



Biographer's South

Holmes Richard

Pour citer cet article

Holmes Richard, « *Biographer's South* », *Cycnos*, vol. 7. (L'Appel du Sud dans la littérature et la culture anglaises au XX^e siècle), 1991, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/570>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/570>

Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/570.pdf>

Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Biographer's South

Richard Holmes

Good morning, dear colleagues. I am just a working biographer, not a learned academic, so you must not expect anything very scholarly from me. An appreciation of the qualities of southern sunlight, perhaps.

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth...

That's Keats of course, but I quote it to remind us of the excellent supper we all had in Nice last night. For the Romantic Biographer, the South could be described as a permanent promise of better things; ideally, we "read much of the night, and go south in the winter". I am always reminded of this when I work in the British Museum reading room in London: one only has to raise one's head to see the beautiful eggshell-blue dome, with its golden lantern 80 feet above, designed by the Italian Antonio Panizzi who became Keeper of Printed Books in 1837. There in the dark, damp, foggy Northern capital of Fact, hovers permanently the symbolic blue sky and golden sun of the southern Imagination. Which is partly my theme, today.

The first journey I ever undertook as a biographer, at the age of 18, was to the Cévennes, which is where for me the South begins. I was on the trail of Robert Louis Stevenson, as I have described in *Footsteps*, and I was learning to write: an apprenticeship of the imagination. Living with vine farmers, sleeping rough *à la belle étoile*, keeping a notebook, discovering the identity of another writer (and something about my own). That was my first naive idea of the South: a real liberation of the spirit. Here is a passage which describes, very simply, how I felt at the time and how Stevenson's personality came alive for me in that landscape of the South. I always think of it as "The Encounter with the Old Man of Costaros" — a symbolic figure of course, as he seems to me now:

Despite his donkey troubles, Stevenson got into the inn at Le Bouchet shortly after nightfall, well ahead of me on this first day's run. I began to appreciate how physically tough he must have been. Coming down to Costaros, in a hot low red sun, I began to shiver with exhaustion and at one point tumbled headlong into a ditch. My shoulders were bruised from the pack, my right foot was spectacularly blistered, my morale low. I fell asleep on the bench of a little dark-panelled café, knocked over my green glass of *sirop*, and was turned out into the twilight street by an angry *madame la patronne*. I felt I was not managing things very well.

"*Désolé, madame,*" I murmured; and that's exactly how I felt: desolate. I was soon to grow familiar with this feeling. It is how every traveller feels at the approach of night, and the lighting up of windows in houses where he does not belong, and cannot enter in.

An old man stopped me, and talked, and took me by the arm. "*Mais oui, la route de monsieur Steamson — c'est par ici, prenez courage...*". He led me to the outskirts of the town and showed me the *vieux chemin*, a glimmer of cart-track heading into the darkening, pine-fringed hills for Le Bouchet. Then, inexplicably, he took me back again, and I was suddenly sitting in a little shoemaker's cottage, under a yellow print of Millet's *Angelus*, eating omelette and drinking red wine from a pitcher and laughing. I remember the old man's dungaree blues, his black beret, his arthritic hands, still nimble and expressive, on the red check tablecloth. He was one of those who knew the story, as if it were part of village history. He spoke of Stevenson as if he had done his *Travels* in living memory, in some undefined time "*avant la guerre*" when he himself was a young lad, full of adventures.

"You see," said the old man, "there is a time to kick up your heels and see the world a bit. I was like that too. And now I make shoes. That's how things are, you will see."

I slept out that night under an outcrop of pines, facing east on a slight incline, with the lights of Costaros far away to my left. The turf was springy, and the pine needles seemed to discourage insects. As I lay in my bag, a number of late rooks came

winging in out of the gloaming, and settled in the pine branches, chuckling to each other. They gave me a sense of companionship, even security: nothing could move up through the trees below me without disturbing them. Once or twice I croaked up at them (it was the wine), and they croaked back: "*Tais-toi, tais-toi.*" This night I fell asleep quickly. Only once, waking, I drank two ice-cold mouthfuls of water from my can and, leaning back, saw the Milky Way astonishingly bright through the pine tops, and felt something indescribable — like falling upwards into someone's arms.

My guide at this time was Stevenson's famous *Travels with a Donkey*, which used to be known as a popular school text-book, a manual of good style studied solemnly in a thousand British classrooms. Then I discovered a rare edition of his original travel *Journal*, and working with this, I slowly realised that the whole journey was really a preparation for his elopement to California (recounted in *The Amateur Emigrant*), and that in reality the *Travels* was a secret love-letter to his future wife, the beautiful gypsy-like American Fanny Osborne. The identity of Stevenson as traveller and stylist, was hiding the identity of Stevenson the lover: hiding it from his parents, his Scottish Calvinism, his whole Northern up-bringing. And here I stumbled upon what is effectively my thesis about the South: that for Northern European, and especially British writers, the process of travelling south, or at least dreaming about it, has always revealed a secret or second identity. It has liberated a "second self". And for the biographer this "second self" is of intense interest, because it demonstrates all the self-contradictions, the inner struggles, the suppressed longings, the alternative personalities, that exist within all of us, but particularly perhaps within writers. The South reveals the mythic or potential life within them.

This conference has been concerned primarily with the modern literature of the South. Culturally one might say it is the zone in which the commercial concept of the Summer Holiday meets the literary concept of the Pagan Escape. It is where the extrovert charms of the Club Med meet the introvert passions of D.H. Lawrence. This is not entirely facetious; if one wants to interpret the meaning of a thousand sunbathing holiday brochures, one can do it by reading Lawrence's extraordinary, sweltering, sexual, narcissistic story "Sun" (1922) — in which one woman's entire personality is altered by a little Mediterranean nudism. The story is the direct product of the Jazz Age Riviera holiday, and can easily be related to the experiences of, say, Scott Fitzgerald, or Hemingway, or Huxley. But the cultural impact is much wider, and would need to include such things as the travel books of Norman Douglas, or the classic cookery books of Elizabeth David, or Cyril Connolly's wartime dream of the peaceful "magic circle" centered on a mellow old farmhouse in Provence. In shorthand one can sum up this modern South as a dream of freedom and release provided by the simplifying, primitive forces of sun, sea, sex, olive oil, and wine. In British writers it tends to produce also a series of neo-pagan, private mythologies of liberation, closely associated with their own ex-patriate travels: the solar myths of D.H. Lawrence; the phallic myths of Lawrence Durrell; the bacchic myths of Malcolm Lowry; the Cretan or labyrinthine myths of John Fowles. For critics, as we are seeing at this conference, it is what makes their fictions so rich and reverberating; while for biographers, it is what makes their personalities so complex and — so to speak — wonderfully enlarged. It is all the effect of the South: it "calls" them out of their narrow, northern selves.

But the point I wish to explore now, is how old, how traditional that "call" is. We could leap back, for example, to Madame de Stael's novel of the south, *Corinne* (1807), and find already at the beginning of the nineteenth century the same forces at work. Her hero is a melancholy Scottish aristocrat, Lord Oswald Nelvil, who travels to Italy to renew himself; while her heroine is the poetess and actress, Corinne, full of vital mystery, sexuality and sunlight, who redeems him. At their first encounter in the Roman Capitol, where she is crowned at the Festival, Lord Oswald immediately senses all the instinctive warmth and freedom of the South, transforming even the language. A bystander calls out: "She is a goddess enveloped in

the clouds!", and this simple phrase shakes him into new, astonished life: "Oswald looked at the man who said this: and to all appearances he was one of the common people; but in the South, poetic expressions seem to come so naturally, that we would say that they were imbibed with the bright blue air, or inspired by the heat of the golden sun". The melancholy Northern man enters into a new, bright, mythological world of the South.

If as a biographer one looks at this call of the South in the nineteenth century, one can recognise various powerful animating themes which have actually shaped the modern one, and lie dynamically behind it. In the first place, there is obviously the classical Arcadian myth — the world of Greece and Rome — which shaped the education of many British writers, and sent them out on various versions of the Grand Tour. (Even Dr Samuel Johnson, who could see little sense in any location outside London, admitted that "the grand object of travel is to visit the shores of the Mediterranean", though he himself got no further than Paris). This classical south soon became combined with a characteristic "scientific" south, generated by the concept of migration: the resonant idea of the bird kingdom returning in winter to their ancient, seasonal origins. The bird flies back south to renew itself, as the writer escapes south to renew his inspiration. It would be possible to compose, for example, a beautiful anthology of nineteenth century "swallow" poems which play upon this rich theme — from Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, Browning — and to find exactly the same in France, particularly among inveterate travellers like Théophile Gautier whose "Les Hirondelles" is perhaps the finest of them all. Alongside these intellectual patterns, but closely connected to them, lie more personal and material ones: the need to go south for restoration of health, or indeed of finances — the tubercular or semi-bankrupt voyagers south are legion among writers in the nineteenth century. So too are the "convalescents" in a moral or social sense: those who fled to seaside resorts, mountain villages, lakeside retreats, or Aegean Isles with mistresses, second wives, disguised sisters, male "secretaries", or simply for the utter bliss of solitude and not dressing for dinner.

Here again we touch on my central theme of the second self, the other life, the southern *alter ego*. For the nineteenth century writer, the south offers the chance not only to convalesce, to get better — but also to *become truer*, to discover a second act to one's existence, a second dimension to one's longings. (In Roman Law the term "convalesce" actually carries the meaning "to become valid, or authentic"). This may often carry a sexual implication, as well as a financial and medical one; while the total transformation may imply a complete imaginative rebirth. An obvious model of this would be Robert Browning's elopement with the sickly, sofa-bound, father-dominated Elizabeth Barrett to Italy in 1846: a southern escape which produced health, happy marriage, a son, and two major books of poetry — Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh*, and Robert's *Men and Women*. But I should like to concentrate for a moment on a much less celebrated, but in some ways more intriguing case; that of a quintessentially solid, English, late-Victorian figure; the Water Rat in Kenneth Grahame's classic *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).

Now Ratty, as you will all recall, is the most sensible, capable, no-nonsense, English chap whose whole life is happily dedicated to the utterly absorbing and satisfying task in life of "simply messing about in boats" on the river Thames. He lives, like all good Victorian chaps, in a solid social hierarchy of friends — Mole, Otter, Badger, and the somewhat eccentric Toad — to whom he is completely loyal. Indeed he is much like his creator, Kenneth Grahame, who worked all his life for the Bank of England, and settled in a comfortable house — where else? — on the Thames near Goring. Ratty is utterly loyal to *his* bank, the River Bank; and *The Wind in the Willows* is always remembered as a pure expression of bucolic, Home Counties, ginger-beer and sandwiches Englishness.

But what is invariably forgotten, or at least strangely suppressed, is the disturbing events of chapter 9, entitled "Wayfarers All". (I might add, as a nautical aside, that the "wayfarer" is

now the name of the most popular, sea-worthy, 16-foot sailing dinghy ever built in Britain). It opens on a wholly new note: "The Water Rat was restless, and he did not exactly know why". It is towards the end of summer, there are ineffable influences in the air, the normally placid Rat is curiously out-of-sorts. At one stroke, Kenneth Grahame now challenges the whole utopian English world of the River Bank. Ratty is being called away: "Rat, ever observant of all winged movement, saw that it was daily taking a *southing tendency*; and even as he lay in bed at night he thought he could make out, passing in the darkness over head, the beat and quiver of impatient pinions, obedient to the *peremptory call*".

Now like Tennyson and Gautier, Ratty begins to hear the swallows talking: "'Ah yes, the call of the South, of the South!' twittered the two swallows dreamily. 'Its songs, its hues, its radiant air!...'. Their intoxicating babble was of violet seas, tawny sands, and lizard-haunted walls". He is extremely agitated. Next, along the river bank comes a lean, jaunty, sun-tanned figure with faded blue breeches and small gold earrings. It is the Sea Rat, with huge hypnotic eyes and an endless supply of raffish anecdotes of the Mediterranean — a sort of cross between Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Byron's *Corsair*. There is much yarning of Venice, Lisbon, Marseille, the Grecian Isles and the Levant. Ratty is entranced, and dreamily packs a picnic in his faithful hamper — but no ginger bear and sandwiches this time! "Remembering the stranger's origins and preferences, he took care to include a long French bread, a sausage out of which the garlic sang like a flute, some cheese which lay down and cried, and a long-necked straw-covered flask containing bottled sunshine shed and garnered on far Southern slopes".

As they eat and drink in the autumnal sunshine, the Sea Rat gradually steals Ratty's soul away with his intoxicating, bardic talk of the South. Here Kenneth Grahame rises to remarkable poetic heights, hovering between a genuine childlike poetry of the South and a kind of pastiche of all Victorian travel-writers from Trelawny to Kinglake. But his inspiration is unmistakable. Here is just a brief excerpt:

The Sea Rat's eye lit with a brightness that seemed caught from some far-away sea beacon, and he filled his glass with the red and glowing vintage of the South... And the talk, the wonderful talk, flowed on — or was it speech entirely, or did it pass at times into song — chanty of the sailors weighing the dripping anchor, ballad of the fisherman hauling his nets at sundown against an apricot sky, chords of guitar and mandoline from gondola or caique?

He ends with a haunting image of a sailing ship leaving English harbour, putting on canvas, rounding the headland, "and then, once outside, the sounding slap of great green seas as she heels to the wind, pointing South!"

At this, the Sea Rat departs, leaving Ratty staring glassy-eyed and utterly bemused. His homely, English, river bank world has been subverted; he must abandon it and go south. The Sea Rat calls back at him: "You will come too, young brother; for the days pass, and never return, and the South still waits for you. Take the Adventure, heed the call, now ere the irrevocable moment passes!" And this is the final seduction: in the South one will become young again.

Well of course Ratty does *not* go in the end, for that would destroy the world of *The Wind in the Willows*. He packs his travelling-bag, though, and sets out as if mesmerised, only to be caught at the last moment by the faithful Mole: "'Why, where are you off to, Ratty?' asked the Mole in great surprise, grasping him by the arm. 'Going South, with the rest of them,' murmured the Rat in a dreamy monotone, never looking at him". The Mole's very sound solution is to lock the Rat in his own front parlour, talk briskly of harvest and ripe apples and nuts and fireside pleasures, and give him pencil and paper to "jot down" a bit of poetry. This "cure" works.

Yet the whole chapter remains an extraordinary evocation of the whole nineteenth century image of the south: both its romance and its perils. The migratory call, the sensual pleasures,

the alternative life, the irresponsible vagabonding, the wine and the sea, the summoning of the spirit of youth and adventure. (The one element which is obviously missing — as it is missing from the whole of *The Wind in the Willows* — is that of sexual enchantment; though it has been persuasively argued that in Grahame's work food takes the place of sex, and one may indeed take a second look at that singing garlic sausage, and provocatively languorous and weeping cheese). Grahame's idea of the "cure", the vaccination against the south, is also interesting and even Freudian: it is sublimation of the southern passion into the northern art of lyric poetry. Nevertheless, the raffish older Sea Rat remains a clear version of the "second self" theme: he is Ratty's southern alter ego, and by implication Kenneth Grahame's too. And here the biographer can add an intriguing footnote. In Grahame's otherwise solid, English, respectable life there was one, tiny bohemian flaw. When he was a small boy, his father got into financial difficulties, left his mother and — absconded South with an unknown woman, never to return. So in chapter 9 of *The Wind in the Willows*, unknown to his readers and perhaps unknown to himself, Kenneth Grahame may well have been celebrating the pagan escape of his long-lost papa.

In case I have made the call of the South appear an unduly light-hearted affair, a minor tune, I cannot close without briefly pointing out its major significance to the English Romantic generation, to whom I believe we are all heirs; it must never be forgotten that Shelley, Byron, Keats, Leigh Hunt, Walter Savage Landor, and Robert Southey all journeyed South, obeying that call, at crucial moments in their literary careers. Marilyn Butler, Professor of English at Cambridge, has pointed out that "for about five years after 1817, the whole thrust of writing by the younger English generation came from the South". She refers of course to such masterworks as Byron's *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Triumph of Life*, all essentially southern works. When Leigh Hunt launched his new magazine for them all at Pisa, it was entitled: *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*.

To the themes of the Grand Tour, and the search for Arcadia, they added a significant political dimension: the pursuit of liberty which they saw embodied in a number of various movements — the Carbonari in Italy, the liberal uprisings in Spain, the War of Independence in Greece. In this sense the South also offered an alternative politics, a renewal of the revolutionary spirit in the widest meaning of the term, so wonderfully celebrated by Shelley in the southern seasonal imagery of his "Ode to the West Wind", composed in Florence. They reacted too, like true people of the north, to all the sensuality of the south — the heat, the light, the waters, and even the language itself.

I cannot forbear to quote here a single stanza, number XLIV, from Lord Byron's *Beppo*, which combines so appreciatively and yet jauntily what one may call the whole linguistic-sexual charm of the South for these poets:

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,
 Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,
 And sounds as if it should be writ on satin,
 With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,
 And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in,
 That not a single accent seems uncouth,
 Like our harsh Northern whistling, grunting gutteral,
 Which we're obliged to hiss, and spit, and sputter all.

Indeed, being surrounded here today by so many learned thesis writers, I might even go so far as to suggest that there might be some new mythology to be constructed around the death of four major Romantic poets in the south. It would be a mythology of the four elements — earth, air, fire and water — each one offering its appropriate quietus to their restless spirits. The South as it were seduced these elements in them, and made them immortal through their force. (You must listen to me in the spirit of that wonderful French critic, Gaston Bachelard). In Shelley's case, it brought forth an oceanic philosophy of love, and then quenched it by drowning in the bay of La Spezia: death by water. In Byron's case, it harvested a realistic

creed of political revolution, wordly and practical, and then destroyed it by fever from the low marshes of Missolonghi: death by earth. In Keats, it confirmed a sensuous world of lyric inspiration, bright and atmospheric, and then ate out his lungs with tuberculosis in Rome: death by air. Finally, in Coleridge, it illuminated a vivid, phantasmogoric world of dreams, and then addicted him to the blazing opium-poppy in Sicily: death by fire. (Coleridge did not of course die in Sicily, but he nearly did — but that is another story!). No doubt this is all too wild for sound, northern scholarship. But I offer its poetic possibilities, an alternative criticism, in the spirit of the south this sunlit morning.

Let me sum up what has been intended as an "atmospheric" paper, rather than an exacting one. For the biographer, the Call of the South in modern British literature has a long, Arcadian tradition behind it which one can trace back at least two hundred years. In the lives of individual writers, the South has always released a second, secret self; a creative, myth-making alter ego. Indeed one might hazard the psychological formulation: the Northern Ego discovers its Southern Id. The Imaginative impulse of the Grand Tour; the Migratory Urge; the Medical, Sexual, or Financial convalescence or rebirth; the rediscovery of the primitive, "natural" man or woman in a Mediterranean culture of sun, sea, wine and oil; all have played their distinctive part. The Call is both romantic and perilous: it challenges a Protestant work ethic with a pagan pleasure ethic. It offers both the possibilities of fruitful rebirth, and lonely exile. It is powerful, and it is persistent; and any writer may be seized by its siren sound. In the future, one may imagine the South (like some retreating goddess) moving beyond the now well-colonized and only too-commercialised shores of the Mediterranean. Is it not her voice that contemporary British have heard already further afield — Jonathan Raban in Arabia, Bruce Chatwin in Patagonia, Redmond O'Hanlon in Indonesia? Yet it is still the same "peremptory call" that Ratty heard in the northern summer night by the Thames; and that I heard so distinctly under the stars on a hillside in the Cévennes so long ago.