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he autobiographical Dilemma in Travel Literature*

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Public vs Private: the autobiographical Dilemma in  
Travel Literature

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Travel writers encounter many kinds of censorship. For example, an American journalist named Helen Winternitz was arrested during her travels in Zaire, and her notebooks and films were confiscated. She described this attempt at government censorship in her book, *East Along the Equator* (1987).<sup>1</sup> Other travellers censor their own writing to avoid revealing too much. Isabella Bird, who travelled alone through the American West in the mid-nineteenth century, confided in letters home to her sister that she had had a proposal from a desperado called “Mountain Jim”. She said he was “a man any woman might love, but no sane woman would marry”.<sup>2</sup> But when these letters were published, under the title *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), she never mentioned this episode, no doubt considering it too risqué.<sup>3</sup> And then there was the Victorian clergyman’s daughter, Margaret Fontaine, whose diaries record her globetrotting. During the course of her travels she fell in love with her Syrian dragoman, a man some fifteen years her junior, had a passionate affair with him and then went ahead and married him – in spite of evidence that he already had a living wife. It’s not hard to see why she left instructions that these revealing diaries be locked up for decades after her death.<sup>4</sup>

In each example, public and private realms conflict. The government of Zaire tried to censor the journalist to prevent her from publicizing the corruption she had witnessed. The Victorian women censored themselves to keep the public from learning intimate details of their personal lives. Each act of censorship is an attempt to avert the public gaze. That a repressive dictatorship or a modest Victorian lady should engage in self-protective censorship will surprise no one. To some extent, their instinct is probably universal. Consider the glaring omissions in some of the most famous nineteenth-century British autobiographies: John Ruskin left out his wife, John Stuart Mill left out his mother, Anthony Trollope left out his marriage.

But if the desire for privacy is shared by dictators and lovers, criminals and princesses, it is nonetheless at times in conflict with the needs of the writer, whose task it is to make public the story of his or her life. How much to reveal, how much to conceal – or censor – is a question the autobiographer faces at every turn. Even more than travel writers, who ostensibly write about the scenes and people among whom they travel, autobiographers must decide how much of themselves to expose.

*Running in Place: Scenes from the South of France* (1989) by a contemporary American writer, Nicholas Delbanco, is both a travel book and an autobiography. It’s an autobiography structured around place, which means that Delbanco tells a great deal about the time he spent in Provence, but almost nothing about the rest of his life. It is simultaneously a literal journey – a trip to France undertaken in 1987 with his wife and teenage daughter – and a metaphorical journey, an autobiographical quest in which Delbanco reflects on the significance of his

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Winternitz, *East Along the Equator: A Journey Up the Congo and Into Zaire* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Dorothy Middleton in *Victorian Lady Travellers* (1965; rpt. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1982), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Isabella L. Bird, *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879; rpt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> The box containing her diaries was first opened in 1978. Edited by W. F. Cater, the diaries were published under the titles *Love Among the Butterflies: The travels and Adventures of a Victorian Lady* (1980; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) and *Butterflies and Late Loves: The Further Travels and Adventures of a Victorian Lady* (1986; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).

earlier sojourns in the region. The narrative is interrupted by flashbacks to 1961, when he first visited the Riviera as a boy of eighteen, and to 1964, when he set up house for six months, a young man determined to turn himself into a writer. The book meditates explicitly on the troubled boundary between the public and private realms in a writer's life.

*Running in Place* begins with a dramatic illustration of the way in which the public world can intrude, even explode, upon the private domain: "A man jumped into my wife's tub while she was taking a bath". Staying at a hotel in Paris, Delbanco was quietly reading when he heard his wife shout, "No. I'm in the bath". As he tells the story:

Two shoeless feet swung through the window's top ... blue pants and black socks. She thought perhaps it was a workman who had lost his footing and was trying to gain purchase on the ledge. A drop would have been murderous; she could not slam the window on his feet. Also, she was naked, covered in bubbles, and flustered; he jackknifed through and fell into the tub.<sup>5</sup>

Delbanco, meanwhile, couldn't get into the bathroom to see what was going on because the door was locked. When he finally managed to open it, he threw the intruder out: "I had not seen strangers in my wife's tub before", he remarks. "I was not gentle."

Later the bizarre incident was explained. The man was a guest at the hotel who had been abandoned by his lover. When he realized this, he went crazy and threw himself out of the window. But in a split-second change of heart, he was able to save himself by jumping back into the window below – and into Delbanco's wife's bathtub.

It's a strange story, and a strange way to begin a travel book. But as the book unfolds, it emerges that Delbanco is preoccupied with the intrusion of the public into private spaces, and this episode serves brilliantly to symbolize that intrusion. What could be more private than a woman alone in her bubble bath, behind a locked door, outside which her husband sits reading? Yet even here, in this most protected spot, the outside world bursts in.

As a horrified husband, Delbanco objects strenuously to having his privacy interrupted. But as a wryly amused writer, he spots the potential for good copy. He reassures the distraught hotel proprietor that this will "make a story someday". And indeed it did. Yet in publishing the story, Delbanco in effect invited the entire reading public into his wife's bathroom. He shattered his own matrimonial privacy more thoroughly than the would-be suicide had done. In contrast to the Victorian lady travellers, Delbanco capitalizes on, rather than suppresses, an embarrassing incident. He's not about to deprive himself of promising material. But his willingness to use such material does more than merely highlight the twentieth century's freewheeling lack of reserve. It also announces his preoccupation with the nature of the autobiographer's art. The autobiographer deliberately exposes his private world to the public gaze. There is a constant and unavoidable tension in autobiographical writing between the desire to conceal and the need to reveal.

Subsequent events show Delbanco himself joining in the public invasion of private spaces. He and his family leave Paris and stay at a country chateau. The owner explains that formerly it had been a private home, but when the Socialist government took over, she was forced to take in paying guests to keep the place going. Her displeasure at this state of affairs is all too evident: "our taxes tripled, and so to make ends meet we make you welcome, yes?"

The Delbancos, of course, feel anything but welcome. They feel more like the intruder in the bathtub. And so they quickly move on to their next destination, the famous caves of Lascaux, where Cro-Magnon wall paintings of bison and deer form the earliest gallery of European art. But here they join in an even more egregious violation of private space by becoming part of the horde of tourists – more than a hundred thousand each year – whose presence is destroying the delicate cave paintings.

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<sup>5</sup> *Running in Place: Scenes from the South of France* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989).

The French government acted in 1963 to save the caves, closing them to all but a handful of visitors. As recompense, “they have recreated the original” caves a short distance away, and it is to these duplicates that the Delbancos are admitted. Delbanco describes the visit in detail. He appreciates the necessity for rescuing the caves, saying that “the government’s decision to impose controls ... cannot be but praised.” He also admires the accuracy of the workmanship in the imitations. But nevertheless, although he understands that the government has acted from the noblest of motives, the experience is disappointing: “It felt secondhand.”

By stepping in to limit access to the caves, the government has, in effect, censored these works of prehistoric art. And like most acts of censorship, this one creates a double standard by dividing the audience into two groups, the privileged few who get to see the real thing, and the ordinary masses who must make do with the “censored” version. Delbanco ponders the social and artistic implications of such a division:

This is one paradox of democracy: the more widely available a site, the less special it becomes ... What was authentic once – be it beach or wilderness, atelier or recipe – becomes its own derivative from the moment of discovery and praise. Call something inimitable, and it is mass-produced. Trumpet someone’s love of privacy, and you increase their appeal.

Delbanco realizes that access erodes authenticity, whether it be of cave paintings, untouched wilderness, or private lives. But he’s caught in the trap of every traveller, seeking an “authenticity” that his own presence corrupts. The tourist’s desire to escape things that are “touristy” creates a popular market for guidebooks promising to take one “off the beaten track”. Of course, the very expression has become a cliché – the “real thing” is like an infinitely receding point on the horizon.

Delbanco’s dismay at having to make do with derivative sights is shared by many travel writers, including Claude Levi-Strauss. In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) he captured that sense of belatedness, writing that: “I wished I had lived in the days of *real* journeys, when it was still possible to see the full splendour of a spectacle that had not yet been blighted, polluted and spoilt”. But he recognized that the “modern traveller, chasing after the vestiges of a vanished reality”, is succumbing to an insidious illusion, for “a few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveller, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see.”<sup>6</sup>

But whereas Levi-Strauss felt himself excluded from a pristine landscape by the contaminating effects of an overdeveloped modern world, Delbanco, in contrast, is kept out of the caves at Lascaux because the government wishes to *preserve* them from further contamination. Paradoxically, the effect on the traveller is the same: he feels cheated. Yet, when the public are allowed to crawl all over monuments of the past, like Mark Twain’s fellow “innocents abroad”, who chip souvenirs off the Sphinx, they spoil irreplaceable relics and works of art.

At Lascaux, the government did not merely exercise the familiar protective function of the censor by closing the caves to all but a few visitors, they went a step further and created reproductions of the caves for the masses. The story of the caves thus illuminates the questions of authenticity and access that censorship inevitably raises. By circulating an “abridged” version of a text, or a “cut” version of a film, censors ensure that audiences who must do with inferior, ersatz versions will forever hunger for the “real thing”, the vanished original. The “censored” object – text, film, cave – is always secondary, always inevitably referring back to its own original.

Delbanco finds a way to escape this dilemma. He learns of another cave that is still open to the public, a real cave that “was not difficult of access”. Of course, it has been vandalized, and the cave paintings of deer and horses are covered with graffiti. But Delbanco prefers a

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<sup>6</sup> *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (1955; New York: Pocket Books, 1977), pp. 33-34.

vandalized but authentic Sphinx to a perfect imitation. Instead of reproductions, this cave offers “an actual painting at arm’s length”. And here, inside what Delbanco calls “that final private space” covered with dancing bison, he says “I knew myself, as not before, transfixed. This is where the journey starts; this is the linked chain. This is its own antidote and oxymoron: commencement, generation, those words that mean, equivalently, completion and beginning”.

Like every autobiographer, Delbanco looks back on his youthful self, trying to make sense of his life, perhaps to find a pattern. In the second cave, the “real thing”, he finds a metaphor for that process of going back to one’s origins – specifically, the origins of the artist. He interweaves speculations on the nature and motivations of those anonymous cave painters with reflections about the consequences of his own choice of a writing life. The cave becomes a metaphor for the innermost recesses of the artist’s mind and past, the dark hidden self that the autobiographer explores with his spotlight, but only illuminates in flashes.

The cave represents the origin of the individual (the womb, the subconscious), the origin of the human race (prehistoric man), and the origins of art (the cave paintings). Thus it serves as an image of what every traveller and every autobiographer seems to seek – a key that will provide access to a personal as well as a collective past. But the traveller’s very presence endangers the rare thing he has come to see. He need not cover the caves with graffiti to destroy them; the bacteria on his sneakers, even the air itself – what Delbanco calls “that inrush of modernity – threatened to undo in decades what millenia had preserved”. And so he is hurried out by someone who is unaware of his private epiphany: “N’oubliez pas le guide!”

By stepping in to protect such places – designating historic districts, funding museums, setting up wilderness reserves- governments try to preserve the past. But insofar as their efforts involve limiting access to a select few, they seem analogous to the protective function of the censor, and they raise similar questions about authenticity, and about private rights vs public access. We often hear of authorities protecting the public from works of art, rather than protecting works of art from the public. But censorship is also about preservation, whether of public morals or prehistoric caves. Yet although censorship may be necessary to preserve art and the past, access is necessary to create art, and to keep it alive.

Delbanco is making a troubling point: you have to expose and endanger a work of art, so that people can feel it. Like the art critic John Ruskin, who called attention to the decaying condition of Venice, but who also hated restoration, Delbanco implies that art, too, has its own mortality. Let it live and die; don’t let so-called restorers turn it into a soulless fake. But that’s not an easy creed to stick to. By the end of the book, Delbanco claims that Provence, the landscape that has shaped his personal history, has been ruined by overdevelopment and hordes of tourists: “Grasse, that perfumed village, stank of exhaust fumes and strained septic systems and cats. It was hard to find a parking place, hard to dismiss the throb of commerce”. He indulges in typical traveller nostalgia for the way things used to be. But then, in the closing lines of the book, Delbanco accepts the inspiration the place can still give him, spoiled as it is, just as he did in the graffiti-covered cave:

It was, of a sudden, standing there – the sky bright blue, the silvery olives beneath us, the soft wind and the perfect fruit – as if there were no damage: no one had died, no one was ill or aging or corrupt.

For a brief instant, it is as if Paradise were regained. It has been, after all, he concludes, “a private not a public fall”.

Bathtub, chateau, caves – these juxtaposed episodes interact with one another to form a complex and suggestive meditation on the conflict between public and private in the autobiographer’s life. In the bathtub story, Delbanco’s first impulse was self-protective – to resist invasion from the outside – but in the end the demands of his art led him to yield his privacy to the public after all. In the caves, he becomes himself a member of the public, who doesn’t like being excluded from private spaces. As a writer, he penetrates that “final private

space” and finds revelation. Writers, especially autobiographers, have to violate private spaces in order to write. They must reveal their own private space, or in the case of the traveller, intrude upon those of others.

For autobiographers and travel writers are in the business of opening up the cave to paying customers. They offer us access, serve as guides. True, they sell their own secret treasures, or those of others, to the public. But they also take us with them into these innermost private explorations of self. Even though he visits the cave as part of a tour group, the travel writer can feel, and make us feel, that this is authentic. Now *he* becomes the guide whom we can’t forget, the mediator who deserves our trip. Had this experience been censored, ours, as readers, would have seemed equally second-hand. Accepting time and change in order to tell us what it is like to brush against a vanishing original, the travel writer seems by definition opposed to all kinds of censorship, including the censorship that might preserve art from the mortal contact that also makes it live.