THE LAST MEDITERRANEAN: PAUL THEROUX'S OBSESSIONS BEYOND THE PILLARS

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Abstract

When Charlie Rose asked Paul Theroux about his reasons for writing about the Mediterranean, the subject of numerous other books in 1995, he said, "I don't like other travel books, and this is *my* Mediterranean."[1] Theroux was a renowned travel writer and novelist known for his unconventional style and sharp satirical gaze. In 1993, he had set off on a journey of nine months through the Mediterranean and subsequently published *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (1995). The mid-1990s was an important period in American engagement with the world: the Cold War had ended, and the US, now the sole Superpower, had kicked its "Vietnam Syndrome" in the Persian Gulf War. While historians have begun to examine the renewed sense of American exceptionalism shaping political events of this era, my article contributes to understanding how cultural works reflected and also shaped this era by delving into this author's narrative choices, his craft as a travel writer and ultimately his silences. Theroux was an idiosyncratic author who still spoke to a generation of readers. My study assesses Theroux's narrative style as well as the people and places he chooses to visit and describe in his book. Theroux's Mediterranean thus provides a gateway to understanding what this sea meant to him as an individual while also providing insight into a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape in the US.

Keywords: Paul Theroux, Mediterranean, Travel Narratives, American Identity, American Exceptionalism

> "The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice."
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> Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (584)

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1 Manufacturing Intellect. "Paul Theroux Interview (1995)." *Youtube*. 04 Apr 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXJ_WSyLiNY&ab_channel=ManufacturingIntellect. www.youtube.com.

In 1993, Paul Theroux embarked on a journey through the Mediterranean Sea that resulted in *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (1995). French historian Fernand Braudel famously labeled this region as “a moving concept, a shapeshifting icon of a place that is constantly reconfiguring its own space.”[2] The Mediterranean fostered the interaction of ancient cultures like the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Ottomans. To travel through it and gain wisdom was a rite of passage for upper-class Englishman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the Grand Tour, a concept embodied in the title of Theroux’s book.

Theroux’s itinerary reflects an unparalleled freedom of movement. He invokes the Grand Tour trope, but, as an American, his plan of travel diverges from its original idea. He decided to set out on his own Grand Tour during yet another historical inflection point, a moment of transition when political and cultural tensions were remaking this region: the Yugoslav Wars, the Algerian Civil War, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the first Chechen War, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On trains, in small villages, in big cities, on cruise ships and ferries, Theroux focused on encounters with ordinary people more than tourist attractions and beautiful landscapes. He sets himself apart from the tradition of the Grand Tour as well as the scenic descriptions other travel writers usually produce.

Theroux’s modern American Grand Tour around the Mediterranean presents an author and travel writer attempting to disentangle himself from both European literary tradition and mass tourism, while paradoxically taking part in both. His travelogue, molded by American exceptionalism, projects an ambivalent engagement with the Mediterranean as both a landscape for historical and cultural depth and a stage for his own literary performance. In his quest for authenticity, Theroux often rejects conventional tourist experiences, choosing instead to focus on ordinary people and the seedy underbelly of the Mediterranean. Yet, despite his anti-touristic stance, Theroux’s narrative is undeniably shaped by a nuanced Orientalist, if not imperial, gaze, reflecting the post-Cold War American mindset of superiority and detachment form the globalized world. As George W. H. Bush concluded his presidency, the U.S.’ popularity surged, attracting numerous new allies eager to align with it.[3] Americans perceived themselves as citizens of the sole world superpower. Their blue passport was widely respected in the international arena, and they could go just about anywhere without a visa.

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2 Fernand Braudel. *Memory and the Mediterranean* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

3 Jeffrey A. Engel. *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 8.

This article argues that Theroux's account does not only document a journey through the Mediterranean but constructs a narrative that serves to validate an American-centric worldview. Through his sarcastic and often scathing tone, Theroux creates a Mediterranean that exists primarily as a reflection of American anxieties and exceptionalism in the 1990s. His travelogue is more than a personal quest – it is an exercise in self-fashioning, where the Mediterranean becomes a backdrop against which Theroux attempts to establish his uniqueness as a writer and traveler, while ironically falling into the same imperialist tropes he seeks to avoid. Geoffrey Moorhouse wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* that *The Pillars of Hercules* is "a valuable traveler's tale on which historians will feed gracefully in times to come."[4] This idea that historians can rely on this travelogue as a genuine account is exactly what Theroux aims to accomplish with his narrative choices.

The Pillars of Hercules ultimately revolves around a tension between the factual and the fictional, a tension that allows for a postmodern reading of the narrative. Michel Foucault's assertion that all history is a form of discourse, constructed through language and power,[5] is particularly relevant here. Theroux's narrative resists straightforward categorization as either factual or fictional. Instead, it occupies a liminal space where the Mediterranean is not so much a geographical place as it is a manifestation of the author's subjective imagination. The tendency to mix fact and fiction in his accounts and the ambivalence that results from that align Theroux with postmodernist approaches to literature; his travel writing can be seen, in essence, as fiction, ultimately challenging the distinction between reality and representation.

It also partially aligns with Edward Said's idea of "imaginative geography."[6] Even though Theroux would not be correctly categorized as a typical Orientalist author with an oeuvre devoted to Othering the East, his account does carry elements of colonial representation. The images of the Mediterranean he constructs hinge on his American-ness and that mythical frontier, where traversing conflict-ridden, or in his words "macabre" places represents the discovery of uncharted dangerous territories, echoing traditional themes of discovery and conquest.

The beginning of this article centers on Theroux's motivations to visit this Sea this late in his career and his obsession with creating his own

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4 This quote was inserted as a blurb on the book jacket.

5 Michel Foucault. "The Unities of Discourse." *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

6 Edward W. Said. "Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental." *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 49.

Mediterranean. Then I move on to unpack what it means to be an American author in the Mediterranean whose narrative choices betray an unconscious sense of exceptionalism. Then I shed some light on the plethora of literary allusions Theroux incorporates in the book. I demonstrate that these allusions paradoxically give the travelogue its supposed authenticity as well as undermine the author's claims of uniqueness. The last section of this article deals with Theroux's other source of authority over the text and the Mediterranean: his conscious choice to be silent.

Why the Mediterranean?

As the tradition of travel writing dictates, Theroux often reminds his readers that his book, his narrative voice, and his itinerary are unconventional. He attempts to establish this by using an anti-touristic tone and focusing on people presently living in the Mediterranean, rather than centering the old ruins that signify its bygone historical significance. Ironically, Theroux's narrative choices speak to his own personal investment in how he wishes to have an impact on his audience, and on a larger scale represent his reliance on the Grand Tour trope to bring his book to life. That is, Theroux, through his idiosyncratic depiction of the Mediterranean, inadvertently pushes his American readers to see every aspect of this region in light of his own multifaceted perspective. This begs the question: how does Theroux claim authority to write about the Mediterranean?

With a writing career that spans several decades, Theroux has been writing his fiction and travelogues during different periods in American history. Every book is as much a product of the author's narrative choices as it is of the time and circumstances he lives in. Theroux published his first book in the late 1960s, a time of social and cultural unrest: the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. In contrast, *The Pillars of Hercules* was written in 1993 when the Cold War had ended, and American society was experiencing a "more optimistic public mood…, the only other time the U.S. experienced a decade-long economic expansion."[7]

The Pillars of Hercules was published 20 years after the *Great Railway Bazaar*. By that time, Theroux was in his fifties and had just gone through a divorce. He boasts that "for years I was flopping along elsewhere, avoiding

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7 Jesse Bennett and Rakesh Kochha. "Two Recessions, Two Recoveries." Pew Research Center. 13 Dec 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/12/13/two-recessions-two-recoveries. www.pewresearch.org.

the Mediterranean,"[8] but now he is undertaking a new beginning as a single man. The idea of the Grand Tour is suddenly appealing to him as the rite of passage for cultured young men seeking wisdom and adventure before settling down in marriage as he writes, "Such a trip had always been regarded as the Grand Tour, a search for wisdom and experience."[9] Ironically, Theroux remarries when he returns from his own middle-aged Grand Tour.

When directly asked about his motivations for this journey, however, Theroux shied away from the details of his personal life. He told Charlie Rose, "I don't like other travel books, and this is *my* Mediterranean."[10] If that's the case, the question would then be: why now? To which Theroux would retort in the first pages of the travelogue, "in the way that you don't really understand great novels until you are older and experienced, you needed to be a certain age to appreciate the subtleties of the Mediterranean."[11] This reflection implies that his journey entails much more than geographical exploration. He would not be satisfied with seeing and traversing this great sea, he would like to imagine and write it, just like a great novel. His Mediterranean is presented as a complex narrative to be explored, appreciated and unpacked; it is also aesthetically aligned with the fictional.

To set the tone for the travelogue, he writes, "half a lifetime of traveling had given me a taste for the macabre." He also ponders how "the Pillars [Gibraltar and Ceuta] marked the limits of civilizations, 'the end of voyaging.'" He then goes on to argue that "the Mediterranean has an odd character."[12] These moments, seemingly oblivious to the complexity of the region, speak to Theroux's unconscious anxieties about aging and writing. It becomes clear that *The Pillars of Hercules* goes beyond a genuine representation of a celebrated sea. The author has personal wild oats to sow through his narrative choices.

Theroux – with his satirical and unrelenting ironic style that sometimes unintentionally touches on his own supposed uniqueness – attempts to defy

8 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 6.

9 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 6.

10 Manufacturing Intellect. "Paul Theroux Interview (1995)." *Youtube*. 04 Apr 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXJ_WSyLiNY&ab_channel=ManufacturingIntellect. www.youtube.com.

11 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 9.

12 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 2-3.

the conventional way most other travel writers create their Mediterraneans. As mentioned above, he tries to legitimize his Mediterranean by avoiding the old ruins. Indeed, as Stephen Greenblatt writes, "there is something decidedly ugly about the mood that ruins seem to bring out in Mr. Theroux."[13] This confirms how hard he is trying to break away from the mold of conventional travel writing, and then he contradicts himself later by tracing the steps of his literary guides.

Despite Theroux's stated intention to establish his own style of travel writing, his narrative shows an adherence to the constraints of the genre. He makes consistent references to previous authors and artists who wrote about the Mediterranean, the recurring theme of adventure and exploration, and the itinerary that has been a tradition in Western travel for centuries. James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, T.E. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Edith Wharton and Lew Wallace are just a few examples of the prominent names Theroux covers in the travelogue. A certain pattern emerges here: most of the authors he alludes to are pillars of Western canon and primarily known as fiction writers. This directly raises question marks about his proclaimed uniqueness as a writer and traveler.

He does recalibrate, however, using the theme of anti-tourism. The first sentence of the book reads, "People here in Western civilization say that tourists are no different from apes, but on the Rock of Gibraltar, I saw both tourists and apes together, and I learned to tell them apart."[14] He then devotes the next couple of pages to arguing that apes are essentially better than tourists. His juxtaposition of tourists and apes is one of several images he uses to promote the travelogue as a challenge to the romanticized view of travel. He ridicules mass tourism, and by doing so he ultimately aims to distance himself from the established traditions of Western travel.

This tension between conforming to the genre and recalibrating it, between claiming unprecedented originality and falling back on the familiar is a recurring motif in the narrative. For instance, he shrouds *his* Mediterranean, and evidently every place he visits, in an air of national character. This is best shown as he defines the Mediterranean, this simple, almost tideless sea the size of thirty Lake Superiors, had everything: prosperity, poverty, tourism, terrorism, several wars in progress, ethnic strife, fas-

13 Stephen Greenblatt. "Bored Among the Ruins." *The New York Times*. 5 Nov 1995. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/18/specials/theroux-hercules.html?scp=14&sq=credit%2520cards%2520abroad&st=cse. www.nytimes.com.

14 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 1.

cists, pollution, drift-nets, private islands owned by billionaires, gypsies, seventeen countries, fifty languages, oil-drilling platforms, sponge fisherman, religious fanatics, drug smuggling, fine art, and warfare, it had Christians, Muslims, Jews; it had the Druzes who are a strange farrago of all three religions; it had heathens, Zoroastrians and Copts and Bahais.[15]

While highlighting the stark geographical, political and cultural dichotomies that make up the Mediterranean, Theroux's authoritative summarization comes across as uniquely tailored for the American readership. This enumeration of an extensive range of religious and ethnic groups, while seemingly informative, also subtly implies a position of an outsider looking in, categorizing and defining the region. His use of Lake Superior to contextualize the Mediterranean for American audiences directly underscores his narrative intentions. He uses the familiar reference of Lake Superior to quantify the unfamiliar foreign land and sea reinforcing an American-centric worldview. This travelogue, therefore, was not meant for a reader living in the Mediterranean.

His insistence on setting himself apart has indeed garnered him a wide appeal among American readers, but a closer look at *The Pillars of Hercules* provides more revealing insights into his ambivalent perspective. All authors project their own biases and perceived standards on the places they visit, sometimes through fascination or anachronistic interest in bygone histories and old ruins. Theroux, however, treads a fine line between fact and fiction, and the word "fact" in this context means his representation of what he experiences. It is not set in stone, as his description of Greece for instance highlights, "The whole of Greece seemed to me a cut-price theme park of broken marble, a place where you were harangued in a high-minded way about the Ancient Greek culture while some swarthy little person picked your pocket."[16] More than the striking "nastiness in tone,"[17] he tries to put forth his unfavorable opinion of the remnants of an ancient civilization as the only factual account of what any American should expect to see or perceive.

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15 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 7.

16 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 65.

17 Stephen Greenblatt. "Bored Among the Ruins." *The New York Times*. 5 Nov 1995. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/18/specials/theroux-hercules.html?scp=14&sq=credit%2520cards%2520abroad&st=cse. www.nytimes.com.

Even during interviews, Theroux can be cagey and somewhat difficult to read. One British journalist, Marianne Macdonald, writes, "[He] is notorious for mixing fact and fiction in his books and refusing to say which is which, but this is nothing beside his slipperiness in interview."[18] This ambivalent writing style that blurs fact and fiction allows Theroux to guide his readers' attention whichever way he deems fit in a specific context.

Theroux weaves his literary allusions into his own narrative fabric, creating a complex combination of personal experience, Western literary tradition and subjective interpretation. In one of his many random conversations, he answers the question, "what do you look for in a novel?" He replies, "Originality, humor, subtlety. The writing itself. A sense of place. A new way of seeing. Lots of things. I like to believe the things I read."[19] He wants to mirror his own writing style by emphasizing the importance of originality and humor, although his reliance on works of fiction to construct his narrative is not exactly original, especially for a firsthand account of what he experiences. Additionally, his response offers a window into his narrative approach. For him, fiction is a "new way of seeing," which is what he claims his travelogue offers. This aligns with his practice of blending fact and fiction, suggesting that he sees the fictional aspect of his writing as a reshaping and reframing of real-world experiences.

On the one hand, Theroux presents himself as an original traveler who defies travel writing conventions; on the other hand, he shows great respect and admiration to his literary heroes through constant allusions. The interplay between these two contradictory aspects contributes to the complexity with which he engages generic conventions. He manages to create a narrative that resists categorization to keep the reader engaged with the quasi-fictional world he established.

Theroux's narrative choices and the portrayal of the Mediterranean intertwine with his persona and life experiences. Over the span of his career, Theroux built quite the ill-famed reputation, even among family members, and it is by no means unintentional. "Paul affects 'a fake British accent. We in the family don't mind his affected gentility, his smug and self-important airs, his urgent starfucking insistence that he's a friend of lords and ladies,

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18 Marianne Macdonald. "Who is Paul Theroux." *Independent*. 17 May 1997. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/who-is-paul-theroux-1262143.html. www.independent.co.uk.

19 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 92.

and only laugh at the fame he courts.'"[20] Theroux's older brother uttered these words as a response to a scathing representation of him in one of his "imaginary autobiographies,"[21] called *My Other Life*. This statement seems at first glance petty and somewhat unnecessary, but given its source and the status of its subject, it offers a raw glimpse into Theroux's tendency to imagine and fictionalize, not just as an author, but as an individual. One of the ways he secures this success despite his reputation is by relying on exactly that fictional and simultaneously unapologetic aspect of his writing. He ends up being perceived as the author who is not afraid to hurt anyone's feelings. The countless passengers, natives, shopkeepers, tourists and many other characters who become the subject matter of most of Theroux's dialogues and notes often find themselves unwitting participants in the creation of *his* Mediterranean.

Theroux's American-ness in the Mediterranean

One would assume a narrative about the Mediterranean is an exploration of Europe, remnants of the Ottoman Empire, the Greco-Roman sites and the holy land. Theroux, however, claims to offer a story about the people living there in the present; he makes the conscious choice to ignore what qualifies the Mediterranean as an attractive destination for Westerners, and that pushes his narrative to secure its surface authenticity, which can evidently be easily contested.

The Mediterranean Sea is impossible to define as one homogeneous place with a specific set of attributes. This fact poses a challenge to how Theroux defines himself in it. The complexity of the Mediterranean can go beyond the usual narrative techniques and test his ability to present himself as a knowledgeable travel writer. He carefully designed an itinerary that would prioritize places of war and conflict, and he travels during the low season as he writes, "… for a note-taker like myself, only the unpopular subjects are worth raising in any country."[22] He needs to dis-

20 Marianne Macdonald. "Who is Paul Theroux." *Independent*. 17 May 1997. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/who-is-paul-theroux-1262143.html. www.independent.co.uk.

21 Marianne Macdonald. "Who is Paul Theroux." *Independent*. 17 May 1997. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/who-is-paul-theroux-1262143.html. www.independent.co.uk.

22 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 43.

tinguish himself from the rest of the "ape-like" Western tourists by only visiting the seedier, more decrepit parts of the region. Far from highlighting his uniqueness, this serves to epitomize the then newly resurfacing American mindset of superiority or exceptionalism towards the rest of the world.

How does an author as apparently enigmatic, self-centered and harshly satirical, as Theroux manage to strike a chord with such a large audience and even speak to a generation of Americans? Everyone wants to identify with this seemingly carefree traveler without constraints who does not care for appearances but is curious about the unknown: Stephen Greenblatt in *The New York Times* book review stated that Theroux's "curiosity is not allied to sympathy or charity or faith; it neither links him to the sparks of goodness in this world nor leads him to dreams of past or future glory."[23] This statement highlights Theroux's characteristic blend of curiosity and detached observation, which he constantly strives to sell as deep interest in the people he encounters. For example, when he visited Pivka, a very small town in Slovenia, he felt like he had documented something. A typical tourist might have opted to explore what historical and natural attractions Pivka had to offer. Instead, he described the following, "walking along I heard a child crying inside a house, and a woman scolding; then a slap, and then the child crying louder, and then more scolding. Scold, slap, screech, scold, slap, screech."[24] The way he recounts this otherwise normal mother/child incident as a sequence of events is almost clinical in its precision. This interest is not necessarily rooted in empathy or a desire to connect on a personal level. It is, instead, more analytical and focused.

By attempting to downplay or conceal his American-ness, Theroux often ends up making it more pronounced. On his way to Istanbul, he puts his travel creed on hold and indulges in one of America's most extravagant tourist rites: the cruise ship. In the beginning, he distances himself from other passengers: "*The Seabourne Spirit* passengers said they were a bit disappointed in Sicily. But it wasn't really that. It was a growing love for the ship which eventually took the form of a general reluctance to leave

23 Stephen Greenblatt. "Bored Among the Ruins." *The New York Times*. 5 Nov 1995. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/18/specials/theroux-hercules.html?scp=14&sq=credit%2520cards%2520abroad&st=cse. www.nytimes.com.

24 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 235.

it."[25] By observing the passengers and using the third plural pronoun, he creates the illusion that he doesn't belong, but a few pages afterwards, his tone changes. "This ship was now more than home – it had become the apotheosis of the Mediterranean, a magnificent vantage point in the sea which allowed us to view the great harbors and mountains and cliffs and forts, in luxury."[26] He is all of a sudden one of the passengers and "they" becomes "us." The apparently subconscious shift in perspective underscores his inability to entirely shed his cultural identity and creates a nuanced negotiation between his narrative choice to sound unique and inevitably being part of a collective experience.

This continues even in his dialogues on *The Seabourne Spirit*: "I was absorbed in my meal and probably being a buffoon, saying, 'Yes, Marco, just a touch more of the Merlot with my carpaccio.'"[27] Even though Theroux attempts to veil his touristy enjoyment of this free experience behind this satirical parody of American and European pretentious indulgence, the reader can deduce his sense of belonging there more than in the cheap hotels in Italy or the war-torn streets in what was then still called Yugoslavia. What shows his American-ness decidedly is the fact that he can move in and out of different spaces in a way that a Serbian freedom fighter, for instance, cannot. Ironically, his dangerous itinerary during a time when empires are falling apart further emphasizes how much of a tourist he really is.

Compared to the jarring images of the Mediterranean he had painted in the beginning, this over-the-top ridicule of the cruise ship can be taken as a contradiction or a wry indication that he is in on his own joke. Just like a bad liar caught in his lie, he doubles down on his satire depicting an admittedly amusing but nonetheless transparent dialogue between him and a waiter,

> 'As I mentioned the other day, I try not to eat anything with a face,' I said. 'Which is why I had the asparagus and the truffles last night, and the stir-fried vegetables.'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'[28]

This interaction continues as Theroux pokes fun at the pompous entitlement of passengers such as himself, but at a certain point, his attitude almost seems to come naturally. The Mediterranean, as it were, was his

25 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 235.

26 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 238.

27 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 315.

28 Ibidem.

oyster. And as previously mentioned, that would be Theroux's bane, being perceived as a mass tourist. As David Foster Wallace writes in his essay about the same experience on a cruise ship, which he wrote during the same time Theroux published his travelogue in 1995: one becomes a "late-date American," "economically significant but existentially loathsome." Theroux ultimately falls within the category of tourists he devoted his narrative to ridiculing; he "imposes himself on places [and people] that in all non-economic ways would be better, realer, without him."[29]

One of the many examples of Theroux's detached encounters with natives takes place in a small village in Calabria – which he is visiting, unsurprisingly, because he had read about it in Carlo Levi's memoir, *Christ at Eboli*. Calabria is a small region in the southern part of Italy with a population of about 2 million people.

A conversation that might seem useless or forgettable in a narrative or literary context can be an amusing slice of Mediterranean life to the average American reader. He sees a small fireplace that reminds him of one he has seen before in Inca villages in the Andes, and notes to the old man showing him around, "it's very old."

"Giuseppe made the Italian gesture of finger-flipping that meant 'an incredible number of years – you have no idea.'"

"'When was the last time it was used for bread?'"

"'This morning,' Giuseppe said, and then barked an unintelligible word."[30]

There is nothing noteworthy about this moment. It is not clear why he includes it in the final draft of this narrative, and why it had been published, but even though he might not completely comprehend what he jots down, he does see the potential of showing himself as well-traveled and knowledgeable in these encounters. Such small details provide him with authority over his Mediterranean. By doing this, he appeals to his readers by displaying his "authentic," "realistic" and authoritative approach through his insider knowledge. However, to a fiction writer, a dialogue like this seems to serve absolutely no purpose.

Even though this conversation might not be significant in its narrative qualities, it is revealing of Theroux's approach to the Mediterranean and

29 David Foster Wallace. "Shipping Out". *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 291-377.

30 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 201.

to history in general. He flaunts his supposed knowledge by claiming to know what Giuseppe's hand gesture means, and then describes a word that he might not have understood as an unintelligible "bark." The fact that Theroux finds similarities between the small fireplace in Calabria to those in Inca villages all the way in the Andes is important. Perhaps it is his way of feigning a belief in the universality of human experiences across cultures, but what he ends up accomplishing is a sense of anachronism in these disparate spaces. The artifact is historically significant but is still used in the present; that is why it did not remind him of something back in the technologically advanced U.S.

Theroux's unorthodox approach, if it can be called that, successfully underscores for the American reader a departure from the anticipated, which is exactly his intention. By stepping away from packaged, predictable experiences offered by travel companies, Theroux's method offered a more "authentic," ground-level exploration. This allows him to cater to the growing desire among American readers for a genuine and less commercialized travel narrative.

Theroux's Literary Pilgrimage

Although Theroux told Charlie Rose he sought out "his Mediterranean," it soon becomes clear that his book replicates the Grand Tour, made by English upper classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, if the cagey Theroux was asked about it, he would have argued that it was a satirical jab at the British, but his satire can be a façade for other implications. In many ways, Theroux recycles a fictional Mediterranean of Western European novelists of previous ages. He often relies on British culture and literature even as he boasts of going off the worn trails of tourists and talking to ordinary people, which thus allows him to imagine his "own Mediterranean." He suggests an understanding of an authentic Mediterranean, even as he unintentionally pays homage to those who came before him.

He reduces this huge and diverse world to a set of incoherent ruins, and then likens it to a great novel. A couple of pages after he claims that understanding the subtleties of the Mediterranean entails a certain level of wisdom that only comes with age and experience, he writes, "James Joyce once wrote, 'Rome reminds me of a man who lives by exhibiting to travelers his grandmother's corpse.' I assumed the whole Mediterranean was like that, tourism as ancestor-worship and the veneration of

incoherent ruins."[31] Using this loaded analogy from Joyce adds another layer to Theroux's approach. The image of a grandmother's corpse implies a static and lifeless presentation of history, devoid of contemporary relevance.

Disparities like these show the nuance that frames, not only his motivations, but the persona he attempts to sell to his readers. And at the same time, they betray a certain anxiety. The way Theroux describes where he goes or who he meets, while captivating, is not the end-product of his narratives. It is a means to create an impression of himself, mostly to be liked and admired as the intrepid adventurer whose chosen dangerous itinerary and unique interest in individuals rather than landscapes positions him beyond a mere tourist, and more importantly for him, beyond his literary predecessors. His expressed intention is to document the Mediterranean, aiming to offer a new "way of seeing," but in reality, the narrative revolves around Theroux himself, resembling an exercise in navel-gazing.

By claiming uniqueness and then performing his literary pilgrimage via alluding to, quoting and at times ridiculing almost every writer who has written their Mediterranean, Theroux, consciously or not, instills an uncertainty in his readers. To further compound his ambivalence, Theroux writes, "My idea was to see [the Mediterranean] out of season, when the tourists were back home, to spend the fall and winter in the northern half, the spring and summer in the Levant and North Africa, going from the Pillar to the other; and to make a modern Grand Tour, seeking out wise people."[32] Although he partakes in the luxury of the cruise ship, it was short-lived, and he claims to have done it because it was free. He paradoxically puts forth the idea that the only way to gain wisdom from his Mediterranean journey is to go during the off-season and then calls it a modern Grand Tour, which has existed for centuries and is no different from Mark Twain's "pleasure excursion."

A few pages into *The Pillars of Hercules*, the literary allusions to American, British, and European fiction writers become more and more prominent. Theroux's interactions with British literary giants, however, are a particularly noteworthy facet of his narrative. His ex-wife is British, and his son, born in England, is also British. This adds an intriguing and highly personal layer to his connections to British literature, especially given that his brother had pointed out his fake accent: it becomes clear that Theroux

31 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 9.

32 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 11.

is fascinated by British culture and the writings of these literary pioneers. This strongly suggests that his narrative about the Mediterranean is framed by his literary guides, despite claims of seeking out "my" Mediterranean.

Based on Theroux's use of Evelyn Waugh, famous author of *Labels: A Mediterranean Journey* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934), he might wince in hurt disbelief at the contention that his narrative is built on others. He would conjure up his constant ridicule of Waugh's obvious narrative flaws and "snap-judgements" as evidence to the purity of his own work. This, however, would merely serve to confirm his need, and perhaps obsession to set himself apart, but eventually not being able to completely accomplish that. To bypass that, he attempts to take advantage of his confusing effect on the reader to hide these apparent paradoxes behind satire, irreverence and ambivalence.

For Theroux, the allure of travel lies in the opportunity to document and describe places that have escaped the typical tourist gaze or mainstream travel narratives. He writes, "*No one has ever described the place where I have just arrived:* this is the emotion that makes me want to travel. It is one of the greatest reasons to go anywhere."[33] By adopting this approach, he paradoxically distinguishes himself for his readers as the writer who avoids popular destinations in favor of more obscure, often challenging locales. It is as if he forgets how many authors he references wherever he goes, and that he is in the Mediterranean. In his quest to carve out a distinct niche for himself and his readers, he faces the well-documented reality of his chosen landscape.

As he is approaching Alexandria, he conjures up what he believes are fictional images of the city previously created by other authors, and then says, "But that fictional city was gone, if indeed it had ever existed."[34] His argument is that the space one visits, its history and what comes with it are fictional, in that they are one's own creation, their idiosyncratic projection on a foreign land. This, to him, is what makes that space real. If an author is skilled enough at writing *their* Mediterranean, they would make their readers see fiction as truth. And much like the images Theroux creates, his introspective musings can also be very convincing.

Theroux's insistence on meeting Naguib Mahfouz accentuates a different aspect of his literary obsession. "[His] conversations are rarely profound," writes Stephen Greenblatt, "the only real exception is a luminous hour Mr. Theroux spends with the Egyptian Nobel laureate, Naguib Mah-

33 Paul Theroux, *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 363.
34 Ibidem.

fouz, as he recuperates in a Cairo hospital from a terrorist's knife – but their cumulative power is considerable."[35] Mahfouz is indeed painted in the best light in this encounter. Theroux tells Charlie Rose that he had to choose between visiting the Pyramids and the Sphynx or going to see the bedridden Mahfouz, and that the choice was clear.[36] This is, however, one of those ironic statements he is consistently unaware of. Mahfouz, to him, is *part* of the Mediterranean, a living relic, a literary specimen to be read, cherished and appreciated, and the chance to personally meet him is nothing more than what he calls "literary pilgrimage." In Theroux's narrative, Mahfouz can never hold the same status of a British writer to be quoted and ridiculed like Evelyn Waugh for instance.

Theroux's Silences

Paul Theroux's numerous interactions with literary figures in the Mediterranean – either through face-to-face conversation or through referencing their writing – differ drastically depending on the specific situations he chooses to depict for his readers. Encounters with authors like Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt and Mohamed Choukri in Morocco reveal gaps or silences more than new information. These silences are not merely the omission of dialogues or avoidance of topics; they are spaces where Theroux's own American preconceptions and the limitations of his cultural understanding come to the forefront beyond his narrative control.

While Theroux is waiting for his meeting with Mahfouz, and as he is trying to explain what had happened to the author, he ropes the reader in with some of his irreverent rants about Egyptian towns, "They seemed to exist in that Third World dimension of poverty and neglect that held them outside of time."[37] After he relates the story of Mahfouz's assassination attempt, he continues to reflect on this seemingly anachronistic dimension that Arabs occupy, "Time had done very little to change the Arabic lan-

35 Stephen Greenblatt. "Bored Among the Ruins." *The New York Times*. 5 Nov 1995. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/18/specials/theroux-hercules.html?scp=14&sq=credit%2520cards%2520abroad&st=cse. www.nytimes.com.

36 Manufacturing Intellect. "Paul Theroux Interview (1995)." *Youtube*. 04 Apr 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXJ_WSyLiNY&ab_channel=ManufacturingIntellect. www.youtube.com.

37 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 368.

guage or the structure of Egyptian life."[38] As he describes the book that led its author to a close call with death, and had won him a Nobel Prize in literature – very real, tangible results in the present – he views the medium used as a language immune to change. His choice of words confirms his paradoxical approach to be silent; he reinforces his silence by implicitly appealing to the more modern, evolving English language.

After Theroux converses with Mahfouz for a bit in the ICU, mostly about the latter's current situation, he, perhaps unconsciously, refers to his silence. He writes, "I realized that I had been the one who had raised the religious issue and harped on the attack. But in retrospect, I had the feeling Mahfouz would have been much happier talking about something else – his work, perhaps."[39] As he proudly boasts, Theroux chose meeting Mahfouz over visiting the Pyramids acknowledging his stature and brilliance, and then he proceeded to do what any American would have: avoid this great writer's extensive career and view him instead as a symbol. Therefore, his fascination with Mahfouz does not necessarily translate into an in-depth exploration of the man's thoughts, but it is rather a touristic observation of a man that falls outside the usual sphere of Western literary and cultural experience.

Even when he appears to be praising the place, he maintains his preconceived notion about a "Third World dimension." Upon his departure from Egypt, he contemplates, "Alexandria on my return seemed serene, as Mahfouz had described it: 'Here is where love is. Education. Cleanliness. And hope.'" … "Alexandria made sense to me now. It was not a derelict or threatening place. It was an ancient city, founded by Alexander the Great around 330 B.C."[40] Alexandria is still an old, anti-modern city, but now it is seen in a new light. Not because he explored its streets and alleys and changed his mind, but because of his encounter with Mahfouz.

At the end of his journey, Theroux lands in Tangier, and of course this famously touristic city on the Mediterranean is not his main interest. He wants to meet the American expatriate writer Paul Bowles who has been living in Tangier for a few decades. Juxtaposing this encounter with Mahfouz before and Mohamed Choukri after is pivotal to understanding Theroux's approach.

He adopts a different, more journalistic tone in his conversation with Bowles, and his previous veneration of Mahfouz as a living literary relic

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38 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 369.
39 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 373.
40 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 374.

disappears as he engages in a dialogue that shows the author as a contemporary literary peer. Although Theroux makes sure to highlight Bowles' idiosyncratic peculiarities, he nonetheless focuses on his career and stay in Tangier. He's not afraid to show this great American author in an unflattering light, which he would not dare do with Mahfouz. He writes, "He seemed at once preoccupied, knowledgeable, worldly, remote, detached, vain, skeptical, eccentric, self-sufficient, indestructible, egomaniacal, and hospitable to praise."[41] Ironically, this long and amusingly observant list of adjectives can just as well be used to describe Theroux himself: he sees himself in this veteran writer. However, he would not claim to know this much about Mahfouz even though he's met with both briefly. Mahfouz is like the Pyramids, not old and dilapidated, but wise and exotic and represents a different era.

The last encounter with another writer in *The Pillars of Hercules* was not planned. After Theroux leaves Bowles' house, he goes to an obscure bar in the alleys of Tangier and meets Mohamed Choukri. Their conversation, abrupt and brief, is arguably more interesting than the other two. Throughout their dialogue, Choukri's answers are direct and unpolished, something that Theroux wants to take advantage of. The following exchange is a good example:

> "'[Jean] Genet preferred me to Bowles'"
> …
> "Why?"
> "'Because I am marginal,' Choukri said. 'Bowles is from a great family. He has money. He has position. But I am a Berber, from a little village. Until I was twenty I was illiterate. … I had thirteen brothers and sisters. Nine of them died of poverty.'"
> "How long have you known Bowles?"[42]

Given his claim as a curious chronicler of the human condition in the Mediterranean, and after hearing all of that from Choukri, his follow-up question is about Bowles. This was not a planned meeting, and he could not help but silence the marginal genius sitting in front of him.

Theroux's silences are a revealing theme in the narrative that show the complex interplay of reverence, exoticization and detachment that

41 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*, 518.
42 Paul Theroux. *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean,* 521.

shape his encounters with these literary figures, and ultimately with the Mediterranean.

In summary, *The Pillars of Hercules*' underlying tone of American exceptionalism is not only a manifestation the author's personal investment but the symptom of the larger encounter between American identity and the Mediterranean. Rooted in a post-Cold War context, Theroux's narrative choices highlight his attempt at being authentic during this idiosyncratic Grand Tour. By distancing himself from tourist attractions and focusing, to a large extent, on the Mediterranean as a lived experience, he manages to set himself apart from traditional travel writing about this space. His portrayal of the region, however, reflects an incongruous blend of reverence for literary giants and a selective gaze shaped by American biases.

Theroux's depiction of the Mediterranean is a testament to the complex exchange between American exceptionalism and the historical gravitas that the region carries. His narrative mirrors his own sense of detachment and superiority, and ultimately provides insights into the American mindset of the 1990s. This study of *The Pillars of Hercules* underscores the significance of analyzing American representations of the Mediterranean in understanding broader themes of cultural encounters: the other frontier, as it were.

Studying Paul Theroux in relation to the Mediterranean can spark necessary debates between scholars from American, Mediterranean and even Transatlantic studies. Theroux's work reveals the ways in which American travelers engage with the rest of the world, while offering a glimpse into their own identity make-up. This exploration allows for a deeper appreciation of the narrative strategies and cultural biases that mold our understanding of the world.

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