

*First Impressions:
Rhetorical Strategies in Travel Writing
by Victorian Women*

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ONE RECURRENT FEATURE in the as yet sketchily developed systematic study of Victorian travel narrative is an insistence on the author's multiple persona, which allows him or her to be both accomplice in, and critic of, the business of imperialism. Jonathan Bishop, in "The Identities of Sir Richard Burton: The Explorer as Actor," presents a parody of the

image of the typical Victorian explorer, forcing his way through wild nature and wilder men, reaching his goal by willpower, guns, and money, a worthy representative of the audience his *Travels* [1893] would subsequently entertain. Morally, as well as politically, he is an imperialist; his achievement is the extension of home values to alien contexts. He may have his eccentricities, but his didactic effectiveness depends on his essential anonymity. His prose style is as simple as his function. (119)

Bishop then proceeds to demonstrate various aspects of Burton's complex role playing, in a "life . . . putative and rhetorical, a theatrical gesture exploiting the attitudes it rejects" (135), and in a body of writing in which an obsession with sexual and geographical domination reflects a deep sense of personal inadequacy. Although his subject's motivations are different from Burton's, John Tallmadge's analysis of Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) also recognizes the "different sets of demands" (324) which Darwin attempted to reconcile in his narrative, namely his father's expectations, his own professional reputation, and his clerical career. *The Voyage of the Beagle* constitutes an extensive re-shaping of the original diary; the result is symptomatic of the dialogic interaction of various forms of discourse in several

Victorian travel-books: although some authors, like Darwin, kept log-book and narrative separate, leaving it for a later critic to unravel the complicated personal agenda of *The Voyage*, others integrated the two, creating twice-told tales following Defoe's model in *Robinson Crusoe*. The theoretically most urgent plea to date for the multiplicity of the traveller-researcher's persona and his/her conflicting rhetorical voices comes from Mary-Louise Pratt. In "Fieldwork in Common Places," her contribution to James Clifford and George Marcus' seminal *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Pratt insists that "anthropologists stand to gain from looking at themselves as writing inside as well as outside the discursive traditions that precede them," and that "a first step . . . is to recognize that one's tropes are neither natural nor, in many cases, native to the discipline" (49-50).

Within the study of the Victorian travel narrative, the writing of women assumes a special role. Not only may the tropes they share with their male colleagues be used with different intention and to different effect, but the rhetorical complexities outlined above may be heightened to the embarrassment of critics eager to co-opt these women for one ideological discourse or another. Thus, critics bent on demonstrating the independence, vigour, and sensuality of women, even at a time when public ideology discouraged such qualities, mine the accomplishments of Isabella Bird, Mary Kingsley, Marianne North, Anna Jameson, and Kathleen Coleman for all they are worth but are dismayed at some of the women's insistence on propriety, their conservative politics and sense of racial superiority, and, perhaps most of all, their apparent lack of pride in their own achievements. Good examples of this approach are two otherwise very fine books, Barbara M. Freeman's *Kit's Kingdom: The Journalism of Kathleen Blake Coleman* and Katherine Frank's *A Voyager Out: The Life of Mary Kingsley*. Freeman scolds Coleman for not providing contemporary feminists with a less ambivalent role model, while Frank, clearly in despair over Kingsley's determined prudishness amidst a voluptuous African environment, conflates the epistemic and the deontic mode of the modal perfect when she wistfully (or grimly) affirms that

[d]aily observing such things [circumcision, menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth] *must* have transformed Mary's aware-

ness of her own body, its impulses, changes, even desires. Her monthly periods came and went; she bathed naked and washed her long hair in streams and rivers. (75; emphasis mine)

I would like to take a closer look at the rhetorical strategies of two books by Victorian women travellers, Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: An Account of Travels in the Interior Including Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrine of Nikko* (1880) and Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa: Congo Français, Corisco and Cameroons* (1897), not to join in the frustration of the critics whose argument I outlined above, but to insist that a more fruitful way to deal with such texts is to acknowledge their metonymic specificity and, above all, to suspend the tyranny of "the pattern of an idealized circumnavigation, [the presumably] archetypal plot structure of developing consciousness" (Tallmadge 344). This tyranny may be exerted by genres such as the *bildungsroman* or the picaresque novel, which have long been found to be gender-specific and in need of revision to accommodate the life stories of women. But monologism may also be imposed by the opposite perspective, which is determined to rework Victorian narratives to tell a very specific feminist success story, whose components may be equally prescriptive and conducive to canon-building. Self-assertion in a Victorian traveller did not automatically imply that she extended the same privilege to others. Nor should diffidence and self-consciousness necessarily earn a narrator pity rather than respect.

The more worrisome of the two texts under scrutiny here is Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*. Published after she had already made a name for herself with *The Englishwoman in America* (1856), *Six Months in The Sandwich Islands* (1875), and *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), *Unbeaten Tracks* is the first in a series of books on her travels in the East, which earned her election to the Royal Geographical Society as its first woman member: *The Golden Chersonese* (1883), *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (1891), *Among the Tibetans* (1894), *Korea and Her Neighbours* (1898), *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899), and *Chinese Pictures* (1900) followed in rapid succession. Terrence Barrow, editor of the Tuttle edition, praises *Unbeaten Tracks* as "both poetic and objective" and, because of

its "factual reporting," confirms its distinction "as an ethnographical document" (xxi) of some value. Yet, from the first page it becomes clear that the "poetic" and the "objective" cannot be as clearly separated as the correlative conjunctions suggest. Instead, the two are frequently used to shore each other up and to compensate for each other's inconsistencies, only to create additional ambivalence. The latter even affects the relationship of text and scholarly apparatus: if other travel books imply a dialogic interaction between log-book and continuous narrative, then the most startling tensions in *Unbeaten Tracks*, as we shall see, are between text and index. The genre of the letter of which the book is composed allows for a certain amount of discursiveness, redundancy, and the *non-sequiturs* of spontaneous response, and Bird's readers must have been prepared to accept minor inconsistencies. But it was essential to Bird's sense of personal identity that the underlying imperialist ideology not be seriously undermined. Bird's persistent efforts to keep the balance between the "poetic" and the "objective" intact indicates just how strong the demands of that programme must have been.

Bird's arrival by boat demonstrates typical features of the arrival scene which Pratt has persuasively identified as a crucial episode in ethnographic discourse. Bird opens with one of several picturesque or sublime set-pieces scattered throughout the book:

Broken wooded ridges, deeply cleft, rise from the water's edge, gray, deep-roofed villages cluster about the mouths of the ravines, and terraces of rice cultivation, bright with the greenness of English lawns, run up to a great height among dark masses of upland forest. (1)

The comparison, "bright with the greenness of English lawns," and others, such as a perceived similarity between Fujisan and "the cone of Tristan d'Acunha" (2), help to naturalize an unfamiliar environment, as does a sketch of Fujisan remodelling it to look like the Matterhorn. There is also an approving nod toward the "American nomenclature which perpetuates the successes of American diplomacy," when the ship passes by "Reception Bay, Perry Island, Webster Island, Cape Saratoga, and Mississippi Bay" and "a red lightship with the words 'Treaty Point' in large letters upon her" (3). Self-confident as this inscription of a familiar dis-

course, aesthetic and literal, on an unknown environment may appear, the description acquires some urgency from "the grayness and dumbness" of the early morning, which conflicts sharply with the sublime scenery evoked in the first paragraph. The first three pages obsessively return to the word "pale," often coupled with adjectives such as "phantom," "ghastly," and "wan." Nor is it fully clear whether "the grayness and dumbness" applies to the environment only or also to the traveller, and equally ambiguous is Bird's summary of her arrival as a form of penetration both aggressive and dazed: "it was all so pale, wan, and ghastly, that the turbulence of crumpled foam which we left behind us and our noisy throbbing progress seemed a boisterous intrusion upon sleeping Asia" (3). The trope of arrival in a foreign land as an act of sexual penetration (and subsequent domination) may seem startling considering that Bird and other women travellers went abroad precisely to escape the demands of their families in general, and their fathers, brothers, suitors, and husbands in particular. Bird's lack of self-consciousness in using her erotic metaphor suggests that her insistence on her own freedom did not necessarily imply a refusal to collude in the oppressive business of imperialism.

Dea Birkett has described how such ambivalence sometimes extended to the women's treatment of their servants whom they deliberately kept in a state of infantile dependency, styling themselves mothers of their "babies" and "child-people" (126-27). A latter-day version of Man Friday, the servant, guide, or interpreter may be chosen in a ritual involving several applicants of increasing objectionability, and the interviewer may pretend to make his decision in an act of defiant despair.¹ *Unbeaten Tracks* provides an excellent example of the process: after surveying a number of candidates who are either too European or too Japanese, Bird settles on Ito, "a creature [who] appeared without any recommendation at all," and her description of him bears similarities with her description of her arrival in Japan: "First View of Japan" and "First Impression of Ito" are especially marked in the brief synopses prefacing each letter and in the index:

[Ito] is only eighteen, but this is equivalent to twenty-three or twenty-four with us, and only 4 feet 10 inches in height, but, though bandy-legged, is well proportioned and strong-looking. He has a

round and singularly plain face, good teeth, much elongated eyes, and the heavy droop of his eyelids almost caricatures the usual Japanese peculiarity. He is the most stupid-looking Japanese that I have seen, but, from a rapid, furtive glance in his eyes now and then, I think that the stolidity is partly assumed. (17)

Bird then recounts the list of qualifications which Ito claims to bring to the job, repeating that he “had no recommendations” and affirming that she “suspected and disliked the boy.” Still, as “he understood my English and I his . . . I engaged him for twelve dollars a month” (17-18). In her description, Bird aggressively naturalizes the unknown “creature” by placing his height and age within a European context, applying her knowledge of phrenology to his features to diagnose his likely degree of intelligence, and assessing his physical strength to determine his usefulness to her. Although now more kindly disposed towards Ito, Bird later affirms his role as a go-between when she describes “a strangely picturesque sight” in an Aino hut where “the yellow-skinned Ito” serves as “the connecting link between [eastern savagery and western civilization]” (242).

Unlike the opium-dazed Hadji whom Bird acquired on her travels through Persia and Kurdistan, however, or Kaluna, “a half-tamed creature from the woods” (*Six Months* 87), who served her in Hawaii, Ito refuses to be completely naturalized into Bird’s stereotype of who he ought to be. On several occasions Bird allows herself to be criticized or corrected by him for her gauche western ways, always claiming that she remains in full control of the situation: “I take his suggestions as to what I ought to do and avoid in very good part, and my bows are getting more profound every day!” (87). The exclamation mark at the end of this statement suggests irony, hence detachment, but the latter is a quality Bird increasingly loses in her dealings with Ito. In answering his probing questions about the etiquette of her language, Bird teaches him idiomatic English; at the same time, she is introduced to a foreign epistemology, an unsettling process signalled in her sometimes abrupt wavering between one response and another. For page 101, for instance, the index notes a discussion of “freedom from insult and incivility in [Japan],” followed by “barbarism and ignorance in [Japan]” (332) only six pages later.

Ito's significance is reflected in the long entry in the index, equalled (and surpassed) only by the entries on "Japan," "Japanese," and the major sights. In this entry, Bird (or her editor, with whose decisions she would have had to agree) sets accents and tells a plot which belie the actual events, and the whole passage may be read as an attempt to rectify her undue impressionability and "straighten" the record. In the narrative, Bird parts from Ito "with great regret . . . I miss him already" (321). An earlier revelation that Ito "ran away [from an earlier master] and entered [Bird's] service with a lie" (214) creates a brief flurry, but Ito clearly comes out victorious when he responds to Bird's reproaches that his are "just missionary manners!" (215). By contrast, the entry in the index tells the following tale about Bird and Ito's relationship:

Ito, first impression of, 17, 18; taking a "squeeze," 65; personal vanity, 78; ashamed, 86, 125; cleverness and intelligence, 87; a zealous student, 87; intensely Japanese, 87; a Shintoist, 161; keeps a diary, 161; characteristics, 162; prophesy, 162; patriotism, 162; an apt pupil, 163; fairly honest, 164; surliness, 175; delinquency, 214; selfishness, 236; smitten, 287; cruelty, 307; parting, 321.

Here, Ito has become a classifiable specimen, on a par with temples and geographical curiosities. Pages 161 to 162 are given the most detailed sub-entries, but none of them draws attention to his considerable influence over his employer. Instead, he falls suddenly from grace, with an abrupt transition from "fairly honest" to "surliness" and a rapid decline through the remaining entries. The "cruelty" which Bird perceives in Ito's condescending dealings with aboriginal Japanese remains unspecified in the index and seems to result directly in his dismissal.

In contrast to Isabella Bird's three-page arrival scene and her briskly indexed dealings with her servant, Mary Kingsley's arrival in West Africa in 1894 seems to extend over the entire *Travels in West Africa* (1897) as she describes attempted entries into, and bare escapes from, treacherous mangrove swamps, muddy rivers, unpredictable roads, and slippery bridges.² She proceeded in the company of constantly changing "personnel," none of whom ever comes as close to Kingsley as Ito did to Bird, and none of whom is as easily dismissed. It would be wrong to idealize Kingsley. She

too “believed that England . . . had every right to extend trade across the globe and to protect it by the English flag, emblem of the highest form of justice” (Claridge xvii), and her text contains the familiar tropes of imperialism: Africans are “teachable and tractable” (403), “sweet unsophisticated children of nature” (164) and “black, naked savages” (197) who, at their physical best, shine “like polished bronze” (124) but, at their intellectual worst, feature a “lamblike calfheadedness” (354) or perennial “mind muddle” (501). The agents of imperialism, Kingsley agrees, make extraordinary sacrifices in training such a deficient people; deft vignettes in her book outline educational success. Describing a particularly well-kept plantation, she affirms that “[t]he whole is kept as perfectly as a garden, amazing as the work of one white man with only a staff of unskilled native labourers — at present only eighty of them” (147). As well as supporting the business of imperialism, however, *Travels in West Africa* presents an extensive critique of its practices, including Kingsley’s own place in it. Her honest assessment of her limitations often leads her to remarkable insight, including the admission “that there is nothing really ‘child-like’ in [the Africans’] form of mind at all” (439), and that their “mind muddle” constitutes a different epistemology *tout court* (485).

Kingsley’s arrival scene has none of the “poetic” features so notable in Bird’s first letter; instead, Kingsley presents an “objective” description in the style of a guidebook:

We reached Sierra Leone at 9 A.M. on the 7th of January. . . . The harbour is formed by the long low strip of land to the north called the Bullam shore, and to the south by the peninsula terminating in Cape Sierra Leone, a sandy promontory at the end of which is situated a lighthouse of irregular habits. Low hills covered with tropical forest growth rise from the sandy shores of the Cape, and along its face are three creeks or bays, deep inlets showing through their narrow entrances smooth beaches of yellow sand, fenced inland by the forest of cotton-woods and palms, with here and there an elephantine baobab. (14-15)

Guidebook descriptions of the geography and flora of a place are of course also an act of possession; a detailed description of a coastline, especially if presented in “detached” language, mimics

the process of reconnoitring a terrain prior to its military and economic occupation. But Kingsley undercuts the effect with a number of ironic strategies. Instead of the "red lightship with the words 'Treaty Point' in large letters upon her" which welcomed Bird in Japan, Kingsley is impressed by "a lighthouse of irregular habits," a phrase quite out of tune with the remainder of the passage, because it is both anthropomorphic and comic, and because it acknowledges from the first a resistance of the land to be efficiently or thoroughly conquered. In fact, such resistance seems to have been present from the moment of departure: the *Batanga* is unable to leave the Mersey "for the dock gates that shut her in could not be opened, so fierce was the gale" (13); furthermore, she must forego the cannon salute with which she customarily announces her arrival at her ports of call because the weather is too fierce to take powder on board. The reader is led to interpret these episodes as the classic signals of foreboding with which travel fictions, *Robinson Crusoe* foremost among them, prepare a tale of adversity finally to be overcome by the protagonist. But Kingsley thwarts the reader's "sense of an ending" and anticipates the departure scene, not as a conclusion to victorious deeds, but as a hasty flight from an obstreperous environment. By using the second-person pronoun, Kingsley includes the reader in the fall from any missionary pretension that she or he may have harboured: "It is the general opinion, indeed, of those who ought to know that Sierra Leone appears at its best when seen from the sea, particularly when you are leaving the harbour homeward bound" (15). Under these circumstances, the naturalization of Free Town as "the Liverpool of West Africa" loses much of its comfort, especially since it comes accompanied by the footnote that "Lagos also likes to bear this flattering appellation, and has now-a-days more right to the title" (15).

Most significantly, however, the arrival scene is *preceded* by fourteen pages giving a detailed account of Kingsley's bumbling preparations for the journey, all presented in her typically self-deprecatory style. As if to prove, from the beginning, that "thinking is not [her] strong point" (298) and that her work will best produce a "varied tangled rag-bag of facts" that needs the intervention of "some great thinker" (436) to make sense, Kingsley

conflates her 1893 and 1894 arrivals in Africa such that she must remind her reader at the end of chapter I that the long episode recounted last “was not on the *Batanga*, but in the days before I was an honorary aide-de-camp, remember” (25). From a feminist perspective, Kingsley’s befuddled pose may at times be exasperating, but it does make for the kind of deconstructionist narrator whom virtually all of the contributors to *Writing Culture* posit as a solution to the *impasse* of ethnographical discourse. Thus, Clifford praises Richard Price’s *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (1983) for clearly stating “external and self-imposed limits to the research, about individual informants, and about the construction of the final written artifact” (7). The many false starts forming part of Kingsley’s departure place her undertaking in ironic brackets from the start, without questioning its sincerity or undermining its usefulness.

Price’s *First-Time* translates its epistemological self-consciousness into a collage narrative, “literally pieced together, full of holes” (Clifford and Marcus 7). Kingsley pursues a similar approach by inserting extracts from her journal into her narrative; this technique aligns with the defence she made of her dialogic approach against a “great thinker,” editor Henry Guillemard, who was determined to rework her *Travels* into a more “scientific” discourse. Kingsley explains that in the diary “the reader gets . . . notice of things that, although unimportant in themselves, yet go to make up the conditions of life under which men and things exist” (100). The diary upsets the hierarchy of “important” events, and suggests a sequence almost as random as the alphabetical order to which Roland Barthes subjected his autobiography in an attempt to break the tyranny of cultural ideas embodied in the *bildungsroman*. Precise botanical and zoological information, adventurer’s tale, missionary story, and cooking recipe cohabit without apology in Kingsley’s diary, and, lest the reader conclude that her physical progress automatically implies teleological progress in her acquisition of knowledge, Kingsley recounts at some length her experience with a wayward path which, like the lighthouse on Cape Sierra Leone, appears to have a life of its own:

The path goes on through grass, and then makes for a hollow — wish it didn’t, for hollows are horrid at times, and evidently this

road has got something against it somewhere, and is not popular, for the grass falls across it like unkempt hair. Road becomes damp and goes into a belt of trees, in the middle of which runs a broad stream with a log laid across it. Congratulating myself on absence of companions, ignominiously crawl across on to the road, which then and there turns round and goes back to the stream again higher up — evidently a joke, “thought-you-were-going-to-get-home-dry-did-you” sort of thing. (118-19)

The scene is virtuoso comedy. At the same time it is one of many in *Travels* in which Kingsley dramatizes her ineffectual efforts to make way, geographically and linguistically. From the beginning, language is as independent and wayward as African paths and rivers. In the traditional apologia prefacing the book, Kingsley (somewhat disingenuously) commends Guillemard for “lassoing prepositions which were straying outside their sentence stockade” (ix); as well, there are many circular conversations in which dialogue is reduced to an inexorable mechanism of question and answer. Examples include a hilarious exchange, set to musical notation, beginning and ending with “You should have been here last week when we had the races” (34), the merciless recital of the virtues of the paw-paw (39), or Joseph’s testimony before the Directeur de l’Administration de l’Intérieur (109). Not infrequently, communication breaks down altogether, either because the surf is deafening or Kingsley’s linguistic skills are insufficient and she is reduced to “smil[ing] wildly” (146). On such occasions in particular, the narrative of *Travels* slides rapidly in and out of various forms of discourse, often seeking to establish a slippery footing by referring to outside authority. “As X. would call it” is one of the most recurrent phrases in the book. In her celebrated encounter with a crocodile, the author grasps for two different discourses to help describe the incident, as if they were paddles held out to pull her out of “the black batter-like, stinking slime”:

Twice this chatty little incident, as Lady MacDonald would call it, has happened to me, but never again if I can help it. On one occasion, the last, a mighty Silurian, as the *Daily Telegraph* would call him, chose to get his front paws over the stern of my canoe, and endeavoured to improve our acquaintance. (89)

But the phrase “As X. would call it,” together with more impressive ammunition, such as long footnotes and quotations in German,

are not fully trustworthy either because Kingsley gently mocks their authors as well: "Great as the protection to the mind is, to keep it, as Hans Breitmann says, 'still skebdical,' I warn you that . . . the study of African metaphysics is bad for the brain" (441).

Sometimes Kingsley's pervasive self-mockery is poignantly counterpointed by experiences of desolation and pantheistic elation. Thus, she does sketch a hilarious picture of herself "tide-trapped away in the swamps [and] . . . cheered by the thought of the terrific sensation [she] will produce 20,000 years hence" (89), but she also evokes scenes in which all sense of self appears obliterated, whether it be a truly terrifying, and rhetorically carefully crafted, vision of "the malarial mud . . . creeping and crawling and gliding out from the side creeks and between the mangrove-roots" (97), or an epiphany as she gazes on the river, "los[ing] all sense of human individuality, all memory of human life . . . and becom-[ing] part of the atmosphere" (178). Always wary of settling down to a cliché, Kingsley brings each scene to an abrupt conclusion with a rapid change in tone and by refusing to mark the change with a paragraph ending. The skilful alliterative patterns which mark these passages also recur in burlesque scenes, such as the story of the man-eating paw-paw, "pepsine, . . . papaine, . . . purloining pagan" (40), and all. The principle of the collage is to relativize each one of these experiences and its attendant discourse while at the same time paradoxically endowing it with greater authenticity; in this sense, Kingsley's narrative "is an experiment in ordering reality, rather than a way of decisively determining it" (Kuspit 49).

Both Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley then speak with multiple voices. Bird's register is more limited: an opinionated, bigoted travel writer if ever there was one when she described her impressions of America in her first book, she found her ethnocentricity increasingly sabotaged by the cultures and individuals she encountered in subsequent expeditions. In *Unbeaten Tracks*, her self-assured imperialist persona loses ground before an assertive representative of the culture she has come to investigate, and seeks refuge in the folds of the index. Kingsley, by contrast, cultivates her fragmented persona so determinedly that it seems insufficient to assume that she was permanently overcome by a sense of per-

sonal inadequacy. Rather, her self-consciousness reveals a respect for her subject matter and a narratological sophistication that place her ahead of many of her contemporaries, both male and female. Travel writing by Victorian women remains to be fully charted, but now that the deconstructive tools to deal with it have been developed, it is high time that it be given the place in a diversified history of feminism that it deserves.

NOTES

- ¹ See also Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869).
² My thanks to Maureen Scobie, whose unpublished work on Mary Kingsley has inspired my own.

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