# Travel and Modernist Literature

## Sacred and Ethical Journeys

Alexandra Peat

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**For my parents**

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# Contents

# Introduction

## The Spiritual Ethics of Modernist Pilgrimage

In 1869, at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society, the philosopher Thomas H. Huxley coined the word 'agnostic'. Huxley needed a new term to define his religious, political and ethical position, something that for him would be 'suggestively antithetic' of the doctrinal religious beliefs of the majority of his fellow Victorians and 'the "Gnostic" of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which [he] was ignorant' (Huxley 1909: 239). In resisting Gnosticism, however, Huxley distinguished his position from that of the atheist as well, for agnosticism, he argued, was rooted in the premise that the existence or non-existence of God was intrinsically unknowable. While Huxley's refusal to commit to a belief in any form of ultimate knowledge has frequently seen him labelled as an anti-religious man of science, he maintained that 'a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology' (Huxley 1903: 318). Huxley's notion of agnosticism thus inhabits a spiritual framework, although it broadens the parameters of this framework to include a spirituality that goes beyond a belief in God to embrace an ethical questioning of the very nature of belief. The significance of this point is far-ranging. At the same time as Huxley articulated the growing religious scepticism of late Victorian intellectual life, he also ushered in the intense secularism seen as synonymous with the modernist era; a precise understanding of his position is thus fundamental to any consideration of modernist spiritual ethics. If modernism can be characterised as an agnostic literary age, Huxley's own definition of his term helps us to see that, even as many modernist writers shared his 'active scepticism', they neither utterly abandoned questions of spirituality nor wholly lost their sense of the sacred.

Following Huxley, many modernist writers transformed or significantly broadened their understanding of what spirituality could mean. For the modernists, a sense of the sacred no longer primarily resulted from an unwavering faith in God, nor could it be easily contained within the framework of a denominational religious system; the question of faith remained nonetheless central to the modernist ethos. Modernist literature evinces a sense of the sacred as a form of faith or, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, a 'will to believe' in something that is not there for the test of

reason or empiricism.[1] It embraces a sense of blessedness derived from manifold sources including nature and interpersonal connections, as well as scientific and technological developments. It understands the experience of the sacred as one of being connected to something larger than the self and consequently constructs spirituality as an ethical mode of understanding the place of the individual in the universe. In the increasingly secularised spaces of modernity, writers from Joyce Cary to Dorothy Richardson, from Henry James to Ernest Hemingway, continued to interrogate inherited definitions of sacredness and to explore emerging notions of non-doctrinal spirituality. These writers became literary pilgrims who combined an active agnosticism with a quasi-spiritual quest to engage with their cultural histories in the search for a new spiritual ethos for the modern age. They did so most overtly through the trope of the sacred journey which recurs persistently and meaningfully in modernist literature.

An illustration from the canons of secular modernism will clarify this point. Virginia Woolf's well-established religious scepticism permeates her novels and is best encapsulated by the figure of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a man whose very posture declares, 'there is no God' (Woolf 1992b: 224). Yet in apparent contradiction to her own and her characters' religious doubt, the novel as a whole enacts a version of a sacred journey. The title of *To the Lighthouse* simultaneously evokes journey and homage. The notion of the journey frames the entire novel, from James's 'extraordinary joy' (1992b: 7) at the thought of visiting the lighthouse in the opening scene, to Mr Ramsay, Cam and James's boat trip to reach the lighthouse in the final pages. Equally, the novel constitutes an act of literary homage to Woolf's family and childhood and, as the title more specifically suggests, to the lighthouse whose beam both punctuates and illuminates the plot. The lighthouse is a sacred space that Woolf consistently conceives of in mobile terms. This mobility is seen primarily in the journey to the lighthouse – a journey prone to rerouting and deferrals – but is also apparent in the image of the lighthouse itself. As Woolf's Lily Briscoe contends, 'so much [ ... ] depends on distance' (1992b: 207): according to the viewer's perspective, the lighthouse is either 'a stark tower on a bare rock' (1992b: 220) or 'a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening' (1992b: 202). Ultimately, it is, James comes to realise, both at once for 'nothing was simply one thing' (Woolf 1992b: 202). The blinking yellow eye of the lighthouse signifies a sacred site that changes according to perspective and that, furthermore, has a transformational power of its own, epitomised by the sweeping beam that lights up the landscape in an instant and then subsides. Instead of representing or inciting a 'grand revelation', this sacred space creates little 'illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark' (Woolf 1992b: 176).

Woolf's lighthouse is a sacred site, and the journey to it can best be described as a pilgrimage. Cam imagines the journey as an expedition of 'adventure and escape', and, as she dangles her hand in the sea during the

short crossing, envisions 'a world not yet realised [ ... ] Greece, Rome, Constantinople' (Woolf 1992b: 205). The journey to the lighthouse imaginatively connects Cam to a larger world of uncharted territory and, at the same time, back to her past and her childhood aspirations. As the lighthouse emerges out of the silvery mist, it becomes a Promised Land for Woolf's characters. The journey to the lighthouse that structures the narrative progression of Woolf's novel impels both characters and readers to realise the symbiotic relationship between geographical and allegorical journeys. The pilgrimage in the novel is simultaneously a material expedition and a metaphorical act of homage. It is this connection, so clear in *To the Lighthouse*, between journey and homage that forms the central focus of this book. *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys* considers the complex ethical relationship between journeying and spirituality in modernist literature and explores the contradiction and ambivalence central to the treatment of the sacred journey in modernism.

## MODERNIST TRAVEL

In modernist literature we do not often find the traditional model of a pilgrimage to a preordained sacred shrine; rather, we must make a conceptual leap in order to see the spiritual journey in the mundane mechanics of modern travel. The transformation of the trope of pilgrimage must thus be understood in relation to the ways in which the idea and experience of travel as a whole were radically changing during this epoch. If we define the modernist period as roughly from 1880 to 1950, then we can see that during this period two key interrelated socio-historical phenomena impacted conceptions of travel: first, the emergence of modernism tourism as an industry, and second the changing breadth and influence of the British Empire. As modernist literature turns repeatedly to tropes of travel, it evinces an ongoing concern with both these socio-historical changes. Paying particular attention to British modernism, Paul Fussell provides an almost mind-boggling catalogue of books about or influenced by travel and notes not only the overt examples of travel fiction but also the metaphors of ships and trains that form the 'accessories and associations' of much modernist fiction (1982: 50). His work suggests that modernist literature is obsessed with depicting space and the movement between spaces, and the consistent recurrence of the trope of travel highlights the critical need to acknowledge modernist travel fiction as a richly varied genre that responds to an important cultural turn. Over recent years, the idea of movement has received growing attention in modernist studies, and the study of modern travel remains an emerging and exciting field of research. The ever-proliferating number of critical studies on modernist travel fiction, such as, to name only a few, James Buzard's *Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture'* (1993), Caren Kaplan's *Questions of Travel: Postmodern*

*Discourses of Displacement* (1996) and Andrew Thacker's *Moving Through Modernity* (2003), attests to the truth of Michel Foucault's contention that the twentieth century is 'the epoch of space' (1986: 22).

During this period more people than ever before were moving around the world, and the experience of taking trains, boats and airplanes to far-flung places excited a new sense of wonder. The opening of Cook's Tours for business in July 1841 is often heralded as the birth of the modern tourism industry. Their first tour was by rail from Leicester to Loughborough, a distance of only about 16 miles, but following the success of their domestic trips, in 1955, the company took a 'Grand Tour' to Europe, which inaugurated the package tour and afforded a wide variety of people the possibility of international travel for the very first time.[2] Other significant historical precursors that paved the way for the modern tourism industry include: the emergence of the guidebook industry in the mid- to late nineteenth century, the development of international shipping lines in the 1830s and the subsequent reign of the ocean liner in the early twentieth century, the consolidation and spread of the railway network, the creation of an international network of telegraph wires and submarine cables and the beginning of commercial aviation in the 1920s.[3] The word 'tourist' first entered the English lexicon in 1780 (*OED*); by the beginning of the twentieth century the word had come to indicate not just a form of travel but also a specific class of leisure and pleasure travelling and a particular travelling identity. By the 1930s, 'tourist' had accrued its current negative connotations (Jonathan Culler describes the perception of the tourist as 'the lowest of the low', adding 'no other group has such a uniformly bad press' [1988: 153]), and people were complaining about tourist trade, traffic and traps. The emergence of the tourist as the quintessential figure of modern travel suggests that whether for good or bad all other modes of travel were left behind or swept aside by the cultural shifts of modernity. Paul Fussell articulates this very anxiety when he nostalgically suggests that 'before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration' (1982: 38); Fussell's fear that tourism sucks the romance out of travel and leaves nothing new to be explored or discovered echoes D. H. Lawrence's world-weary worry, expressed in 1931, that 'the world has become small and known [ ... ] We've done the globe and the globe is done' (1976: 29).

Just as modern tourism can be seen both to supplant and represent the demise of the independent traveller or the valiant explorer, so too is it sometimes identified as a 'frivolous inauthentic activity' or materialistic substitution for the sacred journey (Graburn 1983: 15). However, recent sociological discussions of the relationship between religious pilgrimage and modern tourism have complicated the binary opposition between spiritual journeys and tourism. Responding to Victor and Edith Turner's assertion that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (1978: 20), anthropologists and sociologists frequently characterise tourism as a kind of sacred journey and define such modern tourist attractions as the Eiffel

Tower, Disney World, Graceland or even the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York as new sacred sites. Tracing the links between holidays and Holy Days, Dean MacCannell suggests that tourist attractions constitute the shrines of modernity and posits sightseeing as a kind of sacred ritual (1976: 13). By considering the spiritual aspects of tourism, MacCannell thinks beyond the rather hackneyed and inescapably snobbish view of tourism as simply inferior, hedonistic or passive travel. Indeed, as Erik Cohen contends, the very characteristics that we disparage in the modern tourist are central to the experience of pilgrimage: first, pilgrims are encouraged to follow fixed itineraries, whereas tourists are mocked for refusing to get off 'the beaten track'; second, the presence of other pilgrims enhances the authenticity of the pilgrimage, whereas tourists are belittled for travelling in herds; and, finally, pilgrims travel precisely in order to illustrate and secure their commitment to a religious or social group, whereas tourists are scorned for being, as Boorstin puts it unadventurous and 'passive' (1977: 85).[4] While MacCannell and Cohen usefully explore the convergence between pilgrimage and tourism, they ultimate posit pilgrimage as a precursor to modern tourism. However, the tourist and the pilgrim are not so easily divided by either historical demarcations or travelling practices. After all, even medieval pilgrims interrupted their spiritual journey to buy souvenirs, and modern tourists continue to flock to religious edifices and traditional sacred sites. The examples of modern travel fiction considered in this study all complicate the dichotomy between tourist and pilgrim by tracing the various ways in which the sacred journey is transformed and rerouted in the secular spaces of modernity.

It is impossible to discuss modernist travel fiction without considering the rise of the modern tourism industry; it is equally impossible to ignore the context of colonialism. This historical epoch saw both the height and the collapse of the British Empire and witnessed along the way the consolidation of imperial and expatriate communities, two world wars, the creation of the Commonwealth and the League of Nations and the beginning of larger waves of expatriation, exile and immigration both to and from the colonies. The expanding reach of the British and other empires during the first half of the twentieth century has been connected to both the development of modern travel (McKenzie 2005) and the rise of modernism itself (Anderson 1984; Husseyn 2005; Jameson 1990). Fredric Jameson's 'Modernism and Imperialism' was one of the first critical moves to place these two categories side by side: his work has been taken up in various important ways, albeit by critics who 'do not always agree with the answers Jameson supplied to [ ... ] questions' about the connection between modernist practices and imperial policies (Begam and Moses 2007: 1). Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby's substantial collection *Modernism and Empire* examines the 'pervasive but complex interrelations between British colonialism and the modern movement' (2000: 1). Introducing a special issue of the journal *Modernism/modernity* dedicated to transnational modernism, Simon

Gikandi defines modernism as 'perhaps the most intense and unprecedented site of encounter between the institutions of European cultural production and the cultural practices of colonized peoples' (2006: 421). In their introduction to *Geographies of Modernism*, Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker note how the globalised and increasingly interconnected spaces of colonial modernity suggest ways in which not only people but also 'modernist practices travel and migrate across nations and are, in turn, transformed by encounters with indigenous national cultures' (2005: 4). Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses' collection *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939* explores the diversity of 'responses to empire' (2007: 6). While such studies constitute an important corrective to previous accounts of literary modernism that 'did not mention the late colonial context' (Booth and Rigby 2000: 1), there is now a danger that imperialism will be seen as the only context within which to understand modern travel fiction.

The resurgent critical interest in space, place and travel constitutes a welcome move away from the tradition of privileging time in modernist studies and has done much to broaden our understanding of the social and political dimensions of modernism. Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, rails against the assumption that 'Modernism was elitism. Modernism was the establishment. "High Culture" lifting its skirts against the taints of the "low", the masses, the popular. Modernism was the supreme fiction, the master narrative, the great white hope' (2001: 494). As Friedman's work challenges, in order to broaden, our understanding of modernism, it is the vanguard of critical attempts to account for the political and economic determinants, and social inequalities, of modern literary production. Turning my attention to the persistent trope of travel, I suggest that the very proliferation of modernist travel fiction challenges the preconception that modernism is nihilistic and solipsistic. Travel literature is inherently invested in the relation of the self to the world, and, furthermore, social class, gender and race always influence the activity of travel. Yet, while Friedman warns us of the limitations of binary ways of thinking about modernism, the modernist literature of and about travel is too often seen in binary terms as either a reflection of or a reaction to European imperialism. By considering the multiple motivations for movement in modernity, we can begin to account for the complexity of international travel and transnational culture in an age that must be understood in relation to not only the British Empire but also a new interest in global affairs from all social classes and various political spectrums.

While this book is indebted to previous studies of modernist movement, it differs significantly from such works in that I am not only interested in the fact that the modernists travelled (or indeed the fact that they travelled so very prolifically), where they travelled to, or how they travelled. I am also and primarily interested in *why* they travelled. This study explores the motivations for the journey in modernist literature. Despite the many discussions on the topic, the impetus behind modernism's obsession with

movement remains contested. Is the modernist interest in travel culture a response to the imperialism of the era and thus unavoidably tainted by imperialist agendas? Is it an act of revolt and a means by which to escape from the restrictive mores of one's homeland? Or is it 'an art in itself' (Korte 2000: 77), an aesthetic experience that verges on decadent hedonism? Modernist travel has been consistently critiqued as a geographical and material process; it has also been frequently discussed in socio-political terms, particularly in relation to the growing commercialism of the modern tourism industry and the ramifications of travel during an imperial era. This book builds on the geographical, spatial and socio-political concerns central to previous studies of modernism and travel but shifts the focus in order to argue that modernist travel fiction must also be examined in an ethical and spiritual light.

I place the transformed modernist conception of spirituality side by side with changing ideas about ethics, looking at both through the prism of travel fiction. The field of modernist studies has been recently revitalised by what Marjorie Garber et al. broadly conceive of as a 'turn to ethics' (2000).[5] However, while the geographical movements and the complex ethical concerns of modernity are now acknowledged as two centrally important strands of modernist studies, rarely are these two aspects of modernism brought together. This book begins this work by considering the ethical underpins of travel in the modernist era. The philosopher Bernard Williams distinguishes between 'ethics', a broader term that refers to guiding principles, and 'morals', a narrower term that indicates social conventions or codes. As Todd Avery notes, the 'moral standing-in [for ethics] with its connotation of duty to social convention, involves a reification of dominant social norms and values, at the expense of minority values, or the reification of the idea of a transcendent, transhistorical norm to the exclusion of alternative values' (2006: 129). Williams warns against looking for an absolute truth in ethics and concentrates instead on particular ethical questions. This suggests a way of thinking about ethics in action or ethics in the world, rather than rigid moral systems. This broader understanding of ethics, as distinct from morals, is closely related to my conception of the changing nature of spirituality in the modernist period. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Michael Levenson reminds us of the growing doubts about 'the foundations of religion and ethics', and his pairing of these terms is not accidental (1999: 5). With the loss of spiritual certainty at the turn of the twentieth century, religion no longer provided a foundational moral framework. The new, simultaneously more ambivalent and more expansive sense of spirituality that emerged represented not a comprehensive and closed system of belief but a means of questioning one's place in the universe and thinking in relation to something larger than the self.

Modernism's concern with spiritual ethics comes to the fore in the trope of the sacred journey. The modernist pilgrimage is not only a form of spiritual seeking but also a journey that emphasises the ongoing encounter