

The Role of Travel Literature in Revealing Cultural Values: A Case Study on Two “Traveling Gents” to Turkey—Paul Theroux and Steven Runciman

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Travel literature which has gained popularity and significance among literary circles enables the reader to transport to different places, to different peoples, and hence to different cultural and social settings. Writers who have produced many significant and timeless masterpieces using this genre have revealed important facts about the Turkish social and cultural identities of their times. This paper will take the reader from the past to the present and show that no matter when or where these travel works of literary merit were written, they almost always reveal social and cultural facts. There is a fundamental difference between tourists and travelers. The two writers included in this paper are Sir Steven Runciman and Paul Theroux, and their works reveal their perceptions of Turkey. They are not always objective but more often than not their remarks are justifiable. Yet, they both reveal the cultural identities of the Turkish people as seen through the eyes of two remarkable writers of travel literature.

KEYWORDS: culture, education, Runciman, Theroux, Turkey, travel literature.

Meeting current challenges regarding preserving heritage or cherishing tradition requires an awareness of cultural and national values, while the oral tradition, classical literacy, and technology have the additional power to maintain cultural and national identity within diverse societies. Cultural heritage, as evolving patterns of human interaction, vitalizes members of society. And in our present-day world where globalization plays a major role, cultural studies rather than adherence to literary studies have gained the upper hand. Thus there has been a trend to shift from traditional literary studies to cultural studies.

Simon During, a professor of English at the University of Queensland, explains several reasons for the shift from literature to cultural studies in related departments. He says there is a trend in portraying anti-academicism; a new mode of subject formation which leads students to be consumers of cultural goods, the valorization of social identities perceived as marginal within a traditional academic framework. He also adds that students' choice in enrollment plays a significant role, too. These trends in change rely on the changed modes of ethical formation and the changed institutional structures and strategies. Cultural studies is a way of contextualizing texts, of analyzing the social relations of textuality. Cultural studies shifts the interpretive gaze from a self-contained text to its social and discursive framings. It opens a potentially fruitful methodological exchange between the distinct protocols of interpretation that apply in the social sciences and the textual disciplines. Cultural studies and literary studies work best when they coexist in tension and pave the way to an exchange of ideas based on the cultural and literary background of the class or of those involved in such discussions.

A good culture means national prosperity. Therefore culture, which is defined as the prevailing values, attitudes, beliefs, and underlying assumptions about life held by majority or minority groups in a society (Jennings 2001), is the sole wealth of a nation. *Culture Matters*

(Harrison and Huntington 2000, 55) explores possible links between cultural values and human progress. The authors even go on to classify culture as progressive and static. Education, family, and connections matter more, and are an exclusive privilege of static cultures. On the other hand, community, ethical codes, justice, and authority tend to be more rigorous, are held as universal ideals, and are more widely dispersed in progressive cultures. Lasting changes arise from within a culture; to achieve progress, the value of these changes must be clear to those who focus on local needs and interests, which may not be identical with global priorities and norms.

There is no single understanding of culture. Most definitions center on the notion of shared beliefs, values, customs, and meanings that distinguish one group of people from another (Hofstede 1991). The culture of a society is the glue that holds its members together through a common language, dressing, food, religion, beliefs, aspirations, and challenges. Culture shapes the meaning people make out of their lives, and the meanings they assign to their lives.

Marianna De Koven writes with regard to cultural studies (DeKoven 1996, 127) that literary writing occupies a meaningfully different social-cultural-political territory, and offers possibilities. As a result of the struggle between politically and theoretically oriented paradigms and their opponent culture studies, theorists and practitioners of cultural studies generally regard the literacy as pertaining to objects of consumption, and the valorization of the literacy as a tool of conservative, elitist cultural dominancy, for which literature is the gatekeeper. Cultural studies thus valorizes various forms of popular or mass culture, and also a broadened category of text, or narrative, or cultural production. Marianne De Koven further states in her article that, "Literature does not, as cultural studies assumes, adhere primarily to the high-culture side of a high culture/popular culture binary except within conservative ideologies," and that whether cultural studies will replace literary interpretation is not yet clear and is still questionable (DeKoven 1996).

Globalization has led to increased awareness of differences and similarities both within and across cultures, and to a search for new models of culture. Culture, which is viewed as stable and dynamic, deals with the themes of shared values, beliefs and behaviors that are transmitted through generations. However, it must not be put into oblivion that cultural and social identities may change or even do change through time due to interaction with other cultures, because of immigration, education, and even due to the changes in the living standards.

Travel literature which has gained popularity and significance among literary circles enables the reader to transport to different places, to different peoples, and hence to different cultural and social settings: "The object of traveling is to see and learn; but such is our impatience of ignorance or the jealousy of our self-love, that we generally set up a preconception and are surprised at a quarrel with all that does not conform to it" (Hazlitt 1902-1904). The travel writer should know how to reproduce what he sees, as he is "possessed in the highest degree of those qualities that make an artist out of a simple narrator, and although he produces the most unexpected effects of light and color, he remains simple and natural, for above all, he is sincere," writes Richard Mallory about his perception of art also implying writers of travel and exploration in his book *Masterpieces of Travel and Exploration*. A travel writer takes the attention of the reader to the lands he has trodden. And Turkey has always been a center of attraction to travel writers throughout the centuries. Not only Turkey, but the entire Ottoman Empire, lured many travelers from Europe and not a few from England as well. The most striking of these travelers is Alexander William Kinglake with his great masterpiece *Eothen*.

To mention very briefly, just some of these travelers would include Lady Mary Montagu, Mrs. Harvey, Dorina Neave, Lucy Garnett, Mrs. Ramsay, Mrs. Max Muller, Sir James Porter, Robert Curzon, James Fraser, Edmund Spenser, Richard Pococke, Edward Lane, and David Urquhart. It is worth mentioning Lord Byron at this point as he revealed so many facts about the Turkish way of living in the palace in his two poems *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. When one reads through the letters of Lady Mary Montagu, one actually discovers facts about Turkish culture, folklore, traditions, customs, and social life from her viewpoint. To her, Turkish women were the only free people in the empire and she went on to describe a Turkish woman as one who is "very curious after the manners of other countries, and has not the partiality for her own so common in little minds." Though all the names mentioned above have invaluable reflections on Turkey, and though all are worth mentioning at this point, we should mention David Urquhart, who regrets that the Europeans, and in his case the British, did not put more emphasis on evaluating the Turkish people better. He writes in his book *The Spirit of the East*, "The traveler in Turkey is invariably ignorant of the Turkish; but the commoner advantages of intimacy or friendship with natives of the country are also wanting..." He tells of an incident he witnessed between a five year old boy and his father: "A little boy began to pull his father's beard and whiskers till the old man roared with pain. He looked in a fearful rage, threatened unutterable things, but never thought of using his hands. I asked him why he had not beaten the child. 'Ah!' he said, 'what clever people you Franks are!'" His accounts for why mothers are considered so precious are also striking: "There is no loss which a Turk can suffer equal to that of his mother. If his wife dies, he says, I can get another. If his child is cut off, others, he says, may be born to me. But I be born but once and can have but one mother" (Urquhart 1839). This also sheds lights on to why the Ottoman Sultans did not too much mind when their mothers interfered in affairs of state. Urquhart reveals the passion the Ottomans had for knowledge in the following lines: "We find their (i.e. Osmanlis') Prophet commanding knowledge – Seek knowledge were it even to China. It is permitted to the Muslims to possess all the sciences... The study of the science is a divine precept for the true believers (Urquhart 1839).

Hence the above quotes reveal many important facts about Turkish social and cultural identities pertinent to the times when these works were written which we now get to appreciate more through the lines of these travel writers. This paper will take the reader from the past to the present and show that no matter when and where these travel works of literary merit are written, they will almost always reveal social and cultural facts. There is a fundamental difference between tourists and travelers. Tourists know for sure where they are going, but travelers mostly go with no set destination. By that standard Theroux is definitely a traveler as he set out on his journey to Asia not exactly sure of where he is headed to and what to observe though he is a man of enormous literary reading. Theroux is the writer who just sees things from many directions and thus more often than not surprises the reader. He is one of those rare travel writers always in search of his own truest reaction even if this shows him in an unfavorable light.

The Great Railway Bazaar (1975) is about Paul Theroux's four month of train travels and adventures starting from London and going all the way to Japan and back to London but through different routes. "The journey" is the goal, he wrote. And he chose the railway which he described as the irresistible bazaars snaking along perfectly level no matter what the landscape, improving your mood with speed, and never upsetting your drink (Theroux 1997). Theroux chose Asia for his journey and he wrote he was glad of that as "it was only half a world away." Theroux took the Direct Orient Express which is "the most famous train in the world" and "links Europe and Asia which accounts for some of its romance." The train

passed through Paris, Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and finally arrived in Thrace. Theroux described his first encounter with Turkish lands. “Large gray dogs, a pack of seven, presumably wild, were chasing across the harsh steppes of Northwestern Turkey barking at the train. When the wild dogs slackened their pace and fell behind the fleeing train, there was little else to see but a dreary monotony of unambitious hills. The occasional army posts, the men shoveling sugar beets caked with dirt into steel hoppers, and the absence of trees made the dreariness emphatic... Yet I hung by the window hoping to be surprised” (Theroux 1997). The man he met on the train, Mr. Molesworth, could not keep himself from shouting “turkeys in Turkey” (Theroux 1997, 32) assuming these animals got their name from the country. Theroux went on to explain that these birds got their name from African guinea fowl which were imported through Istanbul and were called turkey cocks.

As the train was getting closer to Istanbul, the scenery Theroux witnessed revealed the living standards and way of life of the people: “In this most glamorous city of the world, scattered tent settlements and fishing villages gave way to high rise apartment houses with shacks at their ankles. Then a shanty town on an outcrop of rock, bungalows where it leveled out, and an uneven terrace of wooden houses toppling grandly from a cliff, a style of building favored in Massachusetts as well as in Istanbul.” Theroux commented that the difference in architecture did not reflect social classes, but centuries, as Istanbul has been a city for 27 centuries “getting older and more solid –shingle to timber, timber to brick, brick to stone—in Theroux’s own words. The arrival of the train at Sirkeci Station in Istanbul gave the traveler the combined shock and exhilaration of being pitched headfirst into a bazaar due to its nearness to Eminönü, and to Galata bridge which accommodates a whole community of hawkers, fish stalls, shops, and restaurants” (Theroux 1997, 33).

Theroux, as some of the former travelers to Turkey, had misjudgments or misinformation about the riches of the Topkapı Palace. He wrote in one place that the jewels on the swords were fake and that the real ones were pilfered years ago. He even went on to the extent of exceeding his limits by saying that an average air fare to Istanbul would buy the whole Topkapı treasury. Religion is partly a reflection of a society’s identity. Though Theroux was utterly aware that Turkey is a Muslim country, he unfortunately mocked the beliefs of the Muslims that the footprint of Mohammed, the prophet, displayed in the sacred chamber in Topkapı palace was not the authentic footstep.

Theroux apparently could never understand the actual societal norms in Turkey. He did see some places in Istanbul but to our dismay he observed what reflected only the past and blamed the Turkish society for still living back in 1938 for he said that modernization stopped in Turkey with the death of Atatürk. He viewed men as wearing their hair in the style of the 30’s and the women wearing brown sweaters and skirts below their knees which women of the 30’s used to wear. All this leads one to the inescapable conclusion Theroux reported, that “if the zenith of Ottoman elegance was the 16th century reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, the high watermark of the modern was in 1938, when Atatürk was still modeling Turkish stylishness on the timid designs of the West” (Theroux 1997, 37). The people and the shops he saw in Istanbul led him to come up with rather presumptuous feelings about the Turkish people and their place in the modern era. Theroux’s only commitment in Istanbul was to meet Turkish writers, playwrights, poets and academics at a luncheon lecture arranged by an American embassy man. The president of the Turkish Literary Union, Mr. Ercüment Behzat Lav, a name which Theroux found as hard to conjure as to pronounce, wanted to talk Turkish as he had a translator, Mrs. Nur, to help him. When Theroux asked Mr. Lav what he did, the response he got startled him. “This is a completely meaningless question. One cannot say in a

few words what one does or is. That takes months, sometimes years. I can tell you my name. Beyond that you have to find out for yourself.” Theroux being equally witty as Lav, responded by saying, “Tell him he is too much work,” and he walked away (Theroux 1997, 38). When he met with the chair of an English Department wearing tweeds and rocking on his heels, Theroux remembered their English counterparts. Just as he tried to start a conversation with some academics, he was pulled away by a man talking in Turkish all the time who, he later learned, was none other than Yaşar Kemal. Theroux had apparently read *Mehmet My Hawk* and believed the novel would be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Yaşar Kemal during this conversation they had claimed himself to be Marxist, and added that during his trip to Russia he caused the Russians to get frantic by saying all Russian writers except Sholokhov were anti-Marxist. And to him the greatest Marxist writer was Faulkner, which Theroux approached with some caution by asserting that Faulkner would not have agreed with him. The conversation continued as Aziz Nesin was among the guests at the luncheon lecture. Aziz Nesin, as told by Kemal, was a greater comic writer than Anton Chekhov. This conversation reflected the political ideologies prominent in Turkey in the 70s. Theroux also paid a visit to Yaşar Kemal’s house, and was not surprised at the disorderliness of the rooms because he said that only another writer would recognize this as order. Theroux also met Thilda, Yaşar Kemal’s wife, who helped them with the translation. Thilda, Theroux pointed out, saw to the practical side of her husband’s affairs by negotiating contracts, answering letters, and explaining Yaşar Kemal’s harangues about the socialist paradise he envisioned. As Theroux and Yaşar Kemal spent the day together, talking in pidgin English, Yaşar Kemal said, “I love my country. I love it. Taurus Mountains. Plains. Old Villages. Cotton. Eagles. Oranges. The best horses—very long horses” (Theroux 1997, 42). The conversation the two writers had reflected the identity of the Turkish writer and his attitude toward writers and their works. Though he enjoyed reading *Moby Dick*, *Don Quixote*, Homer, Chekhov, and Walt Whitman, he found *Ulysses* quite simple. “Joyce is a simple man, not like Faulkner. Listen. I am interested in form. New form. I hate traditional form,” said Yaşar Kemal as the conversation continued. As they walked toward the fishing village, the men sitting outside a café leapt to their feet as they caught sight of Yaşar Kemal. This bewildered Theroux, and he concluded that they looked upon Yaşar Kemal as a celebrity and regarded him with some awe. This attitude of the locals revealed the cultural identity of the people: respect toward a man who holds a position in the society. Although Yaşar Kemal tried to point out he was more akin to fishermen than to writers, there still was a distance though he wanted to overcome it with clowning intimacy, in Theroux’s exact words. He did look like a local character yet he was in stark contrast to it with his stature and outfit which resembled that of a golf-pro. Theroux showed disbelief in the stories he was told about some family members’ imprisonment, and felt astounded after hearing torture stories and still being reassured by Yaşar Kemal that he would love the country. He did not quite know where to place Yaşar Kemal as his convictions defied reason, yet his complexity was that of the Turkish character on a large scale.

Theroux’s stay in Istanbul did not only include his encounter with Yaşar Kemal. He wrote of a man trying to sell a two hundred year old silk scroll for four hundred Turkish Liras and then told how the man reduced the price by half, thinking Theroux really wanted to buy it. The merchant’s words were interesting enough to show how Turkish sellers price their goods as utterly precious items and then through bargaining reduce the price drastically. Once he set himself free from this man, Theroux wanted to try some Turkish food before boarding the Lake Van Express to travel to Iran. He had drawn up for himself a menu which consisted of, in his own words, “the imam fainted,” “vizier’s finger,” “his Majesty liked it,” “lady’s thigh,” and “Lady’s navel.” He had time to taste only the last two and wondered if the Turks’ taste in

anatomy was revealed in their choice of names. As Theroux himself said, these were euphemistic names.

For fear that Lake Van Express would not have a dining car like the Direct Orient, he bought a lot of provisions to keep him going on the three day journey to Lake Van. He was delighted to see that there was a dining car. He noticed the soberly dressed Turkish families and the hippies “all trying to get into the third class compartments, and quarreling over window seats.” As the train started to move east, Theroux remembered he was once again on a railway bazaar that would bring him to the shores of Turkey’s largest lake: “And I was reassured of Turkish Railways. The train was long and solid, and the sleeping car was newer than the wagon-lit on the Direct Orient, the dining car had fresh flowers on the tables, and was well stocked with wine and beer...I was supremely comfortable. I went back to my compartment and was lulled by the feel of Asia rumbling under the wheels” (Theroux 1997).

En route to Ankara, the train passed by many small stations where local people were seated and watching the Lake Van Express pass by, as it was a great event for these people. As Theroux was traveling on his own, he attracted the attention of some Turkish passengers on the train, and they walked into his compartment asking questions like, “why was I alone in the compartment, where was I going, why did I leave my wife behind, did I like Turkey, why was my hair so long, and was everyone’s hair that long back at home?” (Theroux 1997, 46). Once the questions ceased, one of them took hold of the novel Theroux was reading, and was marveled at the tiny print of the 900-page volume. Theroux felt frustrated by these inquisitive people and evicted them from his compartment, bolting the door behind them. They had tried to communicate in German, which shows they were workers coming from Germany and going back to their home town. In the deluxe sleeping car there were only Turks who never left their couchettes nor the car itself, fearing contamination from the rest of the train. This sight put an end to the traveler’s altruism that natives don’t go first class. Although, these Turks avoided going third class, the way they fit into couchettes gave the sleeping car the air of squalor in third class. It was ten o’clock at night when the train reached Lake Van. To quote Theroux, “It was impossible to confirm the stories I had heard of the swimming cats, the high soda content of the water that bleaches clothes and turns the hair of Turks who swim in it a bright red” (Theroux 1997, 54). Arrival at Lake Van was an end to the luxury trip as Theroux no longer had a couchette for himself and crossing the lake on a ferry was a disastrous adventure for him as he had to sleep with the other passengers and tolerate all their sounds. It is apparent that Theroux was a well learned man on Turkey and its regions and the way he recorded the events reveals both the national and the cultural identity of the Turkish people.

An eminent author on Byzantine history, British travel writer Sir Steven Runciman held a number of appointments in many countries including Turkey. The book considered in this paper is called *A Traveler’s Alphabet*. Runciman did travel extensively and in this book he records his travels in an alphabetical order rather than in the order he has traveled. Istanbul was on his agenda and therefore he did go there. but the name of the city makes him recall the past names of this glamorous city, and with apologies to his Greek friends who insist he should call it Constantinople, he goes on to use the name Istanbul. His first visit was in 1924, soon after the Lausanne Treaty. The houses were only within the city walls, and only gypsies, who were very good in fortune-telling, lived beyond them. Veiled women, men with “tarboush,” camels with loads were all he could see; however, his second visit in 1928 startled him as there were no longer any camels on the streets, men wore cloth caps, and women were no longer wearing veils. However, he records that a woman who he had met resented the

removal of the veil as this had destroyed anonymity. Runciman also mentions in this book how an American, Thomas Whitmore, was engaged in uncovering the mosaics of Saint Sophia so as to bring the Christian decorations back to light. In 1937 Runciman had the opportunity to meet with Atatürk on the grounds of Dolmabahçe Palace which was the sugar cake fantasy of the 19th century baroque palace. He describes Atatürk as stocky and upright, with a complexion that was pale olive-green: “His eyes, however, were unforgettable. They were steely blue in color and they seemed to pierce right through you” (Runciman 1996). Atatürk, he says, was very gracious. He also recalls Atatürk’s fondness for history, and this same attitude continued with Atatürk’s successor İsmet İnönü who asked for a History Department on Byzantine Studies to be integrated into the curriculum at Istanbul University, and this meant Runciman would be in charge of the department since he was a professor of Byzantine Studies. Runciman was in the Turkish Academic life for three years and his lectures were translated into Turkish by his assistant, as all his students were Turkish. Students, he says, liked this, as they could take notes and memorize them word for word for the exams. Runciman comments on this situation by saying that as the exams were done orally, “you had to face having your lectures repeated back at you.” Though the students did not understand a word of what he meant, still they retold every single word Runciman had said in class. This made marking difficult for him.

A striking observation of Runciman is about the girls at the university. He says, “girls, though far fewer, were of a higher standard than the boys. This was because a Turkish girl needed to be keen and enterprising and to come from an enlightened family to get to the University, whereas a boy would go there as a matter of course.” Runciman also talks about the salaries which were a little uncertain. Once when money was short, they were subsidized by gifts of cloth enough to make each of them a suit. As the British Council gave the British professors a useful subsidy they had no problems, but those from other countries with no embassies in Istanbul were not so fortunate.

Runciman met foreigners, ex-patriots from Britain, and also Turkish people from different walks of life. His encounter with Süreyya Ağaoğlu is striking because he considers her to be formidably bright, but yet she could not give orders to her gardener as Turkey was still a man’s world at the time, and men would not get orders from women. Therefore Ms. Ağaoğlu had to ask her brother to convey her orders to the gardener.

Runciman cannot help recalling the attitude of the Turkish academics toward students coming from quite reputable families. In one such case, the student he had failed was passed with distinction by the other faculty members. This meant he was unsuitable for oriental academic life and that it was time for him to leave.

Runciman was invited to the opening ceremony of the Council of Europe exhibition in Istanbul, and was glad to find the city not as badly damaged by modernity as were most great cities, though its skyline was ruined by high-rise hotels on the top of the hill in Pera. It was no longer the domes and minarets dominating the view as you approached the city from Marmara. Runciman regretted this issue which reveals a lot of the value attached to cultural heritage.

Although neither Theroux nor Runciman directly comment on the cultural and national identities of Turkish people in their works, both indirectly reveal striking examples about Turkish people whom they had the opportunity to meet during their travels. Therefore it

becomes possible to say that literature, which is the pillar of cultural studies, helps readers learn about different peoples, different cultures, and consequently their identities.

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