

Urszula Kowalska-Nadolna

# Between Tradition and Progress: History and Modernity, Land and Sea

C R I T I C S :  
Robert Burden, *Travel, Modernism and Modernity*, Farnham 2015.

*Places have deep associations; places have story  
to tell...*

Robert Burden

In 2015, Ashgate Publishing Limited put out a book by Robert Burden, a British scholar who had written several publications on the work of Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence and literary portraits of place and space. The book was titled *Travel, Modernism and Modernity*.

The objective of Burden's study was to explore the internal meanings of travel writing dating from the modernist period. The author roots his observations in select literary and nonliterary texts by five Anglophone writers: Joseph Conrad (1857 – 1924), E. M. Forster (1879 – 1970), D. H. Lawrence (1885 – 1930), Henry James (1843 – 1916) and Edith Wharton (1862 – 1937). While these writers' careers have drawn the interest of literary scholars many times over, what distinguishes Burden's work from other analyses available to readers is its distinct ability to pursue many motifs in

parallel, along with the breadth of its contextual perspectives. Burden creates sketches of his book's protagonists, drawing out the meaning of autobiographical motifs in their texts (travel-related and otherwise). He analyzes the settings in which they wrote in the context of the period, and examines their references to other eras, with special attention to the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions. *Travel* merely offers a superficial thread that ties together the texts. In reality, Burden's whole study identifies parallels, correspondences, original features and special idiosyncrasies in the writing of these five Anglophone authors.

The scope of Burden's analysis includes journals, essays, notes, guidebooks and other literary texts in his exploration of the travel motif in select works by Conrad, Forster, Lawrence, James and Wharton. He defines travel's role and discusses the degree to which this theme impacted the text as a literary trope, dominant theme and narrative model reflected in the narrative structure. In Burden's analysis, travel of-

fers artistic expression a useful metaphor for the search for identity (be it individual, national, or cultural...) in an epoch of profound crisis. A critical gaze on modernism and modernity often comes hand in hand with a sensitivity to the colonial traditions shaping British and American culture.

The essential concept running through the interpretations of the selected texts is, of course, modernism itself. Burden understands this term broadly, following Tim Armstrong and Michael Levenson. Burden brings particular focus to the theme of stylistic and aesthetic diversity that exceeds modernist conventions and can often be found in descriptions of landscapes and architecture.

For Burden, the phenomenon of modernity called out in the title is an immanent aspect of a modernist and binary approach to seeing the world (p. 3). As he states in the book's introduction, his approach rests upon a premise introduced by Steve Giles, who took an in depth look at the modernist discourse on comprehending modernity. Burden describes the ambiguous take on modernity endemic to the turn of the century: modernity brought with it technological and scientific progress, on the one hand, giving man the means to seize control over the natural world. On the other hand, modernity distanced man from traditional value systems that had once provided a sense of identity (p. 3). "The modernist critique of modernity is represented by the writers examined in this study," writes Burden. He also follows after Baudelaire with his claim that contemporary existence is characterized by the "transitory, the fugitive, and the contingent." The modernist loss of traditional values prompted a sudden break from literary conventions, which informed these five authors' campaign to restore classical narratives to literature. Burden also highlights a strategy in these efforts mobilized by four of the writers (Conrad, Forster, James and Wharton) who used aes-

thetic and formal devices to reconstitute traditional values. The artfulness of the prose used to describe places the writers traveled through (spaces, cities and landmarks) and the joy of observation (significantly, from the traveler's perspective rather than the tourist's — Burden highlights this distinction repeatedly as being unusually sharp in modernist prose) correlate to moral values. These values are elucidated through the observation of art and architecture. A sense of harmony (aesthetic and otherwise) was to provide the very basis for contemporary civilization.

In his extensive introduction, Burden reiterates major theories on modernism formulated since the mid-twentieth century. Together, these theories offer an extraordinary range of analytic approaches. Burden cites concepts introduced by Rogvald Eysteinnsson (modernism as the object of different critical formations), Roland Barthes (an emphasis on the "problematics of language"), Ortega y Gasset (who wrote on the dehumanization of art), György Lukács (who was mostly concerned with decadence), Theodor Adorno (for whom modernism was a radical attack on modernity in the realm of the aesthetic), Richard Sheppard (who proposes three strategies for answering the question "what is modernism?" that attend to its political, social, historical and literary contexts) and finally, a group of German scholars centered around Jürgen Habermas who construed modernism as the continuation of the Enlightenment tradition (pp. 5-6).

Having established this broad and diversified background of literature on the subject, with *Travel, Modernism and Modernity*, Burden offers a new take on the motif of travel, which had been neglected in the last few decades' discourse on modernism and world literature. For Burden, this motif operated in the literature of the era as both a narrative model and literary trope. Running through Burden's argument

is the belief that travel's influence only intensified in the late modernist period (the 1930s). He suggests that the trope of wandering — structurally reflected in the textual composition — and the critical role of topography in the space of the literary (or artistic) work are also visible in earlier prose of the period. In this case, travel writing (going against the grain of Victorian models) becomes significantly subjectivized and veers impressionistic, with a new, fervent focus on the impression, experience and consciousness of the traveler rather than the journey itself. Burden's preoccupations and meticulous analysis of the select authors' literary output stem from his observation of the literary devices the authors use to deconstruct conventional travel writing while reasserting the archetypal status of the wanderer, pilgrimage, escape, pursuit, process of discovery, and the quest... He also explores motifs endemic to the age of abandoning one's homeland, emigration, and deracination.

Even in these first pages, Burden calls out resonances between the biographies and literary texts penned by these five authors. He highlights the vivid distinction between travel and tourism. Mass commercial tourism was characterized by superficial observation that lacked depth and in fact was entirely bereft of cognitive exploration. For Burden, this form of travel is symptomatic of the "dark side" of modernism. Conrad, Forster, Lawrence, James and Wharton practiced various modes of travel (both literally and figuratively), and these forms of travel correlate with different cognitive modes and levels of reflexivity regarding otherness and the foreign. Burden points out that the symbolic act of crossing a border (taking the form of an adventure in Conrad's work and a romantic pilgrimage in Forster's and Lawrence's) becomes a departure point for reflecting on the American and British colonization of social, racial, cultural, epistemological and identity-based differences. For Burden, the experience of the traveler fleeing the

kitsch and the cliché is a defining component of the selected authors' travel journals, guides and other texts. This feature distinguishes these texts from the "mass" "popular" ephemera that artificially and coercively reduces and simplifies cognitive impressions. This view informs a literary and artistic perspective (p. 11).

As Burden argues, "places have deep associations; places have stories to tell" (p. 13). In each chapter, he meticulously scrutinizes the various stories "narrated" in the space of these texts. These stories represent the major cities of modernist consciousness (Paris, London, Berlin, New York, Chicago) alongside other topographical portraits of buildings, landscapes, ruins, seas, forests... Burden also emphasizes that a critical attitude towards one's homeland framed within a foreign and externalized perspective functions as an analogy in all five authors' travel texts. Burden thoroughly substantiates his approach with numerous textual examples. In the five chapters devoted to the individual authors, he analyzes their "spatial practices" that engage the cultural associations of specific places and regions. Interestingly enough, Burden's reflection often exceeds the literary level and attends to the philosophical, psychological and sociological valences of travel. At these moments, Burden often evokes the thinking of Freud and Lacan, who both treat travel as the expression of a lack of satisfaction with one's home that ultimately becomes a method of self-discovery. The transgressive and transformative aspects of wandering correlate to the belief so prevalent in modernist works that anyone who sets off on a journey must come home a changed person. Among both writers and the protagonists of their books, we can identify a yearning to travel that exposes their need to confront everyday conventions dominating English and American turn-of-the-century society.

The only author in Burden's study who takes a strong position on social inequality between

men and women also happens to be the only woman in his research — Edith Wharton. The book's last chapter is devoted to Wharton's body of work, offering a sort of foil for the vast scope of the first chapter, which focuses on Joseph Conrad's fascination with the sea and the resulting impression that travel is man's domain. Issues of gender (and sexuality) are by no means absent from the other authors' oeuvres: take Henry James, for instance. In his work, the crisis of cultural integrity and the demise of traditional values coincide with a crisis of masculinity.

I would be hard pressed to do justice to Robert Burden's erudite work in just a few pages. Although he examines celebrated authors who are seminal figures in Anglophone literary modernism, he offers a new take on their work while complementing the existing body of scholarship. The book's finest assets are its multiple layers of text, along with its deep analysis and detailed mapping of travel motifs. Burden's study also provides a useful overview of existing research on this literary period and its representative figures.

The book's first chapter, titled *Joseph Conrad: Stories of the Sea and the Land*, examines themes in specific books by Conrad that broach themes of travel, with an emphasis on the trope of the sea. Analyzing texts such as *Heart of Darkness*, *A Personal Record*, *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* Burden first focuses on the author's strong bond with the sea that clearly derives from personal experience. In Conrad's work, the sea becomes an ideological and imagined space. Burden also attends to the specific microcosm of life on a ship, as well as the opposition between sea and land in which the latter figures as a repugnant non-place, or the very negation of home. Towards the end of the chapter, Burden analyzes devices operative in Conrad's work that reference impression-

ist painting, although he assesses the writer's "impressionism" as a form of radicalized realism (p. 37). Travel also seems to permeate the very structure of Conrad's narrative, which exhibits archetypal echoes of mythic sea voyages and constantly evokes classic myths (e.g. the sea appearing as the mirror from the Narcissus myth). Conrad deconstructs traditional and long-standing clichés of travel writing and the picaresque novel. Burden informs us that the latter was Conrad's favorite genre in his youth. The gesture of conjuring an author's personal experience becomes Burden's signature move, and it occurs throughout all the book's chapters. This maneuver allows him to zoom in on the context of the historical moment and examine biographical information such as family history, life situation, and the itineraries and motives of the authors' travels. Witnessing the British colonial project becomes a significant limit point that links the private and literary existences of all five authors, although this is particularly explicit in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the case of Conrad's work, Burden tries to distance himself from other scholars' allegations regarding the writer's racism (p. 46). Conrad's range of travel prose certainly includes accounts of specific places (the Malay Archipelago, the Congo, South America), but it also describes cities the author himself visited. Conrad's topography occasionally drifts into the figurative, covering exotic regions, seas, and vast urban centers (figuring as a metaphor for the degeneracy of Western civilization). Burden discusses these places in detail in the first chapter and uses them to elucidate the two faces of modernism that appear in Conrad's oeuvre. They also help him draw out Conrad's consistent dichotomy between civilization, progress, and modernity, on the one hand, and, on the other, a return to roots, tradition and nature.

Burden finds similar motifs in the work of the second chapter's protagonist, E. M. Forster. Forster's chapter is titled *The Heuristic Value*

of *Travel and Place*. Here, Burden focuses on the pressure that builds between traveling and dwelling at home. For Burden, this pressure affords Forster the ability to gaze critically at his own birthplace. Unlike in the previous chapter, Burden investigates the author's travel journals as well as his novels. For Burden, the journals offer a guidebook of sorts (albeit one written with an experienced and educated tourist in mind). They describe journeys to Italy, Greece, Egypt, and other destinations. Burden writes that in Forster's text, "geography becomes the key to history by creating a sense of place" (p. 68). Journeying into the past and encountering the "ghosts" that haunt a city's ancient corners can yield a critique of modernity and its empty abandonment of historical tradition. In all five authors' bodies of work, Burden takes an interest in the dissonance between one's mental image of world's remote corners and the reality (this opposition coincides with the one between the tourist's collective and reductive gaze and the gaze of the traveler who manages to grasp the actuality of the space that eludes the tourist's reach). This is a consistent thread throughout Burden's reading of Forster's "Indian" texts, collected in *The Hill of Devi*. These "vacations from Britishness," as Burden ultimately calls them, become an opportunity to celebrate difference and to flee the confinements and affiliations (mainly associated with class, everyday conventions, and heteronormative mores) that bind him to his place of birth. These experiences become a departure point for developing a narrative of contemporary identity and for idealizing the past (Forster also notes this phenomenon in his travels throughout the British Provinces). Forster does not eschew symbolic oppositions in his landscape descriptions (light vs. dark; interior vs. exterior). His journey can be characterized by its heuristic value, offering him space "for the broadening of cultural and sexual horizons" (p. 106).

The next protagonist of Burden's study is D. H.

Lawrence (*Travel, Otherness and the Sense of Place*). His overview of Lawrence's many trips (to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Australia, New Mexico and Mexico) is in fact an exploration of the author's intrinsic condition of lacking a home and endlessly seeking a space of his own. The genuine tone of his literary prose is due in part to the fact that Lawrence penned his texts on the go, in the very act of travel and under the direct influence of new places and landscapes that circumscribed him in specific spaces while exposing him to new and open spaces. The urge to travel pacifies Lawrence's nostalgic yearning to return to a land unshuffled by modernity. At bottom, this desire can be equated with the pursuit of a lost paradise that evolves into a critique of modernity and its interventions on traditional orders, values, and natural bonds. For Lawrence, the quest for "the other" and the encounter with the "ghosts" of the cities he visits provides the only viable path towards defining his sense of identity. His fascination with faraway regions quickly stirs up other associations, becoming a mirror of Lawrence's emotional state, psychological condition, and struggle to define his sexual identity. At the same time, his idyllic and romantic accounts of the landscapes, customs and regions fail to resolve the question Burden poses in reference to all these authors' work: setting aside their openness (or otherness), are they really capable of escaping the imperial perspective and transgressing the framework of the "imperial imaginary" (Mary Louise Pratt) that dominated the turn-of-the-century Western gaze?

For the last two chapters of his book, Burden shifts to the American perspective. In the fourth chapter (*Henry James: Journeys of Expatriation*), the scholar proposes an approach to "border-crossing motifs" in Henry James' nonfiction and literary writing, drawing special attention to the fundamental meaning of travel in his work. For James, travel co-creates narrative and helps him locate a point of departure

for the text (James himself called this kind of journey the “story seeker’s journey” (p. 156). Burden scrupulously analyzes several motifs reflected in James’ texts, including: the longing to travel to Europe, critique of the irreversible changes brought about by modernity, the radical representation of a superficial and mass consumerist tourism against deep cognition, contemplation of time and the ephemeral (particularly visible in his descriptions of ruins), the pursuit of the past undertaken by a man “from a country with no past,” and framing travel as an aesthetic experience.

Burden’s book concludes with a chapter on Edith Wharton (*The Aesthetic Value of Travel*). Again, he starts off his analysis with a brief biographical sketch of the author, drawing out Wharton’s personal travels that were so instrumental to her work. For Wharton, travel became a test of sorts that challenged her cultural fluency and openness towards otherness and diversity (p. 197). In her work, fictional protagonists are given cognitive peepholes through which they come to understand another culture. Finally, we see this experience from a woman’s perspective. Burden concludes that Wharton’s work transgresses gender conventions and evades the trajectory assigned to women by culturally prescribed roles. A substantive portion of the chapter juxtaposes Wharton’s work with James’ (the two writers were personally acquainted, and Burden makes the case that this had a decisive impact on their literary output). Significantly, Burden focuses his analysis on the fact that despite Wharton’s choice to set her major novels mainly in New York (*The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*), their themes explore travel in a literary, metaphorical and literal sense.

These brief comments on the individual chapters of *Travel, Modernism and Modernity* do not capture the level of detail that Burden brings to the themes called out in his title. His in-depth

analysis of select texts by these five authors can be leveraged as a starting point for tackling other motifs in these modernists’ work. Burden’s comprehensive research on the diverse and detailed contexts behind their work, along with his multifaceted assertion of space and travel as formative factors for modernist cultural consciousness, mark this book as an original contribution, despite the substantial scholarship that has already explored these authors’ legacies. This book takes the form of a great culmination of existing concepts while proposing a fresh approach to motifs of travel, wandering, the pursuit of a home and a sense of identity (individual and national) that have been so intimately bound to literature for centuries. Although the texts explored in the book date back to the early twentieth century, it seems that Burden’s findings offer vividly relevant insights for the contemporary moment as well.

# KEYWORDS

*travel writing*

## MODERNISM

### **ABSTRACT:**

The review presents the monograph *Travel, Modernism and Modernity*, written by British scientist Robert Burden, published in 2015. The purpose of Burden's book was mainly to develop and analyze meanings of modernistic travel writing. Fundamental for his studies were literary and non-literary works written by five British and American writers: Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970), David Herbert Lawrence (1885–1930), Henry James (1843–1916) and Edith Wharton (1862–1937). Their works have repeatedly been the object of interest of literary scholars. However, what distinguishes Burden's work from the other analyzes, is very broad contextual perspective. Burden elaborately presents the main characters of his book, emphasizes the importance of autobiographical themes in their texts (not only those related to traveling), contextually analyzes their works in historical, sociological and psychological context. What is connecting selected texts is not only the journey – in fact, the whole study is devoted to pointing out parallels, correspondences, as well as original features, specific, significant differences in the writing of five English-language authors. The discussed book appears as a great summary of previous views, at the same time it offers an interesting thoughts about the archetypical motif of traveling, wandering, searching for a place and human identity (both: individual and national). Although the texts described in Burden's work were written at the beginning of the twentieth century, it seems that the author's investigations are extremely relevant also nowadays.

spacial practices in modernistic literature

## TRAVEL AND TOURISM

modernity

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Urszula Kowalska-Nadolna – A lecturer at the Institute of Slavonic Philology at AMU. Main research interests include: contemporary Czech literature; Prague Spring and its impact on the Czech culture, literature, history and national identity; post-1968 Czech emigration, literature and politics; historical memory and pop culture. Author of two monographs: „*Tato noc nebude kratká*”. *Doświadczenie roku 1968 w czeskiej literaturze emigracyjnej* (2015) and *Pan śpiewak świat widzi ponuro*. *Słowiański bard, popularny tekściarz czy ponadczasowy poeta? O twórczości Karla Kryla i Jacka Kaczmarskiego* (2016).