# "I have seen the Moment of My Greatness Flicker": Travel, Modernism, and Empire in Hilaire Belloc's *The Modern Traveller*

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This paper attempts to examine modernism's engagement with the Victorian discourses of travel that crucially determined the European attitude to imperialist expansion. The paper argues that modernism's pronounced anti-imperialist stance and scepticism, as exemplified in the works of Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and James Joyce, among others, can be traced back to the close of the earlier century, when lesser known and less celebrated texts like Hilaire Belloc's *The Modern Traveller* (1898) exposed the seamy side of British imperialism in a humorous, satirical vein. Through a lengthy verse-parody of the project of travel in the context of imperialism, *The Modern Traveller*, this paper establishes, paved the way for modernism's famed critical engagement with the ideologies of imperialism.

### I

The idea of travel is integral to the English literary and cultural consciousness and has significantly informed literary writing since the age of Chaucer. English expansionism dates back to the 15ᵗʰ and 16ᵗʰ centuries, when explorers like Christopher Columbus and Francis Drake were iconized in the public imagination. Over the years, the notion of travel and exploration came to be inextricably linked to the idea of national pride, which has often been reaffirmed in texts like Richard Haklyut's *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589). Colonialist and imperialist ideologies impinged themselves upon, and were also embedded in, travel narratives. Travel

narratives facilitated colonial expansion and promoted the cause of the Empire. They endorsed many of the beliefs imperialist ideologies were founded upon. They created, perpetuated, and were influenced by the equations of power between European and non-European worlds. By their confirmation to established hierarchies, travel narratives participated in the projects of imperialist expansionism. In the hierarchical Victorian world order, travel to the non-European parts of the world was inextricably interlinked with a certain notion of 'Englishness' and cultural achievement. In her influential book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* Mary Louis Pratt argues how

> Travel books gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized. .... They were the key instruments that made people "at home" in Europe feel part of the planetary project; a key instrument, in other words, in creating the 'domestic subject' of empire (3).

The end of the Victorian age also pronounced the eclipse of some of the ruling ideologies of the time. A strong sense of scepticism had crept into the hitherto confident outlook of the Victorians, voiced eloquently in the literary texts of the time. Notions of national pride in the Empire came to be questioned, as a strong group of thinkers and activists promoted what came to be known later as anti-imperialism. The vast British Empire could no more be written about without a sense of uncompromising unease, and as an unhappy reminder of the overt and covert ways by which the British imposed themselves upon other cultures. The close of the 19th century witnessed the decline of the prevalent jingoistic attitude of travellers to the question of territorial conquest. Concomitant to this paradigm shift was the gradual extinction of a readership that avidly consumed celebratory accounts of travellers' overseas exploits.

Contingent upon such unease with imperialism was the cosmopolitan consciousness of the modern artist, which encompassed all cultures and strove to address a wider international audience. The emergence of a highly influential group of expatriate writers, who had little or no vested interest in an 'English' literary tradition and national culture led to the shaping of a cosmopolitan cultural sensibility that countered the hegemonic discourses of Empire. In his essay "The End of English" Terry Eagleton suggests that the peripheral positioning of this group of writers revolutionized the way the English literary tradition was conceived: "Positioned as they were within essentially peripheral histories, such artists could view native English lineages less as a heritage to be protected than as an object to be problematized" (270). Scholars like Jessica Berman (2001) have shown how a revised notion of community and an unprecedented cosmopolitan outlook are indispensable to modernist writing. For the modernists, cultural difference was no more doomed by the complexities of unequal power relations but defined ideas of shared suffering and cause for solidarity. In this respect, Helen Carr maintains, "Modernist texts register a new consciousness of cultural heterogeneity, the condition and mark of the modern world; in both imaginative and travel writing, modernity, the meeting of other cultures, and change are inseparable" (74). Travel writing's complicity with the discourses of colonialism was rendered problematic by the cosmopolitan consciousness of the modern artist.

The modern intellectual's scepticism towards imperial achievement was nowhere more palpably felt than in early 20th century fiction, particularly in the work of novelists like James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster, among others. Interestingly, the idea of travel was central to much of the best work of the modernists. Travel and travel writing, as Robert Burden (2015) asserts, crucially informed some of the major narrative tropes of modernist fiction.

> ...there is an effect of travel and travel writing on their fiction as narrative paradigm and as recurrent trope for questions of identity and otherness in the

encounter with places and cultures. Perspectives gained from travel at home and abroad or simply the desire for expatriation spill over into the deep-seated concern with the emergent crisis of national cultural identity, Englishness or the new American identity (1).

## II

Published in 1898, Hilaire Belloc's *The Modern Traveller* is a paradigmatic turn-of-the-century text which interrogates Victorian ethos and worldview and mercilessly exposes its limitations. This apparently humorous, parodical poetic venture debunks some of the dominant ideologies of Victorianism. The poem takes shape as a verse-narrative of the conversation between a colonial adventurer who has recently returned from his African expedition and a correspondent from a newspaper called *The Daily Menace*, a satirical dig at *The Daily Mail*, which avidly published and circulated news on travellers' experiences. The book is illustrated with sketches displaying the exotic curiosities of the Oriental world and mocks at the sojourner's fascination for them.

> And so the public want to hear
> About the expedition
> From which I recently returned:
> Of how the Fetish Tree was burned;
> Of how we struggled to the coast,
> [...]
> And how, like Englishmen, we died. (6)

The speaker begins to narrate his account of what is supposed to be a heroic mission of travel to the wilderness of Africa. The text parodies some of the well-known Victorian accounts of travel to Africa, like Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890) and Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897). The speaker is accompanied by Commander Sin and Captain William Blood, two formidable presences in his expedition. William Blood, an uncompromising patriot, is avidly interested in the imperial

ambitions of England. His career is a reflection of all that is ambitious and ruthless in an imperial officer of the time inclined to assist in the expansion of the territory:

> His soul with nobler stuff was fraught;
> The love of country, as it ought,
> Haunted his every act and thought.
> To that he lent his mighty powers,
> To that he gave his waking hours,
> Of that he dreamed in troubled sleep,
> Till, after many years, the deep
>  Imperial emotion,
> That moves us like a martial strain,
> Turned his Napoleonic brain
> To company promotion. (22)

Both Blood and Sin are of a dubious origin. Their dubious, sinful origin also crucially informs their double dealings in the context of imperial expansion. Blood, we are told, was born of a man whose identity is not known; his unsure parentage being an important determinant of the origin of debasement in him. The emphasis on the ruthlessness of colonial violence and the unquenchable sense of avarice from which it springs is consistently reiterated through the actions and motives of Blood and Sin: "Was there by chance a native tribe/ To cheat, cajole, corrupt, or bribe?" (25). The speaker's hypocrisy is exposed in the way he is overcome with sympathy for the poor souls that were defeated. He affirms the need to uplift the 'native races' and suggests ways in which the imperial explorers could do so. Sin suggests they use the power of the gun to subdue the natives of Africa during a mutiny that ensued: "Whatever happens we have got The Maxim Gun, and they have not" (41). They victoriously declare, "We shot and hanged a few, and then/ The rest became devoted men" (42). The lines satirize the imperialist idea of complicity through violence.

The narrative has as its focus the adventures of the trio in the Eldorado Expedition. The later reference to the expedition in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and its thematic centrality may

not merely be a coincidence. The inter-textual resonances between Belloc's poem and Conrad's novel and the steady genesis of ideas in both texts is only one instance of how late Victorian texts anticipated and addressed some of the major debates of modernism. In *The Modern Traveller,* the fear and insecurity of "foreign foes" is overcome during the expedition by extremely ridiculous mechanisms. The Russians and Germans, both competing political forces, are perceived as potential threats to British imperialism.

The massive failures of the trio, in spite of their pronounced heroism exposes of the limits of imperial masculinity, which was premised on certain notions of infallibility and impeccability. The text underplays some of the dominant motifs through which imperial authority asserted itself. The notion of unquestioned reverence for everything English, which was a defining assumption of colonial supremacy is turned upside down, as the natives of Africa flaunt colonial authority and threaten Sin and Blood. The absolute possibility of the fate of the unfortunate but "noble" chief (74), their European predecessor, replicating itself in his case as well is shamelessly acknowledged by the narrator. The relics of the dead chief are displayed by the natives as proud markers of their victory over the colonizer. The awkwardness that the reactions of Sin and Blood evoke in readers at this point is a further indication of their obliviousness to such humiliation in the hands of the natives. In spite of the humorous tone, the narrator's propensity to failure and indignation repels the readers. The Mutiny that results out of the resistance of the natives to colonial presence turns out to be a complete disaster for the trio. They are vanquished by the natives, but strongly refuse to be subdued. The immediate Victorian audience of Belloc might have found the text shockingly unacceptable. The vulnerability of the characters might have been perceived as not just inadmissible, but impossible to the Victorian audience, accustomed as it was to consuming jingoistic accounts of travel to the colonized domain.

### III

What makes Belloc's *The Modern Traveller* appealing is the trio's recurring tendency to fail in action, even while eulogizing

failure as martyrdom and heroism in rhetoric. The insurmountable gap between imperialist rhetoric and action and their incongruence is emphasized in the text. Imperialist rhetoric is high-sounding, unbelievably optimistic even in the face of irrevocable failure. The dubiousness of this rhetoric and its incapacity to legitimate its high claims to power and authority are exposed in Belloc's poem. Imperial authority relied heavily on this well-established rhetoric, which was often used to legitimize the action of the colonizer. This rhetoric has a refined appearance, and often promotes high and noble values like culture, civilization and morality while dubiously taking recourse to hypocrisy, corruption, and injustice. In his book *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993) David Spurr proposes that at a time of high imperialism, a well-established and popular rhetoric on the colonized domain was available to the Western writer inclined to write about the non-Western world. This rhetoric, he suggests, constituted "a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse, a range of tropes, conceptual categories, and logical operations available for purposes of representation." Further, he argues, these rhetorical modes were "the tropes that come into play with the establishment and maintenance of colonial authority or, as sometimes happens, those that register the loss of such authority" (3). Belloc's poem targets the palpable hollowness of this rhetoric and wittily subverts the prevalent belief in the 'White Man's Burden'. The narrative demystifies the binary of Western civilizational superiority and native moral debasement through the figuration of the native King and his representatives who are more rational and commonsensical than the European explorers. They see through the vile intentions of the trio and subject them to befitting punishment and torture.

By consistently focusing on the trivial and the petty in what was supposed to be a magnanimous, massive and noble venture, the text calls attention to the banality and mundane-ness of the enterprise. One episode in the narrative details the petty means by which the trio manages to deceive the natives. They pick up a brawl with a native king who, to make matters worse, keeps them imprisoned. They then settle a ransom and seek freedom. In his

*Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (2013) Saikat Mazumdar identifies banality and boredom as two important emotional impulses that inform some of the well-known texts of modernism and constitute an 'oppositional aesthetic' of modernist texts. He shows how the colonized people on the fringes of Empire are caught up in the inescapable banality of their situations, while at the same time defining their relationships to the (apparent) excitement and eventfulness of the imperial centre, London. The lives of imperial administrators, the chief agents in the enterprise, were not entirely free from banality, either:

> The oppressive banalization of everyday life on the margins of the empire is an ineluctable experience of colonial modernity… the iterative banality of colonial life is infective; it is a malaise that ails the agents of imperial administration, too. However, while the boredom of imperial bureaucrats captures a significant experiential dimension of everyday life on the colonial periphery, it is radically different, in its affective structure and political meaning, from the way large groups of colonized people etch their self-image through a sense of the banality of their individual and collective lives against the magnetic epicenter of historical, social, and cultural phenomena represented in the metropolitan centre of empire. (3)

Although the formidable trio in the poem is affected by this banality, they respond to it in seemingly heroic ways, laying bare the rottenness of the conquest. The mock-heroic tone of the poem disparages the apparently heroic venture and the notion of martyrdom attached to it. The unbearably savage torture inflicted upon the narrator is hardly seen as ignominy; it is celebrated as an indicator of his 'unflinching' patriotism. Referring to the excruciating pain of the punishment, he says:

> They hung me up above the floor
> Head downwards by a rope;
> They thrashed me half an hour or more,
> They filled my mouth with soap;
> They jobbed me with a pointed pole
> To make me lose my self-control,
> But they did not succeed.
> [....]
> But did I flinch? I did not flinch.
> In tones determined, loud, and strong
> I sang a patriotic song
> Thank Heaven it did not last for long!
> My misery was past;
> My superhuman courage rose
> Superior to my savage foes;
> They worshipped me at last. (76-79)

This bizarre demonstration of unearthly courage and patriotism even at the verge of a near-death situation is a shrewd maneuver to subdue the natives and demonstrate his cultural superiority. What the narrative helps the readers to unmistakably notice is the cunningness of the colonial explorer, a self-appointed custodian of national pride and community honour. Though the experience of getting flogged by the natives might have been demeaning, it translates into sacrifice and self-annihilation in the narrative, which is but a retrospective recounting of the disastrous encounter. This manner of attributing respectability to an otherwise humiliating incident and unconditionally dignifying it is a typical colonial strategy of self-legitimization.

By consistently attesting to its authenticity, the narrator's tale seems to affirm its falsity and constructedness: "And then—an incident occurred/ Which, I will pledge my sacred word, / Is absolutely true" (66). The narrative questions its own authenticity and obliquely comments upon its own fictive quality. What the narrator shares is also unreliable and mostly fabricated. This important fact of the Victorian travel tale is exposed in the closing

lines, where Commander Sin and Captain Blood, who would have testified to the authenticity of the exotic experiences, are dead.

> Oh! England, who would leave thy shores—
> Excuse me, but I see it bores
> A busy journalist
> To hear a rhapsody which he
> Could write without detaining me,
> So I will not insist.
> Only permit me once again
> To make it clearly understood
> That both those honourable men,
> Commander Sin and Captain Blood,
> Would swear to all what I have said,
> Were they alive; but they are dead! (79-80)

Incidentally, Belloc also wrote an essay arguing for the freedom of the press, entitled *The Free Press: An Essay on the Manipulation of News and Opinion, and How to Counter it* (1917). His reference to the 'popular opinion' or 'the public', referring to the anticipated readership of travel accounts is a self-conscious act. The narrator is seen noting down every minute detail in the exploration, hoping perhaps to publish it after returning to England. This significant Victorian trend of not merely undertaking travel to the colonized domain, but also mandatorily publishing an account of it, is used as an important satirical device in the text. He uses the readerly expectations of Victorian audience as a strategy to puncture and dismantle national pride in colonial achievement.

## IV

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish any specific parallels between texts like *The Modern Traveller* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, it believes that such an analysis is both desirable and essential. Rather than curiously establishing thematic/structural parallels and locating similarities between late-Victorian and modernist texts, the paper indicates possibilities of indebtedness of the modernists to writers like Belloc. Such indebtedness, the paper suggests, was premised

mostly on grounds of ideological orientation and varying attitudes to the project of empire.

As a text arriving at the confluence of historically simultaneous currents of late colonialism and modernism, *The Modern Traveller* adequately thematizes the pettiness and triviality of the colonial project. The poem highly unsettles, for its late Victorian audiences, the dichotomies of domination and subordination. The hierarchical arrangement which established the imperial metropole as culturally superior and more powerful than the colonized periphery is rendered problematic. Though engendered by imperialist ideologies, the text also enables us address some of the major debates about this ideology, which are central to the modernist enterprise. Through its anti-imperialist stance, it complicates our understanding of literature's tacit complicity with the discourses of imperialism. By articulating its scepticism about colonial modernity and its civilizing effects, it dismantles the constructive claims of the political ambitions of the English.

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