

## Essay Review: Going Abroad, Writing Home

By William Howard Adams. *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. Pp x, 354, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$175 paper)

By Larzer Ziff. *Return Passages: Great American Travel Writing, 1780-1910*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. Pp. 304, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.)

Historians have been slower than scholars from other disciplines, particularly literary studies, to investigate travel as a cultural practice. Perhaps American historians have set aside the numberless journals and letters from foreign lands to be found in manuscript collections because they have assumed these sources, written as they are from outside the United States, have little to tell us about its history. These two books indicate that the study of travel narratives is a promising field for students of American history and culture.

As William Howard Adams, a fellow at the International Center for Jefferson Studies and a former museum curator, and Larzer Ziff, a scholar of American literature for Johns Hopkins University, demonstrate, Americans abroad thought and wrote carelessly about the meaning of foreign travel for their understanding of the nation's future and past. Indeed, overseas travel intensified reflection on national identity precisely because presence in a foreign land seems to have compelled travelers to crystallize their feelings about their homeland. In the case of Thomas Jefferson, fear of European corruption mingled uneasily with his wish to transfer the sophistication of pre-Revolutionary Paris to the republic. Ziff examines the writings of five very different travelers—John Ledyard, John Lloyd Stephens, Bayard Taylor, Mark Twain, and Henry James—all of whom were convinced that America had much to learn from foreign societies.

These commonalities are more a function of the nature of travel writing than a unified interpretive front, however. These are two very different books, though each is written in an accessible style that should appeal to a wide readership. Ziff is more concerned than Adams with addressing interpretive and theoretical questions. But his chapters are so

elegantly written that the analysis seems to emerge naturally from the page rather than from the jargon so common in literary studies nowadays. Adams is concerned less with addressing historiographical issues—and not at all with theoretical ones. His book is the latest in a significant body of literature on Jefferson's tenure in Europe, and he integrates this scholarship deftly. But Adams is mainly concerned with reconstructing the context of Jefferson's Parisian world. This focus renders *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson* rich and highly readable, but it may be of less interest to scholars seeking an analysis of how Jefferson's encounter with France shaped the early republic. Rather, Adams situates Jefferson's European sojourn in terms of his political and intellectual development.

Adams divides his treatment into roughly four categories: art and aesthetics; literature and science; diplomacy; and Jefferson's encounters with women. Politics is a constant throughout, from his ambivalence toward the old regime to his excitement over the early rumblings of the French Revolution. Adams is enthusiastic, not to say uncritical, toward Jefferson throughout. His treatment of slavery however is mostly sensitive and sophisticated, free of easy moralizing. His liberal circle forced Jefferson to think more critically about the moral and economical dilemmas of slaveholding and Adams recounts how Jefferson's ruminations were simultaneously discerning and self-serving. And Adams is critical of those writers, Gary Wills in particular, who have accepted the likelihood that Jefferson engaged in a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings while exonerating his conduct. Adams is skeptical that Jefferson could have kept such a liaison secret. But he concludes rather lamely with the observation that "the supposed relationship [has] also provided material for the fertile inventions of novelists and film makers"—a statement that adds little to our understanding of the controversy and eludes the author's responsibility to engage this important debate (222).

In other respects, Adams adds substantively to our understanding of Jefferson's intellectual development. He skillfully explains the world of Jefferson's French acquaintances, a particularly important task given his political and diplomatic entanglements. And he deals forthrightly with the inconsistencies that have frustrated generations of scholars. Regarding the Parisian cultural life Jefferson found so beguiling, Adams concludes that his "determination to inoculate America against city life would undercut the values unique to the vital urban culture he had discovered in Paris" (156). Adams simply notes that Jefferson failed to reconcile these conflicting impulses, resisting the temptation to impose a settlement on his subject. Similarly, Adams untangles Jefferson's diplo-

matic interests, particularly the confusing issues surrounding commercial relations in the post-Revolutionary period. And Adams writes with real insight of Jefferson's circle of women friends, placing his relationships with Maria Cosway, Angelica Schuyler Church and others in the context of the debate over women's status in French society. Jefferson seems to have been hardly moved by this ferment. In contrast to his deftness in the diplomatic and cultural worlds, Jefferson's awkward dealings with women indicate that he remained shockingly naive and unsophisticated.

The five writers studied by Larzer Ziff differed markedly from each other and from Thomas Jefferson, but they all shared a devotion to justify the ways of the New World to the Old and a conviction of the importance of travel to the making of American identity. Ziff seeks to show how each writer's background informed his view of foreign cultures, and he also argues that for each writer, America, not the object of travel, became their ultimate focus. Rather than seeking to inform Americans about foreign cultures, these writers came to see travel as a means to prompt Americans to examine themselves. He also suggests, counter-intuitively, that these writers reveal that national self-confidence vis-a-vis the Old World declined during the nineteenth century, as the confidence of Ledyard gave way to James's ambivalence.

Adams's account of Jefferson certainly sustains Ziff on this point—one need only consider his "Hints to Americans Traveling in Europe (1787)." Jefferson urged that if Americans had to visit the Old World (he preferred they did not, though characteristically he made an exception for himself) they should do so as a nationalist exercise. Important differences distinguished these writers, of course. Though Ledyard hoped to make money, the progression to James traces the evolution of travel writing as a career. And their accounts became more critical, particularly toward race and American ideas of material success. Hence Bayard Taylor is the pivotal figure in this book, for he invented the travel writer-as-professional and assumed the racial superiority of whites and the benignity of western imperialism, both important elements of late-nineteenth century travel literature.

Most readers will be unfamiliar with Taylor and John Ledyard and John Lloyd Stevens. Perhaps for this reason these chapters stand out, particularly the treatment of Ledyard. The author of a well-known account of Cook's last voyage to the Pacific, in the 1870s Ledyard also planned to walk across Russia, sail across the Pacific to North America and proceed to the United States. Jefferson encouraged Ledyard in this

fantastic venture, not the least because the latter saw his trip as a nationalistic enterprise. As an American he believed he had a responsibility to expose the follies of the systems of privilege he encountered, and he found plenty of opportunities in Russia. In contrast with the sympathy with which he wrote of South Pacific islanders, Ledyard scorned serfs and peasants, though he attributed their degradation to political oppression, not (as later writers like Taylor would do) racial or ethnic inferiority. Though Catherine foiled his efforts, Ledyard's accomplishments were significant, if only because he emerges as a singularly interesting writer who made the most of the two gifts his American provincialism gave him: dual identity as a European and a primitive, and the will to test the naturalness of systems of economic and social privilege.

Ledyard also stands out as the first American travel writer. By the time of John Lloyd Stephens and Bayard Taylor, it was already a crowded and immensely popular field. Stephens's engaging personality—self-deprecating, single-minded, and knowledgeable—sold his four books on Eastern Europe, Central America and the Yucatan. Ziff finds Stephens's work worthy of note because, unlike most writers, he refused to provide readers with "associations"—directions on historic or aesthetic interest—but neither did he cynically debunk this practice. Rather, the places he visited became interesting because of his reflections, not from some external, culturally-sanctioned source. This quality distinguishes a traveler from a tourist. As a writer, Bayard Taylor was far less original than Stephens, for he made sure to stock his many writings recounting his visits to Europe, Africa, Japan, and beyond with such guideposts. Taylor was the first American travel writer who traveled to write. As such writing became his main source of income, Taylor found himself seeking out new and more interesting places about which to report. Although Taylor's writings were forgotten soon after his death, Ziff argues that they illustrate the emergence of two important elements of a "culture of travel": a distinction between cosmopolitan travelers and vulgar natives, and the imposition of cultural superiority on the part of the traveler and his readers, the essential foundations of imperialism.

His final subjects, Mark Twain and Henry James, are more conventional, but Ziff ties them together by showing how both turned travel writing into social criticism. Like Taylor, Twain despised the travel genre but found himself compelled to publish four more after the financial success of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). In a more literary sense, however, the travel account meshed well with Twain's strengths and weaknesses. Not gifted at fashioning long, complex plots, he was the master

of short pieces and thoughtful meanderings—precisely the stuff of travel narratives. The genre was the perfect medium for Twain's emerging social criticism, particularly his anti-imperialism. Yet too often Twain took the cheap way out. For example, in evaluating European art Twain chose to play along with Americans' aesthetic ignorance instead of educating it. Generally, though, Ziff suggests that Twain used "exotic cultures to expose the hollow core of American self-satisfaction rather than to find those cultures wanting by American standards" (200). James, the best known travel writer covered in this collection, was unique among them for never writing about exotic locales. Rather than capture readers by visiting interesting places, James depended on the quality of his own impressions of even the most conventional sites. Hence his best-known work, *The American Scene* (1907), seemed fresh because James wrote it after a long absence from home, when the once-familiar had become foreign. Like Twain, James sought to shake Americans out of complacency, but in a quite different sense; he admonished them to hold onto their western European roots against the tide of immigration which he believed threatened to wipe them out.

Both of these works are written in an accessible, lively style that should appeal to a literate readership, but they are valuable to the scholarly community as well. Ziff's book, in particular, blends theory and scholarship with humor and elegance in a way that is, alas, all too rare in academic publishing. And while quite different in theme, both works should awaken students of the American scene to value the travel accounts. Whether in Paris, Palestine, or Russia, the thoughts of Jefferson, Twain, and Ledyard all turned to the home country—to its virtues and vices, to what it had to teach as well as what it remained to learn. Indeed, what Ziff says of travel writers holds true for Jefferson and other travelers, from Grand Tourists to medical students, "For a European, African, Asia, travel abroad is travel away from home, but for an American it is also travel toward it" (286).

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