Video Night in Kathmandu

The reflections on the authenticity of simulacra that Eco initiates can be taken beyond his essay and beyond the realm of art. These thoughts can be used as a tool to examine the way other travellers approach foreign cultures and represent the simulacra they encounter on their journeys (whether they are objects or cultural practices). In this section, I aim to use the conclusions drawn from the analysis of Eco's essay to question

³⁷⁷ The concept of the 'referent' is absent from Eco's own theory of semiotics. I use the Peircean term 'object' as a possible alternative. However, for the sake of clarity and conciseness, I use them as synonyms to refer to the real extra-linguistic object that a sign attempts to refer to.

³⁷⁸ As Michael Caesar explains in his study of Eco's works, Eco borrows the concept of "unlimited semiosis" from Peirce (87).

the conceptions of the authenticity of travellers who compare transcultural simulacra to original items and treat the former as second best. I shall highlight the fact that the situatedness of the travellers in question (their country or culture of origin) has a significant bearing on their conception of authenticity and I shall also suggest that transcultural simulacra could be viewed as new originals and compared in a non-hierarchical way to the items and practices that inspired them.

I borrow the concept of “transculturation” from Mary Louise Pratt, who uses it to refer to “a phenomenon of the contact zone” and to “describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture . . . [and] determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for” (Pratt 7). I term ‘transcultural’ the objects and practices originating from a hegemonic culture that are absorbed, hybridised and reinterpreted by the culture that receives them in ways that are unforeseen or uncontrolled by their culture of origin.

In this section, I shall analyse the descriptions of transcultural objects in Pico Iyer’s travelogue *Video Night in Kathmandu*. While Eco suggested that American copies were inauthentic when compared to European originals, Iyer, who grew up partly in the United States, sometimes hints that the simulacra he encounters in Japan are inferior to American originals, which shows that conceptions of authenticity depend on the speaker’s situatedness.

Despite this difference, Iyer’s text gives evidence of a tension comparable to the one I find in Eco’s essay, insofar as Iyer oscillates between using his country of origin as a standard against which to assess other cultures and examining the transcultural items of these other cultures as creative originals.³⁷⁹ In *Video Night*, he contends that Asian cultures are able to counterbalance American cultural hegemony through the reappropriation and reinterpretation of the products and practices that the United States exports.³⁸⁰ However, some of his descriptions of transcultural objects and practices indicate that he establishes a hierarchy in favour of the original American items, which are seen as more meaningful, or which are simply preferred to their Asian reinterpretations.

In a manner that is reminiscent of Eco, Iyer emphasises the importance of *reception*. For Eco, mass media created a state of “Semiological Guerilla Warfare” (“Semiological” 135). For Iyer, “weapons of cultural warfare – videos, cassettes and computer disks” (*Video* 6), as well as American music and films, are harder to defeat than bombs (5) and have a significant effect on the Asian cultures they impact. Nevertheless, he strives to look at his destinations in terms of cultural exchange rather than in terms of unopposed unilateral hegemony. The main thesis he defends in *Video Night* is that one can find resistance and counterstrategies in Asian cultures colonised by “America’s pop-cultural imperialism” (5). He presents, for instance, a nuanced picture of the Philippines,

³⁷⁹ As regards Pico Iyer’s country of origin, it is worth adding that he grew up with a multicultural background sometimes simplified by critics who comment on his work. His parents were from India, but he grew up between California, where they relocated, and the United Kingdom, where he attended school. As an adult, he settled in Japan.

³⁸⁰ More specifically, Iyer writes about Bali, Tibet, Nepal, China, the Philippines, Burma, Hong Kong, India, Thailand and Japan, based on journeys that took place before 1988.

which appear to be both “the world’s largest slice of American Empire” (168), and an idiosyncratic culture that has appropriated and reinterpreted parts of the American legacy, and more specifically American songs, which have been translated into Filipino and which are sung with no less talent there than in the United States. In a comparable manner, Iyer comments on the Japanese reappropriation of baseball, and on the specific new traits that the sport acquires there – especially concerning the discipline expected of players (321-330). Moving to India, he remarks that Bollywood does much more than duplicate Hollywood, it alters it to suit Indian audiences (252). His readers are thus inclined to see these transcultural items and practices as authentic items standing side-by-side with the American products from which they sprang up.

At times, however, Iyer also seems to assume that American cultural products are the ‘real thing’, and that their reinterpretations come second best. This may be due to the bias he admits at the start of the travelogue when he informs his readers that his focus is as much if not more America than it is Asia: “I went to Asia, then, not only to see Asia, but also to see America, from a different vantage point and with new eyes” (9). This bias could explain why Iyer seems to endorse the idea that Japan degrades the Western items it copies: “if the first familiar truism about Japan was its conspicuous consumption of all things Western, the second was its inability ever to make those things fully its own” (320). Even though Iyer presents this idea as a common prejudice, he seems at times to espouse it, such as when he mocks “the silliness of signs for ‘Jerry Beans’ or ‘Gland Beef’” (the Japanese mistranslations of ‘jelly beans’ and ‘ground beef’ (319). Rather than giving his viewpoint directly, Iyer conveys it obliquely, by stating the words of a Japanese student. Speaking through this student gives him the legitimacy that, being an outsider to the Japanese culture, he lacks: “‘There are few who would seriously object to exposure to foreign habits and customs through copying’, wrote an eighteen-year-old local high school student, Raymond Wong, in a magazine called *Tokyo*, ‘but when absorbed only at face value – and without understanding – the purpose is lost and the original intention devalued’” (320). Iyer is also subtly dismissive of the transculturations of objects of consumption in other countries, as can be seen when he comments on India’s Campa-Cola “which took its name, its logo and its concept from Coke, though sadly not its taste” (280). Thus, the American original continues to influence his appraisal of transcultural items, some of which consequently appear as pale copies.

Iyer’s oblique comment – made through the Japanese student – concerning the value of Japanese transcultural items could be challenged for several reasons. First, because Iyer only reports on what has been lost in translation (the correct spelling, the reference). He does not dwell on what may have been gained. For instance, these transcultural items create a cognitive dissonance that makes Western items uncanny for the Western traveller, thus inviting him to look at his own culture with new eyes. The traveller could interrogate his cultural assumptions on both his own culture and on the culture that he visits, thanks to the sylleptic nature of the transcultural items, which point towards both the culture that exported them and the culture that reinterpreted them. Second, Iyer may be overstating the importance of “the original intention” (320) that is allegedly lost in the process of “transculturation” (Pratt 7). It is likely that the transcultural items acquire new “intentions” and “purposes” that are no less valuable once they are relocated in another

culture.³⁸¹ Third, Iyer's critical evaluation of these simulacra correspond to what Christine Montalbetti identified as a mediocre strategy to represent foreign otherness. Montalbetti explains that when travellers encounter an unknown object, they may decide to compare it to something they and their readership know, which makes the object "readable" and "communication" easier, but which also "absorbs otherness within resemblance" and "which is often used at the expense of the specific character of the object" (177, 178).³⁸² Montalbetti presents this type of "comparison" as inferior to other means by which travellers represent otherness (177).³⁸³

Iyer's examples of transcultural items raise crucial questions regarding the frame of reference used to look at non-Western cultures. When travellers assess transcultural otherness based on its resemblance or dissemblance with what they know, this otherness is less likely to be granted authenticity. However, if they did not think in terms of the Platonic hierarchy that sees simulacra as less valuable than originals, they could apprehend foreign simulacra – such as the Japanese "Jerry Beans" (*Video* 319) – as new originals. From this angle of approach, other countries cease to be "mimic men", to borrow V. S. Naipaul's expression, who fall short when compared to those they mimic. Comparisons of transcultural and original items need not be hierarchical. Once hierarchising comparisons are discarded, the affordances of transcultural hybridity appear clearer: transcultural items invite a redefinition of the notion of authenticity which is no longer exclusively linked to the source or origin of an object or practice but is linked to its creative reception and modifications elsewhere.

Conclusion

Pursuing the demonstration that I started in **Chapter 6**, I have explained why Eco portrayed hyperreal museums and theme parks as inauthentic. I also went further and showed what made some museum displays authentic in Eco's view and how authenticity could be recreated by museum visitors.

I have shown that "Travels in Hyperreality" contains the idea that the authenticity of an artwork is partly created the moment that it is received and interpreted by these visitors. Eco suggests that, for authenticity to be present, hyperreal artworks need to function as signs in a way that does not deceive the beholder. According to him, they can function in this way if the visitors who behold them are given the space and freedom to interpret them critically.

³⁸¹ For a more in-depth theorisation of the change of interpretation that a change of context requires, see Linda Hutcheon's discussion of quotations and intertextuality, in *A Theory of Parody*, 41.

³⁸² "L'altérité . . . est résorbée ainsi dans la ressemblance" (Montalbetti 177). "Le mouvement de mise en rapport auquel procède la comparaison . . . [renvoie] seulement au geste d'une traduction . . . qui s'établit sans doute aux dépens de la spécificité, mais vise l'efficacité de la communication. La relation d'équivalence permet d'attribuer à l'objet exotique ou visuel un substitut qui fonctionne comme opérateur de lisibilité" (178, emphasis added to indicate the sections I translated and quoted in English above).

³⁸³ To illustrate the strategy of the comparison, Christine Montalbetti quotes Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*: "Instead of Konstanz, let us imagine Pontoise, and we will be nearing truth" (my translation of Nerval). The French original reads: "À la place de Constance, imaginons Pontoise, et nous voilà davantage dans le vrai". Montalbetti quotes Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, t.1, Flammarion, 1980, 72.

Most of the time, the hyperreal museums and theme parks Eco describes are not designed in a way that gives visitors sufficient space. Instead, the museum displays are saturated with signs that deny their visitors the distance required to read them. In addition, the interpretations of artworks are often already signposted by means of captions or voice commentary. Hence, theme park visitors are manipulated into behaving like passive consumers, which deprives them of the leeway needed to grant meaning to the experience they are having and to the objects they look at. I have also argued, however, that Eco showed his readers that critical distance could be regained through an “aberrant decoding” of exhibitions (Eco qtd. in Munteanu 230).³⁸⁴ His ironic tone reintroduces the interpretative distance he values, turning the hyperreal copies into parodies and recreating the authenticity that was lost.

All in all, Eco gives us more clues as to what is inauthentic for him than what might be authentic, and the authentic must thus be deduced from the inauthentic. The focus of his essay is clearly on fakes, which have long interested him, as he explains in his “Intellectual Autobiography”, where he states his “penchant for forgeries” (46). One of the remarks he made in the same text suggests that he does, nevertheless, have a criterion for ‘truth’: “it is impossible to speak of fakes if one does not have an underlying criterion for truth” (46). However, it is difficult to determine what his criterion for truth might be.³⁸⁵

Nevertheless, in “Travels in Hyperreality”, Eco shows his preference for artistic fakes that are created by museum curators, craftsmen and archaeologists who wish to offer learned interpretations of originals rather than deceptive duplicates. Therefore, I contended that self-reflexivity, self-criticism and interpretive distance were key criteria of the conception of authenticity he implicitly puts forward in this essay.

I proposed that some of Eco’s descriptions of fakes encouraged a reassessment of the Platonic system of representation in which the original was held sacred and in which its representations and simulacra occupied a secondary position. In “Travels in Hyperreality”, some simulacra are creative enough to find favour with Eco, and others (such as the wax Venus with arms) are so detached from their originals that they could be considered new originals in their own right. In addition, the original artworks that inspired the hyperreal copies Eco describes are conspicuously absent from his essay, which suggests that the notion of authenticity is only a far-off ideal. This impression is reinforced by the networks of fake artworks that he describes. The copies are compared to each other rather than to an original, which conveys the sense that they are self-referential. Through these copies, Eco takes his readers away from *mimesis* (reference to reality) and into *semiosis* (self-referential systems of signs).

I proposed that the insights gained from Eco’s text could also be of help when looking at the representation of simulacra in other travelogues. I drew examples from Pico Iyer’s

³⁸⁴ Cristinel Munteanu quotes Eco, “Towards a semiotic inquiry into the TV message”, published in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, University of Birmingham, n. 3, 1972, 103-21.

³⁸⁵ As Eco puts it in an interview, “[i]t is very difficult to establish what it is true. Sometimes it is easier to establish what is false” (qtd. in Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 169). Raúl Rodríguez-Ferrándiz sources Eco’s words from an interview he gave in April 2015. He references this interview as being contained in *Numero zero*, Harcourt, 2015. No page numbers are given.

Video Night in Kathmandu in which the traveller discusses transcultural objects that have become detached from their culture of origin and deprived of their initial meaning. Iyer adopts an ambiguous position, at times highlighting the creative nature of transcultural items that reinterpret American products, at times presenting these transcultural objects as second best. I suggested that, instead of being assessed as if they were inauthentic duplicates, which reasserts a Western hegemony, transcultural objects and practices could be looked at as emancipated simulacra. To go further in the revaluation of simulacra as authentic items and not as inauthentic copies, we could perhaps turn to the concept of “difference” that Gilles Deleuze develops to replace the allegiance to “the Same” (*Différence* 91).³⁸⁶ The philosopher explains that we should shift away from the Platonic mode of thinking that emphasises the “resemblance” of representations and copies to real models (95).³⁸⁷ According to Deleuze, instead of using similarity and hierarchy to assess copies, we can use difference, which can link and articulate various objects with each other without using ideas of identity, resemblance or opposition (154). His concept constitutes an alternative frame to the Platonic hierarchy that places the original item above its subsequent copies.

In the realm of travel writing, reflections on simulacra could also be explored further with the help of Iyer’s *The Global Soul*. This travelogue focuses on the cosmopolitan experience of frequent flyers, on the dissolution for them of the concepts of home and identity, and on the pervasiveness of corporate capitalism in such places as Hong Kong and in events such as Atlanta’s Olympic Games. This opus invites a further investigation of the loss and gain in meaning that occurs when objects and words are not just transcultured but commodified by their use in globalisation. Iyer suggests that the circulation of goods in the globalised economy has not been accompanied by an equal circulation of meaning. He hints that the words and images borrowed or exported from one culture by another are stripped of their initial meaning, but not necessarily endowed with new ones.³⁸⁸ Nevertheless, what the simulacra that he evokes lose in meaning they gain in creativity. Although the scope of this study does not allow for a more thorough investigation of Iyer’s linguistic simulacra, in the following chapter, I shall have an opportunity to explore the creativity that sometimes stems from the gap between words that have been detached from their initial referents. I shall focus on Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s travelogues, which show us how nonfiction travel texts can take liberties with the reference to reality and approach foreign countries with maximum creative distance.

³⁸⁶ “[L]e Mème”, “la différence” (Deleuze, *Différence* 91).

³⁸⁷ “[L]a ressemblance” (ibid., 95). Although Deleuze was not focusing on art in particular when he developed his theories, James Williams points out that Deleuze’s arguments also touch upon aesthetics (57). I work on the assumption that Deleuze’s theory of multiplicity can help us think about other forms of art too.

³⁸⁸ For examples of these globalised simulacra, see Iyer’s *The Global Soul*, 279, 294.

CHAPTER 8

**Bypassing Postmodern Inauthenticity:
Roland Barthes's and Jean Baudrillard's Attempts
at Writing Non-Referential Travel Texts**

Introduction

I have previously contended that, in the postmodern era, some travel writers have conveyed an impression of authenticity by announcing the artistic nature of their texts, by reflecting on the limits of representation, and by registering the gap that exists between word and world (**Chapter 5**). This gap is at its widest in the travel books of Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, who move away from the assumption that literature can or should be articulated on an extra-textual referent. After travelling to Japan and to the United States respectively, they published short travel essays that cast aside the referential claims that the travel-writing genre traditionally makes: *Empire of Signs* (*L'empire des signes*, 1970) and *America* (*Amérique*, 1986).

These travel essays differ sharply from the conventional forms that travel texts usually take. Barthes's *Empire of Signs* includes photographs and small hand-sketched maps and it is divided into short disjointed chapters titled after seemingly insignificant objects, such as "Chopsticks" and "Packages", or abstract concepts, such as "The Breach of Meaning". These vignettes convey a kaleidoscopic image of a half-fantasised Japan. Although readers gain a sense of the joy that Barthes felt on discovering Japanese culture, the essay is devoid of autobiographical markers. He presents his impressions and sensations in an impersonal manner, and we know virtually nothing about his interactions with Japanese people. The style he adopts conveys the pleasure he felt while living in an exotic culture, and gives the impression that he wishes to explore the affordances of literature.

Baudrillard's *America* also conveys a sense of exhilaration, which stems from long nominal sentences concatenating neologisms and superlatives. This short text sometimes seems to reproduce the speed and distance covered by a moving car, which is the means he chooses to probe the country (*America* 54/55). As Michel Butor did in *Mobile* two decades before, Baudrillard includes catchphrases and snippets of advertising boards he may have passed by, italicising or capitalising them, and separating them from the rest of the text, without providing any interpretation or explanation for them. Like Barthes, Baudrillard does not include his interactions with local people. Instead, he makes sweeping statements about the nature of the United States, which he sees as a fascinating and dynamic utopia and a parody of Europe. At times he describes cities in an abstract manner; at times he makes some statements concerning sociological and political phenomena. The main theme of his essay seems to be the disappearance of reality in the simulation.

America and Empire of Signs can be read as semi-theoretical essays in which Baudrillard and Barthes superimpose their philosophies of the sign on faraway lands. Thus, the authors can be seen as “allegorists”, that is, travellers who

spea[k] of a (foreign) people in order to discuss something else – a problem of concern to the allegorist himself and his own culture . . . the others are subject to the author’s needs. In this sense, the allegorist is a profiteer, with the one difference that he is operating on the symbolic and not the material level. (Todorov, *Human* 349)

An in-depth analysis of their texts shows that Baudrillard reflects on the properties of the simulacra through the United States, while Barthes muses on writing, the text and language through Japan. In addition, both authors reflect on the shortcomings of their culture by comparing it to the cultures of the countries they visit. Due to these allegorical dimensions, their Japan and America appear abstract and detached from geographical and temporal contexts.

My contention is that, for them, literature is at its most authentic when it abandons mimetic pretence, and foregrounds instead the act of writing (for Barthes) and the hegemony of signs (for Baudrillard). Their shared belief in the all-pervasiveness of signs and their call for a use of language that matches the collapse of the referential illusion justify a comparative study of their theories and travelogues. I work on the assumption that these two authors try *not* to refer because they see *mimesis* (the imitative representation of reality) as inauthentic, that is to say, as inadequate to describing the simulation that has replaced reality (for Baudrillard) and as unable to keep impressions alive (for Barthes).³⁸⁹

I shall argue that Barthes and Baudrillard pursue an ideal of non-referentiality, by which I mean that they seek to detach the linguistic sign from its extra-textual referent. In this chapter, I shall explain in more detail what ‘referentiality’ implies for the two authors, why they seek to go beyond it, what rhetorical strategies they devise to reach this goal, and why their claim about the non-referentiality of their texts can be questioned.

I shall start by analysing *Empire of Signs* and *America* on the terms set by their authors: as essays disconnected from extra-textual countries. After presenting the non-referential claims they make at the start of their travel essays, I shall explain these claims in the light of their respective definitions of the ‘sign’ and of its relation to reality. I will call upon a sample of their theoretical works that are particularly suited for this purpose: Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (*Simulacres et Simulation*, 1981) and *Forget Foucault* (*Oublier Foucault*, 1977) on the one hand, and Barthes’s *Mythologies* (*Mythologies*, 1957), *S/Z* (*S/Z*, 1970) and *New Critical Essays* (*Nouveaux essais critiques*, 1972) on the other.³⁹⁰ As a consequence, the first third of this chapter will be dedicated to clarifying the theoretical framework that is required to understanding the authors’ stylistic and rhetorical choices.

³⁸⁹ Baudrillard uses the words “simulation” and “simulacrum” to refer to the same phenomenon.

³⁹⁰ Most of the English translations of their theoretical texts are my own, with the exception of Barthes’s *The Grain of the Voice*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, and *New Critical Essays*. To avoid confusion, when the translations are my own, I shall refer to Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s theoretical books by their French titles because the page numbers I provide as reference refer to French editions.

I will then move on to examining the rhetorical strategies they develop to bypass referentiality. I will first show that they undermine the authority of the author before demonstrating that they substitute references to the geographical and temporal contexts with abstract reflections on writing (for Barthes) and on the properties of the simulacra (for Baudrillard). I will provide evidence that Barthes and Baudrillard emphasise the *signifier* (the word as an empty container not yet associated with meaning) over the *signified* (the possibility that the *signifier* can be exchanged for a stable meaning that would give information about an extra-textual reality).

I will argue that their preference for non-referentiality is partly underpinned by a rejection of dialectics, which, for Barthes, means a rejection of the argumentative thinking built on the triad thesis/antithesis/synthesis, and, for Baudrillard, a denial that binary oppositions of concepts can still help us make sense of the world. I will show that dialectics nevertheless resurfaces each time they oppose their European or French addressees to exotic others. This analysis will eventually lead me to challenge their non-referential claim and point out its ethical limits.

8.1. The authors' statements of intention

Japan is a fantasy and America a fiction

Barthes and Baudrillard place atypical demands on their readers, who are encouraged to accept that they are entering a parallel space – the space of writing in *Empire of Signs*, and the space of simulation in *America*. From the outset, Barthes's Japan is portrayed as a product of the author's "fantasy" and as a non-representational "system" (3/11):

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also – though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse) – isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan. (*Empire* 3/11)³⁹¹

Barthes's Japan is not presented as a personal lived experience, but as an artificially constructed text. When Barthes warns readers that *Empire of Signs* exists in parallel to the real Japan,³⁹² he embraces the idea that art (in this case writing) should acknowledge its

³⁹¹ "Si je veux imaginer un peuple fictif, je puis lui donner un nom inventé, le traiter déclarativement comme un objet romanesque, fonder une nouvelle Garabagne, de façon à ne compromettre aucun pays réel dans ma fantaisie (mais alors c'est cette fantaisie même que je compromets dans les signes de la littérature). Je puis aussi, sans prétendre en rien représenter ou analyser la moindre réalité (ce sont les gestes majeurs du discours occidental), prélever quelque part dans le monde (*là-bas*) un certain nombre de traits (mot graphique et linguistique), et de ces traits former délibérément un système. C'est ce système que j'appellerai: le Japon" (Barthes, *L'empire* 11).

³⁹² By 'real' Japan and the 'real' United States, I intend to refer to the extra-textual, geographical entities that bear those names.

constructed nature. By openly stating the arbitrariness of the literary Japan that he will present, Barthes complies with the ideal he expressed in *Mythologies* long before his Japanese journey: “If there is a ‘health’ of language, it is the arbitrariness of the sign which is its foundation” (*Mythologies* 212).³⁹³

To understand this positioning better, we can draw a parallel between Barthes’s opening of *Empire of Signs* and Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effect” (Brecht 91). Barthes himself obliquely invites this parallel by praising Japanese Bunraku theatre in a manner that is reminiscent of Brecht’s appraisal of Chinese acting. Brecht praised Chinese acting because it was “played in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying with the characters in the play” (91) and it dispelled the “illusion” that “the events [we]re really taking place” (91, 92).³⁹⁴ In a comparable manner, Barthes acclaims Japanese Bunraku theatre because the actors who manipulate the puppets and read the text are clearly visible on stage, and acknowledge rather than hide the artistic nature of their performance, by contrast with “Western theatre” that “conceal[s] the very artifice” of the performance (Barthes, *Empire* 61/84).³⁹⁵ Therefore, the opening of *Empire of Signs* can be seen as Barthes’s attempt at highlighting the artistic nature of his representation of Japan in a somewhat Brechtian manner.

In a manner comparable to Barthes, Baudrillard disengages his *America* from the United States understood as a geographical space with borders and cities. He presents it as a “hyperreality”, a “simulacrum”, a “utopia” and an “abstraction” (28/32, 41/44, 1/7).³⁹⁶ One is not supposed to relate his United States to a notion of reality, but rather to “enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction” (29/33).³⁹⁷ Despite the paratextual clue given by the title of the book, and despite the real cities named in the text (Salt Lake City, New York, Los Angeles, etc.), the readers of *America* sense that they are not reading a travel text about the United States – hence the “nation-wide consensus . . . among [American] reviewers that he [Baudrillard] had not really ‘addressed’ America”, as William Stearns and William Chaloupka point out (1). When taken as a text about the real United States, *America* immediately appears inaccurate, as stressed by Thomas Dumm, who mocks Baudrillard’s claim that there are “no elevators in Los Angeles” (*America* 125/120):³⁹⁸ “Now, I have been to the Bonaventure Hotel and I have seen the elevators there. How did Baudrillard get to the top of the Bonaventure to have his drink? Did he drive a car?” (Dumm 111).

We can begin to explain Baudrillard’s non-referential claim by examining his theory of simulacra and simulation. He asserts that we live in a historical moment dominated by

³⁹³ “[S]’il y a une santé du langage, c’est l’arbitraire du signe qui la fonde” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 212).

³⁹⁴ As Jonathan Culler explains, Brecht’s “critical distance”, which impedes the immersion of the audience in the illusion of the play, “provided the new dramatic practice Barthes had been looking for” (Barthes 51). Diana Knight also stresses Barthes’s “[f]ascination with the alienation technique of Brecht’s epic theatre” (29).

³⁹⁵ “Prenez le théâtre occidental des siècles derniers; sa fonction est essentiellement de manifester ce qui est réputé secret . . . tout en cachant l’artifice même de la manifestation” (Barthes, *L’empire* 84).

³⁹⁶ “[H]yperréalité”, “simulacre”, “utopie”, “abstraction” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 32, 44, 7).

³⁹⁷ “Ce qu’il faut c’est entrer dans la fiction de l’Amérique, dans l’Amérique comme fiction” (ibid., 33).

³⁹⁸ “Pas d’ascenseur . . . à Los Angeles” (ibid., 120).

simulation, which means that “the signs of the real” have created a “resurrected” reality that has utterly replaced “the real” (*Simulacres* 11).³⁹⁹ Non-referentiality enables Baudrillard to be true to the idea, argued through a number of his theoretical works, that signs are all we have, that they can no longer be exchanged for extra-textual meaning – as he puts it, “[t]he sphere of the real is no longer exchangeable against that of the sign” (“Radical” 62) – and that simulation has replaced reality, to which we can no longer refer.

Probing these texts for depth is discouraged

Not only do Barthes and Baudrillard discourage attempts to read *Empire of Signs* and *America* as nonfiction, but they also deter their readers from probing these texts with the tools of critical commentary. To do these travelogues justice, before proceeding to challenge the preferred reading their authors intended for them, it seems necessary to lay out Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s perspectives on critical analysis.

For Barthes, critical analysis cannot discover the core meaning of a text: all it can do is create coherence through a commentary (a new text), that will exist in parallel to the text it sought to explain. In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes explicitly criticises “the Occident” for its tendency to “superimpos[e] layers of meaning”, or worse, force meaning onto texts: “we systematically submit utterance (in a desperate filling-in of any nullity which might reveal the emptiness of language) to one or the other of these *significations* (or active fabrications of signs): symbol and reasoning, metaphor and syllogism” (70/94, 73/100, 70/94-96, emphasis original).⁴⁰⁰ As he explains in *New Critical Essays*, “the analytical mind . . . can only double the explained world by a new world *to be explained*” (38/103, emphasis original).⁴⁰¹ By contrast, the kind of literary analysis that Barthes favours and applies consists in exploring the multiple dimensions of a text, rather than uncovering an overarching meaning: in his own words, the text is “a construction of layers (or levels, or systems), whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes” (qtd. in Culler, *Barthes* 82).⁴⁰²

If we now turn to Baudrillard, we can see that he shares Barthes’s interest in a renewal of criticism. Forget the impulse to decipher and criticise, urges Baudrillard: America “is a place of signs of an imperious necessity, an ineluctable necessity – but void of all meaning,

³⁹⁹ “Il s’agit d’une *substitution au réel des signes du réel*”, “l’ère de la simulation s’ouvre donc par une liquidation de tous les référentiels – pire: par *leur résurrection* artificielle dans les systèmes de signes” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 11). I have emphasised the words I quoted in English above.

⁴⁰⁰ Barthes asserts that “notre poésie” (classical French poetry, as opposed to haiku) is based on “superimposed layers of meaning” – “des couches superposées de sens” (*L’empire* 100). “[En] Occident” (94), “nous soumettons systématiquement l’énonciation (dans un colmatage éperdu de toute nullité qui pourrait laisser voir le vide du langage) à l’une ou l’autre de ces *significations* (ou fabrications actives de signes): le symbole et le raisonnement, la métaphore et le syllogisme” (96).

⁴⁰¹ “[L]’esprit analytique . . . ne peut que doubler le monde expliqué par un nouveau monde *à expliquer*” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 103, emphasis original).

⁴⁰² Jonathan Culler quotes Barthes, “Style and its Image”, in *Literary Style: a Symposium*, edited by Seymour Chatman, Oxford UP, 1971, 10.

arbitrary and inhuman, and one crosses it without deciphering them” (127/122).⁴⁰³ His strategy consists in driving through the United States, crossing the country rather than stopping to delve deeper into its culture. At any rate, considering that, for Baudrillard, the signs that compose the simulation we live in “dissimulate that there is nothing” (*Simulacres* 17), probing the depths of such signs with analytical tools in search of meaning has become infeasible. For Baudrillard, there are no depths to be reached, no original world outside simulacra. Rather than vainly exerting critical thinking, one should relish the ecstasy of non-referential signs: “a culture of simulation and fascination, and not always the culture of production and meaning: here is what could be proposed that would not be just a wretched anti-culture” (*Simulacres* 99).⁴⁰⁴ We can interpret “production” here as the production of deceptive signs of reality, which would explain why Baudrillard would like to avoid it (see **Chapter 6.4**). As for “meaning”, Baudrillard explains that it is a product of the dialectical-minded era that he would like to leave behind. He opposes “the dialectical reason that bound itself to meaning” to the disappearance of reality (and “meaning”) that he seeks to document (*Simulacres* 231).⁴⁰⁵

In *America*, he hints that we should adopt an attitude of “fascination” and “sideration” and relish the disappearance of the referential power of signs (see for instance 1/7, 7/12, 103/101).⁴⁰⁶ A brief look at the French meanings of the verbs ‘*fasciner*’ and ‘*sidérer*’ can help us interpret these two words better. Someone who accepts being ‘*fasciné*’ and ‘*sidé*’ as Baudrillard does, chooses in fact to be paralysed or transfixed by an external source (often the numinous influence of the stars), the domination of which they choose not to resist (*DAF*). In other words, Baudrillard indicates that it is vain to resist the simulation we live in, as any act of resistance is re-absorbed by the simulation (*Oublier* 62, 85; *Simulacres* 40).

I have made these preliminary remarks regarding Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s rejection of a certain type of literary analysis for two reasons. First, they give clues as to why the authors decided not to attempt to explain or impose meaning on Japan and America. Second, I aimed to stress that their texts were not made to be probed with the type of literary analysis that I practice, and it is in full knowledge of this that I proceed with a reading that goes against their preferred methods.

⁴⁰³ With the adjective “imperious”, Baudrillard’s America appears as much an *empire* of signs as Barthes’s Japan: “c’est le lieu des signes d’une impérieuse nécessité, d’une inéluctable nécessité, mais vides de sens, arbitraires et inhumains, qu’on traverse sans les déchiffrer” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 122).

⁴⁰⁴ “[U]ne culture de la simulation et de la fascination, et non toujours celle de la production et du sens: voilà ce qui pourrait être proposé qui ne soit pas une misérable anticulture” (ibid., 99).

⁴⁰⁵ “[L]a raison dialectique qui s’attachait au sens” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 99).

⁴⁰⁶ See also the chapter of *America* titled “L’Amérique sidérale” and translated as “Astral America”. In addition, in *Simulacres et Simulation*, Baudrillard suggests that “fascination” is both the cause and consequence of the “destruction of meaning” (129, 220).

8.2. Definitions of the sign, meaning and referentiality

The impossible exchange of 'signs' for 'the real' in Jean Baudrillard's works

Barthes's and Baudrillard's definitions of the sign and of its relation to the real referent can help us understand the non-referentiality that guides their rhetorical choices in *Empire of Signs* and *America*.

According to Baudrillard, it is no longer possible to reach a referent outside of semiosis. Instead, what one can do – and what he does throughout his works – is point to the disappearance of the real and to the properties of the simulation that has replaced it. If one were to try to refer to reality, one would be acting like the simulation, which produces signs of reality to conceal the absence of reality (*Simulacres* 17).

We can therefore better contextualise the motivation Baudrillard gives for his journey to the United States: “The only question in this journey is: how far can we go in the extermination of meaning, how far can we go in the non-referential desert form without cracking up and, of course, still keep alive the esoteric charm of disappearance?” (*America* 10/15).⁴⁰⁷ His travels are presented as an allegorical path covering conceptual rather than geographical distance, as he explores the disappearance of reality *through* the United States, while trying to steer clear of referential language.

Defining the 'sign', 'signifier', 'signified' and 'reference' with Roland Barthes

Scholars unanimously stress that Barthes's thought evolved throughout his career.⁴⁰⁸ As a result, explaining his definitions of the 'sign', 'signifier', 'signified', and 'reference' is challenging. At first, he embraced structuralism as an inspiring method, which he applied for instance to the criticism of culture in *Mythologies* in the 1950s, before asserting in an interview with Stephen Heath in *Signs of the Times* in 1971 that he had outgrown it (*Grain* 129/123). *Empire of Signs* is located after his poststructuralist shift and can be better explained with the help of the theoretical works he wrote and the interviews he gave around that time. Yet, his earlier works also shed light on his understanding of the 'sign'. Despite the shifts in Barthes's theoretical outlook, I shall attempt to clarify what he meant by *signifier*, *sign*, *signified* and *reference*, in this order.

Diana Knight suggests that for Barthes, the “signifier” refers to “the fantasmatic dimension of reality” (75). The *signifier* also seems to refer to an empty envelope that gives

⁴⁰⁷ “Nulle autre question à ce voyage que: jusqu'ou peut-on aller dans l'extermination du sens, jusqu'ou peut-on avancer dans la forme désertique irréférentielle sans craquer, et à condition bien sûr de garder le charme ésotérique de la disparition” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 15).

⁴⁰⁸ For Diana Knight, Barthes “does not necessarily have a consistent theoretical position on reality and representation” (10), while Bernard Comment stresses that he “celebrates here what he rejects there, rejecting it to better celebrate it later” (“exaltant ici ce qu'il rejette là, ne rejetant que pour mieux exalter”, 15). Jonathan Culler remarks that Barthes's “writing is too playful to authorize a definite conclusion” (*Barthes* 16), while Jean-Louis Calvet explains that “Barthes is not a man of systems, he is above all a man of intuitions, of immediate reactions, of moods . . . it would be bold to say that it constituted a 'theory': a way to look at the word, rather” (“Car Barthes n'est pas un homme de système, il est avant tout un homme d'intuitions, de réactions immédiates, d'humeurs . . . il est aventureux de dire que cela constituait une 'théorie': un regard plutôt”, 176).

the writer the (blank) space he wishes for, and that enables him to create Japan anew. Barthes's preference for the *signifier* is clearly visible in *Empire of Signs*, as he relishes the relief from semiotic recognition that the Japanese language affords him. Being ignorant of the language, he can enjoy its sounds (its *signifiers*) without associating them to societal and historical connotations (*signifieds*):

The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner . . . in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue: the regional and social origins of whoever is speaking, his degree of culture, of intelligence, of taste . . . the pure significance, forms around me, . . . a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness . . . I live . . . delivered from any fulfilled meaning.
(*Empire* 9/21)⁴⁰⁹

I propose to argue that in *Empire of Signs* Barthes chooses non-referential strategies in order to maintain this state of “pure significance”, which gives a central role to the *signified* (9/21). In an interview about *S/Z* and *Empire of Signs*, Barthes explains that he sees Japan as superior to “our Western societies” because it epitomises the “liberation of the signifier” (*Grain* 84/83).⁴¹⁰ In the same interview he describes the desire he had of “entering completely into the signifier” when he was in Japan (84/83).⁴¹¹

The preference Barthes shows for the *signifier* in *Empire of Signs* can be explained by the negatively-connoted definitions of the sign and *signified* he gives in his earlier writings. The early Barthes defined the sign as the correlation of an empty *signifier* and a chosen *signified* resulting in a sign that was “full” of meaning (*Mythologies* 197-198).⁴¹² In this text, he indicates that the *signifier* is empty and can be freely associated with multiple *signifieds*, but becomes a sign the moment it is tied to a final meaning (198). He hints that language is rich when meaning is not fixed and when variations in *signifier-signified* associations remain dynamic. The way he writes *Empire of Signs* suggests that the writer's task is to preserve this movement. Once formed, the sign contains “a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a moral, a zoology, a Literature” (*Mythologies* 203).⁴¹³ This definition

⁴⁰⁹ “La masse bruissante d’une langue inconnue constitue une protection délicieuse, enveloppe l’étranger . . . d’une pellicule sonore qui arrête à ses oreilles toutes les aliénations de la langue maternelle : l’origine, régionale et sociale, de qui la parle, son degré de culture, d’intelligence, de goût . . . La langue inconnue, dont je saisis . . . la pure signification, forme autour de moi, . . . un léger vertige, m’entraîne dans son vide artificiel . . . je vis . . . débarrassé de tout sens plein” (Barthes, *L’empire* 21).

⁴¹⁰ “Le Japon [possède] . . . une supériorité partielle mais indiscutable sur nos sociétés occidentales où la libération du signifiant est entravée” (Barthes, *Grain* 83).

⁴¹¹ “[J]’ai éprouvé la nécessité d’entrer entièrement dans le signifiant” (ibid., 83).

⁴¹² “[L]e signifiant est vide, le signe est plein, il est sens. Soit un caillou noir: je puis le faire signifier de plusieurs façons, c’est un simple signifiant; mais si je le charge d’un signifié définitif (condamnation à mort, par exemple, dans un vote anonyme), il deviendra un signe” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 198); “the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is full of meaning. Take a black stone: I can make it signify in several ways, it is a simple signifier; but if I load it with a definitive signified (a death sentence, for example, in an anonymous vote), it will become a sign”.

⁴¹³ “[C]ontenait tout un système de valeurs: une histoire, une géographie, une morale, une zoologie, une Littérature” (ibid., 203).

sheds light on the preference Barthes shows for the *signifier*: as long as it not tied to a *signified*, the *signifier* remains the space for play, creativity and impressions.⁴¹⁴

“Reference” to an extra-textual reality appears not only undesirable but also impossible, if we follow the idea Barthes expresses in *S/Z* and “Theory of the Text” (“Texte (la théorie du)”, 1973). For him, “Reference”, which he capitalises, is an open-ended, dynamic, and intra-linguistic movement of signs that eventually leads back to literature: “what lies behind the sheet of paper is not the real, the referent, it is Reference, the ‘subtle immensity of writings’” (*S/Z* 111, 118).⁴¹⁵ In the light of this statement, which we can connect to the idea he expressed in “Theory of the Text”, that “there is always language before and around the text” (§14),⁴¹⁶ we can more accurately conceive why *Empire of Signs* speaks about literature more than it speaks about Japan.

Roland Barthes’s search for an ideal language

Before analysing *Empire of Signs*, I would like to foray into the types of writings that Barthes seems to take as models. In stark contrast with the attack he makes in *Mythologies* against the ideological emptying of the sign (230), in his other texts Barthes sometimes expresses the desire for a language that would be emptied of history and value. It is my contention that opting for a style that gives a non-referential impression affords him the possibility of freeing the *signifier* from previous associations that he sees as cumbersome, and it enables him to invest this *signifier* with his own imaginary. Avant-garde poetry and haiku epitomise the type of *signifier-signified* relations that he implicitly portrays as more authentic writing. A short look at the virtues he sees in these models will later enable us to comprehend better the stylistic choices that he makes in *Empire of Signs*.

He praises avant-garde poetry (especially Stéphane Mallarmé’s)⁴¹⁷ for its ability to avoid “description” and “expression” (which he disfavours), and to find a balance between “silence” and the renewal of literature (*Le degré zéro* 63, 59).⁴¹⁸ He asserts that such poetry “tries to turn the sign back into meaning” in order to “reach not the meaning of the words but the meaning of the things” (*Mythologies* 220; see also the same analysis of avant-garde poetry in *S/Z* 118).⁴¹⁹ Antoine Compagnon explains that, for Barthes, “[o]nly the poem can still redeem literature, resuscitate it and save the world” (436).⁴²⁰

In *Empire of Signs*, what Knight calls Barthes’s “utopian aspiration” crystallises around

⁴¹⁴ In his analysis of Marcel Proust’s place names, Barthes expresses a more positive view of the *signified*, hinting that it is composed of one’s synaesthetic impressions of a referent, and that it is a “space for imagination” – “la place de l’imaginaire” (*Nouveaux essais* 129). Thus, at times the *signified* seems constrained by historical connotations, and at times it is free to be associated with fantasy. I read this seeming contradiction as the expression of what Bernard Comment called Barthes’s “changing thought” (“*pensée en mouvement*”, 15).

⁴¹⁵ “[L]a Référence”, “mais ce qu’il y a derrière le papier, ce n’est pas le réel, le référent, c’est la Référence, la ‘subtile immensité des écritures’” (Barthes, *S/Z* 111, 118).

⁴¹⁶ “[I]l y a toujours du langage avant le texte et autour de lui” (Barthes, “Texte (théorie du)” §14).

⁴¹⁷ Mallarmé is mentioned several times in *Empire of Signs*. See, for instance, 100/140.

⁴¹⁸ “[D]escription”, “expression”, “silence” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 63, 59).

⁴¹⁹ “[E]lle [la poésie d’avant-garde] s’efforce de retransformer le signe en sens [pour] . . . atteindre non au sens des mots mais au sens des choses mêmes” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 220).

⁴²⁰ “Seul le poème peut encore racheter la littérature, lui rendre vie et sauver le monde” (Compagnon, *Antimodernes* 436).

haiku poetry (7). Both Knight (7) and Compagnon (436) stress the importance of epiphanic haiku for Barthes, who seeks throughout his career to come closer to an aesthetics of “presence” that acknowledges the limits of language, the value of silence, and the pleasure of the text, as Compagnon argues (440). For Barthes, haiku does not “descri[be]”, “defin[e]”, “instruct, express, divert”; it is “insignificant” and simply “designat[es]” that something is present (*Empire* 82-84/113-115).⁴²¹ Haiku “enters into that suspension of meaning . . . which makes [commentary] impossible” and encourages the reader to “suspend language” (81/112, 72/98).⁴²² It is “open to meaning” and yet “means nothing”, and Barthes praises it because, according to him, in haiku “what is abolished is not meaning but any notion of finality” (69/93, 82/113).⁴²³

The ideal literature that he adumbrates through his appraisal of haiku and avant-garde poetry can partly explain his attempt to avoid description, definition and instruction in *Empire of Signs* in favour of an aesthetics of presence and suspended meaning, which possesses specific stylistic traits that I shall study in the next sections.⁴²⁴

8.3. Undermining the authority of the author

Roland Barthes’s removal of the authorial “I”

To create an effect of non-referentiality and come closer to the kind of literature he implicitly presents in his theoretical writings as more authentic, Barthes effaces himself from *Empire of Signs*. It is clear that, as author of the text, he is behind every word. Yet he constructs this text in such a way as to make his presence as author, narrator and traveller inconspicuous.

The removal of authorial presence can be seen through the rapid reduction of the autobiographical ‘I’ after the first chapter. Although it does not disappear completely, this pronoun dwindles drastically after the opening chapter “Faraway”, in which Barthes only takes up his authorial role to dissociate the “system” he calls “Japan” from any “real country”, and to distinguish “the author”, to whom he refers in the third person, from the “I”, who writes about this author (3/11, 4/14).⁴²⁵ It is possible to interpret this diminution of the ‘I’ in various ways.

It could be read as an attempt to distance himself from his mother tongue and its cultural and historical background, and mimic the Japanese sentence structure in the hope that it will help him achieve a freshness of expression. This hypothesis is supported by

⁴²¹ I have added emphasis to the words I quoted above: “*insignifiant*” (Barthes, *L’empire* 112), “le haïku ne sert à aucun des usages concédés à la littérature . . . *instruire, exprimer, distraire*” (113), “Ce qui disparaît, dans le haïku, ce sont . . . *la description . . . et . . . la définition*” (114), “le haïku s’amincit jusqu’à la pure et seule *désignation*” (115).

⁴²² “[L]e travail de lecture qui y est attaché est de suspendre le langage”, “[il] entre dans cette suspension du sens” (ibid., 98, 112).

⁴²³ “[L]e haïku ne veut rien dire”, “il semble offert au sens” (93), “ce qui est aboli ce n’est pas le sens, c’est toute idée de finalité” (ibid., 113).

⁴²⁴ For further details about Barthes’s view on haiku, see his *Preparation of the Novel (Préparation au roman, 1978-1980)*.

⁴²⁵ “[C]e système”, “pays réel”, “L’auteur” (Barthes, *L’empire* 12, 14).

the remark Diana Knight makes when she suggests that Barthes had done “some retrospective research into the structure of Japanese” before writing the second chapter of *Empire of Signs* (152). In this chapter, he commends the Japanese grammatical subject for being “a great envelope empty of speech, and not that dense kernel which is supposed to direct our sentences, from outside and from above” (*Empire* 7/16).⁴²⁶ The way he describes this grammatical subject brings to mind the God-like figure of the author that he rejects in “The Death of the Author” (“La mort de l’auteur”, 1967).

His removal of the subject ‘I’ can be seen as an attempt to reach a perception of Japan that would be free from the French literature and culture that make the grammatical subject a “dense kernel” (7/16). Barthes hints that the French grammatical subject is too compromised by habits of thought and too imbued with an authoritative (“fatherly”) “culture” to be able to keep travellers’ impressions alive (7/16).⁴²⁷ From the outset, he expresses a wish to explore uncharted literary territory, distancing himself from such canonical French travel writers as Pierre Loti and Voltaire (4/12). Therefore, when he asserts that “an enormous labor of *knowledge* is and will be necessary” (4/12, emphasis original),⁴²⁸ we can interpret it as a wish to perceive the Orient anew and to go beyond the *recognition* of literary paths already signposted by French cultural habits.

By removing the ‘I’, Barthes also shifts the focus away from himself as acting subject and onto the impressions he gets. Effacing the ‘I’ can be seen as an attempt to convey live impressions without the mediation of an authoritative and culturally heavy ‘I’. Instead of presenting himself as author, Barthes presents himself as a “reader”, which contradicts the first chapter of *Empire of Signs*, in which he explicitly wrote that he was the active agent behind the construction of “the system” he called “Japan” (3/11): “I am, in that country, a reader” (79/109).⁴²⁹ He puts himself in the position of the subject who receives impressions, rather than in the position of the author who controls their organisation on the page: “The author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan. Rather, he has done the opposite: Japan has starred him with any number of ‘flashes’” (4/14).⁴³⁰ He conveys the impression that Japan was already there, awaiting him, and that the impressions he describes came from Japan, and not from his reshaping of his experience into a text. As we can see from the passage I have just quoted, Barthes becomes the grammatical *object* on which Japan acts. This self-effacement of the author can also be seen in the text through recurring impersonal verbs and expressions that suggest that events unfold by themselves, out of sheer necessity, such as: “to occur”, “to happen”, “the point is to”,

⁴²⁶ “[U]ne grande enveloppe vide de la parole, et non ce noyau plein qui est censé diriger nos phrases, de l’extérieur et de haut” (Barthes, *L’empire* 16).

⁴²⁷ “[L]a langue paternelle, celle qui . . . nous fait à notre tour, pères et propriétaires d’une culture” (ibid., 15).

⁴²⁸ “[U]n énorme travail de connaissance est, sera nécessaire” (ibid., 12).

⁴²⁹ “[J]e suis là-bas lecteur” (ibid., 109).

⁴³⁰ “L’auteur n’a jamais, en aucun sens, photographié le Japon. Ce serait plutôt le contraire: le Japon l’a étoilé d’éclairs multiples” (ibid., 14).

“to be necessary” (107/149, 79/109, 28/42, 26/42).⁴³¹ These verbs convey a sense of naturalness, as if there was no agent behind the writing.

The quasi-absence of the ‘I’ in *Empire of Signs* could also be interpreted as a way to keep “the plural of the text” alive (*S/Z* 44) and to direct his readers towards “Reference” (*S/Z* 111). In other words, Barthes may be hinting that texts are intertextual and always refer to other texts. In *S/Z*, he writes that, “[t]he more undetectable the origin of speech, the more plural the text. In the modern text, the voices are altered until all points of reference are denied: the speech, better still, language, speaks, that is all” (43-44).⁴³² Without an ‘I’ to take charge of the contents that are written down, the intertextual origin of the text comes to the fore. We can see Barthes’s non-acceptance of the authorial role as a minor expression of a broader project of authority destruction outlined in “The Death of the Author” (“La mort de l’auteur”). In that essay, Barthes takes a stance against the notion of the author as a unique authority from where meaning originates. For him, such a notion prevents the open-endedness, “the play of the *signifier*”, the “text’s plural” from blossoming (*New Critical Essays* 79/140, emphasis added).⁴³³ For Barthes, the language of the writer is necessarily intertextual and the origin of the text unidentifiable: “We now know that a text is not made of a line of words, releasing a unique meaning, in a sense theological (which would be the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but a space of multiple dimensions, where diverse writings, none of which original, blend and challenge each other” (“La mort de l’auteur” 65).⁴³⁴

The removal of the ‘I’ in Barthes’s travelogue can also be seen as the expression of his preference for an oblique language. By removing the ‘I’, he makes *indirect* claims about Japan, expressed through the impressions he describes. Barthes hints that, to try and reach some form of authenticity, one needs to use language in a way that is not assertive: “in literature as in personal interactions, if I want to approach ‘truth’, I need to be . . . as ‘indirect’ as possible” (qtd. in Coste 19).⁴³⁵ In Barthes’s view, a written work that is assertive “can keep none of its author’s ‘good faith’” because as the author “cannot but show that he wants to be believed, he never escapes the system of theatre” (qtd. in Comment 136).⁴³⁶ Thus, for instance, an author who wants to communicate generosity will only succeed in using a “language marked by the signs of generosity”, because “the

⁴³¹ I have added emphasis to the words I quoted: “En n’importe quel endroit de ce pays, *il se produit* une organisation spéciale de l’espace” (149), “là-bas . . . il *advient* toujours quelque chose” (109), “*il s’agit . . . de*” (46). Richard Howard translated “Il faut” by “we must return to”, but in the French original the subject is impersonal, hence my retranslation as “to be necessary” (26/42).

⁴³² “Plus l’origine de l’énonciation est irrepérable, plus le texte est pluriel. Dans le texte moderne, les voix sont traitées jusqu’au déni de tout repère: le discours, ou mieux encore le langage, parle, c’est tout” (Barthes, *S/Z* 43-44).

⁴³³ “[L]e jeu du signifiant”, “le pluriel du texte” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 140).

⁴³⁴ “Nous savons maintenant qu’un texte n’est pas fait d’une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens, en quelque sorte théologique, (qui serait le ‘message’ de l’Auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n’est originelle” (Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur” 65).

⁴³⁵ Claude Coste quotes Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, t.II, Seuil, 2002, 276: “en littérature comme dans la communication privée, si je veux être le moins ‘faux’, il faut que je sois . . . le plus ‘indirect’”.

⁴³⁶ Bernard Comment quotes Barthes, *Essais critiques*, Seuil, 1964, 275-276: “Une œuvre ne peut rien garder de la ‘bonne foi’ de son auteur . . . il ne fait qu’afficher qu’il veut qu’on le croie, il ne sort pas d’un système de théâtre . . . un langage généreux n’est jamais qu’un langage marqué des signes de la générosité: l’écrivain est quelqu’un à qui l’authenticité est refusée”.

writer is someone to whom ‘authenticity’ is denied” (qtd. in Comment 136). By contrast, we can hypothesise that making the authorial presence inconspicuous enables Barthes to be “indirect” and to escape to a certain extent the theatrical inauthenticity he wished to avoid.

Nevertheless, this strategy has its limits. As Seán Burke remarks, the more the author tries to remove himself from a text, the more conspicuous his efforts to do so become: “the impersonalist aesthetic itself – as worked through Flaubert, Eliot and Joyce amongst others – has usually assigned the highest degree of control to the writer, that of creator presiding over the whole of his creation whilst not appearing anywhere within it” (10). In addition, the withdrawal of the ‘I’ leads to an author being irresponsible, raising concern in a nonfiction travel text. By refusing to position himself as the author of the text, Barthes impedes potential discussion of his statements – and, not least of all, of his exoticism. Yet, considering that he calls “Japan” the “system” he creates, instead of giving it “an invented name”, and bearing in mind that this essay was published after his three stays in Tokyo in 1966 and 1967, his text clearly contains an autobiographical and nonfiction dimension, which means that the impressions described and opinions expressed can be taken as Barthes’s own and as related to an actual country and its people.

Jean Baudrillard’s unreliable reporting

The impression that Baudrillard’s *America* does not refer to a real country is also partly the effect of a weakening of the figure of the author, who is present, but appears unreliable. The abundance of allegedly universal truth statements endorsed by the narrating ‘I’ paradoxically undermines the idea that the author can provide meaning. To put it another way, Baudrillard’s statements are so assertive that they can be seen as intentionally absurd claims intended to undermine the very idea that any truth claim can be made in the era of simulation.

Baudrillard often employs sentences marked by restrictive or over-assertive expressions such as “[n]othing is further from pure travelling than tourism or holiday travel” and “[d]riving is a spectacular form of amnesia” (9/14).⁴³⁷ Stephen Watt draws attention to the fact that Baudrillard was criticised by Robert Hughes, among others, for “his penchant, revealed in *America* perhaps more blatantly than in other texts, for totalizing pronouncements that masquerade as cultural analyses” (138).⁴³⁸ The determiners, locatives and adverbs “all”, “every”, “each”, “everywhere”, “always” and “never” transform many sentences into ungrounded truth statements (“*tout*”, “*chaque*”, “*partout*”, “*toujours*”, “*jamais*”). Thus, the readers encounter such sentences as “[e]verything here [in America] is real and pragmatic, and yet it is *all* the stuff of dreams too” (28/32, emphasis added).⁴³⁹ A sample of the many sweeping statements found in *America* could perhaps also contain the following: “Everywhere the transparency of interfaces ends in

⁴³⁷ “Rien n’est plus étranger au travelling pur que le tourisme ou le loisir”, “Rouler est une forme spectaculaire d’amnésie” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 14).

⁴³⁸ Stephen Watt discusses Robert Hughes’s review of Baudrillard’s *America*, “The Patron Saint of Neo-Pop”. *New York Review of Books*, 1 June 1989, 29-30.

⁴³⁹ “Tout ici est réel, pragmatique, et tout vous laisse rêveur” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 32).

internal refraction” (59/60) and “[w]e [Europeans] shall never catch them up [the Americans], and we shall never have their candour” (78/79).⁴⁴⁰

In the vast majority of these statements, the first-person pronoun ‘I’ is implied but not expressed, which gives the impression that Baudrillard is stating a universal truth and not his own view of the United States. However, perhaps such statements should not be taken as assertive truths, but as intentionally nonsensical claims. Indeed, in his theoretical works, Baudrillard makes it clear that he thinks strong assertions concerning “truth” or “reality” are not valid in the era of simulation: “Meaning, truth, reality can only appear locally, within a restricted horizon, they are partial objects, partial effects of mirrors and equivalence. Any reduplication, any generalisation, any crossing the limit, any holographic extension (an inclination to give an exhaustive account of the universe) makes their ridicule emerge” (*Simulacres* 162).⁴⁴¹ Therefore, it is possible to assume that Baudrillard is not trying to make earnest claims about the United States, but is trying to unsettle the very idea that we can reach any kind of stable and totalising meaning. In this sense, he contributes to the agenda of “French theory”, which Sande Cohen and Sylvère Lotringer sum up in the following words: “what French theory said was that meaning is probably a red herring, a repressive ideal, as signification is local, partial, precise” (5).⁴⁴²

The strong assertions he makes in *America*, and more specifically the synecdochic ones that claim to reach conclusions about the whole country by observing small parts of it, can in fact be seen as “ridicul[ous]” “generalisations” or playful statements aimed at revealing the impossibility of making totalising statements in the era of simulation (*Simulacres* 162). To give another example, we can suspect that Baudrillard is being ironic when he asserts that “America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements” (29/33).⁴⁴³

Lastly, the authority of the author is downplayed through many stative and semi-stative verbs that convey the impression that events have no other origin than themselves, since no agent causes them to happen. These verbs include: “to be born” (17/22), “to develop” (115/112), “to secrete” (37/40), “to be actualised”* (9/14).⁴⁴⁴ Some are reflexive verbs in the French original (“*s’engendrer*”, “*se développer*”, “*se réaliser*”), which suggests that the objects coming into existence are self-generative and not caused

⁴⁴⁰ “Partout la transparence de l’interface finit dans la réfraction interne” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 60), “Nous [les Européens] ne les [les Américains] rattraperons jamais, et nous n’aurons jamais cette candeur” (79).

⁴⁴¹ “Le sens, la vérité, le réel ne peuvent apparaître que localement, dans un horizon restreint, ce sont des objets partiels, des effets partiels de miroir et d’équivalence. Tout redoublement, toute généralisation, tout passage à la limite, toute extension holographique (vellété de rendre compte exhaustivement de l’univers) les fait surgir dans leur dérision” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 162).

⁴⁴² Meaning is still possible, but “stable correspondence between sign and thing, word and world” and “*faith in denotation*” are lost, if we follow Meghan Morris’s analysis of Baudrillard’s texts (197, emphasis original).

⁴⁴³ “L’Amérique est un gigantesque hologramme, dans le sens où l’information totale est contenue dans chacun des éléments” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 33).

⁴⁴⁴ I have emphasised the verbs quoted in English above: “Là *s’engendre* l’objet architectural pur” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 22), “le travelling pur . . . il *se réalise* au mieux dans la banalité . . . des déserts” (14), “Hystérie: processus de ce qui continue de *se développer* par inertie” (112), “chaque objet *secrète* des doubles” (40). *Chris Turner translated “se réalise” as “it is best done” (9/14). I retranslated it to place emphasis on the reflexive nature of the French verb.

by an agent. As such, they illustrate Baudrillard's claim that the simulacrum is a loop without an origin: "No need to wonder which one is the first term, there are none, it is a circular process – the process of simulation, of the hyperreal" (*Simulacres* 124).⁴⁴⁵

8.4. The circulation of signifiers in *Empire of Signs* and *America*

I shall now continue to focus on the stylistic, rhetorical and compositional traits that create the impression of non-referentiality (and thus, of authenticity) in these texts. I shall link these formal traits to the suggestions Barthes makes in his theoretical works as regards the form literature should adopt, and to the position Baudrillard defends concerning the inability of signs to refer to reality.

I will discuss the overall structure, chapter disjunction, syntax and use of photographs in *Empire of Signs* to show how Barthes emphasises the *signifier*. I shall also interpret his archaisation of Japan as a strategy to untie the literary country he constructs from its extra-textual referent. I will then turn to the stylistic, syntactic and rhetoric strategies Baudrillard uses in *America* to demonstrate that they illustrate and support the claims he makes in his theoretical writings about the disappearance of reality and the existence of simulation. I will also pinpoint the lexical choices he makes to keep the extra-textual America at a distance and convey the impression that it is unreal.

I propose to argue that, to create the impression that their texts are detached from the real Japan and the real United States, the authors place emphasis on such words as *signifiers*, and attempt to release them from the *signifieds* and referents they allude to. To postpone the moment when his Japan will be tied down to a final *signified* or meaning, Barthes employs repetition, fragmentation and successive analogies. These choices help him abide by the ideal of a language in movement that he adumbrated in his theoretical works. As a result, his Japan appears to be a collection of floating impressions rather than a country with well-defined characteristics.

Moving on to *America*, I shall show that, to give more weight to the idea that signs (including words) cannot fully seize reality, Baudrillard relies on paronomasia, epanorthosis and nonverbal lists.⁴⁴⁶ In addition, I will seek to demonstrate that he makes the referent (the United States) more elusive and abstract by means of geometrical and spatial metaphors.

Fragmentation and circulation of the signifiers of Japan

Barthes's theoretical writings seem to indicate that, for him, literature is at its most authentic when it proceeds by fragments, repetitions, meandering, decentring and postponement without imposing excessive order on the subject it addresses. He chooses

⁴⁴⁵ "Inutile de se demander quel est le terme premier, il n'y en a pas, c'est un processus circulaire – celui de la simulation" (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 124).

⁴⁴⁶ In French and classical rhetoric, 'paronomasia' is a rhetorical figure that refers to the juxtaposition of words with clear graphic or phonetic similarities but different (sometimes opposed) meanings (Suhamy *Les figures de style* §66). 'Epanorthosis' refers to the retroactive correction of one's own words, often with an ironic intent (§42).

this kind of literature over the opposition of concepts of structuralist linguistics, and over the dialectics of thesis, antithesis and synthesis specific to the highly coded art of the French ‘*dissertation*’,⁴⁴⁷ as Claude Coste remarks (58-59).⁴⁴⁸

I pointed out earlier that Barthes favoured a type of criticism that did not look for a fixed, final meaning that could explain a text in its entirety (see 8.1.). For instance, in *S/Z*, he suggests that critics should divide up texts in an arbitrary manner, go against the rhetorical breaks the authors made, and avoid subsuming their microanalyses under an overarching meaning: in short, he advocates a critical commentary that “evades any ideology of ‘wholeness’” (*S/Z* 19).⁴⁴⁹ I would like to suggest that this goal guides not only his critical analyses in the 1970s, but also his writing in *Empire of Signs*.

In his travelogue, topics such as emptiness, lightness and insignificance are repeated from one chapter to the next, illustrating the author’s aesthetics of repetition, while fragmentation can be observed in the seeming lack of link between the juxtaposed chapters. Bernard Comment argues that fragmentary writing is one of the techniques Barthes advocates, especially after the 1970s, in order to reach “the Neutral” (43-44), a notion that refers to an ideal state of language and literature and “to all the non-dialectical solutions that allow one to trick the antithesis, to elude the necessity of choice” (Coste 12).⁴⁵⁰

Barthes does not structure his journey with the help of the conventional forms of the travel-writing genre. *Empire of Signs* does not follow the type of transformational arc, quest fulfilment or argumentative progression that shape many other travel texts. The chapters are not organised to report a chronological journey, nor do they state the point of departure or the end of the traveller’s explorations. Barthes suggests in an interview that he intended these chapters to appear disconnected and juxtaposed, like fragments: “for *Empire of Signs*, . . . I particularly allowed myself the freedom of writing in fragments” (*Grain* 146/138).⁴⁵¹ This rhetorical choice hinders the kind of analytical reading that would reintroduce connections and that would attempt to identify guiding principles (other than a methodical meandering) in the travelogue.

The emphasis on fragments can also be observed within the chapters themselves, most of which focus on a seemingly insignificant object – chopsticks, a piece of fried vegetable, a wrapped gift, stationery – as if Barthes was trying to practise “decentering” by focusing on small fragments of Japanese life and avoiding themes that would be heavy with historical and cultural meaning (*Grain* 117/112).⁴⁵² Some of the objects and themes he focuses on are markedly devoid of a core or centre. For instance, Barthes emphasises

⁴⁴⁷ With the word ‘*dissertation*’, I refer to an argumentative essay often structured as a triptych (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) and practised in France at colleges and universities.

⁴⁴⁸ See also Barthes’s interest in “thinking about the discontinuous” (“la pensée du discontinu”, *Grain* 132/126), and his avowed “lassitude” and “distaste . . . toward the dissertation” (“une lassitude, presque un dégoût, en tout cas . . . une intolérance, que j’éprouve actuellement . . . envers la dissertation”, 72/72).

⁴⁴⁹ “[S]e soustrait à toute idéologie de la totalité” (Barthes, *S/Z* 19).

⁴⁵⁰ “[L]e neutre renvoie à toutes les solutions non dialectiques qui permettent de ruser avec l’antithèse, d’éluder la nécessité du choix” (Coste 12).

⁴⁵¹ “[P]our *L’empire des signes*, . . . je me suis donné . . . le droit d’écrire par fragments” (Barthes, *Grain* 138).

⁴⁵² “[D]écentrement” is one of the key concepts that Barthes explores in relation to Japan (ibid., 112).

Japanese packages rather than their contents, and the polite forms of address in Japanese rather than the message they contain (*L'empire* 45/65, 63/87, 68/91).⁴⁵³

Side by side with fragmentation and insignificant objects, Barthes sometimes employs successive analogies, which convey the impression that his Japan is elusive, changing and impressionistic. For instance, in the chapter titled “Water and Flake” the description of a Japanese dinner tray soon becomes a description of painting, which turns into a reflection on writing. First, Japanese dishes are described as a graphic art:

The dinner tray seems a picture of the most delicate order: it is a frame containing, against a dark background, various objects . . . it might be said that these trays fulfil the definition of painting . . . you are going to play in the course of your meal . . . in the manner of a (specifically Japanese) graphic artist . . . (*Empire* 12/23)⁴⁵⁴

Then, in the second half of this chapter, Japanese food turns into a linguistic system:

Hence, Japanese food establishes itself within a reduced system of substance . . . in a shimmer of the *signifier*: these are the elementary characters of writing, established upon a kind of vacillation of language, and indeed this is what Japanese food appears to be: a written food . . . For writing is precisely that act which unites in the same labor what could not be apprehended together in the mere flat space of representation. (14/26)⁴⁵⁵

In these extracts, Barthes uses a type of analogical writing that postpones the moment when he will indicate the main topic of his chapter. Is it food? Is it writing? Is it writing about food? Barthes allows a lingering doubt until the end of the chapter. The expression he uses to close it – “the mere flat space of representation” – can refer to the page, the canvas, or the dish; in the French original, “flat” is “*plat*”, which can refer to a flat space, but also to a dish. The analogies follow each other closely, and leave little time for the readers to identify the motivation behind the choice of the first analogue (painting), before it is followed by a second one (writing). They convey the impression that Barthes’s Japan is made of circulating *signifiers* (the analogues) rather than fixed *signifieds* (the fixed and graspable meanings they would refer to).

The impression of movement and unstable meanings conveyed by these successive analogies illustrate an idea that Barthes puts forward in *The Semiotic Challenge* and which Diana Knight summarises as follows: “symbolic meaning no longer operates in terms of one-to-one correlation between signifiers and signifieds, whereby a signifier . . . might have a stable semantic content” (147). Even something as concrete as a Tokyo railway

⁴⁵³ “[I]nsignifiant”, “la politesse”, “signifié” (Barthes, *L'empire* 65, 87, 91).

⁴⁵⁴ “Le plateau de repas semble un tableau des plus délicats: c’est un cadre qui contient sur fond sombre des objets variés . . . on dirait que ces plateaux accomplissent la définition de la peinture . . . vous allez jouer au fur et à mesure que vous mangerez . . . à la façon d’un graphiste” (ibid., 23).

⁴⁵⁵ “Ainsi la nourriture Japonaise s’établit-elle dans un système réduit de la matière . . . dans un tremblement du signifiant: ce sont là les caractères élémentaires de l’écriture, établie sur une sorte de vacillation du langage, et telle apparaît bien la nourriture japonaise: une nourriture écrite . . . Car l’écriture est précisément cet acte qui unit dans le même travail ce qui ne pourrait être saisi ensemble dans le seul espace plat de la représentation” (ibid., 26).

station is caught up in a “network of shifting urban meanings” that are “historically variable and above all extremely imprecise”, so that one needs to be aware that “signifieds constantly turn into the signifiers ‘of *something else*’”, Knight explains (147, emphasis original).⁴⁵⁶ Introducing several consecutive transformations of a concept (such as Japanese food), could be seen as a way to support and illustrate the idea that *signifieds* are elusive. Knight identifies a handful of “circulating signifiers” in *Empire of Signs*, naming “body, face, writing” (149), but many more can be observed, such as food, painting and writing in the example I gave above. I would like to suggest that this circulation of *signifiers* serves to keep the *signified* and referent at bay.

In his analysis of Honoré de Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine*, Barthes makes a remark about the beauty of the protagonist Marianina that can help us more fully understand the effect successive comparisons can produce:

[B]eauty refers to the endlessness of codes: beautiful like Venus? And Venus? Beautiful like what? Like herself? Like Marianina? The only way to put an end to the replication of beauty: to hide it, to return it to silence, to the ineffable, to aphasia, to send the referent back to the invisible. (*S/Z* 36)⁴⁵⁷

We can compare Barthes’s series of questions in *S/Z* to the consecutive analogies in *Empire of Signs*, and suggest that, when his Japan is divided up into topics such as food, pinball machines, sumo wrestling, etc., and when these themes themselves are caught in a web of successive comparisons, the “referent” or the last *signified* – ‘beauty’ in *Sarrasine*, ‘Japan’ in *Empire of Signs* – is kept at a distance. This method thus enables the writer to convey movement and elude fixity.

Such deferrals can be interpreted as Barthes’s attempt to reproduce in writing what he said he observed in Japan: the “perpetual withdrawal of the *signified*” (*Grain* 84/83).⁴⁵⁸ Longer citations would show that Barthes also creates the impression that his *Empire of Signs* contains no central argument and that he seeks to avoid final reference to the real Japan or to the *signified* he evoked in *The Grain of the Voice*. To achieve this impression, he often spins his sentences over half a page or more, and defers the end of these sentences with dashes, semi-colons and digressive parentheses. Combined with the disjointed chapters and the shifting analogies I mentioned previously, this type of syntax turns *Empire of Signs* into a multidirectional exploration of a large array of *signifiers* (food, pinball machines, ideograms, street layouts, etc.). In other words, the essay does not guide readers towards a definite and general statement that Barthes would be making about the real

⁴⁵⁶ Like Peirce and Eco, Barthes developed his own theory of “unlimited semiosis” (the term is Eco’s). See “unlimited semiosis” in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*.

⁴⁵⁷ “[L]a beauté est renvoyée à l’infini des codes: belle comme Vénus? Mais Vénus? Belle comme quoi? Comme elle-même? Comme Marianina? Un seul moyen d’arrêter la réplique de la beauté: la cacher, la rendre au silence, à l’ineffable, à l’aphasie, renvoyer le référent à l’invisible” (Barthes, *S/Z* 36).

⁴⁵⁸ “[U]n recul perpétuel du signifié” (Barthes, *Grain* 83). In my view, it would be more accurate to say that Barthes projects his *desire for the withdrawal of the signified* onto Japan, rather than take for granted that this withdrawal is indeed a characteristic of Japanese language and culture that he identifies, as some critics and interviewers do (such as Diana Knight and Stephen Heath), and as Barthes encourages them to do in the interviews he gave about *Empire of Signs* (see *Grain*).

Japan. Rather, it maintains the impression that his Japan is a fragmentary and provisional notion.

The coexistence of various types of *signifiers* in Barthes's travelogue (photographs, paintings, maps, calligraphy and hand-written notes) can also be interpreted as a strategy aimed at highlighting the *signifier* over the *signified*. The *signified* appears to be deferred by the multiplication of types of *signifiers*/mediums. In addition, with the multiplication of these *signifiers*, Barthes points out the deficiency of the literary medium and produces an effect of postmodern authenticity. As I have argued earlier, postmodern authenticity consists in acknowledging the limits and flaws inherent in literary representation. In *Empire of Signs*, the abundance of *signifiers* reveals the arbitrariness of each and all of them, as they all refer to Japan in some way, yet always in an insufficient manner. As Barthes puts it in *Le discours amoureux* (1974-1976), “[w]hat is repeated . . . is marked by a fault, a gap, an absence” (331).⁴⁵⁹ Repetition highlights the gap between world and words: by repeating, one puts emphasis on the shortcomings of the words one used first. If language is bound to fail, at least partially, to represent reality, as Barthes seems to suggest, then the most authentic literary gesture the author can make may be to point out this failure, for instance, through repetition.

Nevertheless, *Empire of Signs* still seems to place one main idea above others. The themes of ‘writing’ and ‘literature’ are so pervasive in the essay that they can be considered central to the travelogue. Barthes's exploration of the fragments of Japan often turns into reflections about writing, as Diana Knight has noted: “Barthes uses writing metaphors for every aspect of Japanese culture, from cooking and Pachinko, to Bunraku, flower arranging, bowing, and Zengakuren” (163). These metaphors contribute to the impression that Barthes's travelogue, and more generally literature as a whole, are self-referential, that they call forth what he called the “subtle immensity of writings”, rather than “the referent” (*S/Z* 111, 118).⁴⁶⁰

Japan suspended in archaism

Thus far, I have argued that Barthes drew upon a postmodern authenticity that consisted in forfeiting representational claims, untying the text from extra-textual reality, and pointing out the limits of the literary medium. As I pursue my exploration of the traits that create an impression of non-referentiality in *Empire of Signs*, I will move on to discussing another conception of authenticity that would seem to underpin this essay. I shall argue that Barthes presents the Japan of the past as more worthy of his attention than its modern version. His text appears partly underpinned by a conception of authenticity that grants more value to a half-imagined past.

The suspension of the *signified* in Barthes's essay raises some ethical issues. First, Barthes's desire to “enter completely into the signifier” (*Grain* 146/138) seems to correlate with a gesture that empties the *signifier* (in this case, Japan) of parts of its

⁴⁵⁹ “Ce qui est répété . . . se marque d'une faute, d'un trou, d'une absence” (Barthes, *Discours* 331).

⁴⁶⁰ “[L]a Référence”, “mais ce qu'il y a derrière le papier, ce n'est pas le réel, le référent, c'est la Référence, la ‘subtile immensité des écritures’” (Barthes, *S/Z* 111, 118).

contents, namely its modern history.⁴⁶¹ This emptying gesture can be seen as a way to turn the *signifier* (Japan) into a blank creative space, but it is problematic because it goes against the demystifying principles Barthes wrote by in *Mythologies*. In *Mythologies*, Barthes showed that “myths” (deceptive signs) and their ideology could be countered by referring to history (Comment 30), and he criticised them for being selective about the history that surrounded them or for trying to hide it altogether. He attacked, for instance, the *Blue Guides* used by tourists because they failed to account for the present life of the local people (*Mythologies* 123). Yet, in *Empire of Signs*, Japan is stripped of its recent history and is kept mostly feudal.

It is not so much the real Japan that Barthes keeps at a distance as it is modern Japan. Much more attention is given in *Empire of Signs* to feudal and early modern Japan than to the Japan of the 1960s. This suggests that Barthes sees the earlier Japan as more worthy to be described, and that his travelogue is underpinned by the idea that century-old traditions are more authentic than, for instance, modern technology. We know that we are in twentieth-century Japan on account of the taxis that drive the traveller around Tokyo, the public landlines used by their drivers to find their bearings and a few colour photographs with modern framing. However, most of the time, Barthes practices a technique of archaisation that keeps Japan in feudal and early modern times. Art is epitomised by Sumo and traditional Kabuki and Bunraku (puppet) theatre, most of the Japanese poets mentioned belong to the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Bashō, “Jōco” Naitō Jōsō and Shiki) and most photographs present artworks from the twelfth, sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even the map of Tokyo dates back to the end of the eighteenth century (31/48-49). It is clear that this map, alongside the numerous sketches drawn by passers-by for Barthes, is not meant to help the reader find his way in the present-day city. Rather, it draws attention to the lines traced in black ink and to the materiality of writing. Yet these sketches of “street maps” led Diana Knight to write that Barthes offered “*practical advice* on eating out, shopping, getting around the city” (152, emphasis added). In the era of guidebooks, a few barely readable sketches and highly abstract sections on Japanese cuisine make a very weak ground on which to base such an argument.

I beg to differ with Diana Knight on another point. She claims that “what fascinates [Barthes] above all is the conjunction of these feudal traces with the very modern aspects of a new Japanese society” and that “it is certainly a severe misreading of *Empire of Signs* to suggest (as negative critiques of the text’s Orientalism tend to do) that it is nostalgically fixated upon Japan’s cultural and historical past” (156). However, contrary to what Knight argues, very few “modern aspects” of Japan can be found in the travelogue – I have listed them in the paragraph above – and the essay possesses other Orientalist traits that can justify “negative” critiques, as I shall show in the next section (8.5). I would be more inclined to side with Jonathan Culler, who observes that “the capitalist Japan of economic miracles and technological supremacy makes no appearance” in *Empire of Signs* (Barthes 105). When Barthes describes recent changes undergone by Japan, he presents

⁴⁶¹ “[P]our *L’empire des signes*, . . . je me suis donné la liberté d’entrer complètement dans le signifiant” (Barthes, *Grain* 138).

them as defacing the country: “Japan enters its Occidental sloughing: it loses its signs as one loses one’s hair, teeth, skin; it goes from (empty) signification to (mass) communication” (-/132).⁴⁶² Selecting only the archaic part of Japanese culture as authentic enough to be preserved is a questionable move, as it confines Japanese identity to a form of quaint backwardness, and deprives the country of the possibility to evolve over time, since modernisation is equated with degeneration. Barthes’s preference for an archaic Japan brings to mind what Victor Segalen called “[e]xoticism in Time . . . [e]scape from the contemptible and petty present” (24/48).⁴⁶³ However, instead of escaping into a made-up era that would give him full freedom to indulge in his fantasy, Barthes escapes into a referential past, which is detrimental to the effect of non-referentiality that he seeks to create.

Barthes’s earlier works can help us understand on his terms what we may otherwise simply question as exoticism. His analysis of the texts of the French Orientalist Pierre Loti indicates that, for Barthes, imaginary and temporal distance with the country visited, and “political regression”, which can be interpreted as an apolitical stance, are key to producing a praiseworthy travelogue (*New Critical Essays* 117/175).⁴⁶⁴ It is worth quoting at length his eulogy of Loti’s style, because it provides precious information concerning what Barthes considers to be the ideal stance a writer can adopt when writing about a foreign country:

Whether Turkish or Maghrebi, the Orient is merely a square on the board, the emphatic term of an alternative: the Occident or *something else*. As long as the opposition is unresolved, merely subjected to forces of *temptation*, meaning functions positively: the book is possible, it *develops*. When Loti is constrained to *opt* . . . he must shift from the imaginary level to the real level, from an ethic to a status, from a way of life to a political responsibility; he must yield to the constraint of a *praxis*: meaning ceases, the book stops, for there is no longer any *signifier*, and the *signified* resumes its tyranny.

What is remarkable is that the hallucinatory investment, the *possibility* of meaning (and not its halt), what is *previous* to the decision . . . always occurs, it seems, with the help of a political regression: . . . desire always proceeds toward an extreme archaism, where the greatest historical distance assures the greatest unreality, there where desire finds its pure form: that of an impossible return, that of the Impossible.

(116-117/174-175, emphasis original)⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² “Le Japon entre dans la mue occidentale: il perd ses signes, comme on perd ses cheveux, ses dents, sa peau; il passe de la signification (vide) à la communication (de masse)” (Barthes, *L’empire* 132). This text appears as a caption under a pair of recent photographs that are not included in the Noonday edition. There is thus no translation by Richard Howard.

⁴⁶³ “L’Exotisme dans le temps. . . . Fuite du présent méprisable et mesquin” (Segalen 48).

⁴⁶⁴ “Une régression politique” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 175).

⁴⁶⁵ “Turc ou maghrébin, l’Orient n’est que la case d’un jeu, le terme marqué d’une alternative: l’Occident ou autre chose. Tant que l’opposition est irrésolue, soumise seulement à des forces de tentation, le sens fonctionne à plein: le livre est possible, il se développe. Lorsque Loti se trouve contraint d’opter . . . il lui faut passer du niveau imaginaire au niveau réel, d’une éthique à un statut, d’un mode de vie à une responsabilité politique, céder devant la contrainte d’une praxis: le sens cesse, le livre s’arrête car il n’y a plus de signifiant, le signifié reprend sa tyrannie.

Ce qui est remarquable c’est que l’investissement fantasmatique, la possibilité du sens (et non son arrêt), ce qui est avant la décision, . . . se fait toujours, semble-t-il, à l’aide d’une régression politique: . . . le désir

In the light of this passage we see that the *signifier* emphasises the lack of political stance, “extreme archaism” and the substitution of an imagined fantasy for the Orient, which is reduced to the role of “the emphatic term of an alternative”. All these traits that I interpret as exoticist features of *Empire of Signs* can be seen as strategies devised to keep meaning alive (and not to “halt” it), to avoid the “tyranny” of the *signified*, and to find the “pure form” of desire through writing (117/175).

Nevertheless, it is possible to criticise this “political regression” and argue (117/175), as Todorov did, that “allegorist” travellers are “profiteer[s]” (*Human* 349), because they use the representation of foreign countries as a means to an end, and more specifically as screens onto which they can project concerns unrelated to these countries. I would like to go further and suggest that treating the reality of the foreign other as a blank page, and using this page to illustrate or apply one’s theories, or to project and develop one’s fantasy, can be seen as a colonialist move. This is the case insofar as it requires first that others be emptied of their identity, or that this identity be denied and swept aside, so that travellers can later invest their destinations with their fantasy.

An extraterrestrial and ‘simulacral’ America

Contrary to Barthes, Baudrillard explicitly locates his *America* in the late twentieth century, and the cities and landmarks he visits are identified by name (Porterville, Monument Valley, etc.). Yet his text does not convey the impression that he addressed the real United States: where, then, does the floating impression come from? I propose to argue that this impression is created by stylistic, rhetorical and compositional features that aim to describe the characteristics of simulation and that help Baudrillard support his ideas and build his argument about simulation. For Baudrillard, simulation (an all-encompassing saturation of signs) has replaced reality. Upon close analysis, the themes and idiosyncratic style of *America* seem to reflect the properties of the simulation that Baudrillard developed in *Simulacres et Simulation* and *Oublier Foucault*. These findings lead me to argue that Baudrillard’s travelogue is underpinned by the idea that the most authentic aim literature can pursue now that reality has vanished, is to describe the properties of the simulation that has replaced it. In the paragraphs that follow, I will focus on key characteristics of the simulation and show how they are illustrated, expressed and supported by the style and rhetorical choices that Baudrillard makes in *America*.

The defining traits of what Baudrillard calls simulation include the fact that all that remains in our “‘irreferential’ era” are signs and *signifiers* (as opposed to reality and reference), the equivalence/reversibility of meanings and values (which approaches a type of nihilism), and the movement of signs circulating in a loop (as opposed to the exchange of signs for meaning and extra-textual referents) (*Simulacres* 71).⁴⁶⁶

“Equivalence” and “reversibility”, two key terms Baudrillard uses to refer to the impossibility of exchanging signs for meanings in *Simulacres et Simulation*, are illustrated by

va toujours vers l’archaïsme extrême, là où la plus grande distance historique assure la plus grande irréalité, là où le désir trouve sa forme pure: celle de retour impossible, celle de l’Impossible” (Barthes, *Nouveaux essais* 174-175, emphasis original).

⁴⁶⁶ “[N]otre ère ‘irréférentielle’” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 71).

some of the stylistic devices he uses in *America*.⁴⁶⁷ Both abstract notions act as replacements for the dialectical oppositions that he rejects (“Radical Incertitude” 59). In *America*, the idea of equivalence is pervasive and is manifested through the expression “it is always the same”, and through a plethora of comparative sentences stating that one given event is “the same” as another, which flattens oppositions, differences and hierarchies (46/48).⁴⁶⁸

When applied to language, “equivalence” and “reversibility” mean that words are not a safe means to access a stable truth since they are reversible. In my view, the primary aim of the many seemingly cryptic expressions Baudrillard uses, such as “star-blasted . . . stereolithically by the megalopoi” (27/31) and “[t]he defibrillation of the body overloaded with empty signs” (10/15), is not to convey a stable meaning that the reader could decipher.⁴⁶⁹ Rather, they seem to indicate that the meaning we attribute to words and sentences is not inherent in language but depends on our “faith” in the ability of words to be exchanged for extra-linguistic information (*Simulacres* 16).⁴⁷⁰

To support and strengthen the idea that signs exist independently from meaning, Baudrillard also draws attention to words as *signifiers* and to sound sequences rather than to their function as carriers of meaning. He does so through paronomasia, a rhetorical figure bringing together words that sound and/or look similar, such as “[t]he latent, the lacteal, the lethal” (121/117), “desire: the desert” (123/119), “identity”/“dentition” (34/37),* “scene”/“obscene” (8/13).⁴⁷¹ In the contexts in which Baudrillard gives them, the sole function of these words seems to be to evoke sounds and echoes.

To convey the impression that the *signified* is difficult to stabilise in language, Baudrillard also relegates the predicate to the end of his sentences. Many sentences and paragraphs are thus structured as long lists, eventually leading to the point Baudrillard wanted to make. We can observe this syntax in the following passage about joggers: “Not to be aware of the natural light of California, nor even of a mountain fire . . . to see nothing of all this and to carry on running . . . till sacrificial exhaustion is reached, that is truly a sign from the beyond” (39/41).⁴⁷² Many more lists take the form of nominal sentences, illustrating a point made in a previous or subsequent sentence, which conveys

⁴⁶⁷ *Simulacres et Simulation* contains many occurrences of the words “équivalence” (16, 40, 45, 159, 162, 194) and “réversibilité” (16, 43, 55, 92, 196).

⁴⁶⁸ “[C]’est toujours la même chose” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 48).

⁴⁶⁹ “La sidération . . . celle, stéréolytique, des mégalofoles” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 31), “La défibrillation du corps excédé de signes vides” (15).

⁴⁷⁰ The following passage gives us indications concerning the role of “faith” in the possibility of exchanging signs for meaning: “All Western faith and good faith have been committed to the wager of representation: that a sign can refer to the depth of a meaning, that a sign can be exchanged for a meaning, and that something serves as a guarantee for this exchange – God, of course”; “Toute la foi et la bonne foi occidentale se sont engagées dans ce pari de la représentation: qu’un signe puisse renvoyer à la profondeur du sens, qu’un signe puisse *s’échanger* contre du sens et que quelque chose serve de caution à cet échange – Dieu bien sûr” (Baudrillard, *Simulacres* 16, emphasis original).

⁴⁷¹ “[L]e latent, le laiteux, le léthal” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 117), “désir: désert” (119), “identité”/“dentition” (37), “scène”/“obscène” (13). *Chris Turner translates “*dentition*” as “wonderful teeth”, but this does not convey how phonically near the French word “*dentition*” is to “identity”, hence my retranslation.

⁴⁷² “N’être même pas sensible à la lumière naturelle de Californie, ni à cet incendie de montagnes . . . ne rien voir de tout cela et courir obstinément . . . jusqu’à l’épuisement sacrificiel, c’est un signe d’outre-tombe” (ibid., 41).

the impression that we are in a simulation that produces a multitude of signs (represented by the elements of the lists) to hide the absence of reality (the point Baudrillard wants to make). For instance, to illustrate in advance the point he will make about the obsession of preservation he observes in the United States, Baudrillard draws up a list of museum items: “Hence the elephants enveloped in liquid bitumen, . . . together with the lions, mammoths, and wolves who . . . were the first, prehistoric victims of the oil fields” (40-41/43).⁴⁷³

At times, Baudrillard also postpones the predicate by means of epanorthosis, a figure of speech with which one corrects a previous statement (often presented in the negative form). In the French original, Baudrillard’s epanorthoses often take the form of the sentences “*non seulement...mais...*”, “*non pas... mais*” and “*ce n’est pas . . . c’est...*”, which translate into “not only...but...”, “not...but...” and “this is not... but it is...”, such as in the following examples: “Not only are the Americans missionaries, they are also Anabaptists” (41/44) and “[t]his is not narcissism . . . not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit” (37/40).⁴⁷⁴

We can also notice that the main message Baudrillard wishes to deliver is sometimes held off by the turn of phrase “*ce qui... c’est...*” in the French original. This structure creates proxies for the subject with the help of the pronouns “*ce/c’*” that function as substitutes for their antecedent, which is pushed to the end of the sentence, as if to postpone the moment when the readers will be able to make sense of Baudrillard’s point. For instance, we can observe this turn of phrase when Baudrillard writes: “What has always struck me about Death Valley is its *mildness*, its pastel shades and its fossil veil” (68/67, emphasis original).⁴⁷⁵ A look at the French original reveals the presence of two subject pronouns and one subject noun (see footnote).

As I have mentioned previously, the disappearance of reality is the main point Baudrillard defends in his theory of simulation. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, which convey the impression that the predicate (which I interpret as representing reality) is deferred, Baudrillard employs multiple metaphors that give the impression that the United States is a simulation rather than a reality. “Disappearance” and the connate notions of “vanishing”, “extermination” and “amnesia” reoccur frequently through *America* (10/14-15).⁴⁷⁶ What vanishes is the possibility of exchanging words for stable meanings, as I have pointed out earlier, and to distinguish signs from reality, as I shall now show.

Baudrillard depicts the United States as composed of signs, artifice and fiction, as if images had completely replaced reality or had become indistinguishable from it: “no

⁴⁷³ “Ainsi les éléphants ensevelis dans le bitume liquide, . . . les lions, les mammoths, les loups . . . – aujourd’hui embaumés pour la deuxième fois à Hancock Park dans un musée catéchistique de la préhistoire” (ibid., 43). Chris Turner splits the French sentence into two sentences, hence the discrepancy between the passages quoted in the French original and the English translation.

⁴⁷⁴ “Non seulement les Américains sont missionnaires, mais ils sont anabaptistes” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 44), “Ce n’est pas du narcissisme . . . Ce n’est pas un imaginaire narcissique . . . c’est un effet d’autoréférence éperdue, c’est un court-circuit” (40).

⁴⁷⁵ “Ce qui m’a toujours frappé, c’est la *douceur* de la Vallée de la Mort, le pastel de ses couleurs, le voile fossile” (ibid., 67, emphasis original).

⁴⁷⁶ “[A]mnésie”, “disparition”, “évanouissement”, “extermination” (ibid., 14-15).

vision of America makes sense without this reversion of values: it is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America's reality!" (104/102).⁴⁷⁷ To communicate his vision of a semi-fictional United States, Baudrillard blends the lexicon of cinema in his descriptions of the country. The first paragraph of *America* compares the journey, now completed, to a film Baudrillard would like to play again (1/7), and he draws parallels between the United States and cinema throughout the travelogue, calling the country "cinematic" (56/57), remarking that "[t]he desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen" (56/57), and that "the whole of space, the whole way of life . . . are cinematic" there (101/98).⁴⁷⁸ Each time he uses the word "*travelling*" in the French original, sometimes translated by Christ Turner as "panning shot" (123/119), we can also interpret it as a way to link his journey to a mode of exploration that is akin to filming or watching a film, since "travelling" is a cinematic technique that consists in taking shots with a moving camera.

Cinematic metaphors that bring the United States closer to fiction can be interpreted as one of the techniques that Baudrillard uses to make his America appear unreal, and to keep the extra-textual country at a distance. He explains that he "wanted to go there in a sidereal way . . . which means following a rule, keeping a distance" (*Radical Alterity* 89). Thus, the word choices that turn the United States into a film, a geometrical form, and an extraterrestrial object can all be interpreted as strategies devised to follow this rule, to "play with distance and foreignness like Segalen said", as Baudrillard puts it (89). Baudrillard's exoticism is nevertheless rather unconventional: not only does he turn the United States into an abstract entity, but he also undermines the referential power of language in the process.

Words that are doubled-up with an abstract meaning lose the stability that their initial meaning gave them. In other words, they can no longer function as signs pointing to a stable extra-textual referent. For instance, the desert is no longer a desolate land, it is reduced to a "form": "the desert is no longer a landscape, it is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others" (*America* 127/122).⁴⁷⁹ An even more telling example can be found in the descriptions of the cities Baudrillard visits, which cease to be cities when he endows them with attributes belonging to the desert or to geometry until they become mere abstractions. Once New York, Salt Lake City, etc. stop referring to cities, they join a cloud of floating *signifiers* that could refer to anything. No longer real referential cities, they become abstractions. For instance, Salt Lake City undergoes this kind of textual transformation. It is endowed with the mineral and dazzling characteristics of the desert:

⁴⁷⁷ "[N]ulle vision de l'Amérique ne se justifie en dehors de ce renversement: Disneyland, ça, c'est authentique! Le cinéma, la télé, ça, c'est le réel" (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 102).

⁴⁷⁸ "[T]out le pays est cinématographique. Vous parcourez le désert comme un western, les métropoles comme un écran" (ibid., 57), "c'est tout l'espace, tout le mode de vie qui sont cinématographiques" (98).

⁴⁷⁹ "Le désert n'est plus un paysage, c'est la forme pure qui résulte de l'abstraction de toutes les autres" (ibid., 122).

Everywhere marble: flawless, funereal (the Capitol, the organ in the Visitor Center) . . . In fact the whole city has the transparency and supernatural, otherworldly cleanness of a thing from outer space. A symmetrical, luminous, overpowering abstraction . . . (*America* 2/8)⁴⁸⁰

The city is not represented as a large human settlement, but as an extraterrestrial object. All that remains once the *signifier* (the word “city”) has been emptied of its initial meaning or *signified* (a large human settlement) is a form or a container (as suggested by the words “symmetric” and “transparent”). We can thus understand Baudrillard better when he writes: “I speak of . . . the cities which are not cities” (123/119).⁴⁸¹ Like Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*, 1972), Baudrillard’s cities are stripped of most of their properties, and only geometrical forms remain: symmetry, horizontality, verticality, and so on. A swift comparison with Calvino’s text shows that Baudrillard seems to invite his readers to reflect on the imagined structures they superimpose on reality when they try to make sense of it. In Calvino’s novel, the frontier between reality and imagination is blurred from the outset, as the text begins with the following words: “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions” (5). Calvino hints that we use our imagination to make sense of the world, and that the way we describe it is partly imaginary. Baudrillard seems to attempt something similar: when he emphasises the (geometrical) forms he sees in American cities, it suggests that the shape, coherence and meanings we see in the extra-textual world are forms we project on it, and that reality is thus overlaid by signs.

In order to make America appear unreal and turn it into an abstraction, Baudrillard draws from the lexicon of geometry, as we have seen previously, but also mathematics, physics and astronomy. Reflecting back on his travelogue in a conversation first published in 1994, he describes his journey to the United States as “a stellar one”, “inhuman, and a little extra-terrestrial” (*Radical Alterity* 82, 83). The lexicon of outer space is frequently found in *America* and gives evidence that Baudrillard is intent on keeping his America separate from an ‘earthly’ referent with words such as “extraterrestrial” (2/8), “astral” (27/29), “orbital” (28/31), “star-blast” (27/31), “solar” (124/119), “irradiation” (124/119), and “stratospheric” (126/122).⁴⁸² This vocabulary enables him to introduce the greatest distance possible with the subject of his book by turning the United States into an otherworldly object, and observing it from an “omega point exterior to the human” (“Radical Incertitude” 60). When he describes Los Angeles and Mulholland Drive with words such as “geometric”, “diagonals”, “horizontals”, “lines” and “perspectives”, we can assume that he is describing them from above, adopting “an extraterrestrial’s vantage point on earth” (51-52/53).⁴⁸³

⁴⁸⁰ “Pompeuse symétrie mormone, marmoréité impeccable et funèbre (le Capitole, les orgues du Visitor’s Center) . . . Toute la ville d’ailleurs a la transparence et la propreté surhumaine, extraterrestre, d’un objet venu d’ailleurs. Abstraction symétrique, lumineuse, dominante” (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 8).

⁴⁸¹ “Je parle . . . des villes qui n’en sont pas . . .” (ibid., 119).

⁴⁸² “[E]xtraterrestre” (ibid., 8), “sidérale” (29), “orbital” (31), “sidération” (31), “solaire” (119), “irradiation” (119), “stratosphérique” (122). Spatial vocabulary is also found in *Simulacres et Simulation*, for instance “black holes” and “physical stellar systems” (“trous noirs” and “systèmes physiques stellaires”, 110, 109).

⁴⁸³ “[G]éométrique”, “diagonales”, “horizontal”, “parallèles”, “points de fuite” (ibid., 53).

This viewpoint is reminiscent of the perspective Michel Butor adopts in *Mobile* (1962), the travelogue he published after his stay in the United States. Visually, Butor's text is very airy, with spaces added and lines skipped in between short paragraphs, which increases the impression that the reader is flying over vast space. The impression that we are reading about wide-open space is also increased by the repetition of the time of day or night at the locations he explores over several time zones, and by the accumulation of lists that suggest both the desire and the impossibility of mapping out such a large country in its entirety. While it is beyond the scope of this study to compare the formal similarities between Butor's *Mobile* and Baudrillard's *America*, we can at least stress that the bird's-eye view they both adopt makes the United States appear unfamiliar, and flattens out the details, depth and hierarchies that the gaze of a pedestrian would pick out.

In Baudrillard's travelogue, the "inhuman" point of view is also expressed in passages that focus on human perspectives that have been altered by technology (*Radical Alterity* 59). More specifically, the traveller defamiliarises the United States by sometimes adopting the viewpoint of a passenger on a plane, sometimes that of a driver in a car. He claims that driving is the best way to get to know the country: "the point is to drive. That way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you" (54/55).⁴⁸⁴ The emphasis he lays on the car can be interpreted in several ways. It could be seen as a way for him to address the automobile culture that pervades the United States and to point out that the experience of driving is seminal to the American lifestyle. It could also be interpreted as a way of introducing the notion of distance within the United States, as the model driver he describes crosses the country without stopping and remains inside his "insulating" vehicle, to borrow the term Daniel Boorstin uses when he comments on tourist automobiles (111).

In addition, cars illustrate the idea Baudrillard developed in *Simulacres et Simulation* that the possibility of exchanging signs for something real, different, or meaningful has collapsed, now that all that remains is circulation, the movement of exchange, and interchangeability/reversibility. Circulation is epitomised by four elements that reoccur in *America*: traffic, television, light and the desert. These elements allow for the easy circulation of cars, of information, of images and of the gaze. Baudrillard's aesthetics of circulation and equivalence are epitomised by the following excerpt:

Thus, the only tissue of the city is that of the freeways, a vehicular, or rather an incessant transurbanistic, tissue, the extraordinary spectacle of these thousands of cars moving at the same speed, in both directions, headlights full on in broad daylight, on the Ventura Freeway, coming from nowhere, going nowhere: an immense collective act, rolling along, ceaselessly unrolling, without aggression, without objectives. (*America* 125/120)⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ "Il s'agit de rouler pour en savoir plus long sur la société que toutes les disciplines réunies" (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 55).

⁴⁸⁵ "Ainsi le seul tissu de la ville est celui des *freeways*, tissu véhiculaire, ou plutôt transurbanistique incessant, spectacle inouï de ces milliers de voitures circulant à vitesse égale, dans les deux sens, tous phares allumés en plein soleil, sur le Ventura Freeway, ne revenant de nulle part, n'allant nulle part: immense acte collectif, rouler, dérouler sans cesse, sans agressivité, sans but" (*ibid.*, 120, italics original).

This passage conveys the impression of circular motion through words that are repeated with slight or no variation, as if the writer were circling around the same terms: “tissue” is reiterated, “incessant” is doubled by “ceaselessly”, “rolling” reappears in “unrolling”, “technological” becomes “technology” and “soft” is repeated a second time (albeit once in English, once in French in the original). We can also observe an aesthetics of equivalence through the interchangeability of the descriptors of the cars: there is a “collective” of “thousands of cars”, whose speed, direction, origin and destination can be interchanged with no alteration, since they drive at the same speed, in both directions, come from nowhere and go nowhere. We could go so far as to interpret the circulation of these cars as a metaphor for the circulation of signs and *signifiers* in simulation.

We can also interpret the aesthetics of circulation, equivalence and reversibility as a way for Baudrillard to avoid dialectical tension. Dialectics implies that elements are separate, distant and different: “subject and object, means and ends, true and false, good and bad” (“Radical Incertitude” 59). Such oppositions convey order but, according to Baudrillard, they “no longer correspond to the state of our world” (59).⁴⁸⁶ In the era of simulation that he describes, they have been replaced by circulation, equivalence and reversibility.

8.5. Incompatibility between non-referentiality and exoticism

The conception of authentic representation as non-referential representation that I identify in *America* and *Empire of Signs* runs into certain aesthetic limits and raises some ethical issues that I will now seek to outline. I will show that the binary dialectics and referentiality that Barthes and Baudrillard try to avoid reappear through the exoticist dimension of their texts. In both *America* and *Empire of Signs*, the authors clearly reject their own culture and embrace unconditionally the image they have of their destinations, however incomplete and idealised this image may be. By introducing stark oppositions between two clearly referential cultures, the exoticism at work in these texts limits their non-referential claim. In *Empire of Signs*, the laudatory comments made about Japanese culture also suggest that Barthes seems to see foreign others as more authentic when they are as different as possible from him.

I ground my analysis of Barthes’s and Baudrillard’s exoticism on the definition that Tzvetan Todorov gives of the term. While Victor Segalen developed a positive understanding of the term at the start of the twentieth century, Todorov defines it in a more critical way in *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (*Nous et les Autres*, 1989). For Todorov, texts can be deemed exoticist when their authors aspire to “praise without knowledge”, when “otherness is systematically preferred to likeness” and when “what is valorized is . . . a country and culture defined exclusively by their relation to the observer” (264, 265). Todorov’s definition helps us to frame better the representation of otherness in the travelogues under study, in which the traveller places emphasis on the difference of foreign others and praises this difference.

⁴⁸⁶ For Stephen Watt, Baudrillard also expects his readers to forget “the tension between the Hegelian thesis and antithesis, the Freudian superego and id, the Saussurian *signifier/signified*” (140).

Jean Baudrillard's fascination with the United States and his rejection of Europe

Baudrillard's descriptions of the United States often take the form of stark oppositions spanning a large array of fields. For instance, Baudrillard opposes "[t]he lyrical nature of pure circulation" of "Astral America" to "the melancholy of European analyses" and to "the fevered distance of the cultural gaze" he finds in Europe (27/31).⁴⁸⁷ Americans are "modern", whereas Europeans are not (73/72); European cities are "medieval" by contrast with the "aerial perspectives" American ones offer (52/53); in New York, change comes with a "feeling of glory", whereas it is "lugubrious" in Europe (23/27); "[w]e are a culture of intimacy . . . ; they have a democratic culture of space" (94/92).⁴⁸⁸ Overall, for a concept that has allegedly "disappeared" or is disappearing (29/32),⁴⁸⁹ "Europe" seems very much present in *America*, and we could even argue that Baudrillard's *America* is an allegory that criticises French and European cultures through descriptions of the United States.

If the European and/or French cultures are always found lacking when compared to the American one, Baudrillard's praise remains ambiguous. The traits he compliments in the United States are often far from flattering: he lauds the "primitive" nature of the Americans (92/91), who are described as delightfully "naive" (97/95), "vulgar" (102/99) and incapable of "irony" (97/95), and who are depicted as having no history (76/76) and no "aesthetic[s]" (101/99).⁴⁹⁰ In addition, he claims that "[t]hey certainly do not have aristocratic grace" (94/92) and that "we [Europeans] are a desperately long way behind the stupidity . . . of their society" (23/28).⁴⁹¹ Baudrillard explains that "calling it primitive meant giving it the most distance" (*Radical Alterity* 90-91), which is in keeping with the other strategies he devised to keep real America at bay – for instance through geometrical and spatial lexicons.⁴⁹² Nevertheless, such paradoxical over-generalisations about the United States raise issues, all the more so as Baudrillard hints that he makes them without having thoroughly studied American culture, history and society, or so he lets us believe when he writes that he prefers "driv[ing]" across the country to other modes of inquiry (54/55).

⁴⁸⁷ "L'Amérique sidérale. Le caractère lyrique de la circulation pure. Contre la mélancolie des analyses européennes. . . . Contre la distance fébrile du regard culturel" (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 31).

⁴⁸⁸ "[M]odernes" (ibid., 72), "des villes du Moyen Âge"/ "perspectives aériennes" (53), "un sentiment de gloire"/ "le spectacle lugubre du changement" (27), "Nous sommes une culture de la promiscuité, . . . eux ont une culture démocratique de l'espace" (92).

⁴⁸⁹ "Quand vous vous retournez, l'Europe a tout simplement disparu" (ibid., 32).

⁴⁹⁰ "[P]rimitives" (ibid., 91), "naïve" (95), "vulgaires" (99), "ironie" (95), "l'esthétique" (101).

⁴⁹¹ "Ils n'ont certes pas de grâce aristocratique" (ibid., 92), " Nous sommes désespérément en retard sur la stupidité . . . de cette société" (28).

⁴⁹² Baudrillard was aware that such statements were not well received in the United States: "The Americans were not pleased" (*Radical Alterity* 90-91).

Binary oppositions between Japan and France/Europe

Like Baudrillard's *America*, Barthes's *Empire of Signs* offers an ample supply of binary oppositions. At times, Barthes avoids them, for instance when he compares a Japanese food tray to painting and writing rather than to French food. Nevertheless, most of the time he employs the plural pronoun "nous" (a formal "we"), its possessive "notre" ("our") and its locative case "chez nous" (in our country, in our home) to oppose the inadequacies of French language, cuisine, reading habits, urban planning, etc. to Japanese culture, which is found superior in all things. Thus, "our discourse", "our classical literature", "our theatre", "our ways of speaking" always fall short of the mark (81/112, 82/114, 54/71, 68/92).⁴⁹³ The paradox between Barthes's "intolerance" as regards dialectical tensions (*Grain* 72/72),⁴⁹⁴ and their revival in his exoticism has not gone unnoticed by critics. Diana Knight, for example, stresses his "adherence to the opposition of Occident and Orient, despite his apparent desire to get outside of the binary oppositions that he attributes to Western thought" (143). Barthes himself confessed this distorted opposition: "I profoundly reject our civilization, *ad nauseam*. This book [*Empire of Signs*] expresses the absolute revindication of a complete alterity" (*Grain* 83/82).⁴⁹⁵

Bernard Comment aptly remarks that Barthes's praise of the other and his desire to distance himself from his own culture are overemphasised, as "his journey is shaped in a way that extols the virtues of the Other, and rejects the Same in a manner that can sometimes be deemed a caricature" (67).⁴⁹⁶ Such rejection of modernisation, Westernisation and, more largely, hybridity, that we find in *Empire of Signs* raises certain questions, as others would only seem to be valued for their difference, aspects of which may be imagined or amplified. If the traveller acknowledged that the travelleses were in some ways similar to him, it would most likely unsettle his exoticist fantasy and compel him to re-evaluate his notion of difference.

Barthes's exoticism can seem surprising as it conflicts with the anti-colonialist essays he published in *Mythologies* in the 1950s (especially "Bichon Among the Blacks" and "Myth Today"), but his reluctance to engage with the politics of representation in *Empire of Signs* conforms with the apolitical dimension that critics have identified in his later works. For instance, Barthes's exoticism dovetails his uncritical praise of the Orientalist Pierre Loti in some passages of the preface he wrote to the new edition of *Azjyadé* in 1971.

Critics such as Diana Knight, Alec G. Hargreaves and Jonathan Culler are divided on Barthes's Orientalism. Knight and Hargreaves stress the stark contrast between the early Barthes who authored *Mythologies* in the 1950s, and the Barthes who wrote *Empire of Signs*, *Incidents* and the preface to Loti's book in the 1970s. For Knight, the early Barthes was "a demystifier of Orientalist discourse" (93), an idea also supported by Hargreaves (55). Knight stresses that in the essays "The Batory Cruise" and "The Blue Guide", Barthes

⁴⁹³ "[N]otre parole" (Barthes, *L'empire* 112), "notre écriture classique" (114), "notre théâtre" (71), "Nos habitudes de parler" (92).

⁴⁹⁴ "[U]ne intolérance" (Barthes, *Grain* 82).

⁴⁹⁵ "[J]e refuse profondément ma civilisation, jusqu'à la nausée. Ce livre exprime la revendication absolue d'une altérité totale" (*ibid.*, 82).

⁴⁹⁶ "[Le voyage] prend la forme d'une exaltation de l'Autre et d'un rejet parfois caricatural du Même" (Comment 67).

denounced tourism . . . as a fine alibi for travelling without taking any interest in political realities” (117). Nevertheless, she admits that when it is his turn to travel, Barthes shows the same political disengagement as the tourists he once criticised (117). Knight also criticises Barthes for his lack of reflection on the French cultural colonialism that allowed him to work abroad (126). However, she still argues that Orientalist readings of his works are “a severe misreading” (156).

Nonetheless, some traits of *Empire of Signs* support the idea that it can be interpreted as an exoticist text, and, to a certain extent, as an Orientalist one too. This travelogue lends itself to an exoticist reading for the reasons I previously mentioned: Barthes de-historicises Japan, displays an uncritical fascination for the foreign other, and relies heavily on comparisons between the Orient (joyfully mysterious) and the West (encumbered by literary traditions and habits). *Empire of Signs* also shares some features with the Orientalist discourse that Edward Said analysed. Said defines Orientalism as a systematically organised discourse created mainly by France and the United Kingdom about the Arabs and Islam, which means that it has deep roots in colonialism (6, 17). *Empire of Signs* is clearly removed from colonial politics and contrary to the Orientalist that Said describes, Barthes does not seek to reinforce “European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (7), neither does he exhibit a desire to “understand” or “control” “what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (12). However, like Said’s Orientalist (33), Barthes does not seem to have any interest in the speech or possible response of Japanese travellers and his depiction of Japan “sends one back to the imagination as a place preferable . . . to the real Orient” (Said 101).

Ethical issues raised by the non-referential portrayal of the other

Barthes’s representation of the Japanese is somewhat questionable and reveals the ethical limits of authenticity as non-referentiality. As I explained at the outset of this study in the **General Introduction**, travel literature holds a special status, as it borrows from fiction, but remains “answerable to the world”, as Bill Buford puts it (7). Thus, when a travel writer calls the Americans “primitive” and “stupid”, as Baudrillard does, he exposes his text to criticism, whereas a fictional narrator may call the inhabitants of an alien planet “sly devils” without raising ethical issues (Lovecraft and Sterling §7). The exoticism found in *Empire of Signs* and *America* reminds us that Barthes and Baudrillard are accountable for the way they evoke extra-textual referents (Japan and America). Non-referentiality reaches ethical limits when it is correlated to questionable discourses about foreign others. There is a risk that, by claiming that their texts are independent of reality, the authors preclude discussions of their texts on the ground that these texts are exercises of the imagination.

It seems crucial to criticise literary practices that contribute to the continuation of prejudices and synecdochic fallacies (such as when Barthes describes various “types” of Japanese people [96/133])⁴⁹⁷ and essentialism (which is evident in the chapter “The

⁴⁹⁷ Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter call “synecdochic fallacy” the false impression that what is true for an individual should be held true for the category this individual allegedly represents (14). “Synecdochic

Eyelid” [99/139]). If we approach the issue from the viewpoint Barthes himself expressed in “The Death of the Author”, we can say that, once it is published, the book is no longer its author’s fantasy, but becomes part of literature, and will go on to influence future travellers and writers. It thus seems necessary to question the ethics of interpersonal encounter upheld by travelogues that do not reflect the lack of reciprocity between the traveller and the travellee. This is in the hope that we can find “contemporary alternatives to Orientalism” and new ways of studying “other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective”, as Edward Said puts it (24).

In *Empire of Signs*, the representation of the Japanese raises ethical issues because the traveller’s interactions with the local people are one-sided and objectifying: others are associated with food, integrated as passive objects in the imagination of the traveller, and their speech is not included in the travelogue.⁴⁹⁸ Interactions with Japanese people always stage an exchange in which they do something for the author: they sketch maps for him, play Kabuki theatre for him, cook for him and serve him food. The lack of reciprocity we can observe in the travelogue brings to mind the practices of the nineteenth-century travellers that Mary Louise Pratt examines in *Imperial Eyes*: “The European travellers, we assume, pass and see; nothing calls upon them to sit still and be seen” (78). Nicolas Bouvier’s *Le vide et le plein: Carnets du Japon 1964-1970*, which recounts journeys Bouvier made around the same time as Barthes, offers an enlightening counterpoint to Barthes’s literary treatment of foreign others. Bouvier frequently evokes the efforts he makes and the difficulties he faces in his encounters with Japanese people (for instance when he attempts to speak Japanese), which conveys the impression that both traveller and travellee resist each other’s culture, and that their interactions are two-sided.⁴⁹⁹

In comparison, the lack of reciprocity between traveller and travellee in Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* is striking. This lack of reciprocity is especially noticeable in the metaphors of consumption that dominate Barthes’s representation of Japan. Such metaphors point towards the traveller’s hedonistic purpose of enjoying the other as a passive object to be possessed and consumed, which is reminiscent of John Urry’s idea that modern tourists visually consume the places they visit and the people they encounter there (148). For instance, Japanese others are turned into a dish through the verb “to savour” (“*savourer*”), which is generally used in relation to food and drinks:

fallacy” describes instances when “the represented part is taken as an accurate reflection of the whole”, to cite Daniel Chandler (133).

⁴⁹⁸ From Alec G. Hargreaves’s analysis of *Mythologies* we learn that Barthes was already muting the other in his early works, in which he “never enable[d] us to hear the voice of the dominated Other” (59).

⁴⁹⁹ Bouvier and Barthes travelled to Japan during the same decade, and the travelogues they wrote share some common themes, but they differ in so many other ways that it is easier to contrast them than to compare them. Charles Forsdick nevertheless addresses the links that exist between their works and points out for instance that some of the photographs that Barthes selected and included in *Empire of Signs* were taken by Bouvier (““(In)connaissance”” 64).

To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken . . . it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text. (*Empire* 10/22)⁵⁰⁰

In this passage, the passive triptych “has been known, savored, received” turns the other into an object consumed by the traveller, who appears as the invisible agent of this passive form. The same word “*savourer*” reoccurs as an adjective later on in the essay (this time translated as “enjoyable” by Richard Howard), turning once more the other into food: “it is always enjoyable to watch someone write, all the more so to watch someone draw” (34/53).⁵⁰¹ More questionable still than the use of this verb is Barthes's mention of “a naked Japanese boy, tied up very neatly like a sausage” in the middle of his chapter on envelopes and gifts (45/64), because it turns this boy into another of the “packages” Barthes writes about, and, in the French original, into foodstuff, since he is tied up like a “dried sausage” – “*un saucisson*”.⁵⁰²

In *Empire of Signs*, Japanese others are sometimes portrayed in a way that objectifies them, placing the emphasis on their difference from (and not on their resemblance to) the French traveller. For instance, in the chapter titled “The Eyelid”, Barthes writes about the epicanthic fold in the same way as he writes in the other chapters about a piece of fried vegetable, chopsticks or packages. The body of the foreign other is cut up into parts, one of which Barthes especially enjoys because it epitomises the difference he is looking for:

The pupil, intense, fragile, mobile, intelligent (for this eye barred, interrupted by the upper edge of the slit, seems to harbor thereby a reserved pensivity, a dose of intelligence kept in reserve . . .) – the pupil is not dramatized by the orbit, as in Western morphology . . . The Western eye is subject to a whole mythology of the soul . . . but the Japanese face is without moral hierarchy; it is entirely alive, even vivid . . . because its morphology cannot be read ‘in depth’, i.e., according to the axis of inwardness. (101-102/139-143)⁵⁰³

The use of the permanent present tense, combined with the lack of agent and an ‘I’ that would explicitly take charge of the description, convey the impression that we are not reading a subjective perception but a general truth. This chapter also contains a black and white photograph of a Japanese schoolboy with a handwritten caption directly referring

⁵⁰⁰ “Fixer un rendez-vous (par gestes, dessins, noms propres) prend sans doute une heure, mais pendant cette heure, pour un message qui se fût aboli en un instant s’il eût été parlé . . ., c’est tout le corps de l’autre qui a été connu, goûté, reçu et qui a déployé (sans fin véritable) son propre récit, son propre texte” (Barthes, *L’empire* 22).

⁵⁰¹ “[I]l est toujours savoureux de voir quelqu’un écrire, à plus forte raison dessiner” (ibid., 53).

⁵⁰² “[U]n jeune Japonais nu, ficelé très régulièrement comme un saucisson” (ibid., 64).

⁵⁰³ “La prunelle, intense, fragile, mobile, intelligente (car cet œil barré, interrompu par le bord supérieur de la fente, semble receler de la sorte une pensivité retenue, un supplément d’intelligence mis en réserve . . .), la prunelle n’est nullement dramatisée par l’orbite, comme il arrive dans la morphologie occidentale . . . L’œil occidental est soumis à toute une mythologie de l’âme, centrale et secrète . . . mais le visage japonais est sans hiérarchie morale; il est entièrement vivant, vivace même . . . parce que sa morphologie ne peut être lue ‘en profondeur’, c’est-à-dire selon l’axe d’une intériorité” (ibid., 143).

to his “porcelain eyelid”, which turns him into a china doll (101/140).⁵⁰⁴ In addition, Barthes gives the impression that it is possible to describe at one go the eyelids of all Japanese people, disregarding individual differences in favour of an oriental type. Whether Japanese travel writers of the same period wrote about the eyelid of the French is doubtful, and Barthes’s chapter can be considered a remnant of the Orientalist tradition from which he said he wished to depart. Barthes’s attempts at overcoming referentiality thus do not seem to correlate with a desire to go beyond Orientalism and exoticism. The ethical issues raised by *Empire of Signs*, and to a lesser extent, *America*, suggest that the claim of non-referentiality cannot be sustained throughout a travel text, which belongs to a referential, nonfiction genre that implies a form of accountability.

Conclusion

Barthes and Baudrillard start by claiming a non-referentiality that separates their travelogues from Japan and the United States. This gesture gives them the space they need to devise rhetorical strategies that fit the principles they developed earlier in their theories. Barthes and Baudrillard can be seen as “allegorists” who project their reflections on literature and signs onto the countries they visit (Todorov, *Human* 349). As a result, their travelogues acquire an abstract, semi-theoretical quality that makes them stand apart in the field of travel literature.

These authors do more than acknowledge the limits of literary representation, as other writers from the same (postmodern) era do, they also claim that the literary object is independent of its potential model. If reality cannot be represented, but only replaced by linguistic signs, as Baudrillard suggests; if it is weighed down by the reference to reality and renewed by writers who invest empty *signifiers* with their fantasy, as Barthes hints, then the most authentic way to write about one’s journey may be to make one’s travelogue non-referential. To put it another way, their travelogues seem underpinned by the idea that the most authentic way to write about one’s journey is to make one’s text non-referential, that is to say, to separate it from the extra-textual reality that may have inspired the author.

To support his claim about the disappearance of meaning in the simulation that has replaced reality, Baudrillard undermines the figure of the author as meaning-giver. He presents his subjective observations as easily questionable assertive statements, which strengthens the impression that no claim can be made that would give more order to reality. He refuses the role of meaning-giver, and shows that meaning is difficult to stabilise as regards simulation. Thanks to the lexicons of geometry, space, film and circulation, Baudrillard creates a distance between his *America*, which appears unreal, and the reference to an extra-textual United States. In addition to these lexicons, he employs epanorthoses and paronomasias to illustrate the properties of the simulation (reversibility, equivalence and circulation) and to highlight the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, which only possesses a provisional and arbitrary meaning.

⁵⁰⁴ “[L]a paupière de porcelaine” (Barthes, *L’empire* 140).

In *Empire of Signs*, non-referentiality is also clearly tied to reflections on the affordances and limitations of the linguistic sign. Barthes hints that literature can be renewed if the writer empties the sign of the burdensome meanings and connotations it has acquired throughout history. Thus, 'Japan' as a sign is removed from its temporal context and turned into an abstract entity. Barthes devises various strategies that convey the impression that his Japan escapes stable definition and extra-textual reference. The 'I' that typically confirms the autobiographical, nonfictional and referential nature of the travel text is relegated to the background, which gives the impression that the text springs from a "subtle immensity of writings", rather than from Barthes's imagination and experience (*S/Z* 118).⁵⁰⁵ At the stylistic and syntactic levels, he employs successive analogies, lengthens his sentences, and incorporates multiple mediums (texts, photographs, paintings) in order to show that his Japan is elusive and cannot be completely captured.

The authors' preference for non-referentiality can partly be explained by their refusal of dialectics: in their theoretical works, they explicitly reject binary oppositions. In *Empire of Signs*, dialectics are replaced by the free play of empty *signifiers*, while in *America*, a state of indeterminacy and reversibility takes their place. Nevertheless, the non-referential claims made at the outset of *America* and *Empire of Signs*, as well as the authors' attempts to avoid dialectical tension, are limited by the strong presence of exoticism. Both Barthes's and Baudrillard's texts reject sameness and praise difference in exaggerated ways. This reintroduces oppositional dialectics and enables readers to identify the extra-textual addressers of the texts as European and French. The exoticism that pervades these travelogues also raises the issue of the accountability of travel texts to the extra-textual world. The non-referentiality they claim conflicts with the accountability of nonfictional travel literature, which necessarily occupies a certain position in the politics of representation. In the case of Barthes's and Baudrillard's texts, this position proves to be exoticist.

The investigation initiated here on the conception of authenticity as non-referentiality raises broader questions concerning the in-between place of the travel-writing genre, which sits astride fiction and nonfiction and referentiality and non-referentiality. The analysis I proposed could be pursued further by comparing the affordances and limits of non-referentiality in nonfictional travelogues, such as those I studied, and in fictional travel literature such as Henri Michaux's *Voyage en Grande Garabagne* (1936), which Barthes cites in the opening chapter of *Empire of Signs*, and Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exactitude in Science", which opens Baudrillard's *America*.

⁵⁰⁵ "[L]a 'subtile immensité des écritures'" (Barthes, *S/Z* 118).

CONCLUSION TO PART II

In the investigation carried out in **Chapters 6, 7 and 8**, my aim was to chart the conceptions of authenticity that underpinned Eco's criticism of American hyperreal art in "Travels in Hyperreality", and the non-referential writing choices that Barthes and Baudrillard made in their semi-theoretical travel essays, *Empire of Signs* and *America*. I have found that these three semioticians treated their destinations as a system of signs rather than as geographical entities. Their travelogues share a common concern for the postmodern question of the correspondence of signs and reality. The arguments they put forward in their essays undermine *mimesis* and encourage their readers to look at artistic representations (artworks and literature) as a coded system of signs. They place particular emphasis on the creative distance that separates representations from their models and suggests that authenticity (in art and in writing) depends on this distance. Eco criticises the mimetic pretence of hyperreal art as deceptive, Barthes seeks to free his writing from *mimesis*, which he sees as "repressive" (Compagnon, *Démon* 113),⁵⁰⁶ and Baudrillard claims that reality has been overlaid by signs and has disappeared. Consequently, I contended that their travelogues abided by a postmodern conception of authenticity that required art to openly state its representational nature and artists and writers to acknowledge the distance between their artistic or literary representations and reality.

Eco hints that, for artistic reproductions to be authentic, it is necessary for them to be received in a critical and creative way. Studying his text has afforded us the opportunity to explore various conceptions of authenticity upheld by the curators and collectors of hyperreal art, which he opposes and undermines, as I showed in **Chapter 6**. According to Eco's descriptions, these curators and collectors seek to create a sense of authenticity by evoking the past and by claiming that the reproductions achieve a perfect visual resemblance to their models. However, for Eco, these reproductions are grotesque, they only succeed in evoking material accumulation, and they belie the postmodern principle of pointing out the gap between art and reality. The mocking and contemptuous tone he adopts to write about the hyperreal copies is ambiguous. On the one hand, he partly invites his readers to question the very notion of authenticity, in relation to originals as well as copies. On the other hand, he sometimes seems to endorse the notion that the original artwork is sacred and unquestionably superior.

In **Chapter 7**, I showed that the conception of authenticity implicit in Eco's text was closely related to his work as a semiotician intent on decoding cultural phenomena critically. Eco suggests that some simulacra can be elevated to the rank of originals, provided that they differ sufficiently from their models, offer learned interpretations of these models, or lend themselves to parodic interpretations. He shows how this new authenticity can be created, by applying "punishing irony" to the most inauthentic collections he beholds, which reintroduces a certain degree of authenticity as far as reception is concerned ("Travels" 28). The findings related to Eco's essay have significant implications for the analysis of the representations of simulacra in other travel texts, as I suggested through a study of the simulacra contained in Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu*.

⁵⁰⁶ "[P]our Barthes, la mimésis est répressive" (Compagnon, *Démon* 113).

The main limitation of my study of authenticity in hyperreality is linked to the context in which these travellers wrote. Eco and Baudrillard wrote long before the current digital era and, in the light of the latest developments in virtual realities, it would be fruitful to reassess the value of their theorisations of hyperreality⁵⁰⁷ and to look at the way the concept of authenticity has evolved. Certain developments, such as virtual museum tours and the exploration of digital environments with haptic VR, have clearly affected our conception of travel.

Moving beyond the study of Eco's conception of authenticity in relation to art, in **Chapter 8** I went on to examine the aesthetics of non-referentiality in Barthes's and Baudrillard's texts. Instead of providing explanations or descriptions of the countries they visited, and instead of reading these countries as signs, they wrote semi-philosophical essays that supported their views about the impossibility of referring to reality. I argued that their non-referential aesthetics supported and expressed their conception of authenticity in relation to writing. Equipped with their theoretical texts, I showed that Baudrillard claimed that simulation had replaced reality, and therefore questioned the possibility of describing and referring to the United States, while Barthes sought to free the signifiers from their signifieds and to liberate himself from references to the real Japan by constructing his own literary version of the country. I contended that their aesthetics of non-referentiality afforded them the possibility of keeping on writing despite the crisis of *mimesis*. I showed that, in the second half of his career, Barthes favoured poetical, meandering and fragmentary literatures, from which he seems to have drawn inspiration to shape *Empire of Signs*. In this travelogue, he attempts to renew literature and to keep his impressions fresh after his journey to Japan by detaching his literary Japan from the extra-textual country and by devoting his attention to words as signifiers. The absence of the autobiographical 'I', the disjointed chapters, the concatenation of metaphors that shift as he writes, and the metatextual reflection on writing and literature that pervade his text, contribute to the impression that his text is less about Japan than it is about writing.

Turning my attention to Baudrillard, I contended that his *America* could be understood as a defence and an illustration of the claims he made in his theoretical writings concerning simulation. Rather than portraying a reality that has vanished, Baudrillard employs a style and rhetoric that enable him to describe the characteristics of the simulation that has replaced it. He creates an impression of non-referentiality by means of nonverbal lists, epanorthoses and paronomasias that together aid the writer in avoiding claims about reality. But when such claims *are* made, Baudrillard expresses them in such an assertive manner that the reader might well question whether *any* claims can in fact be made. Furthermore, he turns the United States into a semi-fictional country with the defamiliarising lexicons of cinema, geometry and outer space.

Be this as it may, it should also be acknowledged that the conception of authentic writing as non-referential writing that is foregrounded by Barthes's and Baudrillard's texts is limited by their exoticism. By consistently opposing foreign others, whom they praise, to the French or European cultures that they criticise, they introduce references to clearly identified cultures. Barthes's exoticism also reveals that he abides by another conception of authenticity, which is based on the idea that the past grants value to the destination

⁵⁰⁷ As Steve Redhead points out, Baudrillard "was stubbornly 'old media'", and preferred the typewriter to the computer (9).

visited. Indeed, his archaising portrayal of Japan conveys the impression that he prefers to ignore the signs of modernity he sees there in favour of an idealised image of a feudal Japan. This fits better his project of immersing himself in a culture that is unquestionably different from his own. I offered some concluding remarks concerning the implications of the nonfictional status of travel writings and defended the idea that the conception of authenticity as non-referentiality seemed incompatible with the accountability of the travel writer.

The conclusions reached in **Chapters 6, 7 and 8** are to some extent different from those David Scott came to in *Semiologies of Travel: from Gautier to Baudrillard* (2004). For Scott, the arbitrary nature of signs – words in particular – became apparent after the Enlightenment, in part due to the discovery of other *épistémés* through travels of exploration (7). Scott explains that, from this crisis of the sign, travel writing, not least of all ethnographies, developed an interest in so-called ‘primitive’ societies. This was because the travellers believed that civilisations that had not been intruded upon still worked with systems of signs that retained a sacred and unquestionable link to what they referred to (9). Scott’s main thesis is that the texts of these travellers are characterised by “the nostalgia for epistemic systems in which the symbol maintains an authentic connection with the real or sacred” (14). Yet the travelogues of Eco, Barthes and Baudrillard do not fit this pattern. There is little or no trace of such “nostalgia” in their texts. Eco’s and Baudrillard’s theoretical reflections on the simulacra explain their texts more adequately than a “nostalgia” for referential signs. In addition, they seem to value the gap between the sign and the thing, rather than lament it. When Eco studies wax statues that claim to refer perfectly to an original or a model, he mocks and criticises the fiction of perfect reference that they display. If Baudrillard diagnoses a nostalgic impulse in American culture, as Scott hints, the French philosopher gives no indication that he shares this nostalgia. On the contrary, he approaches the disappearance of the referential power of signs with a sense of “fascination” and “sideration” (*America* 1/7, 7/12, 103/101).

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This study started as a double enquiry into the conceptions of authenticity upheld by voluntary nomads who journeyed to the wilderness and semioticians who journeyed to hyperreal or highly cultural destinations. Whereas the former wrote travelogues that corresponded to the conventions of the travel-writing genre, the latter produced philosophical travel essays that reflected on the (im)possibility of artistic representation more than they described the countries visited.

Because of this difference, the initial enquiry branched out into a set of key questions that I used to probe the corpus. I sought to determine what Sylvain Tesson, Peter Matthiessen, Sara Wheeler and Colin Thubron portrayed as an authentic relation to nature (**Chapters 1 to 4**), what Umberto Eco deemed to be authentic art in American hyperreal settings (**Chapters 6 and 7**), and what Tesson, Thubron, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard considered to be an authentic way to write about their destinations in the context of the postmodern crisis of representation (**Chapters 5 and 8**).

I adapted my approach of the travelogues to address both their nonfictional and literary nature. I offered close readings of the composition, style, internal and intertextual relations of the texts under study, discussed the ethical implications of the travellers' representational choices and put them into perspective by exploring the conventions of the travel-writing genre. In the case of Barthes and Baudrillard, I explained the arguments that they supported in their travel essays regarding art and referentiality. This method helped me determine the textual means by which an effect of authenticity was achieved in their texts.

The concept of authenticity is a much debated one. Postmodernist scepticism set out to debunk the idea that anything 'authentic' could exist. Criticism in tourist studies claimed that the tourists' search for the authentic was inherently vain. Yet, at the same time, travel-writing scholars continue to sprinkle their texts with the words 'authenticity' and 'authentic' to describe certain travel experiences that some travellers aim for and/or find. Few of these scholars define what is meant by 'authenticity', as if the concept were universal and self-explanatory. In this project, I have argued that, although authenticity is always constructed, it is not a hollow idea, a self-evident notion, or a purely personal view that varies with each traveller. I have shown that certain conceptions of authenticity dominate the travel literature I selected and that these authenticities are conventional. Some seem inherited from the travel-writing and nature-writing genres; some correspond to the authors' own complex theoretical systems; others seem to be a response to the postmodern shift.

The authenticities I have addressed are constructed along certain lines. I brought into focus patterns and recurrences in the authenticities found across the corpus and proposed that they could be attached to three main definitions of authenticity that other scholars in the field may find helpful: authenticity as exoticism and a reverence for tradition; as the belief in the ability of the wilderness to return the self to its original state; and as the postmodern acknowledgement of the limits of art and literature. Even though the findings I offer are limited by the size and scope of my corpus – composed for the most

part of highly educated Western white male travellers – the present study has nevertheless gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of what contemporary travellers portray as authentic in relation to nature, travel, themselves and foreign art and culture. I have also pointed out the limits of these conceptions of authenticity and discussed their ethical implications. The prevailing discourses of authenticity that I identified are influenced by the geographical and temporal contexts that surround the travelogues I selected. This study thus offers a picture of what authenticity means for some contemporary Western travellers at a given moment – between 1970 and 2019.

The sociocultural, economic and ethnic backgrounds of the writers I have investigated are relatively homogeneous, which may have a bearing on the understandings of authenticity that have emerged. As Carl Thompson stresses in the foreword to *Encountering Difference: New Perspectives on Genre, Travel and Gender* (2020), “travellers necessarily carry with them a gaze formed by their upbringing and background, and by membership of diverse, intersecting communities and identities” (xii). Jamaica Kincaid (*Among Flowers*) and Sara Wheeler (*Terra Incognita*) hint that the various relevant aspects of the travellers’ identity can affect not only their gaze, but the experiences that are available to them, the literary legacy they inherit and choose to respond to, the way they are perceived by the people they encounter, and the way they represent these people.⁵⁰⁸

Shirley Foster and Sara Mills point out that Western women travellers “have always been subject to a range of constraints which are different from those affecting the behaviour and writing of men” (4). We could add that ethnic minorities and people with disabilities are subjected to even tighter constraints, and that, on a global scale, few people are at leisure to travel and write about it, which creates a *de facto* pattern of exclusion in the field of travel literature and in the critique that is attached to it. Further research would be needed to examine whether conceptions of authenticity remain the same when factors including, but not limited to, the gender, social class, ethnicity and (dis)ability of the travel writer vary. The way travel writers inscribe the various facets of their identity in their texts and play with them to fashion their travelling persona may cast light on conceptions of authenticity hitherto unmapped. These questions call for a set of theoretical tools that pertain to the fields of gender studies and intersectionality, which falls outside the remit of this project. The special attention that these issues deserve can hardly be compensated for with a paragraph in a conclusion.

Travelogues authored by women, by wayfarers who do not “conform to a normative sense of able-bodiedness” (Forsdick, “Disability” 72), and by travellers from countries beyond the Western world have long been the blind spot of travel-writing criticism and

⁵⁰⁸ In this travelogue, Jamaica Kincaid humorously recounts the mesmerised or rude reactions of the Nepalese people she meets, who seem never to have encountered a woman with her skin colour or her hair type. More than any other travel writer that I refer to in the bibliography of this study, Kincaid is careful not to typify the travellers, and she uses particular caution when describing their physical appearance.

Sara Wheeler denounces the rejection she felt at Rothera, the British Antarctic station, and attributes it to gender-based discrimination. In addition, her travelogue *Terra Incognita* is marked by intertextual references to the travels of the women who preceded her at the South Pole and who have been sidelined by history. It is also worth noting that, to refer to the men she meets at the South Pole, she appropriates the kind of synecdochic typification and objectification that is sometimes found in the travelogues of male travel writers to refer to women (see Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul*, for instance). For example, she calls some of the men she meets “beards”.

have only recently come into focus. Recent female-authored travel literature such as Jan Kerouac's *Baby Driver* (1981) remains largely unknown, as do the travelogues authored by travellers with motor or sensory impairments, such as Frances M. Parson's *I Didn't Hear the Dragon Roar* (1988), to say nothing of works written from a "south-to-south and south-to-north perspective" published in a language other than English, such as the travelogues that the award-winning Indian Nepali travel writer Solon Karthak published between the 1970s and the 2010s.⁵⁰⁹ If we take the question of gender as an example, we can see that scholarly works have frequently relegated it to a chapter (*The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* [2002], *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* [2019]) or a concluding "coda", as Alison Russell does in *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern travel literature* (2000). As Gigi Adair and Lenka Filipova remark, even less attention has been dedicated to the travelogues of non-European women (xxi). Even anthologies of female travel writing push such travelogues back to the literary margins if they include them at all. Despite their titles, *Amazonian: The Penguin Book of Women's New Travel Writing* (1998) and *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (2002) are mostly about *British* women. Although Dea Birkett's *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* (2004) mentions foreign women who travelled to the United Kingdom, they are hastily dispatched in the very last pages, and most of them are either upper class or kindled the interest of royalty in some way. Perhaps archival or recovery work is needed to retrieve the as-of-yet unimagined travel reports of women with different sociocultural backgrounds. All in all, it seems that more multi-focal corpora of texts would benefit not only further studies of authenticity, but travel literature in general.

In this study, I have demonstrated that, for some of the voluntary nomads I selected, travelling to and dwelling in the wilderness is more authentic when it enables a momentary return to a fantasised pre-modern existence. Paying close attention to the way Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler and Thubron depicted nature, their relation to it, and what they expected to find there, I concluded that nature gave them a sense of authenticity when it was free from some elements of modern life. These adverse aspects included the daily responsibilities that came with family life or life in London; the codified social interactions of life in Paris; or the meaninglessness of historical horrors that marked the landscapes of post-Soviet Russia. I have discussed the problematic ethical implications of this "hyperseparat[ion]" of the wilderness from modern civilisation (Crane 15), arguing that, by locating authentic nature away from humanity, Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler and Thubron endorse a discourse that sees humanity as a stain, and they also disclaim their own agency and responsibility towards nature in their urban lives.

I have given evidence that the relation to nature that Tesson, Matthiessen and Wheeler implicitly portray as authentic is spiritual (epiphanic) and embodied (linked to their experience of physical hardship). All three dedicate particular attention to the epiphanies they experience in Siberia, the Himalaya and Antarctica respectively, and Tesson and Matthiessen also place emphasis on the physical challenges they take on. I have contended

⁵⁰⁹ Solon Karthak's works are currently being translated into English by Abrona Lee Pandi Aden. See <https://icm.as.cornell.edu/icm-global-south-translation-awards>.

that these three wayfarers inherit and reinterpret the Transcendentalists' approach to nature, and that it has a significant bearing on what they deem to be an authentic relation to the wilderness. They hint that, provided that they journey far from civilisation, contemplate the wilderness with reverence and pay attention to the beauty around them, they can experience epiphanies and be returned to their authentic self. They implicitly define this authentic self as a pre-social self, a calmer self or a child-like self that is capable of seeing "the miraculous in the common", to borrow Emerson's phrase (*Nature* 45). For these travellers, nature and animals channel a type of spirituality that they portray as unquestionable and authentic.

The physical hardships that Tesson and Matthiessen foreground also act as rhetorical devices that make their travels appear more authentic. Physical strain provides them with a sense of immediacy and personal victory and gives them the opportunity to showcase and authenticate their performance as risk-taking adventurers and 'wild' men. I argued that, in *Consolations of the Forest* and *The Snow Leopard*, the local people embody the life of 'wild' men that the travellers try to emulate. I discussed the problematic implications of this representation of the travellers. I also questioned the conception of authenticity that Tesson in particular fosters through his triumphant (though admittedly humorous) descriptions of physical feats, because this conception instrumentalises nature and revives the imperialist image of the traveller as conqueror. My analysis confirmed and developed further Graham Huggan's argument concerning the presence of "authenticities of endangerment" alongside the "authenticities of endurance" in contemporary travelogues (178). For Huggan, "the extremist tendencies of contemporary travel, the sometimes bizarre death drives that appear increasingly to be sustaining it" and the "postmodern consciousness turning increasingly to the body – turning destructively on the body" can be explained by the travel writers' sense that they have come too late, that too little remains to explore, and that they need to go to extremes to re-imagine travel (7). In the light of the corpus I selected, I suggested a different interpretation of these "extremist tendencies", arguing that they dovetail Tesson's and Matthiessen's desire to focus on the present, that is to say on the 'here and now' of their experience in nature; their attempts to be reintegrated in nature in a way that implies being prey to its dangers and discomforts; and their desire to be authenticated as adventurers rather than tourists.

My analysis has confirmed the findings of the extensive body of critical works on travel writing that have pointed out and criticised the hierarchy that travellers try to establish between themselves and tourists. Unlike Huggan, I would not say that the distinction between the tourist and the traveller is "an age-old debate" that is not worth bringing up again (5), for it is clear that contemporary travellers continue to insist on this distinction. As I have noted, they place emphasis on the traits that separate them from tourists (such as physical hardships), and tone down the traits that would make them look like tourists (such as the commercial aspect of their travels). As long as travellers continue to foster this distinction, it will be necessary to reiterate and point out its arbitrariness.

I have unravelled the formal means by which these travellers attempt to capture and translate the epiphanies and the feeling of immediacy that they experience in the wilderness and that is key to their conceptions of authenticity. Reading their travelogues closely gave me the opportunity to explore the affordances of travel literature as a literary

genre and to show that much could be gained from studying it with the formalist techniques usually reserved for fiction. I demonstrated that, contrary to what previous scholars have argued, Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* is not a self-centred narrative and that the particular attention Tesson and Matthiessen pay to nature takes the form of lyrical and joyful passages. I also showed that the lexical and syntactic refinement with which Tesson depicts nature provides evidence of his desire both to see beauty in seemingly unremarkable nonhumans and to renew the language of travel writing and the representation of nature.

I found that the nostalgia for a half-imagined past, when nature was allegedly untainted, when history meant progress, when art was unquestionably auratic, and when foreign cultures were indisputably different, is pervasive in the texts under study. I showed that some of the travellers I examined still use the image they have of the past as a standard against which to compare their present-day travel experience and assess its authenticity.

Nostalgia is not the only form of traditional authenticity to live on in the travelogues I selected. One of the most significant findings to emerge is that exoticist expectations coexist with anti-exoticist conceptions of authenticity in the selected corpus (and sometimes inside the individual texts themselves). Exoticist expectations are epitomised by Barthes's portrayal of the Japanese, and anti-exoticist conceptions of authenticity by Thubron's representations of the Russians. Examining the representations of local people by Tesson, Matthiessen, Thubron and Barthes provides a first insight into the various conceptions of authenticity that underpin the portrayal of foreign others. It would be fruitful, however, to undertake a more comprehensive comparison of the manner in which foreign others are represented in contemporary travelogues. Such a study could investigate whether they are given a voice and what roles social interactions play in the general economy of the journeys.

Other conceptions of authenticity promoted by the texts of the voluntary nomads I examined seem more in keeping with current environmental ethics and postmodern aesthetics. For instance, studying Tesson's and Matthiessen's descriptions of the wilderness reveals that, for them, the most authentic relation one could have with nature is immersive and transformative. If we consider that the representation of otherness is the cornerstone of travel literature, and that nature and animals epitomise otherness, it is surprising that so few studies have been dedicated to the representation of animals in travel literature. Save for book chapters by Elizabeth Leane and Jopi Nyman, the field of travel-writing theory still lacks thorough examinations of the way animals are represented by travellers, the role they play in the travellers' experiences, and the ethical implications that stem from these representations. The analysis of Tesson's and Matthiessen's travelogues that I presented with the help of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "Becoming-Other", contributes to advancing this still emerging field. With this concept, I was able to go further than I would have done by merely exploring the idea of 'going native'. Although this notion can help us understand travellers' attempts to be assimilated into foreign communities, it proves inadequate where travellers who wish to fit into nature are concerned. The Deleuzoguattarian concept helped me cast light on the metaphors that Tesson and Matthiessen create to represent their integration into the

natural environment. This analysis prompted me to argue that these travellers suggest that an authentic relation to nature involves self-transformation. For the most part, these voluntary nomads do not adopt a position above and outside the environment and communities they visit.

Some of the texts under study possess traits that are in line with postmodern aesthetics. My analysis of Thubron's and Tesson's texts in particular has shown that they embed reflections on the limits of the literary medium (Tesson) and on the limits of their own understanding (Thubron) into their narratives. I defended the idea that these travel writers conformed to the postmodern convention of undermining their own authority as authors. I showed this by examining the self-deprecation and intertextuality of Tesson's *Consolations of the Forest* and *La panthère des neiges*, and by analysing the way Thubron questions his own nostalgic expectations in *In Siberia*. I argued that the multifaceted self-reflexivity at work in their texts plays a role in the travellers' attempts at creating an effect of authenticity. I proposed that, in the postmodern era, writers are more likely to appear authentic if they acknowledge the flaws or limits of their texts, the existence of previous intertexts, their own subjective bias and so on. What had started as an examination of the conceptions of authenticity that inform their representations of nature turned into an investigation of the conceptions of authenticity that underpin their approach to *writing*.

The present study adds to the growing body of research that focuses on innovative travel literature and indicates a renewal in the representation of otherness. It contributes to this field by blending a formalist approach that brings to the fore the strategies travel writers devise to achieve certain effects, and an ideological criticism of the premises and implications of their representational choices. However, this project parts with other comparable research in that I do not adopt a postcolonial perspective to assess these texts, as scholars focusing on contemporary travel writing often do.⁵¹⁰

The specialised tools of postcolonial studies, which can efficiently help critics identify complicity with and resistance to imperialist representations, proved inadequate to examine relatively apolitical travelogues that feature destinations that are not former colonies. Yet, the travellers I focused on construct and foreground discourses of authenticity that are built on certain ethical premises that needed to be challenged. I found that the field of travel-writing theory lacked in-between tools that were not enmeshed in postcolonial studies and that could be used to question the assumptions and corollaries of the travellers' representational choices. Consequently, I adapted concepts sourced from other fields of study, such as Lawrence Buell's "toxic discourse", Deleuze and Guattari's "Becoming-Other", Édouard Glissant's "opacity" and Lisa Isherwood and David Harris's "radical Otherness". These concepts could assist in the interpretation of other travel texts that resist the postcolonial framework.

The semioticians whose works I examined in the second part of this study also take up ambivalent positions with regard to authenticity. My analysis has shown that Eco

⁵¹⁰ For instance, see Edwards and Graulund, *Mobility at Large: Globalization, Textuality and Innovative Travel Writing* (2012).

adheres to a postmodern conception of authenticity that valorises irony and parody, while still upholding older notions of auratic authenticity that postulate the sacrality of the original. I have compared the conceptions of authenticity that Eco identifies in hyperreal museums (the iconism and the cult of the past) to the conceptions of authenticity that he endorses (the critical appraisal of art). I have demonstrated that for him hyperreal art collections are inauthentic because they evoke uncritical material accumulations, consumerism and deceit. I have argued that, in Eco's view, for reproductions to be authentic, they need to be created and displayed by artists and curators who adopt a critical distance regarding their models, who acknowledge the limits of artistic representation, and who make or display their art in a way that encourages visitors to interpret it creatively. At the same time, in "Travels in Hyperreality" Eco gestures beyond the hierarchy between original and copy, and towards a conception of authenticity that makes it possible to see some simulacra as new originals.

To date, neither Eco's essay nor the concept of hyperreality that it develops have been studied in much detail. By unravelling the characteristics of the hyperreal locations he describes, and by weaving links with Baudrillard's theory of the simulation, I have proposed a comprehensive definition of hyperreality that lays the groundwork for future research in this direction. I have also suggested new avenues for research, based on the concept of authentic simulacra that Eco adumbrates. Aided by poststructuralist theories, I have proposed that instead of seeing transcultural objects as second best on the grounds that they draw inspiration from a previous product (the original), it is possible to compare them to this original in a non-hierarchical way. In the light of the conclusion drawn from Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality", I suggested that these objects could be assessed according to their creativity (their independence from the original) rather than according to their lack of resemblance to this original.

My investigation of the conceptions of authenticity upheld by semioticians leads me to conclude that, as Wolfgang Funk, Florian Groß and Irmtraud Huber put it in *The Aesthetics of Authenticity*, "authenticity is closely and indissolubly tied to questions of art's relationship to reality" (12). For Eco, whose ideas are decidedly postmodern, art needs to acknowledge the gap that separates it from reality. For Barthes and Baudrillard, literature should also point towards this gap. I have argued that a conception of non-referential authenticity informs the semi-theoretical travel essays of Barthes and Baudrillard. They do not claim to have represented Japan and the United States. Instead, Barthes reflects on the act of writing, and Baudrillard strives to represent the simulation that has allegedly replaced reality. By analysing *Empire of Signs* and *America* in the light of their authors' theoretical works, I have shown that they represent their destinations in quite an abstract way to match their preference for non-referentiality. They thus avoid the representational claims that they implicitly portray as inauthentic. I also mapped out the stylistic, rhetorical and compositional devices they employ to convey an impression of non-referentiality. To my knowledge, such formal analyses have not previously been applied to Baudrillard's *America*, and no attempt has been made at linking the idiosyncratic form of this text to his philosophical stance in *Simulacra and Simulation*. My analyses of Baudrillard's and Barthes's texts raise certain questions that could be pursued further. For instance, the

responsibility of travel writers and the status of the travel text (fictional, nonfictional, referential, non-referential or other) remain inexhaustible subjects for debate.

What is remarkable is that despite the prevalence of postmodern traits in most of the travelogues I examined, one can notice the relative absence of postmodern exhaustion. For instance, Tesson acknowledges the limits of the literary medium, yet still seeks to convey the freshness of his impressions and to experiment with language. His endeavours can be understood as “self-critical optimism” (Huber 216) or as a “willingness to belief” (Timmer qtd. in Huber 33).⁵¹¹ Thubron points out the limits of his understanding of Russian history, yet he returns to Russia repeatedly to meet with Russians and to renew and refine his attempt at grasping parts of their truth. Barthes and Baudrillard replace the representational claims they abandon with “pleasure” at semiotic loss for the former and “fascination” at exploring American simulacra for the latter. These travellers do not fall silent despite being conscious of the limits of the literary medium. Their travelogues evoke “forms of authenticity in contemporary culture which take their status as always already mediated into account and still do not content themselves with this insight but continue their attempt to (symbolically) break through to the authentic, if not real, referent of representation” (Funk, et al. 12). They produce a literature that is sparked by a sense of wonder, which coexists with the postmodernist claim of “the inaccessibility of the real . . . and the impossibility of truth” (Huber 6). The filters to which the travellers draw attention – the literary medium, their subjectivity, their inner library, etc. – do not necessarily decrease the value of experiences they wished to be immediate. These filters also give value to this experience.

In the summer of 2020, Helsinki’s Ateneum Art Museum displayed Stephane Graff’s photograph *Louvre Diptych* (2019), which illustrates the paradox of filters and authenticity that I have addressed throughout this study. This artwork also offers a thought-provoking answer to the question that I brought up in the foreword. It is composed of two panels, one being the black and white negative image of the other. The photographer stood behind the camera-wielding tourists that gathered in front of the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, and captured their image as they photographed Leonardo da Vinci’s masterpiece. In Graff’s diptych, the *Mona Lisa* has been replaced by monochromatic rectangles, one black, the other white. Graff’s photograph can be interpreted in a number of ways. The white and black squares that cover the absent masterpiece can be seen as Graff’s ironic stratification of iconic references, from da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* to Malevich’s *White on White* and *Black Square*. The left-hand panel with the black square at its centre can be seen as an invitation to reevaluate the worshipful attitude towards the masterpieces of the past. The emptiness of this square suggests the alienation of a crowd gone mad, the absence of the authentic item and the impossibility of directly accessing it. All that is left are the frames: the picture’s frame, the digital screens of the visitors’ camera, and the photographer’s reframing.

⁵¹¹ Irmtraud Huber quotes Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Rodopi, 2010, 359.

By contrast, the light that radiates from the white rectangle of the right-hand panel evokes the epiphanic experience of visitors who have been struck by the painting's beauty. The diptych shifts the focus away from the absent *Mona Lisa* and onto the visitors' experience. This reframing can be seen as a way to reassert the importance of their experience in spite of questioning the value of the artwork. Even if the authenticity, value and reverence associated with the *Mona Lisa* are constructed and conventional, the experience of the visitors who behold it can still be meaningful. In this diptych, as in the travelogues I studied, there is no fatigue but a commitment to reasserting the meaningfulness of the experience, without forfeiting the postmodern critical outlook.

ANNEXES

Annexe 1 – The travel-writing genre in French and Anglo-American academic contexts

In France, contemporary travel writing still bears the double stigma of being nonfiction – which connotes a lack of attention to form – and too recent to have been accepted into the canon. As Frank Wagner stresses, narratological tools have developed in relation to fiction, which continues to take centre-stage in literary studies (§3). In contrast, nonfiction is granted a lower status because it is “too dependent on an empirical rendition of contingent events, what happened to happen, for entry into the literary canon”, as Stephen Clark puts it (qtd. in Cooke 17).⁵¹²

As a result, studies in the genre focus predominantly on established nineteenth-century authors who have gained recognition through their work as fiction writers. This preference is epitomised in *Le Voyage, le monde et la bibliothèque* (1997) by the narratologist Christine Montalbetti. Although she chooses a corpus of French travel literature, she makes it clear that she still places fiction above nonfiction, and that travel is only an “*excuse* to investigate the mechanics of referential writing more globally, through the paradigm of the genre” (9, emphasis added).⁵¹³ In addition, she seems to locate literary and aesthetic quality exclusively in the nineteenth-century canon, epitomised by Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Hugo, Stendhal, Flaubert, etc. (8). The classification of the travel-writing genre as minor can be explained by its perceived inferior literary status, but also by the peripheral and politically controversial⁵¹⁴ position postcolonial studies occupy in France.

Nonetheless, a belated acknowledgment of the literary value of contemporary travel literature in the French academic field may be suggested by the inclusion, in 2018, of *L’Usage du monde* (1963), by the Swiss travel writer Nicolas Bouvier, alongside Chrétien de Troyes, Jean Racine and Gustave Flaubert in the programme of the *agrégation de Lettres Modernes*, a competitive examination taken by aspiring university teachers in France since 1766. In addition, on the cultural scene, the festival “*Étonnants voyageurs*” dedicated to travel literature, takes place each year in Saint-Malo, and in the academic field, two main associations now centre around travel literature: the *Centre de Recherche sur la Littérature des Voyages* (CRLV) and the *Société d’Étude de la Littérature de Voyage du monde Anglophone* (SELVA).

⁵¹² Simon Cooke quotes Steve Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, Zed Books, 1999, 2.

⁵¹³ “[L]e voyage sera prétexte à interroger plus largement le fonctionnement de l’écriture référentielle, à partir du paradigme du genre” (Montalbetti 9).

⁵¹⁴ As exemplified by the controversy triggered in February 2021 when the Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Frédérique Vidal, expressed her concern about the existence within academia of subjects which, according to her, did not suffer any opposing views, such as “postcolonial studies”. For a contextualisation of the controversy from an American point of view, I suggest the article by Norimitsu Onishi and Constant Méheut, “Heating Up Culture Wars, France to Scour Universities for Ideas That ‘Corrupt Society’”.

In Anglo-American universities, which are more inclined to blend cultural and literary studies, travel writing took wing in the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of postcolonial studies spearheaded by Edward Said. It has gained its place as an established subject of academic enquiry, as shown by the Centre for Travel Writing Studies that opened at Nottingham Trent University in 2002, the thriving journal *Studies in Travel Writing* founded in 1997 and the cycle of “Borders and Crossings” conferences, ongoing since 1998. Alongside a wide variety of monographs, handbooks by well-established publishers continue to flourish, for instance with Cambridge Companions to *Travel Writing* (2002), *American Travel Writing* (2009), *Postcolonial Travel Writing* (2017), and two Routledge Companions to the travel-writing genre (2016, 2019).

Annexe 2 – Presentation of Primary Sources

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen

Interest in wilderness and native cultures, both at home and abroad, are central in the works of the American travel writer Peter Matthiessen. His nonfiction books include expeditions to wild parts of Alaska, Canada, Australia, South America, Russia and Africa (Bishop 203), as well as reports on North America fauna (*Wildlife in America*, 1959; *The Shorebirds of North America* 1967).

In *The Snow Leopard* (1978), he narrates the expedition to the Himalaya that he joined after the death of his wife. In the hope of seeing the eponymous creature, he followed his friend the biologist George Schaller on a two-month journey to Inner Dolpo, a Nepalese part of the Tibetan Plateau, in order to observe the rut of blue sheep. After a rapid start in Kathmandu, the narrative slows down for the weeks taken climbing to the Crystal Monastery, the abode of blue sheep, and includes the return journey across the mountains back to the Nepalese capital. As for the leopard, pugmarks and “cat scrape[s]” point to its presence (203), but it is never seen.

The narrative takes the shape of a diary recording the immediacy of mountain life, interspersed with musings on Tutken, Matthiessen’s favourite Sherpa, meditations on Buddhism, Tibetan legends, and memories of his late wife. The book is divided into four sections of comparable length, each of which bears a Sanskrit syllable on its title page, corresponding to the four parts of the Buddhist mantra OM|MANI|PADME|HUM, thus turning the volume into a complete prayer.

Consolations of the Forest and La panthère des neiges by Sylvain Tesson

The journeys of the French travel writer Sylvain Tesson are marked by an appetite for risk, extreme physical conditions and little to no technological help. He has travelled across the Himalaya, Siberia, Central Asia, the Mediterranean and France, and the nonfiction he subsequently wrote is characterised by astonishing literary erudition, irony and aphorisms, and a love of nature. He has also contributed to documentaries about nature, such as *The Velvet Queen* (2021), which follows him as well as his companions in the Himalaya.

Translated from the French *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* (2011), *Consolations of the Forest* is the diary Tesson kept during the six months he spent alone with two dogs and a large supply of vodka in a hut overlooking not Walden Pond but Lake Baikal. The narrative starts with the arrival at the hut, comprises six sections corresponding to the months he spent there, and ends on the day of his departure. He records encounters with Russian forest rangers he comes to know well, and days of alcohol-induced immobility in his cabin, alternating with experiences of physical exertion cutting wood, fishing, kayaking, walking and climbing. His diary contains lyrical descriptions of the landscape, interwoven with intertextual references, ironic aphorisms, and abrasive comments on his detestation of consumer society, which is evoked as one of the reasons why he decided to travel.

La panthère des neiges (2019) recounts Tesson's journey to the Himalaya with the animal photographer Vincent Munier in search of a snow leopard. The book is dedicated to his deceased mother, whose spirit he hopes to evoke when he sees the leopard. Animals are given the main role and many chapters focus on his patient wait, which is rewarded with the appearance of wolves, wild yaks, a manul, an owl and the snow leopard. In comparison with *Consolations of the Forest*, Tesson's misanthropic comments are toned down, and his praise of the wilderness increases in lyricism. The narrative bears resemblance to Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* to the extent that it can be seen as its unacknowledged hypotext. *La panthère des neiges* won the Prix Renaudot 2019 and was the French book that sold the greatest number of copies in France that year.⁵¹⁵

In Siberia by Colin Thubron

Most of the narrative explorations of the British travel writer Colin Thubron concentrate on Central Asia, China and Russia. He describes himself as an "avid researcher", which is evidenced by the frequent historical contextualising of what he witnesses and experiences during his travels (interview by Jordan Foster 141).

After a journey undertaken in Western Russia during Brezhnev's era (*Among the Russians*, 1983), Thubron returns to Russia in the late 1990s with the following question in mind: "What, I wondered, had replaced Communist faith?" (*In Siberia* 3). *In Siberia* recounts his quest for communities that had escaped devastation (BBC *Bookclub*), his unsuccessful attempt to find a "core" to Siberia (*In Siberia* 84), and his frustration at the Russians' understanding of history. The book starts in the ruins of the bulldozed house where the Romanovs were murdered, follows the traveller as he moves eastwards by train, bus, boat and, more rarely, by plane, and ends in the ruins of a uranium mine in Butugychag. The narrative resembles a pilgrimage to the landmarks of Russia's tragic history.⁵¹⁶ Narrated for the most part in a journalistic style, it is rich with historical lore, lyrical descriptions of nature, and local people's grim life stories.

Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica by Sara Wheeler

The British travel writer Sara Wheeler has received considerable attention for the "woman's perspective" she brought to the field of masculine exploration when she journeyed to both poles (Birch and Hooper, unpagged). In the 1990s, she travelled to the Antarctic continent as part of a scheme funding artists there. *Terra Incognita* (1996) retraces her geographic and spiritual explorations, starting with her life at the American and New Zealand bases, followed by her stay at the British facilities, and her return near to the American station, this time in her own small camp, shared with the water colourist Lucia DeLeiris. The accomplishments of past explorers shape the fantasised image of the continent that Wheeler takes with her on her journey: she admires them, sees their texts

⁵¹⁵ See "Sylvain Tesson, auteur francophone le plus lu de l'année 2019" by AFP and *Le Figaro*, Feb. 2020.

⁵¹⁶ Which led Stacy Burton to include *In Siberia* in her book on post-war travel.

superimposed on the landscapes she beholds, compares her experiences with theirs, and questions the myths that surround them.⁵¹⁷ The narrative is fragmented into snapshots of daily life on polar bases, snippets about scientific research performed there, intertextual pieces of past explorers' journals (Scott, Shackleton, Amundsen, etc.), reflections on travelling as a woman, criticism of British masculinity, and religious feelings about the landscape.

"Travels in Hyperreality" by Umberto Eco

Novelist, professor, specialist in aesthetics, semiotician and popular culture critic, Umberto Eco advocated critically analysing the messages that surround us, not least of all those coming from the entertainment industry. It was crucial to Eco that those who received these messages should take critical distance in order to subvert and disrupt them rather than passively consuming them. In his essay "Travels in Hyperreality", he puts this method into practice in American museums, blocking the messages intended by curators, and reinterpreting the artworks "in the spirit of irony and sophisticated repulsion" ("Travels" 31). He takes his readers on a journey across the United States – but mainly focusing on the West Coast – exploring museums where kitsch copies and authentic art cohabit. Since his avowed aim is to find "The Absolute Fake" (35), he also extends his exploration to wax museums, zoos, theme parks and cabinets of curiosities, which enable him to study the changes undergone by cultural objects in hyperreal settings.

America by Jean Baudrillard

Often associated with postmodernist and poststructuralist theories,⁵¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard developed an idiosyncratic philosophy based on sociology and cultural criticism. His conceptualisation of simulacra, simulation and hyperreality reveals a deep interest in the way systems of signs work. Originally published in the same year as the English translation of Umberto Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality", *Amérique* (1986) is an experimental travel text that projects Baudrillard's abstract concepts onto the United States. We may consider him an "allegorist" traveller, since instead of describing the United States, he describes the properties of simulacra (Todorov, *Human* 349). How does one write a travel text when one believes it is no longer possible to refer to reality? Baudrillard circles around this question with a non-linear, plotless text suffused with nonverbal sentences and an extraterrestrial vocabulary. The book does not mention interactions with Americans and gives precedence to "the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces" (Baudrillard, *America* 5/10).⁵¹⁹ Baudrillard reflects provocatively on the American desire to preserve the past in hyperreal forms, and on what he sees as the utopian, fictional,

⁵¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of intertextuality in Wheeler's text, I recommend Maria Lindgren Leavenworth's *The Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps*, which scrutinises the way travel writers interact with the narratives of past adventurers (Umeå University, 2010).

⁵¹⁸ See "Jean Baudrillard" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020, web.

⁵¹⁹ "[C]elle de la vitesse désertique, des motels et des surfaces minérales" (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 10).

apocalyptic and primitive nature of the United States in contrast with the decadence of Europe.

Empire of Signs *by Roland Barthes*

Roland Barthes was a French professor and semiotician who produced his most prominent works between the 1950s (for example *Mythologies*) and the 1970s (for instance *L'empire des signes*). An heir to linguistic structuralism, he sought to go beyond it in his later works, such as *Empire of Signs*. As a semiotician, he studied systems of signs, including pictorial signs such as advertising and magazine covers, and social and cultural sign systems such as fashion and cuisine. In *Empire of Signs*, an unconventional, non-linear travel essay, Barthes reports impressions from his stay at the French Institute of Tokyo in 1966 (Knight 121). The text is divided into fragmented aspects of Japanese culture, such as “Chopsticks”, “The Train Station”, and “Packages”, which Barthes turns into abstractions – food becomes painting, faces become pages – giving him the opportunity to muse on language and on the practice of writing. Through his depiction of Japan, we can see that he fantasises a world of uninterpreted signs, of surfaces, blank pages and abstractions, a world so exotic that it prevents connotation, symbolism and analytical interpretations taking place in the traveller’s mind. Barthes presents his destination as his “fantasy” and as a “novelistic object” separate from ‘real’ Japan (*Empire of Signs* 3/11),⁵²⁰ yet his gaze can be considered Orientalist, as he de-historicises the country and exhibits uncritical fascination for the other.

⁵²⁰ “[U]n objet romanesque, . . . ma fantaisie” (Barthes, *L'empire* 11).

Annexe 3 – Extended summary in French

Conceptions de l'authenticité dans les récits de voyages contemporains, De la nature sibérienne à l'Amérique hyperréelle

1. *Avant-propos*

À l'automne 2019, à Glencoe, haut lieu des Highlands, la centaine de touristes venus visiter les lieux s'efforcent de trouver un endroit où se photographier sans leurs semblables en arrière-plan. J'étais comme eux descendue de ce bus pour prendre des photos, mais les laisser hors du cadre me semblait problématique. Il n'était pas possible de dissocier l'expérience du voyage de la présence des touristes ; ils faisaient partie de Glencoe. J'aurais pu les photographier devant le paysage, mais qui voudrait d'inconnus et de bus touristiques sur ses photos de vacances ?⁵²¹

Certains, comme Charles Baudelaire, ont des épiphanies au milieu de la foule, mais la plupart des écrivains voyageurs semblent associer l'« authenticité » de leur voyage à une relative solitude. À quoi d'autre associent-ils la notion d'« authenticité » et pourquoi ? Ajoutée à de nombreuses autres expériences de voyage collectionnées lors de mes séjours comme touriste ou expatriée, cette excursion à Glencoe a nourri la réflexion développée dans cette thèse de doctorat, qui s'interroge sur ce qui est considéré comme « authentique » dans le voyage, sur l'origine des idées préconçues sur l'« authenticité », et sur les raisons pour lesquelles ces idées peuvent et doivent être remises en question.

2. *Objectif de l'étude*

Cette étude n'a pas pour but de désigner comme « authentiques » certains livres ou certaines expériences du voyage et techniques d'écriture des écrivains voyageurs. Elle vise à déterminer ce que sept écrivains contemporains présentent explicitement ou implicitement comme étant « authentique » dans leurs voyages et dans leurs textes. Ce travail de recherche entend également étudier la manière dont ces écrivains renforcent, remettent en question ou repensent ce qui a été précédemment considéré comme « authentique » par rapport au voyage, à la nature et à la création littéraire. Cette étude cherche aussi à déterminer l'origine des conceptions de « l'authenticité » mises en avant par ces auteurs, et elle a pour but d'indiquer les limites de ces conceptions en remettant en question leurs prémisses. Les récits de voyage ainsi analysés nous aident à réfléchir de manière plus critique au concept d'« authenticité » dans la littérature de voyage en général. Il est rare que les écrivains signalent clairement et annoncent ce qu'ils considèrent

⁵²¹ J'ai découvert par la suite que Walker Percy avait présenté un problème similaire et proposé qu'une personne désireuse de capturer l'essence du Grand Canyon « se tienne derrière ses compagnons touristes... et regarde le canyon à travers eux et à travers leur situation, leur prise de photos et leur indifférence active » (48-49). La proposition est jugée insatisfaisante par Jonathan Culler, parce qu'« elle n'offre pas une expérience non médiatisée », qui est le Graal des touristes et des voyageurs en quête d'authenticité (« Semiotics » 6).

comme « authentique ». Les résultats de cette étude reposent donc sur une interprétation personnelle de leurs textes, éclairée par l'histoire du genre de la littérature viatique et du concept d'« authenticité » que j'aborderai présentement.

Analyser la manière dont ils présentent leur expérience et interagissent avec les populations locales, les animaux, la nature et les œuvres d'art permettra de déterminer ce que ces voyageurs considèrent comme une relation « authentique » à la nature (Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler et Thubron), à l'histoire des populations locales (Thubron) ; ce qu'ils estiment être « authentique » dans le domaine artistique dans un contexte hyperréel (Eco) et ce qu'ils jugent comme étant une manière « authentique » de narrer leurs voyages en terres étrangères (Tesson, Thubron, Barthes et Baudrillard). Nous verrons que certaines conceptions problématiques de l'« authenticité » perdurent à travers les siècles mais qu'elles sont parfois concurrencées par d'autres « authenticités » nées du contexte postmoderne. Je démontrerai que le corpus oscille entre des conceptions de l'« authenticité » qui valorisent d'une part l'exotisme, le voyage solitaire et la recherche d'un sentiment de plénitude éprouvé au contact de la nature, et d'autre part des conceptions de l'« authenticité » qui vont de pair avec le respect de l'« altérité radicale » et de l'« opacité » des personnes et des lieux étrangers (Isherwood et Harris 9 ; Glissant 189). Une étude approfondie de ces conceptions de l'« authenticité » révélera leurs implications éthiques et montrera également que l'« authenticité » peut être repensée comme un concept dynamique, lié à un contexte spécifique, et créé dans la relation (par exemple, du voyageur à la nature ou du voyageur aux œuvres d'art qu'il contemple).

J'emprunte le terme « altérité radicale » à Lisa Isherwood et David Harris (9), qui l'ont élaboré dans les domaines de la sociologie et de la théologie féministe pour désigner un espace où la différence des autres n'est ni « assimilée » ni « annihilée », où les autres ne sont pas considérés comme une variante du même, ni comme une image inversée de soi (2). Ils emploient cette notion en accord avec les approches poststructuralistes et féministes qui rejettent les dialectiques binaires en faveur d'un mouvement de devenir relationnel (18). En transposant ce concept dans les études littéraires, j'entends préserver l'idée d'une altérité potentiellement déstabilisatrice qui fragilise la position hégémonique du voyageur, son identité et ce qu'il pensait savoir du pays qu'il visite. Ainsi adapté à l'étude de récits viatiques, le concept d'« altérité radicale » va de pair avec une remise en question volontaire des voyageurs, qui cherchent à dépasser leurs préconceptions et à percevoir et retranscrire la différence des autres, sans pour autant la transformer en un spectacle exotique prêt à être consommé. Préserver l'« altérité radicale » des autres implique d'une part que les voyageurs soient prêts à remettre en cause leur identité et celle des peuples qu'ils rencontrent, et leur propre statut vis-à-vis de ces peuples. D'autre part, cela implique que ces voyageurs reconnaissent l'« opacité » des autres (que ces autres soient humains ou non-humains), pour reprendre le concept d'Édouard Glissant (189). L'éthique de l'« opacité » développée par Glissant viendra en soutien et en complément des idées exprimées par le concept d'« altérité radicale » d'Isherwood et Harris. Le passage suivant, tiré de *Poétique de la relation* (1990), résume les points fondamentaux d'une pratique de l'« opacité » :

Non pas seulement consentir au droit à la différence mais, plus avant, au droit à l'opacité, qui n'est pas l'enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable, mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible. Des opacités peuvent coexister, confluer . . . Renoncer, pour un temps peut-être, à cette vieille hantise de surprendre le fond des natures. (204)

Le concept de Glissant présente l'avantage d'offrir un contrepoint à celui d'exotisme. Glissant explique que, lorsque les écrivains occidentaux sont en mesure de décrire les étrangers qu'ils rencontrent, de les « crée[r] une nouvelle fois », ils sont tentés de les « réduire » à des types qui seront plus faciles à cerner et qui permettront aux occidentaux de réaliser leur fantasme du « Transparent » (204). Prenant le contre-pied de Victor Segalen, Glissant propose de remplacer ce fantasme par « le droit à l'opacité », « pour tous » (209). L'« opacité » de Glissant et l'« altérité radicale » d'Isherwood et Harris témoignent de changements récents dans la conceptualisation de l'altérité, qui se reflètent également dans le corpus de récits de voyage sélectionné pour cette étude.

Cette étude fait écho aux altérations subies par le concept d'« authenticité » et à l'évolution des pratiques des voyageurs et des choix rhétoriques et éthiques des écrivains voyageurs. Fuyant le tourisme de masse et son confort, luttant contre l'impression de lassitude associée à la fin de l'ère des grands explorateurs, certains écrivains se sont tournés vers des destinations considérées comme « authentiques » en proportion de l'isolement et des dangers qu'elles offraient. Parallèlement, le changement climatique a modifié notre façon de concevoir l'environnement et la place de l'humanité en son sein, comme en témoignent les récents écrits sur la nature. À l'ère du décompte de l'empreinte carbone, la lenteur et l'exploration de destinations locales ont acquis une dimension écocritique, peut-être encore renforcée par la pandémie de Covid-19,⁵²² durant laquelle seuls le « voyage vertical » et la redécouverte de l'environnement immédiat étaient possibles (Cronin 19).

Le monde de l'art et de la culture (culture populaire incluse) a également été affecté par un changement de paradigme après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. La diffusion de cultures géographiquement éloignées à travers le cinéma, puis avec internet, a refaçonné la perception de la culture de l'autre, à la fois proche et lointaine. Ces images ont aussi contribué à l'émergence d'(hyper)réalités parallèles que Baudrillard nomme « simulations ». En outre, la (re)production de masse et la circulation mondiale des biens de consommation et des objets d'art ont accru la présence des simulacres – c'est-à-dire des reproductions d'œuvres d'art. Les simulations et les simulacres s'ajoutent à la crise multiforme qui touche la représentation artistique depuis les modernistes, et qui a partie liée avec le déclin de l'aura artistique diagnostiqué par Walter Benjamin en 1935. Si, en pratique, dans le monde de l'art, l'original est encore préféré aux copies, depuis la fin des

⁵²² Récemment, des chercheurs des universités de Sydney et d'Oslo ont lancé un projet intitulé « Urban Field Naturalist », qui invite les voyageurs à prendre conscience de la faune et de la flore qui se développent dans les interstices urbains. Les récits publiés sur leur site web remettent en perspective les notions traditionnelles de voyage, d'exotisme et d'environnement sauvage. Ces récits suggèrent que l'« authenticité » peut être réintégrée dans la vie quotidienne. Le numéro spécial de *Studies in Travel Writing* (avril 2022) consacré aux micro-voyages pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 offre un autre exemple de cette tendance centrée sur le local et le voyage « vertical ».

années 1960, en philosophie et en littérature, les penseurs poststructuralistes ont développé des théories qui mettent l'accent sur la différence plutôt que sur la ressemblance avec un modèle,⁵²³ et qui ouvrent par conséquent la voie à une réévaluation de la valeur des copies et de la notion philosophique d'original.

La représentation de l'étranger rencontré en voyage s'est également modifiée depuis les années 1960. Les études postcoloniales ont mis en évidence l'eurocentrisme de la littérature viatique et sa complicité avec le discours colonial, notamment au XIX^e siècle, tandis que l'analyse foucauldienne, pratiquée entre autres par Edward Saïd, a montré qu'il convenait de mettre au jour les conditions de production des récits de voyage et les structures du pouvoir qu'ils contribuaient à diffuser.

Les récits de voyage contemporains sont donc aujourd'hui rédigés sur fond d'une crise de la représentation qui pousse certains écrivains à réfléchir à leur pratique. Même s'il est probable que peu d'écrivains de voyage s'intéressent aux dernières théories critiquant ce genre littéraire,⁵²⁴ on peut tout de même penser que leurs récits sont influencés par les changements qui ont eu lieu dans le contexte sociétal dans lequel ils s'inscrivent.

Le corpus sélectionné fait en partie état d'une érosion de la croyance en la capacité du langage à représenter fidèlement la réalité.⁵²⁵ Cette érosion peut être expliquée à la lumière des théories postmodernes, postcoloniales et poststructuralistes qui ont émergé depuis les années 1960, bien que ces théories n'impactent pas uniformément tous les écrivains étudiés ici, et bien que leur influence semble majoritairement indirecte.

Cette étude entend montrer que les conceptions de l'« authenticité » qui sous-tendent les récits de voyage sélectionnés jouent un rôle important dans les stratégies rhétoriques élaborées par les écrivains voyageurs qui souhaitent éviter les écueils mis en lumière au cours des soixante dernières années, notamment dans la représentation de l'autre et de la nature.

⁵²³ Voir par exemple *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1976) de Michel Foucault et *Différence et répétition* (1968) de Gilles Deleuze.

⁵²⁴ Dans *Travel Writing Tribe*, Tim Hannigan souligne que ces théories sont peu connues des auteurs qu'il reçoit en entretien. Par exemple, Colin Thubron admet n'avoir lu que peu d'ouvrages sur la littérature de voyage (transcription non paginée de l'entretien que Hannigan a réalisé avec Thubron, en vue de la publication de *The Travel Writing Tribe*).

⁵²⁵ Je m'abstiendrai d'encadrer systématiquement les termes « réalité » et « réel » par des guillemets, même si, pour reprendre les mots d'Irmtraud Huber, qui fait le même choix, « je suis très consciente de la nature discursive de la réalité et de la relativité de la vérité, et ainsi de suite. Néanmoins, à mon avis, il y a des limites à la praticabilité d'une telle prise de conscience (sans doute importante). Dire que la réalité est construite et perçue différemment par différents sujets ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas ou qu'aucune compréhension de base du sens de ce mot n'est partagée par ces différents sujets. » (255).

3. Au-delà du touriste : le nomade volontaire

Dans le domaine de la critique portant sur les récits de voyage, le concept d'« authenticité » n'a été abordé de front que pour théoriser les aspirations des touristes et indiquer qu'elles étaient profondément inauthentiques. Évoluant dans un « cocon climatisé » qui les coupe de la rencontre avec les autochtones, les touristes de la classe moyenne font l'objet d'un mépris particulier (Boorstin 111). Leur expérience est considérée comme « toujours mystifiée », « basée sur l'inauthenticité », « superficielle », et, enfin, « moralement inférieure à l'expérience au sens simple » (MacCannell 102). Au lieu de faire l'expérience de la « chose véritable », qui est « gratuite » et abondamment « disponible » (Boorstin 99), ces héritiers de l'angoisse moderne désirent visiter les lieux qui ont été préalablement « désignés comme dignes d'être préservés » (MacCannell 44). S'inspirant de l'étude d'Erving Goffman sur les communautés des îles Shetland, Dean MacCannell déclare aussi vaine la quête de certains touristes cherchant des lieux « authentiques » mais non préalablement désignés comme tels. Pour MacCannell, les « cuisines, les chaufferies [et] les toilettes réservées aux cadres », au premier abord non désignées comme « authentiques », sont en réalité tout aussi « mystifiantes » que les sites touristiques (93).⁵²⁶ Dans le domaine touristique, l'« authenticité » demeure un concept ambivalent : la destination « authentique » doit avoir été désignée comme telle, cependant, la quête de l'« authentique » est également fondée sur le désir d'accéder directement à une réalité non médiatisée.⁵²⁷ Comme MacCannell, Jonathan Culler affirme que l'« authentique » échappe même aux touristes qui sortent des sentiers battus, car lorsque ceux-ci tombent par hasard sur un petit marché pittoresque et le pensent « authentique », ils créent un marqueur d'« authenticité » qu'ils superposent à ce marché, qui est ainsi médiatisé et, de fait, moins « authentique » (Culler 5).

Les études critiques sur le tourisme n'abordent pas la question de l'« authenticité » attachée aux lieux naturels qui ne figurent pas dans les guides touristiques, et négligent d'expliquer pourquoi « [l]es quelques espaces sauvages qui subsistent dans le monde postmoderne sont recherchés avec plus d'avidité que jamais », ou pourquoi « la Sibérie, l'Alaska et les pôles figurent en bonne place dans les récits de voyage contemporains », comme le remarque Peter Hulme dans « Travelling to Write » (94). Il est utile de citer plus longuement Jonathan Culler, qui amorce une réflexion sur l'« authenticité » des lieux naturels, sans toutefois la poursuivre plus avant :

⁵²⁶ Dans *The Presentation of Self in the Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman explique que les comportements observés dans ces « coulisses » sont également des performances, bien qu'adaptées à des circonstances différentes (111-122). Pour une description détaillée des six types d'« authenticité mise en scène » que MacCannell théorise sur la base de Goffman, voir *The Tourist*, 101-102.

⁵²⁷ Les expériences qui ne correspondent pas aux idées préconçues du voyageur le déçoivent, comme le démontre Jonathan Raban lorsqu'il exprime sa frustration d'avoir assisté à une danse amérindienne sous la lumière des néons plutôt qu'au coin du feu (74). Pourtant, même les expériences qui se conforment aux marqueurs attendus sont vouées à être « inauthentiques », en raison de la médiation des marqueurs qui leur confèrent un pouvoir symbolique, comme l'illustre la nouvelle « The Loss of the Creature » de Walker Percy.

Les touristes perçoivent et apprécient la valeur d'une attraction touristique par l'intermédiaire d'un marqueur ou parce qu'elle offre un spectacle visuel. Sur le lieu de la fusillade de Bonnie et Clyde ou sur un champ de bataille de la guerre de Sécession, il n'y a rien d'autre à voir que des marqueurs, tandis que le visiteur qui se trouve face aux chutes du Niagara peut être impressionné tout en ignorant tous les marqueurs placés là (et sans même savoir que ce sont les chutes du Niagara qu'il voit). (« Semiotics » 8)

Cependant, Culler ne tente pas de clarifier davantage ce que peut signifier l'« authenticité » lorsque l'on parle de sites naturels non marqués (par exemple, une forêt de chênes qui n'est dans aucun guide). Il n'offre pas non plus d'explication sur la relation qu'il évoque et qui lie le touriste et le site visité. En somme, il ne répond pas à la question « que signifie percevoir et apprécier la valeur d'un site ? » – « *to be engaged* », pour citer Culler. Jusqu'à présent, les études critiques ne se sont pas penchées sur ce que les écrivains voyageurs en quête d'« authenticité » représentaient comme étant une *relation* « authentique » avec un lieu et ses habitants. Enfin, le domaine de recherche centré sur la littérature viatique n'offre pas non plus d'étude approfondie du concept d'« authenticité » en lien avec des destinations hyperréelles, ce que je me propose de faire en analysant les récits de voyage de sémioticiens tels que Baudrillard et Eco.

De surcroît, les recherches portant sur l'« authenticité » à laquelle aspirent les touristes s'avèrent inadéquates lorsqu'il s'agit d'examiner des textes littéraires tels que ceux étudiés ici, qui contiennent des réflexions métafictionnelles sur le processus d'écriture. Dans cette étude, j'accorderai une attention particulière aux conceptions de l'« authenticité » qui sous-tendent les choix littéraires et rhétoriques des écrivains de voyage analysés. Je montrerai également qu'ils adoptent une position ambivalente qui n'est pas sans rappeler le problème des marqueurs soulevé par MacCannell et Culler. Si le désir d'une expérience non médiatisée est toujours présent chez les nomades volontaires tels que Tesson et Matthiessen, qui trouvent une forme d'immédiateté dans les épiphanies et l'épuisement physique, les voyageurs étudiés réfléchissent également à leurs propres préconceptions (que l'on peut considérer comme des marqueurs), reconnaissant ainsi paradoxalement que la médiation est inévitable.

Avant d'aborder leurs textes, il est nécessaire de conceptualiser la position qu'occupent ces voyageurs, dont les textes dépassent le domaine du récit de touriste. On peut les considérer comme des nomades volontaires.

Ces nomades volontaires sont imbriqués dans des réseaux d'acteurs économiques, comme les touristes, mais ils diffèrent de ces derniers par certains aspects. La plupart sont des écrivains de voyage professionnels, et certains d'entre eux peuvent également être définis comme des ethnographes à temps partiel puisqu'ils « vivent dans le village autochtone », « utilisent la langue vernaculaire, restent un temps suffisant (mais rarement spécifié), enquêtent sur certains sujets classiques », comme les ethnographes que James Clifford décrit dans *The Predicament of Culture* (30). Comme ces ethnographes, les nomades volontaires espèrent découvrir ce que personne encore n'a jamais vu, et expriment leur appréciation pour « la beauté décadente » (Brennan 180). Par exemple, Thubron parle relativement bien le russe, reste plusieurs mois en Russie, parfois des semaines dans le même village, et il cherche à entrer en contact avec des traditions religieuses et culturelles

anciennes, pour certaines quasiment disparues.

Enfin, ces nomades ressemblent en partie au touriste que décrit MacCannell, car ils apparaissent comme des sujets anxieux de la modernité qui cherchent à retrouver une « authenticité » perdue. Dans sa description du touriste, MacCannell met aussi en évidence un élément clé qui concerne également les écrivains de voyage contemporains : la nostalgie. Il décrit la nostalgie des touristes comme « une réponse à l'anxiété généralisée de la modernité ; c'est-à-dire que la certitude des sites touristiques aide à apaiser le sentiment de dérive et de fragmentation qui afflige les sujets modernes en Occident » (14). Il semble que cette recherche de « certitude », par opposition à la « fragmentation » moderne (ou postmoderne), touche également les nomades volontaires que j'étudie dans le cadre de cette thèse. Comme nous le verrons dans le **Chapitre 1**, pour ces voyageurs, la nature joue le rôle apaisant que les sites touristiques remplissent pour les touristes de MacCannell. Elle semble procurer à Tesson, Matthiessen, Wheeler et Thubron un sentiment de plénitude qui contrebalance la fragmentation de la vie moderne qu'ils cherchent parfois à fuir.

4. *Positionnement et méthode*

Contrairement à mes grands-parents et arrière-grands-parents, Espagnols républicains contraints de fuir l'Espagne en 1939 et immigrés venus chercher un avenir meilleur en France au début des années 1930, je n'ai pas fait l'expérience de l'exil. Cependant, le souvenir de leurs migrations forcées signifie que j'ai conscience d'occuper une position privilégiée, en tant que femme blanche lettrée et citoyenne d'un pays de l'Union européenne. Le corpus que je propose d'étudier se compose principalement d'hommes blancs lettrés originaires de pays à hauts revenus, et il n'abordera pas les questions liées à la représentation des mobilités forcées, qui auraient conduit cette étude dans une tout autre direction.

Les voyageurs sélectionnés sont pour certains des sémioticiens, pour d'autres des nomades volontaires qui incarnent ce que Raminder Kaur et John Hutnyk ont nommé « le privilège par le mouvement » et qui explorent dans leurs textes l'éventail des possibilités littéraires à leur disposition (cité dans Huggan 3).⁵²⁸ L'étude approfondie de leurs récits permet de mieux appréhender les limites et les possibilités de la littérature viatique et de prendre conscience des implications éthiques de la représentation de l'altérité dans le cadre de mobilités non contraintes. La richesse des moyens formels que ces auteurs déploient justifie une étude de ce corpus, et plus généralement du genre de l'écriture de voyage, « pour lui-même et pas seulement comme symptôme d'une certaine époque », pour reprendre les mots de Guillaume Thouroude (286).⁵²⁹

Jusqu'à présent, les chercheurs de ce domaine ont estimé la valeur des récits de voyage à l'aune de leur capacité à fonctionner comme une littérature engagée et à surmonter

⁵²⁸ Graham Huggan cite Raminder Kaur et John Hutnyk, *Travel Worlds : Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, Zed Books, 1999, 25.

⁵²⁹ Voir l'**annexe 1** qui offre un court essai sur le statut du récit de voyage comme genre littéraire mineur dans le champ académique français.

l'écueil de la propagande coloniale.⁵³⁰ Par conséquent, la valeur littéraire du genre a été éclipsée par son statut d'objet culturel (Cooke 6), et les « principes et conceptions artistiques » qui guident les choix rhétoriques des auteurs ont été négligés (Korte 3). Même s'il ne faut pas sous-estimer le manque d'objectivité de la littérature de voyage qui était au service des empires, les récits viatiques gagneraient à être soumis à un vaste éventail d'approches, comme le sont déjà les romans.⁵³¹ Étudier des récits de voyage contemporains permet de mettre en évidence certaines positions coloniales résiduelles, mais pas seulement. Une telle étude met également en lumière des problèmes qui dépassent le domaine des études postcoloniales et révèle les ressources littéraires dans lesquelles puisent les voyageurs contemporains pour représenter l'altérité, sans réifier ni exotiser l'identité de l'autre. Par ailleurs, dans le corpus choisi, les voyageurs ne se rendent pas dans des pays précédemment colonisés.⁵³² Les choix formels que font les auteurs du corpus semblent davantage liés à leur héritage littéraire et à l'influence du postmodernisme, et parfois du poststructuralisme, qu'à l'influence du discours colonial ou à une potentielle tentative pour s'en libérer.

Néanmoins, cette étude est basée sur le principe selon lequel les auteurs de littérature non-fictionnelle sont responsables de la manière dont ils dépeignent les autres (les populations locales et la nature). Je discuterai donc des implications éthiques liées à leurs façons de représenter leurs rencontres. Cependant, je considère que, lorsque ces auteurs se représentent eux-mêmes, ils mettent en avant un *voyageur-narrateur* artificiellement construit, qui est plus ou moins le reflet de leur personne. Comme l'écrit Alex Drace-Francis pour expliquer l'utilisation du terme « persona », la littérature viatique est parcourue de « processus rhétoriques et performatifs » et « la figure du voyageur-narrateur est davantage le résultat des processus de création à l'œuvre dans le voyage et dans l'écriture qu'un agent humain distinct qui les précéderait ou les produirait » (182). Par conséquent, il ne sera pas question d'identifier les croyances, les souhaits et les objectifs des *auteurs*, mais seulement ceux du *voyageur-narrateur*, compris comme un

⁵³⁰ Malgré le fait qu'ils offrent un premier aperçu des récits de voyage innovants, les travaux de Debbie Lisle et de Paul Smethurst illustrent cette tendance. Tous deux articulent des arguments binaires autour de la nature coloniale supposée du genre de la littérature viatique. Lisle étudie le « style d'écriture colonialiste » qui marque encore les textes de voyage contemporains et les « efforts [que font les écrivains] pour se distancier des complicités du genre avec l'Empire » (3-4), tandis que Smethurst se penche sur les « moyens formels » utilisés par le récit de voyage colonial pour (re)créer le monde, et ceux mis en place par le récit de voyage postcolonial pour renier cet héritage « souillé » (« Introduction » 3).

⁵³¹ L'argument d'Alasdair Pettinger et de Tim Youngs en faveur d'une plus grande égalité entre le récit de voyage et le roman mérite d'être cité intégralement : « Associer les récits de voyage à l'empire et à la 'race' revient à les confiner à une vision plus étroite que celle qui est par exemple appliquée au roman, dont la forme actuelle n'existe que depuis très peu de temps comparée au genre du récit de voyage, et qui n'est pas moins coupable d'avoir diffusé un point de vue raciste » (11). Terry Eagleton condamne également la tendance qui consiste à passer les textes de voyage au peigne fin pour y trouver des représentations coloniales : « Une fois que vous avez observé que l'autre est typiquement dépeint comme paresseux, sale, stupide . . . énigmatique et un certain nombre d'autres épithètes mutuellement contradictoires, il est difficile de savoir quoi faire ensuite à part chercher une autre illustration textuelle de ce fait » (cité dans Forsdick et al., 2). Charles Forsdick et al. citent Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent : Reviewing Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*, Verso, 2002, 19.

⁵³² L'occupation du Tibet par la Chine ne fait partie des sujets explorés en détail par Tesson et Matthiessen, qui voyagent dans cette région.

personnage qu'ils créent.⁵³³ Par exemple, lorsque j'évoque le fait que Sara Wheeler montre tous les signes d'une croyance en une forme d'éternité, il faut imaginer que « Sara Wheeler » est entourée de guillemets implicites, car l'interprétation que je propose est basée sur des preuves contenues dans un seul texte, et il n'est ni possible ni très utile de vérifier les croyances réelles de Sara Wheeler, l'auteure qui existe en dehors du texte. En outre, il est possible qu'elle projette d'autres aspects de sa personnalité dans ses autres récits de voyage. À moins d'une indication claire qu'il est fait référence aux *auteurs* (lorsque je mentionne leurs entretiens, leur bibliographie, le contexte littéraire qui les entoure, les événements de leur vie réelle et leur responsabilité éthique, par exemple), il faut présumer que cette étude traite des *voyageurs-narrateurs* qu'ils créent.

Cependant, cette étude se base également sur le principe de la responsabilité éthique de l'écrivain de voyage et contient donc une part de critique idéologique. Les récits de voyage sont ici considérés comme des récits non fictionnels exclusivement, conformément à la définition du genre donnée par Peter Hulme (cité dans Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* 4).⁵³⁴ Par conséquent, pour reprendre l'expression de Bill Buford, ces récits ont « des comptes à rendre au monde » (7). Les approches critiques qui pourront être appliquées à un texte, et les attentes des lecteurs varient selon que ce texte prétende (ou non) représenter la réalité.⁵³⁵ Ainsi, il est peu probable que la critique s'oppose à ce que le narrateur fictif de la nouvelle de Howard Phillips Lovecraft et Kenneth Sterling « In the Walls of Eryx » qualifie les habitants d'une autre planète de « sournoises créatures » (§7). Au contraire, elle pourra protester contre l'écrivain de voyage Paul Theroux, qui affirme : « les Afghans sont paresseux, oisifs et violents » (87). Lors de l'étude des caractéristiques thématiques et stylistiques d'un texte, il est utile de prendre acte de ce que nous pouvons déceler de l'intention de son auteur, qui souhaite peut-être que son récit de voyage soit considéré comme semi-fictionnel. Néanmoins, prendre comme point de départ l'idée selon laquelle un récit de voyage est non-fictionnel permet de critiquer les éventuels discours orientalistes et exotocisants, même lorsque les auteurs prennent des précautions rhétoriques contre de telles lectures idéologiques de leurs textes, affirmant par exemple, comme Theroux, « [m]on livre porte sur mon voyage, pas sur le vôtre ni sur celui de quelqu'un d'autre » (x), ou expliquant, comme Barthes, qu'ils créent une sorte de pays littéraire parallèle au pays visité (*Empire* 3/11).⁵³⁶

⁵³³ Le concept de « persona » semble particulièrement pertinent lorsqu'on examine des récits de voyage qui remettent en cause l'autorité et l'indépendance du narrateur, soulignent les lacunes de la mémoire ou font dialoguer plusieurs narrateurs. Le corpus sélectionné ne présentant pas ou peu de ces caractéristiques, il semble préférable de ne pas inclure d'étude approfondie des différences entre auteur, narrateur et persona. Cependant, la théorie de Barbara Korte sera utile aux chercheurs qui souhaitent développer un aspect de l'authenticité qui est ici évoqué indirectement, à savoir les stratégies que les écrivains de voyage élaborent pour convaincre leurs lecteurs qu'ils sont dignes de confiance.

⁵³⁴ « Pour qu'un texte soit considéré comme un récit de voyage, Hulme considère que l'auteur doit avoir voyagé dans les lieux qu'il décrit. Il y a, insiste-t-il, une dimension éthique liée à l'affirmation d'avoir réellement vécu les voyages racontés » (Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* 4).

⁵³⁵ Ayant réuni une poignée de lecteurs passionnés de littérature de voyage dans le cadre d'un atelier, Tim Hannigan, lui-même écrivain de voyage et critique littéraire, leur a demandé ce qu'ils trouvaient de plus inacceptable dans les récits de voyage. Il a constaté que l'altération de l'ordre « réel » des scènes racontées était tolérée, mais que la falsification des anecdotes était condamnée sans équivoque (« Contracts » - communication non publiée).

⁵³⁶ « C'est ce système que j'appellerai : le Japon » (Barthes, *L'empire* 11).

Le mode de lecture et la méthode d'analyse appliqués dans cette étude entendent répondre à la nécessité d'étudier à la fois la dimension littéraire du corpus et ses aspects non fictionnels.

Les **Chapitres 1 à 5 et 8** reposent sur des explications de textes qui mettent en exergue la littérarité des récits et cherchent à déterminer la manière dont les écrivains produisent certains effets rhétoriques au moyen de certaines configurations formelles. On peut résumer cette méthode en la qualifiant de mélange structuraliste et formaliste. Elle consiste à s'intéresser aux « relations internes du texte », ce dernier étant considéré pour partie comme un système clos avec sa propre logique (Genette, « Esquisse » 73). Ces explications de texte se penchent sur la structure globale des textes, cherchent à identifier les récurrences thématiques, stylistiques et prosodiques, et reposent sur l'interprétation des choix syntaxiques, des champs lexicaux, des figures de style et du ton du voyageur-narrateur.

L'intention créatrice des auteurs fera occasionnellement l'objet de certaines hypothèses, émises à la lumière des théories que ces auteurs ont écrites (**Chapitres 6, 7, 8**). Néanmoins, cette étude cherche avant tout à aller au-delà de la simple reconstruction de l'intention des écrivains, aussi leurs écrits seront-ils parfois analysés à l'aide de concepts théoriques qui leurs sont postérieurs, ou par rapport auxquels ces auteurs n'ont pas pris ouvertement position (**Chapitre 4**). Le type d'analyse privilégié ici « consiste à aborder les questions que le texte ne pose pas à son lecteur modèle », pour reprendre les mots de Jonathan Culler (« Defence » 114). Ce mode d'interprétation possède certaines des caractéristiques préconisées par Culler dans « In defence of overinterpretation » (1992). Culler invite par exemple le critique à s'interroger sur « ce que le texte fait et comment il le fait : comment il se rapporte à d'autres textes et à d'autres pratiques ; ce qu'il dissimule ou refoule ; ce qu'il avance et ce dont il est complice » (115). De ce fait, les interprétations proposées et les arguments avancés ne sont pas ceux du « lecteur modèle » et prendront parfois le contre-pied de l'intention des auteurs. D'autres interprétations que celles proposées ici sont possibles, et les lectures analytiques incluses dans cette étude n'ont pas pour but de fermer la porte au « pluriel du texte » que Barthes préconisait (*Nouveaux essais* 140).

Les interprétations proposées s'opposeront notamment à l'intention des auteurs lorsqu'il s'agira de discuter des problèmes éthiques soulevés par leurs représentations des étrangers et de la nature. Discuter de ces questions implique de traiter les récits de voyage comme des objets culturels, et pas seulement littéraires. Ces discussions prendront comme point de départ l'idée selon laquelle ces récits appartiennent à un contexte sociétal qu'ils peuvent influencer. C'est pourquoi j'entreprendrai de clarifier et parfois de critiquer la position des auteurs et leur biais (**Chapitres 7 et 8**) ainsi que les principes éthiques auxquels ils souscrivent, qu'ils soutiennent et perpétuent lorsqu'ils représentent leurs voyages, la nature et les populations locales (**Chapitres 1, 3, 4, 5 et 8**). Les analyses présentées ici se fondent sur les comportements adoptés par les voyageurs au cours de leurs périple (ou du moins ce qu'ils en rapportent), et sur ce que leurs textes révèlent de leurs conceptions du voyage « authentique » et des relations « authentiques » que le voyageur peut entretenir avec la nature et avec les populations locales. Afin de tenter

d'identifier l'origine des conceptions de l'« authenticité » avancées dans leurs textes, je ramènerai celles-ci à trois principales définitions de l'« authenticité » qui sont décrites plus loin dans cette introduction.

Les analyses proposées se fondent également sur l'idée selon laquelle les auteurs sélectionnés évoluent dans un contexte esthétique et littéraire qui dépasse leur œuvre et qui a une incidence sur leur écriture. Le mouvement postmoderniste peut par exemple expliquer la présence de certains traits dans les textes de Tesson et de Thubron (**Chapitre 5**), tandis que l'essai d'Eco se prêtera davantage à une mise en regard avec certaines questions esthétiques (**Chapitres 6 et 7**). De surcroît, les récits sélectionnés gagnent à être étudiés à la lumière des tropes du genre de la littérature viatique, c'est pourquoi tous les chapitres de cette étude comprendront une partie dédiée à ces tropes. En outre, il est plus aisé d'identifier l'héritage intertextuel des auteurs et d'attirer l'attention sur les implications éthiques de leurs textes en les comparant aux récits d'autres écrivains qui représentent le voyage et l'altérité de manière similaire ou contraire. Ce type de comparaison nous aidera également à déterminer la manière dont les textes du corpus repensent le concept d'« authenticité », ce qu'ils ajoutent au genre du récit de voyage, et la manière dont ils nous aident à accroître « notre compréhension générale du fonctionnement de la littérature – de son éventail de possibilités et des structures qui la caractérisent » (Culler, « Defence » 118).

5. Sources primaires

Le corpus a été sélectionné pour répondre à un double objectif. D'abord, identifier ce que certains écrivains voyageurs présentent implicitement ou explicitement comme étant « authentique » dans leur expérience de la nature sauvage. Ensuite, déterminer les transformations subies par le concept d'« authenticité » dans les récits de voyage de sémioticiens qui abordent des questions sémiotiques liées à la langue, à la culture et à l'hyperréalité. Comme l'ont observé Corinne Fowler, Charles Forsdick et Ludmilla Kostova, la littérature de voyage contemporaine présente bien moins d'innovations formelles que les romans postmodernes, comme si le genre du récit viatique avait été peu impacté par le tournant postmoderne (« Introduction » 5). Cependant, les conceptions de l'« authenticité » que l'on trouve dans les récits sélectionnés pour cette étude apparaissent étroitement liées au postmodernisme et à la condition postmoderne, que certains voyageurs embrassent, alors que d'autres tentent de la fuir ou de la médiatiser dans leur œuvre.

Les textes du corpus ont été choisis pour comprendre un double phénomène paradoxal. L'hyperréalité et la simulation, dont l'omniprésence passe désormais inaperçue,⁵³⁷ sont à l'origine de changements majeurs dans notre système de représentation artistique et impactent notre conception de ce qui est « authentique ». Malgré ces changements, des conceptions de l'« authenticité » plus anciennes

⁵³⁷ L'hyperréalité peut être succinctement définie comme une version artificiellement améliorée de la réalité. Son omniprésence est par exemple illustrée par l'essor d'influenceurs Instagram entièrement virtuels, créés numériquement, et par la résurrection d'acteurs décédés au moyen d'images de synthèse.

perdurent,⁵³⁸ et la croyance qu'une vie plus « authentique » est à chercher loin de la mondialisation et au plus près de la nature semble profondément ancrée dans l'imaginaire.

Pour étudier ce double phénomène et ses paradoxes, j'ai sélectionné des récits de voyage non-fictionnels publiés soit par des sémioticiens soit par des nomades volontaires entre 1970 et 2019, en anglais et en français – exception faite de « Voyage en hyperréalité » d'Eco, initialement publié en italien. Tous les récits du corpus ont en commun certains traits : leurs auteurs font le récit d'un voyage en pays étranger, se préoccupent de la forme de leur texte, des problèmes éthiques liées au voyage et/ou à l'écriture et montrent qu'ils ont conscience des difficultés que pose la représentation de l'autre. En outre, les nomades volontaires réfléchissent dans leurs récits aux conventions du genre, et les sémioticiens abordent des questions en rapport avec le fonctionnement du langage et des signes artistiques et linguistiques.

Cette étude explorera d'abord cinq récits de voyage qui avancent l'idée selon laquelle une relation « authentique » à la nature peut exister lorsque le voyageur séjourne dans des lieux sauvages intacts : *The Snow Leopard* (1978), qui narre le voyage de l'écrivain américain Peter Matthiessen dans l'Himalaya ; *In Siberia* (1999), qui suit l'exploration de la Russie post-communiste par le Britannique Colin Thubron ; *Terra Incognita* (1996), qui décrit le voyage de l'autrice anglaise Sara Wheeler en Antarctique ; *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* (2011), dans lequel l'écrivain de voyage français Sylvain Tesson fait le récit de ses six mois d'ermitage au Baïkal ; et *La panthère des neiges* (2019), à ce jour son dernier opus, dans lequel il raconte son voyage dans l'Himalaya.

Nous nous intéresserons ensuite à trois récits de voyage qui réfléchissent plus ouvertement aux concepts d'« authenticité » et d'« inauthenticité » appliqués à certaines œuvres d'art, aux cultures américaines et japonaises, et à la possibilité de représenter ces cultures à travers l'écriture : *L'empire des signes* (1970), qui transmet la joie et la curiosité ressenties par Roland Barthes au contact de la culture japonaise ; *Amérique* (1986), de Jean Baudrillard, qui exprime sa fascination pour la culture de l'artificialité qu'il découvre aux États-Unis ; et « Voyages dans l'hyperrealité » (« *Nel cuore dell'impero : viaggio nell'iperrealità* », 1975), qui suit Umberto Eco alors qu'il fait le tour des parcs à thèmes et des musées les plus kitsch d'Amérique.

Les lecteurs qui ne connaîtraient pas ces ouvrages trouveront en **annexe 2** de brefs résumés de ces textes et de courtes présentations de leurs auteurs.

⁵³⁸ Par exemple, l'art numérique, hautement reproductible, se voit tout de même authentifié comme étant unique, comme l'était l'art avant l'ère de la reproductibilité technique. La persistance de garanties d'authenticité traditionnelles est illustrée par la première vente par Christie's d'une œuvre d'art purement numérique : l'image numérique « everyday » de Beeple. En 2021, cette œuvre d'art s'est vendue 69 346 250 dollars, et avec un nouveau type de certificat d'authenticité appelé NFT (« *non-fungible token* » - jeton non fongible). Même si l'œuvre d'art est en elle-même facilement diffusable et reproductible, ce certificat est unique, et repose donc sur une conception traditionnelle de l'« authenticité » d'une œuvre d'art. Voir www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx

La portée nécessairement limitée de ce projet a nécessité certains choix. Parmi les récits de voyage centrés sur la représentation de la nature qui ont été publiés ces quarante dernières années, on trouve des œuvres exceptionnelles qui n'ont pu être incluses dans le corpus, telles que *Tracks* de Robyn Davidson (1980), *PrairieEarth* de William Least Heat-Moon (1994), *Among Flowers* de Jamaica Kincaid (2005), *Landmarks* (2015) de Robert MacFarlane et *Sur les chemins noirs* (2016) de Tesson, pour n'en citer que quelques-unes. Dans le domaine de l'hyperréalité, les chercheurs qui souhaiteraient pousser plus avant les réflexions initiées ici pourront se tourner vers *Mobile* (1962) de Michel Butor, qui précède *Amérique* de Baudrillard et possède certaines caractéristiques en commun avec cet ouvrage, ou encore, ils pourront se plonger dans les récits de voyage de Pico Iyer tels que *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988), dans lequel il étudie les réinterprétations de la culture pop américaine en Asie, et *The Global Soul* (2001), dans lequel il s'interroge sur ce qui fonde l'identité des grands voyageurs et se penche sur les conséquences qu'a eu la circulation des biens de consommation à l'échelle mondiale sur la culture locale, notamment au Japon.

Bien que les limites de ce projet ne m'aient pas permis d'accorder à ces textes toute l'attention qu'ils méritaient, j'évoquerai occasionnellement certains d'entre eux et les comparerai avec le corpus principal.

6. L'authenticité dans le récit de voyage

1. Préambule et étymologie

Le terme d'« authenticité » est si chargé idéologiquement que les guillemets sont de mise pour signifier la circonspection du chercheur, qui est vivement encouragé à le remplacer par un synonyme moins connoté. Ce terme suscite d'autant plus de méfiance qu'il semble incompatible avec la subjectivité et la relativité mises à l'honneur par le mouvement postmoderniste. Le terme d'« authenticité » connote en effet pour certains un point de vue absolu, capable de juger et de postuler qu'il existe des personnes, des objets, des expériences, des livres, etc., intrinsèquement « authentiques » et d'autres qui ne le sont pas. Le terme est considéré avec suspicion car, à première vue, il évoque une vision essentialiste qui réifie et réduit les entités considérées à certaines caractéristiques qu'elles seraient censées posséder et qui définiraient leur identité une fois pour toutes. Cet essentialisme alimente les doctrines nationales de pureté ethnique et culturelle, ce qui explique aussi la réticence bien légitime que l'on peut avoir à l'égard de la notion d'« authenticité ». Il entretient également les préjugés colonialistes, orientalistes et exotisants, comme l'illustrent encore les voyageurs qui déplorent les changements et la modernisation que connaissent leurs destinations, sous prétexte que ces modifications altèrent ce qu'ils considèrent comme l'essence immuable de ces pays.⁵³⁹

Pour commencer à dissiper l'aura « sinistre » de ce terme (Berman xiv), il est essentiel de partir du principe que l'« authenticité » est toujours *construite*. Les études sur ce concept

⁵³⁹ On peut penser par exemple à l'ouvrage de Paul Bowles, *Their Heads are Green and their Hands are Blue*, dans lequel l'auteur se plaint de l'occidentalisation du Maroc des années 1950.

montrent qu'il est le fruit de conditions historiques spécifiques et que sa signification a considérablement évolué depuis son apparition au XVI^e siècle. Des conceptions concurrentes de ce qui est ou non « authentique » coexistent à travers l'histoire, et la frontière reste floue, mouvante et discutable entre ce qui est considéré comme « authentique » et « inauthentique ».

Pourtant, comme l'affirme Charles Lindholm dans *Culture and Authenticity* (2008), l'« authenticité » est loin d'être une illusion sans importance (141), et il est indéniable que la foi en l'existence de quelque chose d'« authentique » a un impact concret sur les choix de vie et les comportements des gens, sur les décisions qu'ils prennent lorsqu'ils voyagent et qu'ils consomment ; sur les discours politiques, sur les politiques de préservation de l'environnement, sur le commerce de l'art et sur les stratégies de marketing, par exemple. Plutôt que tenir à distance un terme idéologiquement risqué, il semble nécessaire d'en discuter et de démystifier l'aura qui lui est attribuée. Cette étude examinera donc les différentes formes que prend l'« authenticité » dans les récits de voyage contemporains, les racines historiques du concept qui influencent la compréhension que nous en avons encore aujourd'hui, les implications éthiques de ses formes contemporaines et leurs paradoxes. Les guillemets autour du terme d'authenticité seront dès à présent supprimés, car ils signalent une réticence et un scepticisme à l'égard du concept qui paraissent incompatibles avec l'étude approfondie qui est proposée ici.

Afin de mieux contextualiser les conceptions de l'authenticité que l'on trouve dans le corpus, il convient de commencer par un rappel de l'étymologie du terme, avant de rattacher les formes que l'authenticité prend dans la littérature de voyage à trois grandes conceptions de l'authenticité que j'ai théorisées à partir de l'étude du corpus. Je définirai en premier lieu l'authenticité comme une vision de la nature qui la représente comme un sanctuaire où les voyageurs retrouvent une partie d'eux-mêmes qu'ils jugent plus authentique. Je définirai ensuite l'authenticité postmoderne comme un geste rhétorique qui consiste à reconnaître l'écart qui sépare le monde de sa représentation (littéraire ou, plus largement, artistique). Enfin, j'examinerai la corrélation entre la notion d'authenticité et celle de tradition.

Une partie des définitions de l'authenticité que l'on trouve dans les dictionnaires a encore cours aujourd'hui, tandis que d'autres ont été altérées ou rendues obsolètes par la postmodernité. Étymologiquement, le terme « authentique » est un héritage du latin « *authenticus* », qui vient du grec ἀθηντικὸς, composé de αὐτὸς (devenu « *auto* », « le même ») et de ἐντὸς (lié au latin « *intus* », « intérieur »). En résumé, est authentique ce qui n'est pas déterminé, contrôlé ou dominé par un agent extérieur, et ce qui détermine ou crée sa propre existence (*Littre*), et/ou ce qui est « pur » et « non altéré » (*TLFI*), ce qui explique que la nature sauvage, qui n'a d'autre origine qu'elle-même, soit souvent considérée comme authentique. On estime qu'un récit est authentique lorsqu'il possède un pouvoir évocateur et lorsqu'il est perçu comme conforme à la réalité (*TLFI*), ou lorsqu'il est exact et retranscrit parfaitement des faits (*ODL*). Les personnes sont jugées authentiques lorsqu'elles sont capables d'exprimer leur moi intérieur (*TLFI*), qui est

souvent défini comme une personnalité présociale, conformément à l'héritage de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Les dictionnaires français *Littre*, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* et *Le Trésor de la Langue Française* s'accordent également sur la définition de l'authentique comme étant ce qui possède une autorité incontestable, ajoutant parfois que celle-ci lui est conférée par un représentant officiel qui a lui-même été reconnu comme ayant la légitimité de déterminer la présence de cette authenticité (il peut par exemple s'agir d'un membre du clergé lorsqu'il faut authentifier des reliques ou d'un expert en art pour un tableau). Si l'on transpose ce concept dans le domaine de la littérature viatique, on peut supposer que cette autorité est détenue par les premiers explorateurs, par des représentants du canon littéraire - par exemple Henry David Thoreau pour ce qui est du récit d'un séjour prolongé dans la nature - ou, au temps des empires et aux débuts de l'anthropologie, par les ambassadeurs coloniaux, les informateurs locaux, les chefs de tribus et les chamans.

Néanmoins, avec l'ère postmoderne, préférence est donnée à la multiplication des points de vue, dont l'autorité est considérée comme relative. Toute notion d'autorité absolue étant devenue suspecte, les figures qui pouvaient incarner cette autorité et décider de l'« authenticité » d'un récit, d'une œuvre d'art ou d'une culture étrangère ont de fait été remises en cause. Dans la littérature de voyage, l'autorité du discours colonial a ainsi été déconstruite pièce à pièce, notamment par des auteurs positionnés à la marge de l'empire : des femmes écrivant sous le régime colonial, ou encore des écrivains britanniques nés dans les colonies de la couronne ou dont les parents y étaient nés. Pour ne citer que quelques exemples, au XIX^e siècle, les représentations par Isabella Bird et Mary Kingsley des populations colonisées diffèrent des représentations dominantes de leur époque (Mills 3). Plus récemment, en interposant son regard entre le lecteur blanc implicite et les sujets blancs rencontrés dans *The European Tribe* (1987), l'écrivain britannique et antillais Caryl Phillips a permis de renouveler le genre de la littérature viatique (Smethurst, « Introduction » 11). On peut également songer à l'œuvre de l'écrivain togolais Tété-Michel Kpomassie, *L'Africain du Groenland* (1980), qui narre huit ans de pérégrinations depuis son pays d'origine jusqu'au Groenland. Contrairement à ceux de nombreux écrivains voyageurs contemporains largement lus, le voyage de Kpomassie n'a pas été facilité par l'existence d'un ordre colonial résiduel qui donne plus de liberté à qui possède le passeport d'une ancienne puissance coloniale. Comme nous le verrons plus en détail par la suite (**Chapitre 5**), l'autorité du voyageur est également remise en cause lorsque celui-ci se demande, comme le fait parfois Thubron dans sa trilogie russe, si sa position de voyageur et d'étranger de passage lui donne la légitimité de juger, de prétendre comprendre ou de parler pour les populations locales qu'il rencontre.

Lorsque l'adjectif « authentique » est appliqué à un objet, tel qu'une œuvre d'art, il signifie que l'objet en question est conforme à certaines règles de fabrication traditionnelles - le dictionnaire *Oxford Lexico* donne l'exemple de la nourriture italienne, Walter Benjamin celui de l'art non-reproductible, Eco celui de statues faites en marbre plutôt qu'en cire. Un objet est considéré comme authentique lorsque son origine géographique et/ou temporelle est indiscutable, et lorsque l'identité de l'artiste ou artisan qui l'a créé est incontestable. Cependant, cette définition ne prend pas acte des

changements sociétaux survenus avec la mondialisation : le mélange accru des cultures, la production de masse, l'omniprésence de divers médias et des simulacres. Suite à ces changements, l'autorité présumée de l'objet authentique est considérée comme suspecte voire infondée,⁵⁴⁰ alors que ses copies dénotent, par la transparence de leur artifice, une certaine honnêteté (authenticité) postmoderne.

2.L'authenticité de l'Eden naturel

Jusqu'à présent, les études publiées sur le concept d'authenticité ne se sont pas intéressées à la signification qu'acquiert ce concept lorsqu'il est appliqué à des paysages naturels. À peine la nature est-elle évoquée comme le lieu où les voyageurs « éprouvent leur véritable essence » (Lindholm 40), sans plus d'explication sur ce que cela signifie. Walter Benjamin affirme que le concept d'authenticité ne s'applique pas à la nature, qui, selon lui, n'est pas aussi « vulnérable » à l'érosion du concept que ne le sont les objets d'art, car les paysages naturels ne sont pas dotés de « l'essence subtile » que les objets d'art possèdent et perdent lorsqu'ils sont reproduits (14). Pourtant, le seul exemple d'« aura » qu'il donne est lié à la nature : « Qu'est-ce donc que l'aura ? Une étrange trame d'espace et de temps : l'apparition unique d'un lointain, aussi proche soit-il. Poser son regard, par un après-midi d'été, sur une chaîne de montagnes à l'horizon ou sur une branche qui projette son ombre sur celui qui la contemple, c'est goûter l'aura de ces montagnes, de cette branche » (15). Cette branche et ces montagnes sont auratiques parce qu'elles sont ancrées dans l'expérience quasi-épiphanique d'un « ici et maintenant » qui est au cœur de la notion Benjaminienne d'authenticité (13). Contrairement à ce qu'il voudrait faire croire à ses lecteurs, l'authenticité peut exister même sans que soient matérialisés dans une œuvre d'art l'esprit d'une époque et ses traditions séculaires : l'authenticité peut aussi résider dans une certaine sensibilité à la nature.

Mais de quelle nature parle-t-on ? Le premier volet du corpus, qui comprend le récit de voyages en Sibérie, en Antarctique et dans l'Himalaya, révèle que la nature est considérée comme authentique lorsqu'elle possède certains traits et remplit certaines fonctions. Elle est perçue comme authentique lorsqu'elle est sauvage, inhabitée, située de préférence loin de toutes sociétés modernes, et lorsqu'elle évoque un âge d'or antérieur à la formation de ces sociétés. Cette nature permet aux voyageurs d'échapper à la civilisation technologique et/ou aux responsabilités de leur vie quotidienne, de vivre des

⁵⁴⁰ À propos de la fausse croyance en l'existence d'une quelconque authenticité culturelle qui serait basée sur la pureté d'anciennes traditions, voir Appiah 107 et *The Invention of Tradition* de Hobsbawm et Ranger. Au sujet de la « reconsidération de l'idée d'origine ou d'originalité » que la parodie a entraînée au XX^e siècle en particulier, voir Hutcheon, *Postmodernism* 11. Pour d'autres arguments appuyant l'idée selon laquelle « l'art d'aujourd'hui . . . déplace l'œuvre originale hors de sa position centrale » (Benjamin 24), voir Benjamin, qui mentionne également que certains originaux sont créés en vue d'une reproduction ultérieure et n'ont pas visé à demeurer uniques (17). Le fait que Benjamin ait développé le concept d'aura en réaction à l'avènement de la reproductibilité technologique suggère également que le concept d'authenticité dans le sens où il l'entend est en fait en partie généré par l'existence des copies, et y est étroitement lié. L'aura qui entoure une œuvre d'art originale est en partie fonction de la circulation de ses images sous forme de cartes postales, de publicités, d'illustrations de livres d'art, etc. Il est donc possible d'affirmer que l'original tire son autorité de ses copies, et que cette autorité est le produit d'un processus de sélection (telle œuvre sera reproduite plutôt qu'une autre) qui est discutable et influencé par des considérations économiques.

moments épiphaniques, par moments au contact des animaux. Ces voyageurs voient parfois s'opérer en eux une transformation spirituelle et déclarent avoir retrouvé leur identité profonde, transformation qu'ils attribuent à leur séjour dans des lieux naturels.

Dans le **Chapitre 1**, nous verrons que certains auteurs du corpus regardent la technologie, les responsabilités de la vie quotidienne et même parfois les autres êtres humains comme d'indésirables intrus qu'ils préfèrent éviter lors de leurs voyages. Wheeler, par exemple, apprécie la liberté que lui procure son séjour en Antarctique, loin des obligations de sa vie londonienne (94). Matthiessen fait quant à lui part des variations d'humeur que lui causent les lettres qu'il reçoit de ses enfants, le son d'une radio brisant le silence himalayen et la vue de tentes criardes annonçant la présence d'autres grimpeurs étrangers (*Snow* 214, 117, 264). Les textos, la nourriture industrielle et les touristes sont autant d'éléments de la vie moderne que Tesson préfère éviter (*Forêts* 191/242, 3/21, 38/61), tandis que Thubron se remet du spectacle éprouvant de la pauvreté et de l'horreur qu'il rencontre en Sibérie en se plongeant dans une observation contemplative de la nature (*En Sibérie* 139). En outre, Tesson et Matthiessen apprécient la compagnie des autres avec parcimonie, et il semble qu'ils associent l'authenticité du voyage à une certaine solitude.

L'idée selon laquelle la nature serait authentique en vertu des modes de vie prémodernes qu'elle favorise dérive de ce que Lawrence Buell appelle « l'idéologie pastorale », et qu'il définit comme un discours qui idéalise le « (re)tour vers un état de l'existence moins urbanisé, plus 'naturel' » (*Environmental* 31). Comme le souligne Paul Alpers, les paysages pastoraux participent d'un dispositif littéraire séculaire qui nourrit et se fonde sur « la fiction centrale selon laquelle la vie idéalisée des bergers reflète fidèlement de véritables conditions de vie » (459). La littérature pastorale situe donc l'authenticité dans un âge d'or fictif qui n'a pas grand-chose à voir avec la vie des voyageurs contemporains résidant dans des pays très développés.

L'idéologie pastorale est problématique car elle est fondée sur une vision très restreinte, romantique et peu pragmatique de ce que peut être une relation idéale à la nature. Les limites de cette conception de l'authenticité ont été pointées du doigt par plusieurs philosophes, dont Theodor Adorno. Dans *Le jargon de l'authenticité* (1964), il attaque le discours (ou « jargon ») de Martin Heidegger précisément parce que ce dernier postule qu'il serait souhaitable de revenir à un état soi-disant premier de l'humanité incarné par la paysannerie (59).⁵⁴¹ En vérité, les agriculteurs sont pauvres, exploités et subventionnés, le corrige Adorno (46). Adorno explique que l'authenticité de Heidegger est fondée sur le fantasme trompeur et nostalgique qui imagine que l'humanité vivait, à une époque, dans un état de plénitude originelle (Jay 25). La même remarque pourrait être adressée au premier volet du corpus étudié ici, même si les écrivains voyageurs échangent bergers et fermiers contre Sherpas, villageois et gardes forestiers.

Pour le chercheur en écocritique Greg Garrard, l'idéologie pastorale pose également problème dans la mesure où elle ne permet pas d'aborder les questions liées à la présence

⁵⁴¹ La même observation a récemment été réitérée par les pères fondateurs de l'écocritique, qui critiquent l'« idéologie pastorale » parce qu'elle « implique une idéalisation de la vie rurale qui occulte la réalité des difficultés du travail en milieu rural » (Garrard 41).

de l'homme sur terre. Cette idéologie exclut en effet les espaces urbains du domaine de l'authentique, efface toute mention de déchets toxiques, de matières radioactives, d'eaux polluées, etc. Elle repose sur la volonté d'oublier la présence de ces problèmes. Au lieu de prendre la mesure de nos liens étroits avec la nature, de la façon dont nos sociétés modernes s'y insèrent, en dépendent, et l'impactent, les textes pastoraux font l'éloge d'une vie rurale idéalisée. Garrard remet en question le discours pastoral car il dissocie humanité et nature, et dédouane ceux qui s'y réfugient de toute responsabilité vis-à-vis de l'environnement dans la vie quotidienne qu'ils mènent en ville, hors de leurs voyages (78).

On peut faire remonter aux écrits de Rousseau l'idée selon laquelle la nature serait pure et la société une source de contamination. Dans leurs ouvrages sur le concept d'authenticité, Marshall Berman,⁵⁴² Lionel Trilling⁵⁴³ et Charles Lindholm désignent tous trois Rousseau comme le fondateur de la notion d'« authenticité personnelle » (Lindholm 2).⁵⁴⁴ Comme le montre le début des *Confessions* (1782), Rousseau affirme en effet que la société est la cause de comportements criminels et répréhensibles même chez les individus fondamentalement bons (il se prend en exemple).⁵⁴⁵ L'ouverture des *Réveries d'un promeneur solitaire* met également en lumière la misanthropie de Rousseau,⁵⁴⁶ que Tesson ressuscite et réinterprète à sa manière dans ses récits de voyage, y ajoutant toutefois une dose d'ironie. À l'opposé du citadin des salons réprouvé par Rousseau, le bon sauvage incarne pour le philosophe une authenticité qui repose sur un idéal d'autosuffisance qui ne peut se développer pleinement que dans la solitude. Cette idée se retrouve en partie dans les voyages solitaires de Tesson et de Matthiessen et dans la façon dont ils représentent les gardes forestiers et les Sherpas qu'ils rencontrent. Par exemple, Matthiessen juge admirables les habitants du pays de Dolpo, qui est décrit comme « pur » (*Snow* 13), car leur mode de vie est selon lui « préservé » de la contamination de la modernité (24). Il semble que le voyageur espère toucher à la pureté qu'il projette sur le pays en imitant le mode de vie de ses habitants.

Pour comprendre comment certains écrivains en sont venus à associer implicitement

⁵⁴² Dans le domaine de la philosophie politique (*The Politics of Authenticity*, 1970).

⁵⁴³ En esthétique et en littérature (*Sincérité et authenticité*, 1972).

⁵⁴⁴ Dans le domaine de l'anthropologie culturelle (*Culture et authenticité*, 2008).

⁵⁴⁵ Une étude plus approfondie des *Confessions* de Rousseau révèle qu'il attribue souvent le blâme à diverses influences extérieures qui auraient un impact négatif sur le comportement des individus, et les rendraient immoraux. Or, cette façon de décrire les individus les dédouane de toute responsabilité. Dans le livre I des *Confessions* Rousseau raconte par exemple avoir eu une enfance idyllique, qu'il décrit comme un état de bonheur, d'innocence. Selon lui, cet état aurait duré éternellement s'il n'avait pas rencontré des gens qui l'ont maltraité, ont été injustes envers lui, et ont gâté son innocence et son caractère initialement doux et obéissant. On trouve une illustration éloquente de cette position au livre II, où il affirme que son désir d'écrire les *Confessions* provient en partie de la nécessité de se libérer de « l'insupportable poids des remords » qui le rongeaient après qu'il ait fait renvoyer une servante, la condamnant très probablement à une vie de prostitution (136). Pourtant, il prend soin de clore l'épisode en expliquant qu'il n'était qu'un enfant au moment de sa faute. Si le maître de maison l'avait « encouragé » à avouer son mensonge au lieu de l'« intimider », affirme Rousseau, il aurait sûrement avoué et ainsi sauvé l'honneur de la jeune fille. Ces excuses détournent la faute de lui et l'imputent à d'autres ainsi qu'à des facteurs extérieurs. L'on peut donc s'interroger sur le « poids » véritable des remords qui l'assaille.

⁵⁴⁶ Rousseau était plutôt vindicatif et tenait à jeter l'opprobre sur ses ennemis. Pour lui, la société - surtout la société française - était intrinsèquement fondée sur l'insincérité, car elle exigeait que l'on se comporte comme un personnage jouant un rôle sur la scène sociale (Trilling 17).

l'authenticité à l'autosuffisance et au détachement de la société, il est utile de revenir brièvement à l'étymologie qui lie l'authenticité d'une personne à sa liberté d'agir : le mot grec αὐθεντίας désigne en effet un maître, une personne qui « agit par [elle]-même », qui décide de ses propres actions (*Littre*). De la même façon, une personne autosuffisante est capable de déterminer les conditions minimales de sa propre existence, dont elle est maîtresse. En littérature, cette conception de l'authenticité a été développée par les Transcendantalistes américains, qui soutenaient que chacun pouvait nourrir son identité la plus profonde en pratiquant la vie en plein air et en s'abandonnant à contempler une nature sauvage bienfaisante. L'influence considérable qu'ils ont eu sur le genre de l'écriture de la nature explique en partie certaines conceptions de l'authenticité qui sous-tendent les représentations de la nature des écrivains contemporains.

A l'instar des œuvres des Transcendantalistes, une partie du corpus sélectionné pour cette étude suggère que la relation la plus authentique qu'un voyageur puisse établir avec l'environnement naturel dans lequel il séjourne est épiphanique. Ralph Waldo Emerson et Thoreau en particulier voyaient exprimée dans la nature une sorte d'unité divine, qui pouvait être entrevue lors d'heureuses épiphanies, fruits d'une contemplation attentive de la nature. Ces épiphanies étaient vectrices d'un type de spiritualité que ces auteurs jugeaient incontestable et authentique parce qu'elle était ressentie intimement, non pas à l'église mais au contact direct de la nature, lieu « sacré » pour eux (Thoreau, *Walking* 32). De la même manière, lorsqu'ils fuient la routine de leur vie citadine et la présence des autres et cherchent à nouer une relation étroite avec la nature, Wheeler, Tesson et Matthiessen tentent de créer des conditions propices à des moments de clarté contemplative, comparables aux épiphanies transcendantalistes ; c'est pourquoi l'accent sera mis dans le **Chapitre 2** sur la réinterprétation des principes transcendantalistes par les écrivains voyageurs contemporains. Tout comme celles des Transcendantalistes, les épiphanies que relatent Tesson et Matthiessen et la certitude religieuse que Wheeler dit avoir acquise au Pôle Sud leur permettent de bénéficier du pouvoir de jouvence qu'ils prêtent à la nature, comme en témoignent par exemple la traduction en anglais du titre du livre de Tesson, « *Consolations of the Forest* », et le titre du vingt-deuxième chapitre de *La panthère des neiges* – « La consolation du sauvage » (158).

L'origine théologique du concept d'authenticité permet de comprendre pourquoi certains voyageurs attribuent une dimension quasi-religieuse à la nature lorsque celle-ci correspond à l'idée qu'ils se font d'une nature authentique. Lindholm explique que le processus qui consiste à authentifier un objet concernait initialement les reliques religieuses et les objets rituels. Ces objets tiraient leur authenticité de leur fonction dans les rituels, de leur capacité à accomplir des miracles, de la foi que plaçait en eux la communauté de croyants qui leur imputaient ce pouvoir et, le cas échéant, de l'institution religieuse qui les avait authentifiés (Lindholm 14-15). L'authenticité⁵⁴⁷ apparaît très liée à l'idée de croyance, comme illustré par l'attitude de certaines personnes, qui espèrent qu'un objet authentique aura sur eux un effet de jouvence. Comme l'écrit Lindholm, « [p]our les croyants, la contemplation de ces reliques sacrées peut guérir l'âme blessée et racheter le

⁵⁴⁷ D'où, on peut le supposer, le titre choisi dans une des traductions anglaises du recueil d'essais d'Umberto Eco : *Faith in Fakes*.

monde moderne avili » (16). Dans les sociétés sécularisées, ce pouvoir d'élévation spirituelle a été transmis à l'art, qui est désormais « censé fournir la substance spirituelle de la vie » (Trilling 98). Walter Benjamin a résumé cette évolution en comparant le culte de la beauté à un « rituel sécularisé », affirmant que « la valeur unique de l'œuvre d'art 'authentique' est toujours fondée sur la théologie » (17). Le corpus étudié ici suggère que c'est à présent la nature, et non plus seulement l'art, qui remplit cette fonction spirituelle.

Dans l'espoir de faire l'expérience d'une forme d'élévation spirituelle, certains écrivains voyageurs réinterprètent l'une des plus anciennes formes de voyage connues à ce jour, le pèlerinage, en lui empruntant certains de ses traits, comme la transformation spirituelle, même si ces voyageurs préfèrent « les futaies aux nefes de pierre » (Tesson, *Forêts* 78). Par définition, les pèlerins cheminent jusqu'à des sanctuaires où ils espèrent atteindre une forme de « rédemption » et parfois même d' « extase » (Cohen 614 ; M. B. Campbell 37). Leurs voyages les amènent à emprunter le pas de saints ou à visiter des lieux sacrés désignés comme tels par les livres saints. Ils choisissent généralement des lieux qui sont au cœur de leur identité spirituelle, ethnique ou culturelle, que celle-ci leur ait été transmise ou qu'elle ait été choisie (Schramm 139). Les voyageurs du corpus examiné dans cette étude possèdent certains de ces traits caractéristiques du pèlerin : ils retracent les pas de figures qu'ils considèrent comme mythiques (Wheeler), s'arrêtent dans des lieux chargés d'histoire (Thubron), espèrent atteindre l'illumination dans des lieux saints (Matthiessen), ou imitent la vie ascétique des ermites (Tesson). Plus encore que ces caractéristiques, leur séjour dans des lieux naturels et le fait qu'il y surmontent des épreuves physiques paraissent être déterminants dans leur cheminement spirituel. Ces motifs semblent en effet leur permettre d'accéder à ce qu'ils décrivent comme une forme de révélation. Parce qu'elle est perçue comme la marque d' « une vie moralement supérieure » (Huggan 8), la douleur physique qu'ils endurent les rapproche des pèlerins, dont les voyages sont souvent des « rituels cinétiques » et physiquement éprouvants ; on peut par exemple songer aux pèlerins qui se meuvent à genoux jusqu'à leurs sanctuaires (Turner cité dans Coleman et Eade 2).⁵⁴⁸

Choisir des pérégrinations physiquement exigeantes permet également aux voyageurs de se distinguer des touristes, dans un geste fidèle à l'étymologie du voyage entendu comme *travail*,⁵⁴⁹ et en accord avec les conventions littéraires du genre de l'écriture viatique. Alors que le touriste tendrait « vers la sécurité du cliché pur », les voyageurs authentiques mettent en jeu leur intégrité physique, un geste censé leur assurer un rang plus élevé dans la hiérarchie des voyageurs (Fussell 39).⁵⁵⁰ On retrouve cette hiérarchie jusque dans les récits de voyage des années 1990. De nombreux auteurs tels que Mary Morris et Dervla Murphy approuvent en effet « le message implicite selon lequel le

⁵⁴⁸ Simon Coleman et John Eade citent Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Columbia UP, 1978, xiii.

⁵⁴⁹ D'après son étymologie latine « *trepalium* », qui était un instrument de torture (ODL).

⁵⁵⁰ Ainsi, dans les dernières lignes de *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) d'Eric Newby, Wilfred Thesiger traite Eric Newby et Hugh Carless de « chochottes » parce qu'ils osent gonfler des matelas pneumatiques pour y dormir (255).

Dans *Labels* (1930), Evelyn Waugh se moque des voyageurs qui recherchent les douleurs du voyage, et plus particulièrement de la « singulière délectation de l'inconfort » dont fait preuve Hilaire Belloc dans *Le chemin de Rome* (Mikkonen 166-7 et 149-52).

voyage doit être douloureux pour être ‘authentique’ » (Mulligan 76). Les affres du voyageur vont du manque d’hygiène et du manque de sommeil à des situations où la vie des voyageurs est en danger. Nous en trouvons quelques exemples dans le corpus sélectionné et dans d’autres récits de voyage contemporains. Dans une tentative humoristique d’émulation des premiers explorateurs, Wheeler repousse le moment de faire sa lessive et dort dans l’inconfort d’un igloo (*Terra* 276, 164). Robyn Davidson refuse quant à elle de se laver pendant son voyage dans le désert, bien qu’elle ait suffisamment d’eau à sa disposition (196). Plus risqué cette fois, Tesson raconte avoir failli tomber dans une crevasse du lac Baïkal (*Forêts* 4/23), et Matthiessen décrit ses dangereuses ascensions à flanc de montagne (*Snow* 92).⁵⁵¹

Le spécialiste de la littérature viatique Graham Huggan affirme qu’un glissement s’est opéré entre « l’authenticité de l’*endurance*, plus ancienne, et qui représentait et valorisait le ‘dur labeur du voyage’ »⁵⁵² et « l’authenticité de la *mise en danger* de soi, potentiellement autodestructrice » illustrée par l’expédition fatale que narre Jon Krakauer (178, emphase dans l’original). Huggan voit dans le type de quête qui met en avant l’effort physique et le danger l’expression « d’anxiétés masculinistes résiduelles » (9). À ses yeux, ce type de voyage évoque aussi la croyance en « une sorte d’authenticité viscérale liée au sentiment de pleine conscience (ressenti dans le corps) éprouvé au contact du danger » (Adams cité dans Huggan 189).⁵⁵³ Les voyageurs auxquels Huggan fait référence ont également été décrits comme étant en « quête d’adrénaline » (Lindholm 48), et comme des aventuriers qui privilégient les situations dangereuses nécessitant une attention telle qu’« une grande partie de l’aspect réflexif et social du moi [s’efface]. . . ce qui leur donne le sentiment d’être libérés des contraintes sociales » et leur permet « d’accéder à ce qu’ils perçoivent comme leur moi authentique » (Lois 121). Les récits de ces voyageurs s’appuient sur et nourrissent l’idée selon laquelle l’authenticité est liée à une « réalité physique éprouvée de façon totale et indiscutable », « ratifiée . . . par l’évocation d’un ressenti immédiat et irréfutable » (Lindholm 48, 1).

Lorsque nous analyserons le corpus, nous verrons que les récits des écrivains voyageurs qui embrassent cette conception de l’authenticité sont aussi influencés par la croyance rousseauiste selon laquelle il existerait un moi « véritable » et un moi superficiel. La façon dont ces voyageurs représentent leurs aventures laisse à croire qu’ils valorisent l’inconfort, l’effort physique et même parfois les situations potentiellement létales dans l’espoir que ces conditions les ramènent à leur moi véritable. Ainsi, Tesson apprécie « [l]a vie en cabane » car elle est « un papier de verre » : « Elle décape l’âme, met l’être à nu,

⁵⁵¹ Entre les deux on peut trouver des voyageurs tels que Paul Bowles, qui esthétise les désagréments et les transforme en éléments de couleur locale dans *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue*. Il explique que le désert est un endroit fascinant même si la nourriture comestible y est rare, qu’il faut des comprimés d’Halazone pour rendre l’eau potable, que les routes sont dangereuses et les conditions de sommeil mauvaises.

⁵⁵² Graham Huggan cite Gillian Kenny, « ‘Our Travelers’ Out There on the Road : Lonely Planet and Its Readers, 1973-1981 », *Jumping the Queue*, édité par Gabriella Espak, et al., University of Queensland Press, 2002, 111-19, 119.

⁵⁵³ Huggan cite Kathleen Adams, « Danger-Zone Tourism : Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times », in *Interconnected Worlds : Tourism in Southeast Asia*, édité par Peggy Teo, et al., Pergamon, 2001, 265-80, 275.

ensauvage l'esprit . . . mais elle déploie au fond du cœur des papilles aussi sensibles que les spores » (*Forêts* 277). De même, Davidson déclare apprécier « le dépouillement » du voyage physiquement très exigeant qu'elle entreprend dans l'outback australien dans les années 1970, qui lui permet de « se débarrasser, comme d'une mue, des préoccupations et des normes inutiles de la société qu'[elle] [avait] quittée » (181).

Une fois que le voyageur s'est débarrassé de son moi superficiel, demeure un moi perçu comme authentique et décrit tantôt comme un enfant intérieur, tantôt comme un moi animal, qui précéderait dans un cas comme dans l'autre l'éducation en société. Ce moi est caractérisé par son aspect sauvage, sa capacité à être spontané et à ressentir les sensations physiques sans les passer au filtre de la réflexion intellectuelle. Par exemple, *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* contient de nombreux passages dans lesquels Tesson présente les activités physiquement exigeantes (randonner, couper du bois, briser des morceaux de glace) comme particulièrement satisfaisantes. Le récit de voyage qu'il publie quelques années après, *La panthère des neiges*, montre également qu'il accorde une grande importance à la façon de vivre des animaux : leur spontanéité et leur capacité à être ancrés dans le présent lui paraissent dignes d'être imitées. « Les bêtes », écrit-il avec ce qui semble être une pointe de regret pour un état perdu, « appartenaient aux origines dont la biologie nous avait éloignés » (*Panthère* 163). Observer et imiter les animaux nous rapprocherait donc d'un âge d'or originel que les animaux n'ont pas perdu, et, de surcroît, donnerait accès à des épiphanies. Comme nous le verrons dans le **Chapitre 3**, Matthiessen, qui idéalise la vision du monde de son fils de sept ans, pense qu'à l'instar des saints et des enfants, les animaux possèdent une capacité à être « sauvages » que le moi social et adulte a perdue (*Snow* 47).

Les récits sélectionnés montrent qu'un changement s'est opéré dans l'idée que les voyageurs ont d'une relation authentique à la nature. La conception de l'environnement qui dominait les récits de voyage aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles est marquée par le commandement biblique qui donne aux hommes le droit de dominer la nature, et elle peut être résumée en faisant référence à la classification Linnéenne de la faune et de la flore condensée dans l'ouvrage *Systema Naturae* (1735). Les expéditions scientifiques qui accompagnaient les premiers conquérants et colonisateurs ont entrepris de cartographier, de nommer et de s'approprier le monde naturel, dans le but d'imposer « un ordre à l'échelle mondiale grâce aux appareils descriptifs de l'histoire naturelle » (Pratt 15). Contrairement aux premiers naturalistes à bord de ces expéditions, les voyageurs contemporains que j'étudie cherchent à retranscrire la nature en termes poétiques plutôt que scientifiques. Ils ne souhaitent pas que cette nature soit transformée et rendue productive ; au contraire, ils semblent vouloir qu'elle les transforme. Préférant la « déterritorialisation »⁵⁵⁴ à l'anthropocentrisme, Tesson et Matthiessen laissent entendre qu'une relation authentique à la nature implique que le voyageur accepte d'être transformé.

⁵⁵⁴ Je reviendrai plus en détail sur le cadre théorique de Deleuze et Guattari dans le **Chapitre 4**.

3.L'authenticité postmoderne : reconnaître l'écart entre le monde et sa représentation

Au vu des altérations subies par le concept d'authenticité à l'époque postmoderne, qui est marquée par la fragmentation, il est remarquable que le fantasme d'une authenticité comprise comme un état de plénitude perdure. Deux conceptions contradictoires de l'authenticité coexistent ainsi dans les œuvres des écrivains voyageurs contemporains. Comme l'a écrit Casey Blanton :

La recherche de l'authenticité, de la plénitude et du sens est souvent le moteur de leurs voyages, comme ce fut le cas pour les écrivains voyageurs du passé. Pourtant, les récits de voyage les plus récents arrivent souvent à la conclusion que l'authenticité ne doit pas être comprise comme une entité stable, mais comme un « prédicat culturel ». (xiv) ⁵⁵⁵

L'écrivain de voyage contemporain qui poursuit l'authenticité entendue comme *plénitude* doit aussi faire face à la nécessité contraire qui requiert qu'il représente la *fragmentation* de son expérience et la relativité culturelle qui ont émergé avec le postmodernisme. En réponse à ces demandes paradoxales, les récits sélectionnés font appel à des stratégies rhétoriques qui ont des effets opposés. D'une part, on trouve dans ces œuvres des structures rhétoriques traditionnellement associées à la fiction, qui permettent aux écrivains voyageurs de créer un sentiment de plénitude et de cohérence qui peuvent manquer à l'expérience de terrain. Percy G. Adams, qui examine le développement simultané du roman et des textes de voyage à travers l'histoire, constate que ces deux genres littéraires ont certains traits en commun : ils sont centrés autour d'un héros, possèdent un narrateur, et sont organisés autour d'une action et de certains types de personnages, ce qui a valu aux écrivains de voyage la réputation d'être « des embellisseurs de vérité ou . . . des menteurs » (85). Les ouvrages *Novels, Maps, Modernity* d'Eric Bulson et *Narrative Paths* de Kai Mikkonen démontrent également que les échanges entre le genre romanesque et celui du récit de voyage non fictionnel ont été nombreux au cours de l'histoire.

D'autre part, parce qu'il est non fictionnel, on peut attendre du récit de voyage qu'il reste fidèle à la nature fragmentée et subjective de l'expérience et qu'il la retranscrive au lieu de chercher à la réparer. Cette fragmentation se manifeste dans ces récits sous la forme de quêtes incomplètes, ou d'une écriture polyphonique ou marquée par l'autodérision, comme nous le verrons au **Chapitre 5**.

Dans cette étude, j'avance l'idée selon laquelle de tels procédés littéraires correspondent à une conception postmoderne de l'authenticité qui consiste d'une part à reconnaître ouvertement et à mettre en avant les limites de la capacité du voyageur à comprendre les personnes ou phénomènes culturels qu'il rencontre, et d'autre part à admettre et rendre visibles les limites de la représentation littéraire.

Le paradoxe que je pointais du doigt plus haut tient à la nature hybride du récit de voyage, qui est à la fois romanesque et non-fictionnel, et dont la responsabilité est double.

⁵⁵⁵ Toutefois, il existe des exceptions notables parmi les écrivains de voyage contemporains les plus lus. Paul Theroux, par exemple, ne cherche pas à identifier ou à dépasser ses préjugés culturels.

Le récit de voyage rend compte à la fois « du monde » et répond à notre besoin de « fictions », comme le dit Bill Buford dans l'introduction du premier *Granta* consacré au récit de voyage :

Le récit de voyage est le mendiant des formes littéraires :⁵⁵⁶ il emprunte aux mémoires, au reportage et, surtout, au roman. Mais il s'agit avant tout d'un récit raconté à la première personne, authentifié par une expérience vécue. Il répond à un besoin. Le besoin de fictions qui rendraient des comptes au monde réel. Ou peut-être que je me trompe. Peut-être s'agit-il du besoin que nous avons d'un monde qui rendrait des comptes à nos fictions. (7)

En tant que mémorialistes, les écrivains de voyage narrent leur vie et leurs expériences du point de vue d'une subjectivité sociale marquée par l'histoire. En tant que reporters, ils possèdent la crédibilité du témoin oculaire qui rapporte les faits sans fioritures.⁵⁵⁷ En tant que conteurs, on attend d'eux qu'ils soient artistes, attirent et retiennent l'attention du lecteur. Des rôles parfois difficiles à conjuguer. Ce qui manque peut-être à la définition de Buford, c'est l'exploration de la vie intérieure du voyageur, qui est l'un des aspects principaux de la littérature de voyage contemporaine, si l'on en croit Sara Wheeler et Dea Birkett : « le voyage intérieur de l'écrivain est la partie la plus importante . . . de tout récit de voyage. L'endroit où vous allez n'a pas d'importance ; c'est votre interprétation qui compte » (ix). Dans le corpus sélectionné, l'influence des formes mémorialiste et journalistique domine les textes de Wheeler, Thubron et Eco, qui prennent soin de rendre compte de conditions historiques et sociologiques spécifiques, tandis que l'art et l'expérimentation littéraire du conteur apparaissent comme une préoccupation centrale des œuvres de Tesson, Matthiessen, Barthes et Baudrillard.

Parce qu'il est non-fictionnel, le récit de voyage doit rendre compte de la nature désorganisée de la réalité, une exigence qui peut s'avérer contraire à la nécessaire réorganisation de l'expérience qui s'opère lorsque celle-ci est mise en récit. Christine Montalbetti exprime cette tension en ces termes : « le texte ne cesse d'hésiter entre la désignation de ses apories et la mise en place de principes de résolution par où il les dépasse » (6). Quand les écrivains de voyage donnent un sens rétrospectif à leur expérience et lui confèrent une cohérence romanesque, on peut dire qu'ils appliquent des « principes de résolution ». Quand, au contraire, ils admettent que la forme littéraire ne peut contenir entièrement l'expérience vécue, on peut dire qu'ils « désign[ent] [l]es apories » du texte.

⁵⁵⁶ Lettres, journaux intimes, mémoires, essais philosophiques, carnets de notes prises lors d'explorations scientifiques et ethnographiques, objets romanesques... La nature protéiforme du récit de voyage non-fictionnel lui a valu une réputation de littérature parasite, même si le roman n'est pas moins hybride. Sur ce point je me range à l'avis de Guillaume Thouroude qui définit le récit de voyage comme un genre indépendant : « S'il est vrai que le *récit de voyage* fait de la place à d'autres genres, il ne le fait pas plus que n'importe quel autre genre : après tout, le roman contient parfois de la poésie, du théâtre et des récits de voyage, tandis que le poème en prose s'apparente parfois au journal intime, au roman, au récit de voyage, etc. Par conséquent, il est trompeur de considérer le récit de voyage comme un genre hybride qui serait à l'opposé d'autres genres présumés 'purs' » (382).

⁵⁵⁷ Le « mécanisme littéraire fondamental de légitimation dans le genre de la littérature de voyage » consiste à « revendiquer une autorité en tant qu'observateur direct », comme l'écrivent Jaś Elsner et Joan Pau Rubiés (3).

Montalbetti identifie un certain nombre de stratégies qui tantôt exacerbent tantôt atténuent la perte entre monde réel et discours. Par exemple, les écrivains voyageurs qu'elle examine utilisent l'ellipse pour souligner la nature ineffable de la réalité ; ils empruntent à la fiction ; ils se conforment aux scènes conventionnelles du genre ; ils filent des métaphores qui assimilent l'écriture à la peinture et le monde à une représentation ; ils ont recours à des néologismes et mots en langue étrangère ; ils dessinent au lieu d'écrire ; comparent l'inconnu au familier ; commentent les inscriptions graphiques trouvées dans le monde réel et incluent la parole des habitants dans leur récit. Les récits de voyage étudiés ici s'appuient sur ces stratégies. Par exemple, Tesson se compare au personnage fictif de Robinson Crusoé (*Forêts* 109), il assimile son pique-nique au tableau de Vasily Perov, *Chasseurs au repos* (104), transforme une phrase russe en néologisme pour décrire l'état d'esprit russe (278), et écrit des haïkus sur la neige, comblant momentanément le fossé qui sépare la substance du texte et celle du monde d'une manière qui n'est pas sans rappeler les logogrammes que Christian Dotremont écrivait sur la neige (76). Cependant, les micro-stratégies sur lesquelles Montalbetti se penche ne rendent pas compte des macrostructures que les écrivains du corpus sélectionné ici utilisent pour donner une cohérence globale à leurs textes.

Les écrivains de voyage tentent parfois de combler le fossé entre le texte et le monde en s'inspirant de macrostructures typiquement associées à la fiction. Par exemple, certains donnent à leurs voyages la forme d'une quête achevée ou d'un récit initiatique au cours duquel le voyageur lui-même se transforme. C'est ce que fait Tesson, de manière peu convaincante, dans son ouvrage *Dans les Forêts de Sibérie*. Refaçonner un voyage pour lui donner la forme d'un récit avec un arc transformationnel et une fin fermée permet de satisfaire le désir que nous avons de « [c]onnaître l'embouchure, dominer le cours du fleuve, saisir enfin la vie comme destin », pour reprendre les mots utilisés par Albert Camus pour décrire le roman (271). En somme, les écrivains voyageurs donnent un sens à leur expérience en y superposant des structures narratives, dont certaines peuvent évoquer la fiction. Par exemple, le voyage peut être réorganisé et divisé en sections, la première agissant comme scène d'exposition (généralement dans le pays de résidence), suivie d'un élément perturbateur (le désir ou la raison qui pousse à partir), d'aventures (qui prennent la forme de rencontres, de choix, d'obstacles surmontés) et, enfin, d'une résolution, de préférence après que le voyageur ait subi une transformation morale. Pour illustrer le couple exposition/élément perturbateur que l'on retrouve souvent dans le genre du récit de voyage, nous pouvons prendre l'exemple de *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) de l'écrivain britannique Eric Newby, qui débute son récit en expliquant qu'il ne se sentait plus tout à fait à sa place dans le secteur de la mode à Londres, avant de présenter sa décision de partir pour le Nuristan. De la même manière, Caryl Phillips commence *The European Tribe* (1987) par une série d'anecdotes narrants son enfance, marquée par la différence entre sa couleur de peau et celle de ces concitoyens anglais : « on [lui] faisait constamment comprendre de manière subtile et variée qu'[il] n'était pas à sa place » (9). Son récit suggère que ce sentiment l'a poussé à voyager aux États-Unis et, après un bref retour à l'Université d'Oxford, à chercher des réponses en Europe et dans les Antilles. En plus de la présence d'une scène d'exposition et d'un élément perturbateur, Janicke Stensvaag Kaasa (476), Casey Blanton (xi), Peter Hulme et Tim Youngs (6)

soulignent que la littérature de voyage partage également d'autres traits essentiels avec le roman. Outre l'ordre séquentiel qui régit l'apparition des diverses aventures du héros, les deux genres reposent sur la présence d'un narrateur, d'un personnage central et d'un type de narration conçu pour attirer l'attention des lecteurs.

Tantôt ces structures rhétoriques sont utilisées pour créer et transmettre le sens que les voyageurs donnent à leur voyage, tantôt elles sont mises à mal, révélant les limites du support littéraire et les limites de la compréhension du voyageur. Je m'intéresserai plus particulièrement au type d'authenticité qui émerge lorsque les voyageurs remettent en question ces structures. Je qualifierai ce type d'authenticité de « postmoderne », car les voyageurs du corpus adoptent certains traits caractéristiques de la littérature postmoderne, qui leur permettent d'interroger les possibilités et les limites du médium littéraire. Par exemple, aussi répandue qu'elle soit, la structure de la quête souffre de « l'âge du soupçon » postmoderne, pour reprendre l'expression de Nathalie Sarraute. Certains des récits de voyage du corpus étudié ici suggèrent qu'il n'est ni nécessaire, ni possible de compléter une quête. Par exemple, Matthiessen ne rencontre jamais le léopard qu'il poursuit, et la quête de Thubron, qui cherche à identifier le « noyau » de la Sibérie, reste inachevée (*In Siberia* 83).

Si nous nous penchons davantage sur le récit de Thubron, nous remarquons que le voyageur rend compte de la fragmentation dont il est témoin en Sibérie. Bien qu'il s'articule autour d'un objectif clair (atteindre le cœur du pays), qui évoque la quête d'un état de plénitude, *In Siberia* décrit en réalité les ruines qui marquent le paysage de la Sibérie post-Soviétique. Le récit de Thubron met également à nu la nature incohérente et indicible de la réalité historique, ce qui laisse à penser qu'il souscrit à la forme d'authenticité postmoderne habilement décrite par Martin Jay dans son interprétation d'Adorno. Selon Jay, Adorno pensait qu'il était possible de parvenir à une forme d'authenticité qui ne souffrirait pas du défaut absolutiste de l'authenticité utilisée comme arme idéologique. L'authenticité qu'évoque Adorno est décrite comme une authenticité liée à un contexte, une authenticité qui n'est donc plus absolue, et qui « implique que soient prises en compte les catastrophes historiques de la modernité », les « traces des dommages et des bouleversements » de l'histoire, pour reprendre les termes que Jay utilise dans son commentaire d'Adorno (29). Cette authenticité « signifie la fidélité au moment historique, avec toutes ses contradictions traumatiques, plutôt que la fuite vers un prétendu état antérieur de plénitude qui précéderait la chute dans l'aliénation » (29).⁵⁵⁸ Lorsque Thubron donne à voir les cicatrices de l'histoire dans toute leur horreur, nous pouvons dire qu'il fait preuve de ce type d'authenticité, par opposition aux passages dans lesquels il fuit ces horreurs et se réfugie dans la contemplation d'une nature apaisante.

⁵⁵⁸ Dans *Le jargon de l'authenticité* (1964), Adorno dénonce Heidegger et les intellectuels qu'il appelle par dérision « les authentiques », car ils dissimulent selon lui l'écart qui existe entre les mots qu'ils utilisent et les objets auxquels ils se réfèrent. Ces intellectuels utilisent un « jargon de l'authenticité », c'est-à-dire une série de conventions et de codes rhétoriques et théâtraux destinés à faire oublier cet écart. Adorno leur reproche de dissimuler le caractère artificiel de ces conventions et de prétendre que leur discours tire son autorité de Dieu (voir *Jargon* 5, 65). À l'inverse, Adorno suggère que les discours qui reconnaissent le contexte historique qui entoure leur production et conditionne leur degré de vérité, et qui ne revendiquent qu'une autorité limitée, laissent à penser qu'un type d'authenticité moins absolu et plus conforme à l'époque postmoderne est possible.

Lorsque les écrivains voyageurs posent un regard critique sur les filtres intertextuels ou subjectifs qui influencent leur perception de la réalité, lorsqu'ils admettent la difficulté qu'ils ont à produire un récit original dans un monde déjà entièrement exploré et décrit, mais aussi la difficulté qu'ils ont à dépeindre la réalité avec exactitude et à cerner les locaux dont ils font la connaissance, on peut dire qu'ils font preuve d'une authenticité postmoderne dans leur façon d'écrire. Par exemple, plutôt que de revendiquer une originalité devenue douteuse, Wheeler et Tesson donnent à voir les dépendances intertextuelles de leurs récits. Ils remettent également en question l'autorité des récits canoniques qui ont précédé les leurs, comme on peut le voir lorsque Wheeler déconstruit les mythes des premiers explorateurs de l'Antarctique, et lorsque Tesson oscille entre des intertextes ascétiques et hédonistes, mettant à mal les premiers au moyen des seconds. Thubron expose également les limites des outils épistémologiques avec lesquels il sonde la Sibérie, et finit par admettre que sa connaissance de l'histoire et son désir de croire à l'idée du progrès historique ne suffisent pas à expliquer les horreurs du Goulag.

Certains de ces traits postmodernes étaient certes déjà présents dans certains récits de voyage modernistes tels que *Journey Without Maps* (1936) de Graham Greene et *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* de Rebecca West (1941). On trouvera facilement des exemples pour faire mentir toute catégorisation qui trancherait entre traits purement modernistes et postmodernes, telle que celle proposée par Ihab Hassan. À l'instar de Stacy Burton, je considère qu'il existe une certaine continuité entre les récits de voyage modernistes et postmodernes (16). Il me semble également légitime de s'interroger, comme le fait Simon Malpas, sur la nécessité de s'encombrer du préfixe « post- », étant donné que le postmodernisme peut être considéré comme une catégorie du modernisme, dont il partage de nombreuses caractéristiques (44).

Cependant, cette étude part du principe que les récits de voyage publiés après les années 1970 ont été influencés par un contexte littéraire et sociétal très différent de celui qui entourait les récits de voyage publiés dans la première moitié du vingtième siècle. Après-guerre, la foi dans le progrès et dans la capacité de l'art à représenter la réalité a laissé place à la représentation d'un monde fragmenté. Les métarécits ont été abandonnés et remplacés par des récits multiples qui annoncent leur nature subjective et partielle et reconnaissent l'existence et les limites du médium. Le concept de « vérité » a également été radicalement modifié : être fidèle aux faits semble désormais moins réaliste que d'être fidèle à sa propre interprétation de ces faits, aussi limitée, provisoire et subjective soit-elle. Les récits de voyage étudiés ici ont également été publiés longtemps après la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, c'est-à-dire bien après l'apogée de la décolonisation que nous pouvons situer dans les années 1960, bien après le début du tourisme de masse et de la consommation de masse. En raison de ce contexte, ils diffèrent des récits de voyage de l'entre-deux-guerres et possèdent leurs propres spécificités, d'où le choix du terme « postmoderne » plutôt que « moderne » pour qualifier le type d'authenticité à laquelle ils prétendent. D'autres critiques ont identifié un tournant dans le genre du récit de voyage, qu'ils ont situé dans les années 1980 et 1990, mais, à l'exception d'Alison Russell et de Caren Kaplan, ces critiques ont prudemment qualifié les récits de voyage de cette époque d'« innovants » (Edwards et Graulund 9-10), de « cosmopolites » (Lisle 5) ou de « contre récits de voyage » (Sugnet 75), plutôt que de « postmodernes ».

La continuité quasi ininterrompue que Stacy Burton présuppose entre les récits de voyage des années 1910 à 1980 se prête aux études qui souhaitent opposer, comme elle le fait, les récits de voyage publiés entre 1910 et 1980 à ceux publiés dans les années 1800. Il convient de nuancer cette continuité lorsque l'on s'intéresse aux récits de voyage publiés uniquement aux XX^e et XXI^e siècles, sous peine de négliger les caractéristiques qui leur sont propres. Le domaine de la critique bénéficierait grandement d'une comparaison formelle qui établirait un parallèle nuancé entre les récits de voyage publiés avant et après 1945. Une telle étude serait précieuse pour évaluer l'ampleur des innovations génériques qui se sont développées au cours des soixante-dix dernières années.

La distance que les écrivains prennent dans leurs œuvres par rapport aux possibilités et aux limites de l'écriture semble être un élément clé qui permet de créer un effet d'authenticité dans le texte. Dans la deuxième partie de ce projet, je considérerai cette distance autoréflexive comme la marque d'une conception de l'authenticité postmoderne dans les écrits d'Eco, de Barthes et de Baudrillard, dont la forme rappelle plus l'essai philosophique que le récit de voyage à proprement parler. Nous verrons que ces textes s'intéressent à la médiation des signes (mots et représentations artistiques) et à la distance qui sépare la réalité de sa représentation.

Cette distance peut être comprise de différentes manières, néanmoins toutes liées à une certaine transparence qui veut qu'écrivains et artistes admettent ouvertement que les représentations artistiques qu'ils produisent sont discutables et limitées. Comme mentionné précédemment, Walter Benjamin définit en partie l'aura comme « une distance » (15). Il explique que les conditions de production de l'œuvre d'art – c'est-à-dire la main et le style unique de l'artiste – et les modalités de sa réception – de préférence dans un lieu unique, offert à la vue d'une poignée de visiteurs contemplatifs – lui confèrent cette distance et son aura. Mais cette distance, qu'il n'explique pas davantage, peut aussi être interprétée comme la distance qui sépare l'objet artistique de ce qu'il représente. L'artiste donne à voir cette distance quand il admet qu'il ne peut pas capturer entièrement l'objet représenté, mais seulement la « trace-présence de quelque chose qui n'est plus littéralement, physiquement présent, mais dont le chatoiement est néanmoins encore perceptible » (Kaufman 122).

Dans « Travels in Hyperreality », la distance entre le modèle et sa représentation est au cœur de la lutte que mène Eco pour la liberté d'interprétation, car les conservateurs des musées kitsch qu'il visite cherchent à décourager les visiteurs qui voudraient interpréter l'art exposé à leur manière. L'art qui annonce ouvertement sa nature artificielle et reconnaît l'écart entre modèle et représentation, et les musées qui encouragent les visiteurs à interpréter leurs collections de façon créative sont dépeints par Eco comme plus authentiques que l'art et les institutions qui cherchent à dissimuler cette distance et à réduire l'espace de l'interprétation.⁵⁵⁹ On pourrait résumer cette idée en empruntant les mots du critique Miles Orvell, auteur de *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture* : « nous préférons une figure de marbre à une statue de cire : la première ne cherche

⁵⁵⁹ Le raisonnement est le même que pour « le jargon de l'authenticité » - voir la note précédente sur Adorno.

pas à ressembler à ce qu'elle n'est pas » (82). Au cours de cette étude, nous verrons que pour Eco, lorsqu'une distance suffisante sépare l'œuvre d'art originale de sa reproduction, cette reproduction (appelée « simulacre ») peut elle-même être considérée comme authentique.

La distance qui sépare la réalité des signes que les artistes et écrivains utilisent pour y faire référence peut devenir un espace de créativité. Par exemple, dans *L'empire des signes* et *Amérique*, Barthes et Baudrillard utilisent cette distance comme un espace créatif. Dans *L'empire des signes*, Barthes trouve les signifiants japonais si étrangers et si détachés de la réalité qui lui est familière qu'il les dote de nouvelles significations.⁵⁶⁰ Dans *Amérique*, les référents disparaissent et sont remplacés par des signes vides, qui fascinent Baudrillard. Dans les deux ouvrages, les voyageurs semblent souhaiter établir un autre rapport aux signes et au processus de signification que celui qui est disponible dans leur pays et/ou langue d'origine.

Si, à l'époque postmoderne, un artiste qui désire paraître authentique doit ouvertement montrer la nature représentative de son art, Barthes et Baudrillard semblent aller plus loin, suggérant que la littérature ne doit pas même tenter d'imiter la vie, qui est irréprésentable. La littérature aurait plutôt vocation à construire des mondes littéraires abstraits qui existeraient parallèlement à la réalité. C'est ce que semblent faire Barthes et Baudrillard dans leurs récits de voyage, qui soulèvent « le problème sémiologique de la correspondance de la chose et du signe » que Miles Orvell évoque brièvement dans son ouvrage sur l'authenticité (xix), et que j'étudierai en détail au **Chapitre 8**.

4. Pas d'authenticité sans tradition ?

Dans le corpus sélectionné, une troisième conception de l'authenticité domine, qui est étroitement liée aux notions de tradition, de nostalgie et à la vénération du passé. La conception de l'authenticité qui associe le concept à la tradition se trouve à l'origine des représentations exoticiantes des populations locales, comme nous le verrons en étudiant Barthes au **Chapitre 8**. Elle explique la relation particulière que certaines représentations hyperréelles entretiennent avec le passé, comme je le montrerai au **Chapitre 6**.

Cette conception de l'authenticité est particulièrement présente dans les récits des « exotes » qui privilégient les aspects culturels qu'ils perçoivent comme étant traditionnels. Par exemple, si l'on examine *L'empire des signes* de près, on s'aperçoit que ce que Barthes présente implicitement comme étant particulièrement authentique au Japon a peu à voir avec le Japon qu'il visite en 1966. Pratiquant ce que Segalen appelle « [l']Exotisme dans le Temps. . . [La] Fuite du présent méprisable et mesquin » (48), Barthes tient la modernité à distance au profit d'un Japon archaïque où l'art est représenté par le sumo et par le théâtre traditionnel Kabuki. Barthes n'est pas seul à souhaiter avant tout que l'Autre lui donne accès à une autre époque. L'écrivain expatrié Paul Bowles déclarait ainsi : « Chaque fois que je me rends dans un lieu que je n'ai pas déjà vu, j'espère qu'il sera aussi

⁵⁶⁰ Vider un pays de son sens (c'est-à-dire le débarrasser de l'identité qu'il s'est formé au fil de l'histoire) pour le réécrire selon son propre agenda théorique comme le fait Barthes peut être considéré comme une démarche colonialiste, comme je le soulignerai de nouveau dans le **Chapitre 8**.

différent que possible de ceux que je connais déjà » (xxi). De même, Thomas Edward Lawrence « abhorrait l'hybridité moderne » et a fini par écrire des livres « sur des Autres imaginaires », parce que la pureté qu'il recherchait à l'étranger n'existait pas (Carr 10). Ces voyageurs n'accordent pas une grande valeur à l'hybridité, et semblent craindre la menace d'une monoculture qui mettrait fin à ce qu'ils présentent implicitement comme le voyage authentique.⁵⁶¹

Ils ne se contentent pas de faire l'éloge de la différence culturelle, mais la définissent de façon exclusive. Les cultures qu'ils désirent découvrir doivent être absolument différentes de la leur, qui reste la norme qu'ils utilisent pour évaluer le degré d'exotisme des autres. Dans une certaine mesure, ces écrivains peuvent être considérés comme des héritiers de l'Orientalisme, car ils jugent de l'authenticité des autres à l'aune des « désirs, refoulements, investissements et projections » qu'ils ont projetés sur ces étrangers (Said 6). Said explique que ce type de discours place l'Occident au centre, et n'accorde pas aux autres cultures un statut égal (8). L'un des objectifs de ce discours est de faire en sorte que la « culture européenne » gagne « en puissance et en identité en s'opposant à l'Orient comme une sorte d'autre *soi* : un substitut du *moi* ou même un *moi* souterrain » (3).⁵⁶²

Dans une certaine mesure, *The Snow Leopard* porte également les traces de la conception exotiste de l'authenticité qui pousse certains voyageurs à faire l'éloge de modes de vie soi-disant traditionnels. Dans une certaine mesure, on pourrait comparer Matthiessen aux touristes d'Antigua dont Jamaica Kincaid se moque dans *A Small Place* parce qu'ils s'émerveillent de la bibliothèque décrépie, la trouvent pittoresque et oublient que son délabrement est une source d'inconfort pour les personnes qui vivent sur l'île à l'année. Comme ces touristes, Matthiessen fait l'éloge de l'inconfort et de la simplicité lorsqu'il loue le mode de vie des populations qu'il croise lors de son trek dans l'Himalaya, comme s'il s'agissait d'une ascèse menant vers l'illumination. Pour que le citadin occidental y trouve un havre de paix hors du temps, il semble nécessaire que l'ailleurs soit préservé de toute occidentalisation - confort et technologie compris.

On peut également observer que la vénération du passé est parfois associée à une aspiration mélancolique qui accorde de la valeur aux cultures et paysages perçus comme étant en passe de disparaître. On peut résumer ce stéréotype en ces termes : le voyageur qui souhaite contempler « la beauté en déclin » trouvera plus authentique des populations et lieux qui lui apparaîtront comme étant au bord de l'extinction (Brennan 180). Les destructions que subit l'environnement de la main de l'homme sont indéniables et il est clair que certaines cultures sont menacées de disparition, éclipsées par l'hégémonie

⁵⁶¹ Dans la quatrième section du premier chapitre de *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss considère que cette menace s'est déjà concrétisée et que le voyage véritable est devenu impossible : « Une civilisation proliférante et surexcitée trouble à jamais le silence des mers. Le parfum des tropiques et la fraîcheur des êtres sont viciés par une fermentation aux relents suspects, qui mortifie nos désirs et nous voue à cueillir des souvenirs à demi-corrompus » (*Tristes*, Éditions Plon 38).

⁵⁶² Selon Charles Lindholm, l'Occident a initialement commencé à représenter les étrangers comme inférieurs après la découverte, aux quinzième et seizième siècles, lors des voyages d'explorations, que d'autres cultures existaient, qui pouvaient potentiellement menacer l'hégémonie culturelle et religieuse de l'Occident, ou du moins forcer l'Occident à considérer ses traditions comme relatives (5). Lindholm affirme que le concept d'authenticité est né lorsque l'Occident a décidé de se définir comme authentique en opposition à ces cultures nouvellement découvertes.

culturelle d'acteurs plus puissants qu'elles. Néanmoins, l'extinction des cultures, paysages et espèces est parfois exagérée et simplifiée - en un mot, fantasmée - par les écrivains de voyage qui alimentent l'idée d'une authenticité articulée sur la disparition, comme le fait par exemple Matthiessen lorsqu'il affirme qu'« [u]n jour . . . les derniers vestiges de l'ancienne culture tibétaine seront dispersés aux vents parmi ces pierres et ces ruines » (*Snow* 249), que « pour les enfants de [s]es enfants, l'aura, la paix et l'apaisement apportés par la nuit auront été détruits » (117) et que la ville tibétaine de Saldang sera un jour complètement « abandonnée au désert » (245). Sous sa plume, les temples abandonnés ou négligés se transforment en augures présageant d'une culture menacée, et la désertification des plateaux surpâturés annoncent la disparition de la nature tibétaine dans son entier.⁵⁶³ Comme les voyageurs modernistes avant eux, les voyageurs contemporains semblent se consoler en imaginant que, à défaut d'être les premiers explorateurs, ils seront au moins les derniers à voir ces terres exotiques dans leur état édénique. L'existence de leurs récits se trouve ainsi justifiée, puisqu'ils se changent en archives préservant à l'écrit ce qui reste de cultures en voie de disparition.

Le motif de « la beauté en déclin » pose problème pour plusieurs raisons. Tout d'abord, les cultures et lieux naturels que les voyageurs dépeignent comme étant près de disparaître ne le sont pas forcément. Ainsi, dans la préface de *The Tree Were Man Was Born* (1972), Matthiessen admet avoir eu tort lors qu'il prédisait la disparition de la faune africaine, qui, en réalité, a augmenté en nombre après son voyage :

Avec l'effondrement des gouvernements coloniaux, la destruction de la faune par des Africains déchaînés avait été largement prédite, et mon voyage en Afrique en 1961 avait pour objectif principal l'observation des derniers grands troupeaux d'animaux sauvages. Depuis lors (bien que leur avenir reste incertain), les parcs et les réserves animalières d'Afrique de l'Est ont augmenté en taille et en nombre. (26)

Lors d'une conférence sur la littérature de voyage, Scott Manning Stevens, spécialiste des études amérindiennes et indigènes, a soulevé un problème concernant la représentation de la disparition des Amérindiens, que l'on peut assimiler au poncif de « la beauté en déclin », qui interroge également. En effet, il explique que ces populations ont été dépeintes comme presque éteintes bien avant que ce ne soit réellement le cas.⁵⁶⁴ Selon lui, représenter ces populations de cette manière revenait à *souhaiter* leur disparition, et à l'utiliser pour alimenter des fantasmes romantiques. La rhétorique de la disparition qui est appliquée à la nature et à certaines cultures pose aussi question en raison de son fatalisme. Certains des voyageurs qui utilisent ce motif se posent en spectateurs assistant impuissants à cette disparition. Rares sont ceux qui réfléchissent à des solutions, agissent

⁵⁶³ Peter Bishop exprime une idée similaire lorsqu'il écrit que « pour Matthiessen, les peuples et cultures traditionnels semblaient condamnés » (205).

⁵⁶⁴ Dans la présentation qu'il a donné à la conférence *Borders & Crossings* en 2017, Manning Stevens a illustré son propos en s'appuyant sur le tableau *The Last of the Race*, peint en 1847. Le titre de ce tableau résume à lui seul la « disparition aspirationnelle » qui imprégnait la rhétorique américaine de l'époque et qui laissait entendre que la disparition des Amérindiens était une *promesse* de la civilisation américaine avant même sa réalisation. Au moment où cette peinture a été achevée, il y avait encore des centaines de milliers d'Amérindiens, souligne Manning Stevens.

pour lutter contre cette disparition, ou s'interrogent sur leur propre responsabilité en tant que voyageurs, ou sur le fait qu'ils sont potentiellement complices malgré eux de l'industrie touristique qui contribue à la disparition de certaines cultures et de certains espaces naturels. Comme le souligne Manning Stevens à propos du génocide des Amérindiens, lorsque l'on parle de la « disparition » d'une ethnie - j'ajouterais, d'une culture ou d'une espèce animale - on efface l'agent responsable de cette disparition, comme si elle se produisait d'elle-même. Les voyageurs qui ont recours à cette rhétorique dans leurs textes ne proposent généralement pas de réflexion sur les causes de cette disparition ou sur l'éventuel pouvoir d'action dont ils disposent pour l'éviter.

En outre, lorsqu'il s'agit de cultures qui sont effectivement en partie en train de disparaître, on peut se demander s'il appartient aux voyageurs occidentaux de décider de ce qui doit être sauvé dans ces cultures, et si les cultures des pays qu'ils visitent ne pourrait pas être présentées comme modernes et changeantes, à l'instar des cultures Occidentales, plutôt que traditionnelles et menacées. Nous pourrions également nous demander dans quelle mesure les modes de vie que les voyageurs admirent sont réellement traditionnels, étant donné que de nombreux stéréotypes culturels que l'on prend pour des traditions sont en fait des fictions récentes, devenues traditions par convention, comme le démontrent Eric Hobsbawm et Terence Ranger dans *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Comme Hobsbawm et Ranger, Kwame Anthony Appiah se méfie des idées préconçues sur la culture et soutient dans *Cosmopolitanism* que le syncrétisme a toujours existé :

[E]ssayer de trouver une culture authentique peut s'apparenter à éplucher un oignon. Les vêtements que la plupart des gens considèrent comme traditionnels en Afrique de l'Ouest sont connus sous le nom d'imprimés « java », et sont fabriqués selon la technique d'impression javanaise « batik », appliquée à des tissus vendus et souvent préparés par les Hollandais. La tenue traditionnelle des femmes Herero est dérivée de celle des missionnaires allemands du XIX^e siècle, mais elle reste indubitablement Herero, notamment parce que les tissus utilisés sont teints dans une gamme de couleurs qui n'est clairement pas luthérienne. (107)

Représenter d'autres cultures comme des pièces de musée crée également un problème de réification de l'autre et de réciprocité, surtout si l'on considère que le corpus sélectionné ici ne nous renseigne guère sur la façon dont les populations locales perçoivent la culture des voyageurs.

On pourrait attribuer la préférence de certains voyageurs pour les modes de vie traditionnels et exotiques à l'histoire du genre de la littérature viatique. Cette histoire montre que le lectorat attendait généralement des voyageurs qu'ils reviennent avec des récits de monts et merveilles, d'Eldorado, de cannibales, d'agneaux végétaux de Tartarie et autres curiosités. Le ton émerveillé qui dominait le genre depuis Hérodote a perduré même lorsque le souci d'exactitude est devenu une préoccupation majeure des explorateurs et cartographes, car ceux-ci avaient été influencés par les récits fabuleux qu'ils avaient lus. Christophe Colomb s'est ainsi appuyé sur les *Voyages* de Marco Polo et de Sir John Mandeville, qui décrivaient des cyclopes mangeant de la chair crue et des étrangers à sabots portant des yeux sur leurs épaules. Comme le remarque l'écrivain

français Gilles Lapouge dans *L'Encre du voyageur*, même les premiers explorateurs évoluaient dans un monde déjà saturé de mythes et de littérature. Rien d'étonnant donc à ce que Christophe Colomb se soit attendu à rencontrer des cyclopes sur l'île de Cuba, note Lapouge (66). Rien d'étonnant, pourrait-on ajouter, à ce que certains voyageurs contemporains soient encore à la recherche de cultures qui correspondent à l'idée (exotique) qu'ils se font du voyage.

La conception de l'authenticité comme tradition entraîne des conséquences qui vont au-delà de la représentation des populations locales dans des pays non-Occidentaux dont le PIB est inférieur à celui du pays d'origine des voyageurs. Le lien entre authenticité et tradition impacte également la représentation de centres économiques comme le Japon et les États-Unis par des écrivains européens tels que Barthes, Baudrillard et Eco. Leurs récits poussent pourtant à interroger la capacité de la tradition à authentifier des destinations aujourd'hui marquées par la circulation du patrimoine culturel à l'échelle mondiale, à travers les copies, les médias et la consommation de masse.

D'une part, leurs récits postulent que l'Europe conserve un certain monopole sur l'authenticité, en raison de son histoire. On peut résumer cette idée en citant une tirade de Sir Jack, personnage de fiction au centre du roman *England, England* de Julian Barnes. Le magnat fictionnel, qui s'apprête à changer l'Île de Wight en un parc à thème miniaturisant la culture anglaise, définit en ces termes la valeur ajoutée de l'Angleterre : « Ce que nous avons, c'est ce que les autres n'ont pas : une accumulation de temps » (39). L'association d'idée qui lie la notion d'authenticité à celle de durée temporelle et de tradition remonte à Walter Benjamin, qui définissait l'art authentique par la tradition, c'est-à-dire par sa capacité à exprimer l'esprit de l'époque qui l'avait produit, et à accumuler des couches de durée à travers les siècles (13). Suivant la même idée, Eco et Baudrillard laissent entendre que les États-Unis incarnent l'inauthenticité car, contrairement à l'Europe, ils n'ont « ni passé ni vérité fondatrice » et ne peuvent pas puiser dans un stock « d'accumulation primitive du temps » (Baudrillard, *Amérique* 76). Les États-Unis ne peuvent que « piller » le passé européen avec « voracité » et remplacer l'accumulation de temps par une accumulation d'objets (Eco, « Travels » 23). Les deux sémioticiens identifient certaines stratégies qu'ils rencontrent dans la culture nord-américaine, dans ses musées, et dans ses parcs à thème, qui visent à reproduire artificiellement « l'accumulation du temps » qui ferait défaut au pays, en accumulant des objets d'art européens à haute valeur historique ou symbolique.

Cependant, ces récits de voyage semblent aussi se moquer de cette conception eurocentrée de l'authenticité, notamment par rapport à l'objet d'art. Cette authenticité européenne voit son statut aristocratique attaqué par les reproductions hyperréelles qui donnent une image grotesque des œuvres d'art européennes, comme le montre Eco. Certaines de ces copies menacent de supplanter les originaux dont elles se sont inspirées. Les ersatz hollywoodiens du Tibet fleurissent alors que le véritable Tibet dépérit, annonce Iyer dans *The Global Soul* (36), et certaines reproductions de tableaux européens remplacent même les originaux « maintenant abîmés, presque invisibles », comme l'illustre le simulacre de *La Cène* qu'Eco contemple au musée de Santa Cruz (« Travels » 18). Eco, Iyer et Baudrillard considèrent parfois cette destruction symbolique des originaux comme un processus créatif. En effet, certains simulacres diffèrent tant de

leurs modèles qu'ils peuvent être considérés comme des originaux à part entière, ce qui sape la hiérarchie platonicienne qui place l'original authentique au-dessus de ses copies inauthentiques. À travers la description de ces copies, ces auteurs évoquent la possibilité d'un jugement esthétique qui ne dévaloriserait pas les reproductions.

7. Authenticités non étudiées

Comme nous le verrons, ces trois conceptions de l'authenticité se recoupent parfois de manière paradoxale dans le corpus sélectionné. On trouve également dans ce corpus d'autres conceptions de l'authenticité qui ne seront pas abordées ici. Cette étude laisse par exemple de côté les débats philosophiques majeurs autour du concept, y compris l'authenticité existentialiste de Jean-Paul Sartre, qui demande que chacun « reconnai[sse] sa liberté et [prenne] ses responsabilités en tant que personne autodéterminée » (Michelman).⁵⁶⁵

Les différences qui peuvent exister entre les conceptions française, anglo-américaine et italienne de l'authenticité ne seront pas non plus abordées, bien que le corpus analysé dans le cadre de cette thèse comprenne les œuvres d'écrivains qui ont été soumis à ces différentes influences culturelles et intertextuelles. Dans son ouvrage *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling suggère qu'« il est nécessaire de faire la distinction entre la sincérité française et la sincérité anglaise » dans le domaine de la littérature (58), mais il ne développe ni n'illustre cet argument davantage, et il n'est donc pas possible de l'utiliser comme cadre conceptuel. Plutôt que de me pencher sur les différences culturelles qui marquent les textes du corpus, je me concentrerai sur les caractéristiques qu'ils ont en commun et qui justifient une analyse comparatiste. Cette étude laisse également de côté l'authenticité que certains individus trouvent au sein de leur communauté (plutôt que dans la solitude du voyage).

Dans le **Chapitre 5**, je m'intéresserai brièvement à la question de l'authenticité comprise comme adéquation d'un texte aux conventions génériques, mais l'exploration du rôle de l'intertextualité comme technique d'authentification d'un texte comme récit de voyage pourrait être poursuivie plus avant. De même, la conception de l'authenticité qui est créée au moyen d'artifices sera laissée de côté, bien que l'on puisse imaginer une étude future portant sur ce concept, et partant des idées développées par Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde et Henry James, dans *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), « La vérité des masques » (1886) et « The Real Thing » (1892).⁵⁶⁶ Cette étude ne mettra donc pas en dialogue les deux types d'authenticités auxquels Henry James fait référence dans sa nouvelle, et que Miles Orvell appelle authenticité « artistique » et authenticité « littérale » (122).

Seront aussi exclues de la discussion les préconceptions qui poussent certains voyageurs à enfermer les populations locales qu'ils rencontrent dans des 'types', dans un

⁵⁶⁵ Voir la définition de l'« authenticité et l'inauthenticité » dans *The A to Z of Existentialism* de Stephen Michelman.

⁵⁶⁶ Dans la nouvelle d'Henry James « The Real Thing » un illustrateur se rend compte que ses dessins sont plus convaincants s'il fait poser des modèles issus de milieux défavorisés et jouant des aristocrates que s'il fait poser de vrais aristocrates.

souci d'authenticité. Il pourrait cependant être utile de se pencher sur la persistance des 'types' à valeur de synecdoque, qui sont utilisés aujourd'hui pour décrire ces populations, notamment par des écrivains voyageurs que l'on pourrait assimiler à la figure de l'« herborisateur » théorisée par Mary Louise Pratt (26).

Pour finir, cette étude se concentre principalement sur la manière dont les conceptions de l'authenticité adoptées par les voyageurs affectent la façon dont ils interagissent avec les populations locales et la nature, et les représentent. Les techniques qui permettent à ces voyageurs de créer un effet d'authenticité dans leur écriture, notamment lorsqu'ils réfléchissent ouvertement aux limites de la représentation littéraire seront interrogées. En revanche, ce travail ne s'intéresse que de loin aux stratégies utilisées par ces écrivains pour persuader leurs lecteurs qu'ils sont dignes de confiance.

8. Théories utilisées et résumés des chapitres

Les huit chapitres de cette étude sont rattachés aux trois grandes définitions de l'authenticité qui viennent d'être esquissées : l'authenticité de la nature sauvage qui permet aux voyageurs de retrouver ce qu'ils perçoivent comme étant leur moi profond (**Chapitres 1-4**), l'authenticité qui consiste à reconnaître ouvertement l'écart entre le monde et sa représentation (**Chapitres 5-8**), et l'authenticité comprise comme nostalgie du passé et respect de la tradition (**Chapitres 3, 6 et 8**).

Les conclusions présentées ici résultent de l'utilisation d'un ensemble d'outils théoriques. La première partie de cette étude s'appuie largement sur les ouvrages critiques qui explorent le genre de la littérature viatique. Ces ouvrages nous permettront entre autres d'explorer la manière dont les écrivains de voyage solitaires définissent la notion d'authenticité par rapport à la nature. En outre, dans le **Chapitre 1**, les récits des voyageurs qui fuient la modernité seront analysés à la lumière du concept écocritique de « discours de la toxicité » (Buell, *Writing* 30), qui permettra de mieux cerner les problèmes que posent la représentation de la nature comme environnement « pur ». Le **Chapitre 2** montrera que l'importance accordée par les écrivains voyageurs aux épiphanies et à la contemplation de la nature est héritée des Transcendantalistes américains, en particulier Thoreau et Emerson. Puis, dans le **Chapitre 3**, le concept d'« authenticité de l'endurance » et celui d'« authenticité du danger » élaborés par Graham Huggan nous permettront de mieux comprendre la valeur que certains voyageurs accordent aux risques qu'ils prennent, aux dangers auxquels ils font face et aux efforts physiques qu'ils fournissent (178). Dans le **Chapitre 4**, afin de comprendre le rôle joué dans les textes du corpus par les métaphores fusionnant les voyageurs et la nature, l'analyse s'appuiera sur la notion deleuzoguattarienne de « devenir animal » et sur les études critiques portant sur la représentation des animaux. Le **Chapitre 5** examinera plus en détail les traits postmodernes de certains récits de voyage, notamment ceux qui se présentent sous la forme d'une quête incomplète ou d'une réécriture parodique.

La deuxième partie, c'est-à-dire les **Chapitres 6, 7 et 8**, mettra l'accent non plus sur la nature mais sur les conceptions de l'authenticité qui sous-tendent la représentation de la culture, des signes, de l'écriture et de l'art dans les récits de voyage de trois sémioticiens et universitaires. Les récits de voyage d'Eco, de Barthes et de Baudrillard seront étudiés à

la lumière des théories de ces auteurs sur la sémiotique. Le **Chapitre 6** s'ouvre sur une définition détaillée de l'« hyperréalité » basée sur les textes d'Eco et de Baudrillard. Seront ensuite abordés les types d'authenticités identifiés par Eco dans les musées hyperréels qu'il visite aux États-Unis. Nous verrons qu'il tourne ces types d'authenticité en dérision. Le **Chapitre 7** sera consacré au rôle que joue la distance interprétative dans la production et la réception de l'art authentique selon Eco. Le but sera de démontrer que les représentations artistiques qui reconnaissent leur nature artificielle trouvent faveur auprès d'Eco. La distance artistique entre modèles et représentations et entre originaux et reproductions (simulacres) semble jouer un rôle clé dans la conception de l'authenticité qui sous-tend son essai. Eco suggère que lorsque les reproductions diffèrent suffisamment des originaux qui les ont inspirées, elles peuvent acquérir leur propre authenticité, ce qui remet en question la hiérarchie traditionnelle entre original authentique et copie inauthentique.

Le **Chapitre 8** est consacré à ce que j'ai nommé l'esthétique de la non-référentialité, qui domine les récits de voyage de Barthes et de Baudrillard. Je soutiendrai que, pour ces auteurs, la littérature est plus authentique lorsqu'elle ne tente pas de représenter la réalité. Ce chapitre analysera les moyens formels que Baudrillard met en place pour dépasser la *mimesis*, qu'il présente comme inadaptée à la description de la simulation qui a remplacé la réalité. J'examinerai également les stratégies stylistiques et rhétoriques que Barthes invente dans le but de préserver la vivacité de ses impressions du Japon. Le chapitre se terminera par une analyse critique des implications éthiques de cette esthétique. En d'autres termes, j'interrogerai les représentations des populations locales dans les récits de Barthes et de Baudrillard, m'aidant pour cela de la définition de l'Orientalisme d'Edward Saïd et de la conceptualisation de l'exotisme de Tzvetan Todorov, et je soutiendrai que *L'empire des signes* de Barthes est en partie basé sur une conception de l'authenticité comprise comme vénération de la tradition.

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SHORT SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

What conceptions of ‘authenticity’ can we find in contemporary travel writing? Where do they come from and how can they be challenged? To answer these questions, this study maps out what seven travel writers portray as ‘authentic’ in relation to travel, to nature, to local populations, and to artistic representations in travelogues published between 1970 and 2019. First, I study what Colin Thubron, Sara Wheeler, Peter Matthiessen, and Sylvain Tesson present as authentic in their experience of the wilderness. Then, I analyse the transformations of the concept of authenticity in the travel narratives of semioticians who address issues related to language, art, culture, and hyperreality (Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes).

I argue that three conventional and constructed conceptions of ‘authenticity’ dominate the corpus under study: ‘authenticity’ as exoticism and reverence to tradition, ‘authenticity’ as the belief in the ability of the wilderness to return the self to its original state, and ‘authenticity’ as the postmodern acknowledgement of the limits of art and literature.

SHORT SUMMARY IN FRENCH

Ce travail vise à identifier ce qui est dépeint comme étant « authentique » dans un corpus de récits de voyage publiés entre 1970 et 2019. Au moyen d’une méthode d’analyse mêlant stylistique, sémiotique, écocritique et études postcoloniales, seront abordées les conceptions de l’authenticité sur lesquelles les auteurs se basent, qu’ils renforcent, remettent en cause ou réinventent.

Il s’agira d’abord de déterminer ce que Colin Thubron, Sara Wheeler, Peter Matthiessen, et Sylvain Tesson présentent comme étant authentique dans leur expérience de la nature sauvage, puis d’analyser les transformations subies par le concept d’authenticité dans les récits de voyage de sémioticiens qui abordent des questions liées à la langue, à l’art, à la culture et à l’hyperréalité (Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes).

Trois grandes conceptions de l’authenticité dominent ces récits de voyage: l’authenticité des cultures qui correspondent à un idéal exotique, l’authenticité de la nature comme sanctuaire, et l’authenticité postmoderne comme geste rhétorique qui consiste à reconnaître l’écart qui sépare le monde de sa représentation.

KEYWORDS IN ENGLISH

Travel writing, travel literature, authenticity, ecocriticism, wilderness, toxic discourse, epiphany, becoming-animal, neo-transcendentalism, wild man, intertextuality, exoticism, hyperreality, simulacra, semiotics, Sylvain Tesson, Peter Matthiessen, Sara Wheeler, Colin Thubron, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco

KEYWORDS IN FRENCH

Récit de voyage, littérature de voyage, authenticité, écocritique, écopoétique, représentation de la nature, discours de la toxicité, épiphanie, devenir-animal, néo-transcendentalisme, homme sauvage, intertextualité, exotisme, hyperréalité, simulacre, sémiotique, Sylvain Tesson, Peter Matthiessen, Sara Wheeler, Colin Thubron, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco

