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some remarks on travel and writing

I recently received a letter from a friend who's been travelling overseas for quite a while. She's been based in Paris and travelling at speed through various other countries and cities. She's written several long novels but this letter included some recent poetry and she says "Travel has brought poetry out of me - it is the only way I can respond to the broken and vivid impressions of life travelling gives me".

A poem by Wm Carlos Williams has the line: "The beauties of travel are due to the strange hours we keep to see them".

Poetic writing does seem to be required as a response to certain kind of travel - the ones that keep strange hours perhaps - but as travel at different times of your life is of different durations and for different purposes so the writing changes in response.

The first writing I ever published - that is, the first writing that appeared in a book, an anthology, was writing about travel.

Parts of "The Saddest Pleasure" - a collection of sections of a travel diary - appears in anthologies, a prose collection of the same name and is the first and so far only of my writing to be translated, in German as it happens. Writings about travel, then, began as personal journals: a hallucinatory slide-show in

words, compressed and evocative. Poetic, perhaps. Later, I wrote of foreign places from lengthier attempts at multiple view points, shifting perspectives, fictional situations.

Those earliest pieces have a quality that can never be had again, the bliss of writing - and travelling - only for its own sake, the writing being of the kind you do only in your private notebooks, where no-one has to see any of it, and if some of turns out to be "material" ok, but its reason for being brought into being was to express or explore a response to the experience of Other Places. Now, when I travel, I think of it as research.

Since the "travel" diaries Ive published mainly short fictions and novels. I deviated once to a single non-fiction work, a book-length account of a year spent in Papua New Guinea where I went to work in a volunteer development job. It was difficult to write a true book about a difficult experience. I tried to tell simply the story of my year in PNG while looking at ideas on what is a story, woman, race, culture, postcolonialism, development/aid and so on, and whether so-called womens development in third world countries - these terms I use in multiple inverted commas - obligatory irony- is feminism or not or should it be or must it not be. I asked whether being a woman was in itself a kind of culture.

Up to now I had assumed I could take a relativist position on all things and that travel would only [increase] this tendency. It was truly confronting to find myself become definite on a couple things I had seen as [equivocal] One is that when we see cruelty and oppression of women in other countries it is not

acceptable to say "oh that's their tradition, their culture, their business".

The other is an appreciation of how we - late 20th century Australians - seem to be the free-est women who've ever lived on this planet; Im not saying we're in some perfect world but I returned with a new profound sense of how much we owe to the women before us, who fought for the vote, the right to earn an equal living, to have our rights enshrined in law, how we owe those women who wrote when there was no womens literature industry, and those who used the privilege they had to set off on more-or-less perilous and groundbreaking journeys.

After that, writing fiction again seemed a divine privilege. Now I dont travel so much as undertake research trips, and persue not my own experiences - not only - but my characters'experiences - never exactly the same thing, often not the same thing at all.

Perhaps the scientists who are finding a biological basis for everything from mathematical ability to sexual perference will discover that some women are born with a travel gene, an innate tendency to think their favourite place is elsewhere, to be homesick wherever they are.

At one time Id seek out the travel writings of women. Womens travel writing seems to be in a particular tradition - no, the tradition is not the writing, it's the contemporary reading of them - which is that women who travelled alone were particularly nonconformist, even transgressive, eschewing, as

they did, the supposed proper role of woman under patriarchy and so on.

Certainly the beauties of travel are also due to the fact that you never have to do housework.

Alone, though, doesnt mean the same thing in all places at all times. I recall a passage in Beryl Markhams' work - which I did love - where she talks rapturously of being alone on an expedition in the African bush - then later mentions a few of the African servants she had brought with her. Simple solitude meant something different to her.

Nowadays you go alone you do everything. I knew Italy had changed in 13 years when I arrived at the big bus station in Venice and not one single chap offered to help me with my bags. OK I was 13 years older too, but still.

Even in recent times it was considered somewhat remarkable to be a woman travelling alone but now there are a number of guidebooks to tell you how to do just that, with all due attention to womens particular concerns whether it's fears for their personal safety, to their inclination for forming relationships rather than taking shapshots.

There's one convention, incidentally, in the books and articles of advice for women travelling alone. They acknowledge certain joys to the condition - going where you want to, meeting other women more easily, - but they always assume the downside is

when it's time for dinner. The evening meal alone in a new place, supposed to daunt the most intrepid solo female traveller, I have in fact found to be one of life's great pleasures. Some of the best nights you can have travelling begin with dinner alone, whether it's the tranquility of a book and notebook your peaceful and understanding companion from table to bed, or a night you end up dancing til dawn.

Less of that, these days. The younger woman I once was liked new cities as sites to stay up all night in and for erotic possibilites and so on. Now, I look for a place I can stay long enough to have a daily routine.

The beauties of travel are due to the longer hours you have for your diary.

Writing and travel have much in common. Writing is a perfect travel companion, a distracting and demanding one sometimes and yet one that by sharing your experience intensifies it.

It's notable that journal-keeping is done on trips even by those who arent addicted to journal keeping at all times - and just as travel offers a woman an escape from a life defined by others so maybe it's also a "safe" [?] way for a woman to begin to write out of her silences. Perhaps it is for women particularly that both writing and travel are opportunities for a conscious exploration or assertion of usually unexpressed aspects of identity or even oportunties for assumption of quite another identity altogether. People always ask where youre from and guess what, youre free to answer as you please.

Of course, in either writing or travel it's not how far you go that counts, or whether it's a well-travelled road, what counts is how much imagination you take with you. What counts is taking that first step: putting your first marks on a blank page or buying the ticket. What counts is how much openness you bring, how much resourcefulness, how much willingness to make daunting decisions, telling temptations from opportunities, how you keep on going when you want it to be over or never begun. From the journey to a new place or into a new work, you might return changed and find a world that hasn't changed, or not the same way, and find it difficult to take up your old life again.

All that is by way of introduction to presenting a piece I've been working on, one that probably by its very nature will remain unfinished.