

REALITY v IMAGINATION IN THE LITERATURE OF PLACE

Contemplating the distinguished roster of people who've given the Harkness Lecture before me, I thought I should at least give my talk here a properly scholastic sort of title. And it's not a bad one, is it? "Reality versus imagination in the literature of place". It does slightly lack the authority of one of those thesis titles with a colon in the middle. Like, well, you know, "Northern Harmonies: Climactic influences on the Norwegian liturgical tradition". You know the ones, I'm sure. The first half of the title is generally soothing: "Northern Harmonies" sounds peaceful and reassuring, doesn't it, but the crunch comes in the second half, after the colon: "Climactic influences on the Norwegian liturgical tradition." That's there to wake you up! But there we are. I can't match that. Reality v Imagination is what it's going to be, and in my context what that really means is this: How much is fact, and how much is fiction in travel literature - how much is true, how much is just made up, and does it matter either way.

Though I say it myself I am well qualified to speak on the subject, as I've spent much of my life writing what are generally called travel books. As a matter of fact the very first one I ever wrote I wrote for the Commonwealth Fund, sort of. I went to America in 1953 on a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship, and it was the rule in those days that one must spend some time at an American University, and some time travelling. Well, I checked in at Chicago University and found a return to academia not at all to my taste, so I decided to skip the university bit and spent the whole year travelling around America. At the end one had to submit a report to the Commonwealth Fund people and what I did was write a book about my journey, and hand that in as my report. They didn't mind a bit! So not only was that fellowship one of the very best presents I ever had in my life, it really started me off as a writer of books.

And that first book, which I called *Coast to Coast*, really was a travel book, a book about a journey. Long ago, though, I came to detest the classification of travel book, and now I don't actually believe in the genre of travel writing. And I know from my own work how often reality and imagination, fact and fancy, get blurred in a writer's mind. Sometimes it happens despite oneself, willy nilly. Years ago I wrote an evocative piece about sitting on a slope above Sydney harbour, drinking white wine with an old friend and eating crab sandwiches in good crisp bread. When much later I came to write a retrospective essay about the experience I remembered every aspect of it absolutely - the sensual way in which my friend slurped the wine and crunched the bread, the

tang of the crab, the great blue bowl of the Australian sky above us, and to cap it all the white wings of Sydney Opera House, like a huge seabird beside the water, like a benediction. I remembered it all with absolute clarity, not just the sensations of it, but the look of it too, exactly: and it was only long, long afterwards, when I came to re-read the essay, that I realized Sydney Opera House hadn't been built then.

That was an unconscious fusion of real and make-believe, and of course in one degree or another any factual writing about place is bound to reflect the ingrained attitudes, memories and insights of the writer — even the most prosaic of travelogues (awful word!) , even many guide books. I can think of at least two proper guide-books, E. M. Forster's Guide to Alexandria and Richard Ford's Handbook to Spain, which because of their authors' genius are also works of literature. And the very best of travel books, too, books about journeys, I mean, as against books simply about place .— the best of them too, as given us by a Patrick Leigh Fermor or a Cohn Thubron or a Jonathan Raban, can be great works of creative art. For the serious, dedicated writer about travel is bound to see a place through his own individual eyes, not through the responses of his predecessors or contemporaries, or the putative responses of his readers, and successors, but relying entirely on his own sensibility. (I have to say, here, by the way, in brackets, so to speak, that nothing annoys me more than to be told, by a reader of one of my own books about place, that the place I have evoked isn't at all like the place he knows: well of course it isn't. I'm looking at it, not him! I'm not trying to reflect or influence anyone else's responses, I am only writing about mine, the effect of the place upon my own personal sensibility! There we are — end of bracket!)

My own practice anyway is always to travel, if possible, by myself, alone with my own thoughts and my own perceptions, however naive, misleading or bigoted. As a result I am generally an un-convivial, unsociable sort of traveller, and people sometimes take me to be lonely in my calling. Not long ago I was in the Isle of Man, for the first time in my life, preparing an essay about it. I had bought myself a book about Manx folklore, and found an agreeable cafe by the sea, and was drinking Guinness and eating prawns, and reading about the island goblins with a map on the table beside me, and was altogether in a kind of gentle ecstasy. As I sat there basking in it all a lady handed me a pamphlet. "That's very kind of you", said I, hastily swallowing a fork-full of prawns, "that's very kind of you, what's it about?", "Oh my dear", she replied, "It is only to reassure you that God is always with the lonely".

The most innocent sort of deception in travel memoirs is this unpremeditated sort. When we came home from the 1953 Everest expedition, the first to get to the top of the mountain, we were invited to

a celebratory banquet by the British Government, at Lancaster House. I happened to sit next to the elderly swell, whose name/ forget, who was so to speak the major-domo of the occasion, and opposite me sat Tenzing Norgay, the magnificent Sherpa who had reached the summit with Edmund Hillary, and who had never in his life been out of Asia before. Well, early in the meal the old boy on my right said to me that he hoped I would enjoy the claret, which he said was probably the last crate of that particular vintage in the cellars of Lancaster House, and perhaps the last anywhere. I was naturally impressed, and I looked across the table to Tenzing, who was most certainly enjoying the claret. It was perhaps the first grape wine he'd ever tasted in his life, and he was radiant with pride and pleasure — he was a truly princely figure, and the lackeys respectfully filled and re-filled his glass. Presently my neighbour turned to me again and said in his silvery Edwardian English “Oh, how good it is to see that Mr. Tenzing knows a decent claret when he has one”.

I must have written and told that tale a thousand times over the years - when I first went to America I told it in New York, and when I got to San Francisco somebody told it to me. Since then I've spread it all over the world, but the other day I happened to find a menu of that Lancaster House occasion, with the food listed on one side and the wine on the other. And do you know something? There hadn't been any claret! But was I actually wrong in my account? Doesn't the very sound of the word “claret” truly sum up the flavour of that moment, better than the name of any other wine? Aesthetically, historically perhaps, certainly lyrically, it was a claret moment, not a burgundy or a Rioja, let alone a Chilean Merlot moment that we experienced at the dinner table that night.

A very different category of false reportage is the deliberate kind - what has come to be called *faction*. This is often fact masquerading as fiction, or embedded in it. A famous example is the classic book about the island of Capri between the two world wars, an evocation of life on that island then, in all its jumble of colour, scandal, absurdity, beauty and pathos. The classic work about it is not ostensibly a factual work at all. Its author Norman Douglas, in the novel *South Wind*, decided not to call the island Capri, but *Nepenthe*, and he peopled it with characters who were not actually real characters, but were generically so, as it were. Douglas himself said that before a human character became material for fiction it must be “licked into shape”, and he did just that when he turned Capri into *Nepenthe*.

Much of the very best writing about real places is written as fiction. The Russians used to be adept at this hybrid art, sometimes by setting their stories against genuine backgrounds, complete with actual street names, sometimes just by magical topographical evocations. You know

the sort of thing: “On a hot July morning in the year 1866, in a village in the district of X., in the province of T., a young man was standing listlessly at a window when a dilapidated, springless carriage, the sort used in Russia now only by cattle-dealers and poor priests, rumbled and squeaked by on the road to the neighbouring market town of W” — and instantly, by the end of the first paragraph, we have somehow got the hang of the setting. The impression is heightened in my own case, as a matter of fact, because so many of my Russian classics are in the old Foreign Language Publishing House translations, printed in Moscow long ago and still fragrant with the rather sickly printers’ ink they used in Stalin’s time.

Nobody has ever captured the city of Alexandria better than Laurence Durrell in his *Alexandria Quartet*, and that’s because his fictional prose, so ripe, so steamy, so suggestive, represents the character of the place much more exactly than any so called travel writing could. Charles Dickens wrote a famous essay about a city which was more than half fancy, but was nevertheless profoundly true. He wrote seven closely-printed pages without mentioning the name of the place, and takes his readers through a magically suggestive and mysterious water-city, veiled in poetic suggestion, until at last, in the very final paragraph of the essay, he gives the game away by saying: “I have, many and many a time thought since of this strange Dream upon the water: half wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE” I

Modern Americans have been specialists in this sort of thing too, and John Cheever’s vast body of fiction, for example, illustrates so exactly the look, feel and moods of post-war American suburbia that in the future it will surely be compulsory reading not just for lovers of literature, but for sociologists too. And in Wales of course, my own country, where reality is never more than a sort of movable feast anyway, even the old fairy tales are travel books too. They are set in real places, meticulously named, so that you can go even now to the actual pub in Llanidloes where Dick the Fiddler spent his fairy money, or the very place where the foolish farmer of Dyffryn Gwyn captured the elfin cow. The greatest modern Welsh novel, Caradoc Prichard’s *Un Nos Lleuad* — *One Moonlit Night*— almost creepily describes, by means purely of plot and dialogue, the plan of an Edwardian north Wales mining village.

Occasionally people think, actually, that the plot of a novel interferes unnecessarily with its topographical bits. Lots of Thomas Hardy enthusiasts read him more for the Dorset countryside than for the stories. When *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* came out in 1932, a reviewer in the magazine *Horse and Hound* said that although the book contained excellent descriptions of the English landscape, it was spoiled by “certain sentimental or erotic digressions”! On the other hand some

travel books are novels almost despite themselves. The Trieste writer Claudio Magris wrote a marvellous travel book about the Danube, tracing the course of the river from source to mouth, and he defined this masterpiece of travel literature as “a drowned novel”. And a well-known American novelist told me that he liked writing travel books because he didn’t have to make up a plot - the travel did it for him.

Then an opposite category of fiction writing presents totally fictional places as non-fiction. Many writers have chosen, for one reason and another, to write travel books about places that exist only in their own minds — except of course, that everyone’s mind is stacked with the memories and impressions of a lifetime. Alberto Manguel once compiled a dictionary of imaginary places, and a great big book it is. I keep it on my reference shelves, along with the encyclopedias, although there is not a place in its 450 pages that you can find in an atlas. I suppose the original archetype of this art-form was Thomas More’s *Utopia*, which he wrote in 1516, and whose title was to go into languages around the world. It was a fundamentally political work, about the search for an ideal form of government, but it was also an elaborately worked-out gazetteer of an entirely fanciful island, rich in detail, including the widths of streets, the architecture of churches and the exact geographical situation (15 miles off the coast of South America).

Hundreds of authors have followed More’s example, down to Orwell, Huxley, Anthony Powell and the creator of Oz, by way of Francis Bacon, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Butler and a host of others. Some of them are even more detailed than Utopia. In 1978, for instance, the novelist Brigid Brophy devised the Balkan kingdom of Evarchia, and equipped it with a native fauna, an architectural style, a language, a literature and even a destiny — it was taken over by a Communist military Government in the year of its creation. Manguel lists literally hundreds more, in his book of 500-odd pages, and as it happens on page 433 he records a place I invented myself.

And that book should be an object lesson for writers like me who monkey about with fact and fantasy.

I published *Last Letters from Hav*, in 1985, about an obviously and totally imaginary city-State somewhere on the coast of Turkey. But because I was known, God help me, as a travel writer, instantly the book was placed on the travel writing shelves of bookshops. No matter that the geographical and political situation of Hav was obviously nonsensical, that nobody had ever heard of such a place, that extremely improbable things happened there and the place was finally obliterated by a foreign intervention that nobody had ever read about in any newspaper — no matter than the whole thing was a load of balls, it was

written by a so-called travel writer, and so it went on the bookshop travel writing shelves.

Scores of people wrote to me to ask if you needed a visa to go to Hav. Several said they seemed to remember stopping off there on a cruise. Even the librarian of the Royal Geographical Society asked me for more exact identification. Only one single reader, an octogenarian lady in Iowa, recognized the book for what it was meant to be — a historical allegory. It was only when I supplemented it a couple of years ago with a second volume, bringing the history of the place bang up to date, that Hav finally found its proper place on the fiction shelves (where, I have to add, precious few people seem to have noticed it, let alone bought it...).

Of course writers can hardly help telescoping or combining some of their memories and experiences, which is a sort of falsification, I suppose, just as memory itself, after all, often plays us false. I was asked once to write a short piece, for a literary symposium, about my worst travel moment, and I put together a kind of hypothetical awful experience — everything in it had really happened to me, but not all at the same time. This is how it goes. It is to have been robbed of my passport and plane ticket, my baggage having already been lost in flight, while suffering from extreme diarrhea during a high summer heat-wave and a severe water-shortage, at a moment when the local electricity supplies and telephone services have been shut off because of political disturbances, with nothing to read but a John Grisham thriller which I'm almost sure, though I can't be certain, that I've read before, expecting a visit from the security police in a hotel room without a washbasin overlooking a railway freight yard on a national holiday in the Egyptian town of Zagazig.

But there we are, it might have been raining in Zagazig, mightn't it — and how evocative it, wasn't it, to hear those steam trains shunting just outside my window all through the night! And I suppose it was misleading, in a way, because on the whole, or rather on average, I have had an extraordinarily uneventful time travelling. When I was in newspapers in fact I used to be very envious of my colleagues, who were always being arrested as spies and causing diplomatic incidents! Nothing ever happened to me. Perhaps it was because I took the advice of a Minister of National Guidance in the Sudan, years and years ago. He was later executed, I believe, for misguiding the nation, but he had time to tell me that my duty as a foreign correspondent was to report "thrilling, attractive and good news, coinciding wherever possible with the truth". I followed his advice ever after, wherever I travelled.

"Coinciding wherever possible with the truth." I don't blush to repeat it, because like every other writer about place who ever lived, I have just

occasionally tampered with the gospel truth. At least as long ago as the 13th century travellers were suspected of doing this. They called old Marco Polo a liar when he came home from the East to Venice; I think he was tacitly admitting as much when he protested that, in his words, “the reader must be prepared to believe everything in this book”. But the sort of thing we do, Marco Polo and I, is not actually lying. It’s a sort of instinctive deception. I was not lying when I told that story about Tenzing and the claret. I honestly don’t remember, after all these years, if I thought it really had been claret but I’m not at all ashamed if I deliberately invented the wine, because it fitted the ambiance and the music of the tale. I was faithfully recording my own responses to the occasion - even if those responses did not, as the Minister of National Guidance would prefer, correspond exactly with the truth.

Fifty-something years ago I was wandering in the eastern Himalaya, at about 19,000 feet, on an entirely empty snow plateau stretching away to Tibet. There was no human habitation anywhere near, and I was all alone. I was actually fondly hoping to see an Abominable Snowman, but instead I presently saw a solitary man, approaching me across that white wilderness. I plunged through the loose snow to meet him, and he seemed to find nothing strange about my presence there. He wore a yellow hood, a yellow cloak and hide boots, and from his waist there hung a spoon and a satchel. He carried nothing else, and he wore no gloves. He was entirely silent. He stood there slightly smiling, as though he was in a trance, and presently without a word he set off across the illimitable snowy wasteland towards Tibet. He seemed to me without means of survival, and he moved with a proud gliding movement that looked inexorable. He did not appear to move fast, but in a few moments, or so it seemed to me, he had almost disappeared, and was no more than a small black speck, inexplicably moving over the snows.

Well, did I really see him? Was he true? I swear to you that he was, but sometimes, I admit, I do wonder. Was he a high-altitude illusion of some kind? Was I half-tranced myself, or dizzy with strange tales of Tibet? I really don’t know the objective truth about the encounter, the strangest of my life, but I know that subjectively my account of it was dead accurate.. And often, I think, in writings about place, subjective truth is perfectly justifiable. The best travel writing doesn’t set out to tell readers what they are going to see, or feel, but what the writer has seen — just as a painter’s view of something is probably not ours, may well be incomprehensible to us, but is none the less genuine for that.

Take a writer like Norman Lewis. He wrote one of the best books ever about place in his *Naples 44*. It was about the city under Allied occupation during the Italian campaigns of World War II, and it was an astonishing survey of a place addled by corruption, defeat, superstition

and hunger, but at the same time indomitably high-spirited, and through all its troubles still uniquely itself Lewis' narrative is full of scandalous anecdotes, puzzles, cross-currents of Mafia and black market, pervaded always by the smells and depressions of war. It's a wonderful book, universally admired, but I myself take many of its more piquant or appalling moments with a grain of salt. I don't believe it all happened to him as he says it did - and remember he was not, as Douglas was at Lepenthe, licking a subject into the fictional shape he wanted. He was describing his responses to a real city at a real moment of history. But was he actually lying, in formulating this masterpiece? I think not. He was evoking a wider truth, describing Naples in 1944 not simply as he saw it, but as he knew it was, and so far as I know nobody has ever said that it really wasn't like that. If it wasn't strictly true, every word of it, Lewis made it true, by the depth of his insight and the breadth of his view.

Since the beginning of literature, since Homer himself, writers have resorted to duplicity or impressionism to reveal truths. But there is yet another, profounder kind of deception in travel writing, which is not really deception at all. It is the usage of allegory, the literary practice of seeing multiple meanings in everything. Detecting allegories in things, or making allegories of them, has not always been admired. Medieval theologians, for instance, accused heretics of allegorizing holy scripture, and modern scholars still upset religious fundamentalists by interpreting most of the Bible as allegory. For that matter allegory itself has its opponents, especially as a literary instrument. The Oxford Dictionary defines it dispassionately as "the description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance", but it is easy to claim half-knowledge as allegory, or muddled thinking, or just lack of inspiration. Robert Musil once defined writers with a weakness for the form as people who "suppose everything to mean more than it has any honest claim to mean".

That's me. I am one of them. I long ago came to think that my life itself was one long allegory, and the older I get, the more my conviction grows. I did not, however, deliberately foster the device. It just crept up on me. Some of the literary subjects of my old age have been half allegorical from the start — America, for example, and railway trains. Some are subtly tinged with allegory. Some reveal themselves as allegory as I think about them. Some, I admit, I have supposed to mean more than they have any honest claim to mean, and some are really more analogous than allegorical. But I see now that in almost all of them, allegory in one kind or another, the belief that most things in life possess multiple meanings, has subtly affected my perceptions and broadened my vision.

One of the Spanish philosophers, whose name I won't mention because I don't know how to pronounce it - one of those savants once suggested that we all carry upon our backs the legacy of our whole lives, like a curled up roll of film. He lived before the digital age. My experience has been that, as I entered my eighties, I began to review that long exposure with new interest: and so I came to detect, especially in later years of the film, that the meanings of almost everything in life are flexible. Meanings might be apparent to one reader and not to another, be true in different ways, be meanings of reality or meanings of the imagination.

And as the taste for allegory grew upon me, so did a conviction about its ultimate importance. Like most of us as we grow old, I have tinkered with theories about the Meaning of Life, religion and all that, and have reached the conclusion that it is all entirely beyond our reach. We cannot, and never can, know the truth about the great imponderables of life and death. Except that ... Just as some Christian scholars explain the Bible and its miracles as being purely metaphorical, so perhaps the whole conundrum of existence, all the mysteries of creation, the Milky Way and the armadillo, art and mathematics, even love and hate and sorrow — perhaps the whole damned caboodle is itself no more than some kind of majestically impenetrable allegory.

A running theme of my own work has been an enigmatic preoccupation with the city of Trieste, which culminated a few years back in a book. I have known the place for sixty years, and while it hasn't changed all that much, my visions of it have, because I came to see it over the years more and more through eyes of allegory. When I first knew Trieste, at the very end of world war 2, I saw it, and described it, as an archetypal European city. It had survived the war largely unscathed, and it seemed to me to be a summation of everything I thought of as European. Its architecture, its purposes, its history, its populace, its culture - all were, as I saw it then, figures of Europeanness, and seemed to speak of me of da Vinci, Bach, Bonaparte, Shakespeare, Einstein and all the other names which spelled out for me, aged 19 and never out of Britain before, the immemorial meaning of our continent. I sat on a bollard by the waterfront one evening and wrote an essay along these lines — and I still have it, somewhere under the stairs at home. Such was my first allegory of Trieste.

The second was less reassuring. Later, for many years, the world squabbled over the possession of the city - Italians, Yugoslavs, as they then were, Americans, British, even Russians, at a distance. Then I began to see the city as something less coherent, ethnically mixed, politically confused and confusing: the sort of place that people in general are not quite sure about - where it is, what country it's in, who lives there, what language it speaks. I began to think of it as a figure of

the world's contradictions and anomalies, always searching for its own meanings, never satisfied.

I kept going there, on and off, over the years, and as the political confusion of it gradually subsided, I began to perceive through the substance of the city the presence of a lost authority, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had ruled its multi-ethnic populace until the first world war, and was still visible in its structures, and almost tangible in its atmosphere. This was my third allegory of the city — a place where civilized order was at least possible, whatever the circumstances, among people of many races. It seemed to me that the Empire of the Habsburgs had almost succeeded in making a grand unity of its subject peoples — though never, of course, quite pulling it off, the very principle of Empire having a fatal moral flaw at its heart. I wrote several essays then, not a bit like the other ones, expressing not so much the existence of that spectral order, as the lingering shade of it - for you see, imagination was impinging upon reality, and allegory was taking over.

Finally, not so long ago, at last I wrote a book about Trieste — my final book and in my own view the best. It was ostensibly a book about the city, but it was really my fourth allegory of Trieste, in an extreme sense. Having thought about the place for so long and with such varying susceptibility, I had now come to feel that in a sort of way I was Trieste. Its muddles of identity mirrored my own life. Its solitary posture reminded me of my own. I called the book Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere, because it was a city, as had come to see it, always alone, on a fold in the map, neither altogether this nor altogether that. And in this too I thought I could detect my own situation in life.

The book ends with an image of nightingales swarming out of a castle on the shore of Trieste, and one of the book's editors queried the passage with the words "Do nightingales swarm?" Well of course they don't, but does that mean I was lying about them?. Not exactly. Should the book have been called fiction? Well, that would have been misleading, because it was a portrait of a real city. Was it actually non-fiction, then? Not absolutely, because so much of it came out of my own dreaming. The book is a little exemplar of the conflict that seems to exist between Imagination and Reality, but which so often turns out to be, in my mind anyway, not a conflict at all, but an alliance — not only in books, but perhaps in all our lives too.

For the two of them, reality and imagination are often united to magical effect. The imagination of children, especially, often creates imaginary friends — as real to them as actual children, to be conversed with, and played with, even quarrelled with - inhabitants of a world unknown unimagined, by the grown-ups all around. And when imagination

summons faith, too, into the alliance with reality, then the result can be profound: for many a true Christian, I believe, even among the most sophisticated of them, knows. really knows, that the wafer he is given at Mass genuinely is the body of Christ. His imagination has created a reality, just as people's belief that a place is holy really makes it holy.

Anyway, even all the allegories of Trieste are less vivid in my mind than a make-believe village that was imagined first in medieval times, and is still perfectly real to me. It is the idea of a perfect Wales, a dream, where everything most lovely about our little country governs the daily life of the people, where nothing cruel or humourless is tolerated, and everything kind, beautiful and fun is cherished by one and all. This delightful figment of literary fancy was known to the old poets as Abercuawg, "where the cuckoos sing". At moments of extreme patriotism, inspiration and perhaps intoxication, I really I feel I live there still, and I often write about it; but contemporary critics, knowing my addiction to the place, and my senile conviction that reality and imagination can truly be one and the same thing - dullard critics inevitably accuse me of living — where else? - in cloud cuckoo land.

Perhaps I am. And why not?