Peter J. Brenner

Does Travelling Matter?
The Impact of Travel Literature
on European Culture

1. Introduction

Ever since its beginning European culture has been connected to travelling. Some of the most ancient literary texts are texts about travelling.

In order to grasp the significance of the idea of travelling for the European culture of modern times, it is worth looking way back in time. Some fundamental patterns of travelling and travel literature started to develop very early. Naturally travelling has changed as much as the writing about travelling has changed. But it is indeed astounding that the main features of travelling have been maintained over long periods of time. A myth of travelling has emerged which has literally accompanied the development of European culture right from its start and has not lost its fascination or impression until today.

In his *Odyssey* Homer describes the ten years of odyssey of his hero, which finally lead to his happy return home. This motive is taken up time and again: In Latin literature it was Vergil with his *Aeneid*; during the 15th century *The Lusiads* is written in Portugal and becomes the national epic. The German author Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen writes his *Simplicissimus* during the 17th century, whose hero does not only travel Europe but in the last chapter around the world, as it was known back then.

During the European Enlightenment, travel literature gains vast dimensions. It is definitely not wrong to claim that it has become the most important literary genre next to the novel in Western European countries.

It is no coincidence that the motive for travelling and travel literature had been closely connected with the development of European culture over the period of two and a half centuries. This European

culture is a dynamic and expansive culture; and the predominant role of travel literature has its roots in this reality.

2. Some remarks on the prehistory of modern travelling

Even the ancient Greek time was marked by extensive movement. According to latest perceptions of historians, Greek culture has won its immense power due to the fact that it was not laid out in a central-istic but centrifugal way.

It evolved by the establishment of more and more new settlements mainly in the Mediterranean area, which required a corresponding travel culture and travel technique. This will also be a significant fea-ture of European culture in the following centuries.

The Middle Ages are distinguished by an astounding diversity of travelling. If one considers the technical difficulties, social problems and natural threats that had to be overcome in order to go on a journey in those times, the ideological force that was implied in the idea of becomes clear. During the Middle Ages sovereignty was shown by travelling. Kings moved from residence to residence to show their physical appearance to their subjects and thus legitimate their sover-eignty.

For the kings of the Middle Ages travelling was a form of exercis-ing power. However, in a much more intense way, travelling among the simple people developed in the Middle Ages as well. Pilgrimage becomes a mass movement and includes a wide range of population strata in medieval Western Europe. During the Middle Ages as well pilgrimage developed as an individual way of travelling. It is hard to explain why this form of mobility was able to attain such popularity. But in spite of all threats and problems that had to be faced during pilgrimage, this form of travelling became a mass movement in the 13th and 14th century. Even though it is definitely not possible to state exact numbers, one can say that it must have been millions of people. The three most important pilgrimage destinations were Rome, Jerusa-lem and Santiago de Compostela.

Rome and Santiago de Compostela have remained pilgrimage des-tinations until today. It is quite stunning how popular the medieval *Camino de Santiago* has become with modern pilgrims today. How-ever, looking more closely, one can see the changes that have oc-

curred to travelling. Modern pilgrimages are strongly connected with tourists' motives. The new success of the *Camino de Santiago* may also be due to systematic sponsoring with means of modern marketing.

Medieval travelling has left clear marks in literature. The travelling motif is especially predominant in the epic literature of the Middle Ages. The crusades were the great travel experience of that time; they find their response in the French *Song of Roland*, which had great influence especially on German medieval literature.

In the epics of *Erec* and *Yvein* by Chréstien de Troyes and in Germany by Hartmann von Aue, a model which will have consequences can be seen. Literary travelling is strongly connected with the idea of "probation". The heroes have to fulfill certain duties which are often hard to fulfil. Even at this early stage of travel literature one can see why this genre has such a long tradition in European literature and why it has become more and more important since early modern times: The human being develops itself by confronting itself with reality. This basic pattern can be seen repeatedly in European travel literature.

With the beginning of modern times the constellations of travelling change dramatically. Within short time the great expeditions by Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci and Magellan do not only change the idea of the world. They also give decisive impulses for the economic, political and idealistic development of Europe.

In retrospect the pilgrimages of the Middle Ages and the great maritime expeditions and conquests of the 16th century appear to be the most prominent and most influential phenomena of European travel culture in early modern times. They are supplemented by a third form of travelling which gradually emerges during the 16th and 17th century.

It was the individual journey which essentially served the cause of personal development or gathering information. As it is the case with pilgrimage it was an international movement. European aristocratic families who were able to afford it sent their sons on a journey through Europe, attended by mentors. Final destination of these journeys were mainly the European courts. The young noble men were supposed to not only learn about the behaviour at court in the centres of power – Paris and Madrid – but also to tie a closer network among

European nobility. These journeys were a costly matter and only richer families were able to afford them. During the 18th century the gentlemen journey disappears from the history of travelling not least due to financial reasons.

That is the real situation of the history of travelling in Europe during the beginning of the 18th century.

Three very different movements form the history of pilgrimages, expeditions and gentlemen journeys. It is not hard to see that these different kinds of travelling had most different motives and hardly anything to do with each other. Pilgrimage is motivated by spiritual interest, expeditions have mostly economic reasons in the end and gentlemen journeys serve the purpose of political networking.

These basic patterns of travelling in early modern times are systematically connected with literary texts. Every one of the forms of travelling has brought up literary evidence. There is only rare historical tradition of pilgrimage reports from the 14th century; Columbus himself comments his expeditions in letters and systematic travel diaries were produced during gentlemen journeys as a rule. However, these were normally written down by their mentors. These kinds of texts were only published by coincidence. They were not intended for print and their tradition is therefore incoherent and heterogeneous.

Travelling has a great factual meaning for the development of Europe during the Middle Ages. But in the history of the ideas, the value of travelling is only seen in an ambivalent way. The idea that travelling may have a major share in the development of the world and the development of a personality is not yet very widespread.

However, there has been an early controversial discussion about the benefit of travelling. And in this discussion the advantages and disadvantages are carefully weighed up against one another. It is hard to tell whether sceptics or supporters compose the superior number. One can say, however, that the problem of travelling was a conscious problem in opinion leaders of early modern times. Dante's *Divina Commedia* discusses the thirst for adventure and the curiosity of Homer's Odysseus in a sceptical way; the same problem is seen in a more positive way in Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata*. Even until the 18th century the educational theorists John Locke, David Hume and even Rousseau discuss the advantages and disadvantages of travelling for the process of education.

Even during the Enlightenment the scepticism about travelling does not disappear. Nevertheless, the travelling culture develops a new quality during the 18th century. The Age of European Enlightenment is characterized by travelling. Paul Hazard, the French historian of European Enlightenment, has pointed out in his work *La crise de la conscience européenne* the significance that the travelling motif will have for the self-conception of the Enlightenment in his great study on the power of reason. During the first decades of the 18th century some epoch-making literary texts are written in which travelling is made a topic in various ways. In 1719 *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe is published. This text shows the ambivalence towards travelling in the thinking of early modern times. *Robinson Crusoe* has become a key text for European thinking.

The European, who ends up on a lonely island and has to fight a hostile nature, is one of the ancient scenes of modern European mythology. But in the long history of this text, it was overseen that actually a different motive underlies. It is not about the assertiveness of the European man but the presumptuousness, the hubris. The fact that Robinson has to stay on a lonely island for 30 years is a punishment. It is the punishment for leaving his home and merchant family without major reason but out of pure curiosity only. The fact that this aspect is completely suppressed in the history of reception of this novel, says a lot about the self-conception of the Enlightenment. While the confrontation with the reality of foreign parts of the world was seen as a necessity rather than a virtue during early modern times in Europe, the unknown becomes an attractive challenge during the 18th century. The ancient contradiction of wilderness and civilization, which can be traced back to ancient Greece, is construed in a different way. Wilderness looses its scare, it is being civilized and colonialized by the Europeans.

Rudyard Kipling will find the formula with which the program of colonization is legitimated later on in the 19th century: *The White Man's Burden*. The white European takes on the burden of civilizing the rest of the world.

Another text of the early 18th century picks out a different aspect. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* from 1721 confronts Paris, the centre of European civilization, with its own weaknesses, deficiencies and scurrilities. Two Persians, delegates of an exotic advanced civiliza-

tion, view with wonder the strange conventions and customs which have been established in Europe. The foreign view becomes the central characteristic of self-conception during the Enlightenment. This is not very new. During the 16th century Montaigne already published two famous texts in his essays, *De Cannibales* and *Des Coches.* With these texts he intended to not only show the idiosyncrasy of foreign cultures but also their own right.

In its own time and during the 17th century this consideration hardly found an echo. During the 18th century it quickly becomes the normal way of Enlightenment thinking. In the middle of the century, in 1750 and 1755, Rousseau formulates a brilliant self-criticism of the European culture which has an effect up to the present. It was inspired by the experience which the 18th century had gained with the world outside of Europe. It is no longer the Asians, Chinese and Persians with their advanced cultures who become the measure of criticism. Now it is the "wild", the indigenous people of the South Sea who should serve as models for the Europeans.

All of this is known and well-researched. These phenomena of cultural history have led to the fact that travelling has had an enormous influence on the development of society since the 18th century. In fact there are more indications for the fact that travelling was an instrument of the Enlightenment.

3. Effects of travelling

Travelling naturally has had a great effect on the self-conception of Europe. The ideas of curiosity, thirst for adventure, the global grasp on the world, in which Europe is the centre, have been part of the mental economy of the Europeans since the 18th century or maybe even earlier. Since the 18th century they are completed by the myths of education.

Travelling always has a double effect. It has an effect on the traveller himself, and at the same time it has an effect on the culture – on the culture which is visited as well as on the home culture of the traveller. Since the end of the 18th century at the latest, the idea of travelling as an important means for the education of a person has gained acceptance. A traveller does not only seek information. Everyone who confronts himself with a foreign culture will also see change within

himself. Travelling has therefore been defined as an important instrument for education since the 18th century, at the latest since Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* dated 1768.

Especially since Goethe the myth of the "educational journey" has been established in Germany. "Travelling educates", is what the Germans say ever since and they also believe it. If that is really so, is a different question.

In cultural studies it has become questionable whether travelling really played such a decisive role in the constitution of modern Europe in this empathetic sense. Recently, the number of sceptical voices has increased. Travelling culture studies have shown very clearly that travelling has a rather low educational effect.

The traveller sees less of a culture than he thinks. He only sees what he can see and only through his own culture. Individual problems, needs, prejudices and stereotypes have more influence than authentic perception of the unknown.

This insight is not really new. One of the key novels of European modern times describes this experience in an incomparable way – it is *Don Quijote* by Cervantes, dated 1605 and 1615. It deals with the world-famous meandering knight who travelled into the unknown and had to fight against windmills instead of giants. We have got used to reading the novel as a parody – indeed it is a parody on the trivial romances of its own time and it is also a parody on the old medieval knight epics. But the novel is even more.

It marks the beginning of Western European fiction of modern times and one may also read it as very early animadversion on the euphoric myths of travelling that are gradually starting to become established in modern times. The novel also shows that worldly wisdom, travelling, or the confrontation with the unknown, does not necessarily have an illuminative power.

Don Quijote does not learn anything from his journeys. He does not become more intelligent, more informed or more enlightened. At the end of the novel he is the man he was at the beginning: A friendly and harmless knight but also an unrealistic and fatuous one. Don Quijote is a wake-up call for the subsequent travelling culture. It warns against overestimation of the effect of travelling on the individual and shows what will be proven right again and again at a later point: Every

perception of a foreign reality is formed by the patterns of the own culture and the own individuality.

The reality of travelling at a later point confirms this early warning: One should not expect too much of the educational effect of travelling. Whether one really learns something and becomes a different person if he travels, seems quite dubious. Naturally there are prominent examples that this may be so; but in case of the rank and file of travellers of modern times, this effect cannot be observed.

The best evidence for this statement is the development of modern mass tourism. Tourism is one of many forms of travelling in modern times. It has its roots in the idea that one must have seen the world to build a personality. In this respect it is closely connected with the idea of an educational journey.

The first tourists were the English travellers to the Rhine in the later 18th century. They travelled to the "romantic Rhine" hoping for an educational or at least emotional effect.

But in the following two centuries tourism has moved further and further away from this idea. Looking at the tourist as an antetype of the modern traveller, one will not come up with the idea that "travelling" has a useful personal or cultural effect. There is hardly a kind of traveller who compares to the bad image of the one of a tourist. There is a wealth of stereotypes connected with the image of tourists: They are dumb and ugly; they lack respect for foreign cultures, which is very obvious in the selection of their clothing and behaviour; they are not able to appreciate the value of cultural and art monuments without instructions; they harm the environment and destroy indigenous life forms; and at the end of the journey their image of the unknown is reflected in cheesy souvenirs and bad pictures.

Tourism defines public space in many regions of the world like no other sector of economy or culture; but the effect of this characterization is dubious. One might not want to call tourism a contribution to cultural progress.

On the other hand it has brought quite revolutionary effects for the Western world in some respects. During the last decades tourism has become one of the most important economic sectors. One really can state here: Travelling does matter. For some regions in Europe – also in Spain and Portugal – tourism has become the only way of economic survival.

Looking at the reality of cultural heritage, we shall come to the conclusion that the educational power of travelling is more of an illusion. Travelling does not educate the individual person nor does it normally contribute to the cultural progress of societies. Even the confrontation with the "unknown" does not necessarily have to lead to pleasant results. The long centuries of European expansion as well as modern migration have taught us that there are various different forms of cultural contact – and it seems reasonable to assume that the aggressive conflict is much more frequent than the friendly approach.

4. The myths of travelling and the reality of travelling

Has the European travel culture consequently had no influence on the cultural progress in Europe?

Looking at the great documents and monuments of travel literature and comparing them with reality, one will become rather disillusioned. Certainly there are great testimonies of enlightenment and of humanity among them, but they are very rare and limited in their effect.

More recent studies look at the history of travel culture and travel literature through different eyes than ten years ago. The ancient idea that the confrontation with the "unknown" and the writing about it has an educational effect *per se*, has been shelved: It does not comply with the historical reality.

One can say that this insight is the consequence of a different approach into this field of research: More recent studies deal predominantly with historical sources of the history of everyday life. On the contrary old history mainly dealt with canonized literary texts. In this way certain stereotypes on the value of travelling have developed. However, in the meantime we have had to learn that literary journeys do not have anything to do with the reality of travelling – not when the author claims to have written authentic travel reports either. Literary journeys follow ancient myths and create new myths. But the history of everyday life speaks a different language.

The insight in sources of everyday life of cultural testimonies on travelling opens new perspectives for the various forms of cultural encounter and transfer. It has become clear that contact within cultures is a very complex and also a very dynamic historical process. The old

procedures of hermeneutics – research on "the image of the foreign country" – and the research on stereotypes fall short of this insight.

More recent studies on cultural transfer have shown that travelling has played an important role for the development of Europe mainly since the 17th century. But this role is different than was believed so far. Travelling does not have much to do with curiosity and tolerance, with thirst for adventure and the building of a personality.

In fact, the actual significance of travelling in this century can be found where so far no one has really looked for it. The spectacular expeditions and individual educational journeys have not defined the reality of Europe during the 18th and 19th century. This perspective of research is based on an overestimation of the History of Concepts.

Really significant journeys are probably the ones which are hardly noticed: Everyday journeys which were mostly taken out of practical reasons and which have hardly left any historical, let alone literary marks.

European culture of modern times was mostly defined by a net-work of all kinds of little journeys, which is hard to disentangle, and with various purposes and in various social environments. Europe has been formed by a continuous exchange of knowledge and information since the 17th century. In this process the great expeditions to regions beyond Europe probably did not play the most important role. Journeys within Europe and between individual cultural and economic regions were probably much more important.

The culture during the Enlightenment is characterized by its thirst for information. Its foundations lie in the continuous exchange of knowledge of any kind and quality. Insofar the travelling culture of the time has played a major role for the process of enlightenment. Primarily travelling was a means of search for information, exchange of information and information balance. The intensification of com-munication has become the most important incentive of enlightenment since the middle of the century.

The fragmentation of the continent plays an important role in this respect. Europe was fragmented in a wealth of geographic, ethnic, cultural, political and confessional units. Travelling had a constitu-tional function in this fragmentary reality: It creates unity through exchange.

This exchange between regions within Europe was probably the most important way of travelling during the 18th century. Europe's cultural physiognomy was defined by it. One has to look for the real effects of travelling on the European cultural development in these hardly spectacular travel movements. Only when the myths were left behind, travelling received a power able to influence reality.

Travellers of the 18th century were the first ones to realize the un-timeliness of European development in the 18th century. In travel reports the backwardness of regions at Europe's borders due to a miss-ing communicative infrastructure was often realized and reported about. Much to their surprise, they found that there were still "wild peoples" which had not yet been enlightened in the far North, Iberian South, and in the Slavic East. It were the same travellers who contrib-uted to the halt of this untimeliness.

This form of communication by travelling was a tiresome busi-ness. It is hard to imagine for us modern people to which extent Euro-pean societies depended on travelling during the 18th and 19th cen-tury. In the 21st century we have got used to the fact that we are able to receive any kind of information about any place in the world at any time. It is hard to imagine the efforts that were necessary to get and exchange information during previous centuries.

Modern electronic communication allows a global exchange with-out great material or financial effort for the individual. This vast dis-engagement of information of the material carrier has started very late. Only in the middle of the 19th century feasible technical requirements were created for electronic transfer of information.

Before that the infrastructure of cultural exchange was quite dif-ferent. Knowledge was bound to a material carrier, which had to be moved physically. The exchange of information and culture was no different to the exchange of goods. People had to travel or have some-one travel physically to transport information back and forth. Until the end of the 19th century, moving people was the only way of commu-nication. The development of an infrastructure for the exchange of information, communication, trade and traffic went hand in hand for a long time. Only the introduction of the railway in the early 19th cen-tury on the one hand, and the first electric data transfer in the later 19th century on the other has brought fundamental change. It is not

until then that journeys by people, transport of goods and information exchange are separated from each other.

But until the middle of the 19th century, the exchange of information uses a technique and infrastructure which hardly changed for centuries. The significance of an organized news and newspaper system was realized very early. European countries of the 18th century had an efficient and well-established post and traffic system to a large extent. However, the road network was developed very differently in European countries. The earliest development of a road network occurred in states with a centralized government from the late 16th century on; France led the way. There the political and technical efforts for the development of an efficient road network in the 18th century were the most intensive and most successful.

Due to this development, it is no coincidence that the fundamental processes of enlightenment took part in the centres of Western Europe, in England, France and later on also in parts of Germany. There was a time delay in the South and East and for a long time also in the North of Europe. As we know, the same applies to Spain and Portugal. This infrastructure became the basis for a culture of pragmatic everyday journeys. These technical conditions certainly explain why the Enlightenment developed very differently in Europe; it occurred much more slowly at the periphery compared to the centres.

Coming back to the initial question: Does travelling matter?

Travelling had played a central role in the development of Europe in modern times. But it is not so much the spectacular journeys and not the works of travel literature which have become very significant. They only contributed to a little extent to the History of Concepts in Europe. However, mass movement in everyday life was really important and connected cultural regions within Europe. This defined the face of Europe and created that unity in the plurality which makes the continent special until today. In this sense one can conclude: Travelling does matter.

Translated by Anja Baldauf