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**Travel Literature Reconsidered:
Mobility and Subjectivity in *Passenger to Teheran***

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Abstract

Travel Literature Reconsidered: Mobility and Subjectivity in *Passenger to Teheran*

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The critical attention that has been given to Vita Sackville-West's travel literature has primarily focused on the relationships between these texts and the novels of Virginia Woolf on account of the intimate relationship that existed between the two writers. I argue in this paper that Sackville-West's travel accounts are worthy of study in and of themselves. This report explores the ways that the genre of travel literature was changing in the early twentieth century through Vita Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* (1926). Critics such as Marie Louise Pratt have noted that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British travel accounts had been used as a way to transmit technical knowledge of, and authority over, the East. Sackville-West's text throws this tradition of the genre into question through its focus on the traveler's subjectivity. Working from Michel de Certeau's ideas regarding railway travel and incarceration, I want to demonstrate that the traveler's subjectivity is augmented by her position as a passenger in various modes of mobility. Ultimately I argue that the privileging of imagination and subjectivity over scientific knowledge found in *Passenger to Teheran* unravels the traditional

epistemology of travel writing which positions the traveler as an authority figure on the East, and instead positions Sackville-West as a traveler-*aesthete*. This shift in the role of the travel writer reveals that while Pratt's description characterizes some travel writing, Sackville-West's travel project is more concerned with discovering the creative potential that travel can stimulate in the mind rather than purporting to reveal facts about the outside world.

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The Travel Book and its Limitations

Upon her return from her first journey to Teheran, Vita Sackville-West received a letter from her intimate friend Virginia Woolf, asking if she would let the Woolfs have the travel book describing the trip (DeSalvo and Leaska 124). Although Sackville-West was dubious about the quality of her first foray in the tradition of travel writing, Virginia Woolf had the second batch of proofs for *Passenger to Teheran* in hand only a few months later, and quickly “swallowed [them] at a gulp” (DeSalvo and Leaska 139). “I think it’s awfully good,” she wrote to Sackville-West, “The whole book is full of nooks and corners which I enjoy exploring” (139-40). While scholarly attention has recently been given to the travel book that Woolf deemed to be “awfully good,” the focus on *Passenger to Teheran* (1926) has primarily rested on its relationship with and influence on Virginia Woolf’s novels, particularly *Orlando*.¹ Other recent studies have included brief discussions of these pieces of literature in an attempt to augment examinations of travel fiction by inserting commentary on non-fictional narratives.² Even books aimed at being expansive studies of Vita Sackville-West’s works, such as Sara Ruth Watson’s *V. Sackville West*, which claims to be “the first full-length study” (5) of the writer, dedicate

¹ For discussions of the relationship between Sackville-West’s travel writing and Woolf’s novels, see Joyce Kelley’s “‘Nooks and Corners Which I Enjoy Exploring’: Investigating the Relationship between Vita Sackville-West’s Travel Narratives and Woolf’s Writing”, Karen R. Lawrence’s *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* pp. 183-206, and Urmila Seshagiri’s *Race and the Modernist Imagination* pp. 168-88. For a discussion of how the intimate relationship between the two writers had an impact on their works, see Joanna Grant’s “They Came to Baghdad: Woolf and Sackville-

² Alexandra Peat *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys*, pp. 17; 28-31.

only a few paragraphs to her travel writing.³ Yet due to the emergence over the past decade or two of travel literature as a serious area of study,⁴ the “nooks and crannies” of *Passenger to Teheran* enjoyed by Virginia Woolf demand critical attention in of themselves.

The lack of critical attention given to *Passenger to Teheran* in the past may be due to the status of the literary genre they fall under, which has been “traditionally classified as [a] minor or marginal genre[], and accused of lacking the invention, creativity, and imagination which characterize highly ‘literary’ genres such as fiction.”⁵ Travel writing is also seen as an amorphous body of literature, taking on the characteristics of multiple genres. In their Introduction to *Perspectives on Travel Writing*, Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs note that “[i]n much the same way that travel itself can be seen as a somewhat fluid experience, so too can travel writing be regarded as a relatively open-ending and versatile form” (3). Despite these challenges, Sackville-West’s epistemological and aesthetic undertaking in her travel narratives merits further exploration. Through an examination of Sackville-West’s first travel narrative, *Passenger to Teheran*, this paper explores how the limitations of a genre that is already unstable are complicated further by modernism’s epistemological questioning and modernity’s forms of mobility.

³ The Hogarth Press published Sackville-West’s second travel book, *Twelve Days*, in 1928. It describes her journey through the Bakhtiari Mountains in 1927.

⁴ In their Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), Hulme and Youngs reveal that “The academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome their previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously and have begun to produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated,” pp. 1.

⁵ Loredana Polezzi, “Between Gender and Genre: The Travels of Estell Canziani,” pp. 123.

One of the aspects of *Passenger to Teheran* that I am most interested in examining for this paper is Vita Sackville-West's self-awareness of the traditions and limitations of the genre of travel literature. In "Increasingly 'Imaginative Geographies,'" Joyce Kelly remarks that "Sackville-West invents a text that is... less a travel narrative than a meditation on the form of travel narratives" (368). This meditation on form is most apparent in the "Introductory" chapter of *Passenger*. Here Sackville-West uncovers one limitation of letters of travel by pointing out the distance between the reality of a place known since childhood through literary representation and the "fresh but not necessarily truer impression of our actual beholding" (26).⁶ This prompts the travel writer to conclude:

There would seem, then, to be something definitely wrong about all letters of travel, and even about books of travel, since the letters of another age, collected into library editions, may fairly claim to rank as books rather than as mere correspondence. There would seem, going a step further, to be something wrong about travel itself. Of what use is it, if we may communicate our experience neither verbally nor on paper? (27)

In her essay "The Metamorphosis of the 'Travel Book' in Vita Sackville-West's *A Passenger to Teheran*," Vita Fortunati claims that these references to the tradition of travel narratives are made "to modify it and to question some issues that have always been posed by those writers involved in such a hybrid genre" (65). The above-cited passage shows that Sackville-West locates her concerns with the travel literature genre in language. As it is defined by Sackville-West in this particular narrative, "Travel is

⁶ All page citations for *Passenger to Teheran* are taken from the second edition of the text (1990), which was reproduced recently by Tauris Parke Paperbacks (2007). The second edition includes a New Introduction by Sackville-West's son and literary executor Nigel Nicolson, as well as Nicolson's addition of over 50 photographs that were not included with the Hogarth Press text (1926). This reframing of the text demands further critical attention, which I intend to explore in a longer version of this essay.

simply a taste” (29), a type of sensory experience that is incommunicable since “it may be that language, that distorted labyrinthine universe, was never designed to replace or even to complete the much simpler functions of the eye” (27). Yet, following this introductory chapter that perhaps can only be logically concluded with the death of travel literature as a genre, Sackville-West presents the narrative of her own journey from England to Teheran and back again.

As a travel writer, Sackville-West is forced to navigate through the distorted labyrinth of language that inadequately conveys her experiences to the audience. In addition, she draws attention to another limitation of travel writing: perception. “Like Kinglake’s traveller,” Sackville-West claims, “I was fit only to report of objects, not as I knew them to be, but as they seemed to me – and to read into them, I might add, a great many attributes they could not really possess” (45). Her own admission of reading into objects and reporting them as they “seemed” reveals Sackville-West’s self-consciousness regarding the representational distance encompassed by the pitfalls of language and of her own perception. Her concern with language and its ability to communicate her experiences with the audience also serves as an explanation for why Sackville-West continuously refers to the works of other travel writers. After borrowing a passage from Kinglake, she explains that she brought his text into her own narrative “simply because he had given my meaning better than I could hope to give it myself” (31).⁷ Due to her lack of confidence in language in general, and at times her own words in particular,

⁷ Alexander Kinglake traveled from London to the what was then called the Near East in 1834 (Morris vi-ix). He discusses the superficiality of his own travel narrative in the “Preface to the First Edition,” which Sackville-West paraphrases above. See Alexander Kinglake’s *Eothen*, pp. 1-6.

Sackville-West states that she “was determined to go through Persia with an eye to outward appearances only” (104).

Travel narratives have always walked a fine line between fact and falsehood. As Marie Louis Pratt discusses in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, during the eighteenth century travel accounts and journalism “were essential mediators between the scientific network and a larger European public. They were central agents in legitimating scientific authority and its global project alongside Europe’s other ways of knowing the world, and being in it” (29). However, despite their role for distributing scientific knowledge of the world to the European reading publics, the reliability of travel narratives did not go unquestioned. In his book *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Percy G. Adams dedicates a chapter to “The Truth-Lie Dichotomy” found in the evolving novel and travel narrative, since “travel writers have always been condemned as embellishers of the truth or as plain liars” (85).

An example of the traditional travel account’s concern with fact and falsehood can be found in the oft-cited *Turkish Embassy Letters* of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. The popularity of these letters and their prominence within the travel writing tradition is acknowledged by Sackville-West, who mentions them as an example of letters read “less for the sake of the countries described than for their historical curiosity” (26). Along with the work of Kinglake mentioned above, these letters are part of the tradition that informs Sackville-West’s own writing and to which she is constantly referring. A brief examination of Montagu’s text, therefore, illustrates the forms of travel accounts Sackville-West is building upon and revising. Throughout the *Letters*, Montagu seeks to

correct the falsehoods she claims are present in other travel accounts of the Ottoman Empire. In a letter addressed to her “dear sister,” Montagu relates how she is “downright peevish” with the “ridiculous imagination” of one of her correspondents, who is angry with Montagu because she “won’t lie like other travellers” (Vol. 1.119, Letter XXI). She is particularly ruthless in her criticism of male travel writers’ accounts of the Turkish harem—a space they would have had no access to due to their gender, except through rumor. Montagu writes: “’Tis a particular pleasure to me here, to read the voyages to the Levant, which are generally so far removed from the truth, and so full of absurdities, I am very well diverted with them. They never fail giving you an account of the women, whom ’tis certain, they never saw” (2.131, Letter XXXVII). Her own class and gender positions, however, allow Montagu to claim to be the first Westerner to enter the women’s spaces of the Ottoman Empire and offer an objective report of their reality. The title page of the first three editions, which all appeared in 1763, asserted that the information contained in these letters is “Drawn from Sources that have been inaccessible to other Travellers.” In this way, Montagu’s text participates in the tradition of travel books that Marie Louise Pratt argues “gave European reading publics as sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invested, invested in, and colonized” (3).

Although Sackville-West’s own travel account draws upon and makes reference to this tradition of travel writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, unlike Montagu she makes no attempt to correct any false information they might include. Rather than purport to contain an authoritative, factual account, *Passenger to Teheran*

seems to negate what sense of familiarity with the East that might be available for either traveler or reader. Due to the lack of confidence in language mentioned above, and her belief that “no experience can ever be truly communicated” (27), Sackville-West invalidates the tradition of correcting other travel accounts and privileging one’s own experiences over those of other travelers. While traveling around Teheran and describing the people and places she sees, Sackville-West is careful to explain her actions: “not that I cherish any idea that I am seeing ‘the life of the people’; no foreigner can ever do that, although some talk a great deal of nonsense about it; but I like to look” (92). Although she likes to “look,” Sackville-West avoids making claims of “knowing” the cultures and peoples she encounters since to do so is to talk nonsense.

The Dilettante's Travel Account

Rather than purport to convey knowledge of the East, Sackville-West's consciousness of the limitations of travel writing leads her to privilege the traveler's subjectivity and imagination over any facts gathered during one's travels.⁸ Sackville-West even considers the tradition of the "informative book of travel" to be offensive, since there is nothing more "odious" (31). *Passenger* seems to throw even the existence of an "informative book of travel" into doubt. In the epistemological discussion of the "Introductory" chapter, Sackville-West questions the relationship between even the process of thought and the world of fact. She goes so far as to suggest that this relationship may merely be "a conventionalized, stylized relation such as is born by art, that extraordinary phenomenon, that supreme paradox of conveying truth through various conventions of falsity" (28). As a novelist and a poet, Sackville-West is heavily invested in the phenomenon of art. Rather than attempt to create a merely "informative" narrative, Sackville-West's travel account relies on what she calls the "region of imagination," where "the true pleasure of life may be tasted" and which can be destroyed by the intrusion of reality (25).

By eschewing the informative book of travel, Sackville-West also avoids creating a narrative that has a false claim to knowledge, as well as becoming one of the travel writers Adams noted were called just plain liars. After all, as she approaches Persia for the first time, Sackville-West explains that none of the other travelers to Persia "had

⁸ Helen Carr briefly discusses this trend from "the detailed, realist text, often with an overtly didactic or at any rate moral purpose, to a more impressionistic style with the interest focused as much on the travellers' responses or consciousness as their travels," in "Modernism and Travel (1880-1940), pp. 74.

made one single useful or illuminating remark” about the place (67). Although none of the travel books she has read actually describe the land she is traveling through, she believes this is beneficial as it enables her “to enter Persia with an open mind” (67). In addition to having an open mind about Persia, this lack of accurate description also preserves the traveler’s ability to imagine, since she cannot be sure of what she will encounter. While describing her travels through Egypt, Sackville-West reproaches herself for not taking full advantage of the years she had in England to imagine the Valley of the Kings, since she realizes that once she encounters this site in reality, “the dreary facts of knowledge” (37) will replace the power of her imagination.

These “dreary facts of knowledge” Sackville-West is opposed to exchanging with her ignorance seems to be a significant difference between the modern travel account and the tradition of travel writing. Unlike the travel narrative that was closely aligned with scientific exploration as part of Europe’s ways of “knowing the world, and being in it” (Pratt 29), *Passenger to Teheran* seems to preserve something of the wonder of traveling. Whereas the genre of travel writing had been traditionally used to transmit knowledge of the East to the West, Sackville-West acknowledges that such an endeavor is fruitless. What she is able to communicate, however, is the creative potential of an aesthetic, self-consciously subjective travel account.

It is important to note that Sackville-West does not reject informative books of travel outright, without any contemplation. There are brief meditations in the narrative that reveal her own process of questioning the travel writing tradition rooted in the eighteenth century that, as mentioned above, has served the purpose of conveying

scientific facts to the reading public. Describing the flowers she sees in Teheran, Sackville-West experiences the tension between recording facts and recording her own understanding of the flowers:

I wish I were a botanist, instead of a mere dilettante; but do I wish it really? for I am not sure that pure enjoyment does not wane as technical knowledge waxes; I am tempted to put it to the test, by studying botany until I can distinguish the Scruphulariaceæ from the Caryophyllaceæ, but that I am too much afraid of finding, when I have digested all this knowledge, that I have lost the delights of ignorance. (91)

Sackville-West's vacillation between being a dilettante or a botanist when it comes to describing flowers can be expanded to the larger issue of being a traveler-*aesthete* as opposed to the travel writers who claim to have enough knowledge to perform the role of scientific explorer, specializing in everything from botany to zoology.⁹ For one, even if she were in possession of such specialized knowledge, she would not be able to transmit facts to her audience due to the pitfalls of language. More importantly, gathering such "technical knowledge" removes one's ignorance and thus the power of the imagination. For Sackville-West, "[i]t is safer not to know too much" (91), even though she entertains the idea—if only briefly—of being more than a mere dilettante.

⁹ For further discussion of the various and changing roles played by early travel writers, see William H. Sherman's "Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720)", pp. 22-30.

The Passenger, Incarcerated

In *Passenger to Teheran*, the limitations discussed above are further complicated through the narrator's descriptions of the modes of transportation available to the modern traveler. Even before she leaves Kent, Sackville-West provides the audience with a description of how train travel affects her thoughts and feelings. Describing how landmarks "flash past" her, such as the factory pistons near Orpington, she remarks that during the train ride

[e]verything begins to recede: home, friends; a pleasant feeling of superiority mops up, like a sponge, the trailing melancholy of departure. An effort of will; and in a twinkling I have thought myself over into the other mood, the dangerous mood, the mood of going-out. How exhilarating it is, to be thus self-contained; to depend for happiness on no material comfort; to be rid of such sentimentality as attaches to the dear familiar; to be open, vulnerable, receptive! (33)

The passage above reveals how being mobile allows the traveler to change at the fundamental level of her subjectivity; she becomes superior to her stationary home and friends, taking part in the mood—as well as the mode—of "going-out." The traveler's perception has also shifted, as any feeling of melancholy over her departure from home or sentimentality for her familiar, stationary life is replaced by the exhilaration of watching these attachments recede. The fact that her perception is so quickly and easily affected by the moving train car—and that she appears to realize that this is occurring—is perhaps another reason why Sackville-West is cognizant of the limitation of the travel writer's perception, and wary of any claims of "knowing" the spaces through which she travels.

Although Sackville-West claims that being mobile has caused her to let go of her sentimentality for the familiar in order to be “open, vulnerable, receptive!,” her very position as a passenger creates a sense of distance between herself and the world outside the train car’s window. This separation between the passenger within the train car and what she can see outside of her window is what Michel de Certeau calls the “spectator’s distance” (112).¹⁰ Rather than be able to be vulnerable and receptive to what she sees, the spectator’s distance dictates that, “[y]ou shall not touch; the more you see, the less you hold—a dispossession of the hand in favor of a greater trajectory for the eye” (de Certeau 112). This distance can be seen in Sackville-West’s descriptions of the landscape she encounters once she finally reaches Egypt and has entered a place where she can be open and vulnerable to new experiences. It quickly becomes apparent that her descriptions depend upon her previous descriptions of England.

While on her way to see the Valley of the Kings, which she had not sufficiently taken the time to imagine before her trip, Sackville-West remarks “[h]ow far away now appeared the English fields, yet the two pistons were still going unevenly up and down; small and very brightly green they appeared, as though seen down the wrong end of a telescope, when I thought suddenly of them in the midst of the Theban hills” (36). This connection between the train ride through the English countryside on her way to Dover and her movement down the road to the Valley of Kings certainly demonstrates the “sentimentality for the familiar” (33) that she claimed to be rid of once her travel began.

¹⁰ For another example of how Certeau’s work has been used in studies of modern travel, see Smith’s *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women’s Travel Writing*, pp. 129-31; 149-50. Other than a brief discussion of Virginia Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Smith focuses primarily on the relationship between railway travel and travel narrative in the 1980s and 1990s.

It also demonstrates how Sackville-West's perception of the East has been influenced both by mode of transportation and by her previous knowledge of, and interest in, English landscapes and aesthetics.¹¹ In fact, the incongruence of "soft, green, and cushioned Kent" with the "dust of [Egypt's] lifeless landscape" makes Sackville-West "frightened" while the land itself becomes "threatening" (36). The act of inscribing the familiar English landscapes across the Egyptian plains reveals the distance that exists between the traveler and the space she is traveling through, or at least reveals how the spectator's distance can be maintained and the traveler's identity secured.

¹¹ It was during her trip through Persia that Sackville-West worked on correcting and revising her long poem documenting the Kentish landscape, *The Land*. Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (1983), pp. 157; 165-166.

Modern Mobility In the Primitive East

During her travels through Egypt, Sackville-West's narrative also reflects an awareness of the different types of travel she engages in as a Westerner in relation to the modes of transportation used by the indigenous peoples she observes. In *Moving Lives*, Sidonie Smith explores the link between women's mobility and their position within the Western sphere of "progress." Smith explains that the expanding mobility of women beginning in the middle to late nineteenth century came about as an effect of modernity and "functioned as a sign of modernity as well" (xi). She also discusses how "[n]ew technologies of motion have also created new social relations over the last century. Consequently, they have affected the conditions, the rhythms, even the presentational styles of contact between the traveler and other travelers, between the traveler and strangers" (23). Sackville-West's descriptions of the Egyptians she observes moving through the landscape demonstrate how her engagement with modern technologies of motion affect the contact she has with these strangers:

In long files, flat as a fresco, they trail along the dykes, mud-coloured: the camels, the buffaloes, the little donkeys, and the man. Slouching they go, in an eternal procession...First the camels' heads, swaying on their long necks; then the buffaloes, slouching as though they had just dragged themselves out of the primeval slime; then the donkeys...Then the man, small but erect, driving the lot before him. He drives, but he is part of the procession; he brings up the rear. He completes the pattern. Yet he is not so very different from his beasts, only perpendicular whereas they are horizontal; he is the same colour, though he plies a stick. (37)

In *Passenger to Teheran*, the Egyptian mode of traveling in caravans with one's animals is shown to be primitive—primeval, even—especially when compared to the technology utilized by Sackville-West and her companions. By describing this long file of animals

as an “eternal procession,” Sackville-West implies that it is struck in time. This fresco-like image appears as it has since the beginning of time; it will also remain this way in the future, never progressing. Worse yet, such travel leads to the devolution of the human who is leading the eternally unchanging procession since, to her traveler’s eye, he is like the beasts in everything but the number of legs he walks on.

In addition to demonstrating how the traveler is in a sense imprisoned by forms of transportation and thus kept separate from the space they travel through, passages from *Passenger to Teheran* such as the one above also illustrate how Sackville-West engages in an Orientalist discourse in spite of her awareness of representational limitations. Billie Melman points that Edward Said’s model has been modified considerably since the 1979 publication of *Orientalism* by students of British travel literature, who have demonstrated that “travellers’ representation were not homogeneous but were inflected by gender, class, and nationality” (107). Despite these revisions, certain aspects of his conceptualization of Orientalist discourse are of use to this paper—particularly the idea of a latent Orientalism.

As opposed to manifest Orientalism—where “change occurs in knowledge of the Orient”—latent Orientalism is the “almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity” whose “unanimity, stability, and durability...[is] more or less constant” (Said 206). While Said goes on to briefly mention how this latent Orientalism encourages gendered perceptions of the world (207), for this paper I am most interested in using the term to describe the “essential ideas about the Orient—its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness” (205) that

comes into coherence according to Said during the nineteenth century. If Said's rationale is to be followed, this tradition of stereotypes concerning the East would have been established as part of Western discourse for long enough by the early twentieth century—through the writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers and scholars—that Sackville-West's own text could contain this “almost unconscious” mode of representation. For example, in her description of the “eternal procession” of man and beast moving through Egypt, Sackville-West engages in the latent stereotypical vision of the East as a place of arrested development. Furthermore, this passage takes the tradition of the Oriental as a backward, not fully developed human being, and directly ties this degeneracy to the form of travel used by a group of people.

In Sackville-West's passage through India similar Orientalist tropes can be seen regarding both travel and the affect that transportation has on the traveler and travel narrative. While moving through India, she remarks that “only a few things stand out, but they are detached, as though [she] had seen them through a hole cut in a mask, with their enormous surroundings blacked out, leaving them bright and isolated” (52). Once again, the spectator's distance from the landscape she is being moved through on the train is maintained, as she sees only a few noteworthy objects through the train car window and those as if through a mask. In addition, Sackville-West's emphasis on the words “detached” and “isolated” relate to the few bright places or objects that stand out to the traveler's eye, which are separated from the rest of the landscape. India itself becomes nothing more than a black vacuity in this description. This representation of India is also

found in the personal letters Sackville-West sent to Virginia Woolf while on her travels.

In a letter to Woolf dated 20th February [1926], Sackville-West recalls:

...little noisy jabbering stations which I shall never see again, and flashed through once, or perhaps snatched an orange at. Jungle on either side of the train; rocks looking like mediaeval castles; peacocks paddling in the village pond. Roads tracked in dust, seen from train windows, leading where? A jackal staring in the scrub. An English general. The Taj Mahal like a pure and sudden lyric. And everywhere squalor, squalor, squalor. (DeSalvo and Leaska 104)

Even the short, fragmentary sentences used to convey her experience in this letter reinforce the distance between the train passenger and what exists outside of the train car. There are only brief images—an animal here, and a person there—that provoke questions for the traveler that can only remain unanswered. The repetition of the word “squalor” seems to reinforce the Orientalist stereotypes of the East as a place of backwardness and destitution. It also corresponds to the images of the landscape found in the travel narrative, where India is described as something blacked out, leaving only darkness. Even her experience of the Taj Mahal, the one aspect of India described in a positive light, is only a “pure and sudden lyric” amongst the flurry of other, squalid images seen from the train window.

Traveling by rail through the spaces of Egypt and India not only incarcerates the passenger, reinforcing the distance between spectator and spectacle. This form of mobility also “inscribes, indefinitely, the injunction to pass on” that leaves the passenger with the feeling that “this is not [their] country” (de Certeau 112). It is perhaps this injunction to pass on that causes Sackville-West to record her experience of railway travel through India with such alienation:

I know that for two days and nights I travelled shut up in a stifling little box with smoked windows, which was a railway carriage but which seemed to me like the Black Hole of Calcutta on wheels, and that through the windows I watched the enormous areas go past, disappointingly like an English park down in the plains, but climbing through Bhopal into Gwalior up a track cut through the jungle, crossing ravines and passing hills of square sugar-loaf shape; leaning out I could look down the long serpent-like curve of the train, and see a forest of brown legs and arms hanging out of the windows to cool; and that was India... (54-55)¹²

In this description, the train never stops; for two days, Sackville-West is simply dragged through the India landscape while confined within the railway cars. It is interesting to note that, just as in Egypt, the English landscape encroaches upon the enormous areas of India. Sackville-West remarks that this superimposition of England onto the Indian landscape is “disappointing,” as if the vast spaces of the subcontinent are too empty to uphold a coherent identity. For the train passenger who is relentlessly moved across the land, India is reduced to images and sensations: the curve of the train, brown limbs, and oppressive heat.

Once she finally reaches Persia, Sackville-West leaves behind trains and boats for automobiles. According to Smith, “unlike locomotive travel, automobility fosters an intimate relationship of traveler to technology of motion...the automobilist thus experiences an insular, autonomous individuality and an exhilarating freedom of movement” (170). This shift to automobility provides Sackville-West with an opportunity for new comparisons between her own passage through Persia and her

¹² For a recent discussion of the Black Hole Incident and how it became a legend for the British, see Jan Dalley’s *The Black Hole: Money, Myth and Empire*. According to Dalley, “Gradually, over the years, the phrase became more resonant as an image of fear...It is about the fear of blackness; the existential fear of the unknown, of nothingness, of being lost and helpless in an unfathomable deep; but more specifically a fear of savagery and what Foucault called ‘the other’,” pp. 199-200. See also Iris Macfarlane, *The Black Hole, or The Makings of a Legend*.

identity, with the form of transport employed by the majority of Persians she sees in the distance. She recalls that “They travelled on foot, on horseback, or in wagons...If the distances seemed great to us, sweeping along in a powerful motor, what must they have seemed to that crawling string, whose day’s journey meant no change of scene, no appreciable lessening of the stretch between mountain-range and range?” (68). While there are no longer rails to contend with, the movement of the car down a road creates a similar sense of distance between the passenger and the scene outside of the automobile. At one point as she is travelling through Persia, Sackville-West remarks that she “had crossed nearly a hundred miles of strange, desolate country. Curious geographical formations twisted the landscape into a sort of dead-world scenery; so might appear regions of the moon...” (99). The movement of the automobile has such an effect on the passenger’s bearings that the strangeness of the country is twisted by the mind into a landscape more likely to be found in a Jules Verne story than an informative travel book.

Another statement reveals a sense of disorientation caused by passing through the landscape, not unlike that seen in the descriptions of train travel through India:

We had experienced that sensation so common in Persia, of topping a ridge of hills and of looking down over a new stretch of country, not exactly a plain in this instance, for it was always a plain broken by many accidents; broken by those strange rocks which seemed to advance in battalions, like the dreams of some mad painter, not beautiful, but curious and freakish, and lending themselves to wild resemblances in the imagination. (99)

Once again the audience can see that Sackville-West’s narrative is more interested in the influence that travel has on the traveler’s sensibility and imagination than on its ability to increase technical knowledge. The passenger is not concerned with providing a

completely accurate description of the country; it is enough that the audience knows this is “not exactly a plain.” What Sackville-West privileges, rather, is the opportunity for the imagination to be stimulated by these “curious and freakish” rocks.

While the Persian landscape allows the passenger’s imagination to run wild in a way that Sackville-West would find pleasing, the separation between the traveler and the land being traveled through is exacerbated by the differences between European forms of mobility and those found in Persia. For Sackville-West Persia, where “motor transport is new, and railways nil, and where everything must be done on the back of pack animals,” gives the traveler “a very good impression of the farmyard life of eastern countries” (78). Once again, the narrative engages in the latent Orientalism that represents the people of Persia as closer in development to his animals than to any civilized human from the West. This passage is also the clearest example of how modes of transportation have become tangled up in Orientalist stereotypes in this travel narrative, and might even be seen as the most important feature in classifying the level of development found in various Eastern nations.

Even Egypt, a place Sackville-West found distasteful, and India where she hardly found any images worthy of exaltation, are seen as slightly less “jumbled up” with animal life since they have railways. In Persia, there are no railways, and what motor transportation exists is “new”—so new, in fact, that Sackville-West seems to think the Persians believe the automobile to be an animal:

[Persians] treat a motor exactly as though it were a pack-animal. For generations they have been accustomed to heap their camels and their donkeys with various merchandise, desisting only when the animal’s legs actually begin to give way,

and so with their new, swifter beast of burden they desist from their loading only when the springs begin to grate and the tyres to flatten. You meet upon the road objects which the average English chauffeur would scarcely recognize as motorcars. The poor little Fords almost disappear under the huge bales that swell out over the mud-guards... (98)

While the Persians have begun to use the motorcar as a form of transportation, the narrator describes their treatment of the car almost as if it were a form of abuse. They over-load their new “beast of burden” until various car-parts stop functioning properly as a result of their drivers’ childish ignorance. The use of these “poor little Fords” does not seem to advance the Persians at all in Sackville-West’s mind or in her text, especially since even an “average English chauffeur” could hardly be expected to recognize these motorcars. On the other hand, when our traveler/narrator sits behind the “driving-seat of a Ford car” the “familiarity of the method became a part of [her]” (98). Unlike the Persians, the sophisticated English traveler has such a superior level of understanding when it comes to the motor car that “by the end of the first day it had become instinctive in [her] to glance over the side to see whether the corded petrol-tins had slipped, or whether the canvas bags that held our bedding still retained their slant along the mud-guard...” (98). While the motorcar becomes just another beast of burden in the menagerie of desert animals, for the English traveler—who has a vast experience of different modes of transportation by the time she has reached Persia—the automobile quickly becomes a familiar mode for passing through space and inscribing this experience.

Towards a Modern Epistemology of Travel

Just as every well-rounded travel narrative has its voyage out, it also contains a description of the return home. As Sackville-West returns to England through Russia and then Europe, she ends her narrative with a stream-of-consciousness account that appears to mimic the effect of her mobility on increasingly modern forms of transportation as she progresses westward. Once she manages to navigate through the halting impact that revolution in Eastern Europe is having on mobility in 1926, Sackville-West appears relieved by “[t]he efficiency of Berlin; the quick, good taxi, striped black and white like a bandbox; the lighted streets; the polished asphalt; the Kaiserhof [hotel]” (154). Unlike the squalid landscape and the arrested time of the East, the passenger through Europe is met with signs of modernity ranging from efficiency to polish. The closer Sackville-West approaches England, the faster both she and the narrative begin to travel:

Then everything began to rush. Was I on the sea? very rough, too; beautiful, green, white-crested waves; was I at Folkestone? with English voices talking round me? was that Yew Tree Cottage and the path across the fields? Were those the two pistons at Orpington, still going up and down, and still a little wrong? Was I standing on the platform at Victoria, I who had stood on so many platforms? The orange labels dangled in the glare of the electric lamps. PERSIA, they said; PERSIA. (154-5)

Just as she had promised at the narrative’s introduction, Sackville-West’s account of her travels ends with flashes of places as they seem to her, reproducing the effect of seeing over the side of a quickly moving steamship or through the window of a railway car. By ending with the orange labels that mark the place that she both traveled to and from along her journey, Sackville-West seems to be acknowledging the distance separating her

experiences as a passenger to Persia with the simplest reducible rhetorical and visual representation of her travels. In the end, Sackville-West is back on the platform in Victoria Station where she began her journey, as if she had never left and the trip was merely another fancy in the traveler-*aesthete*'s imagination. There is no grand accumulation of "knowledge" about the East, nor any sense of ownership of those distant spaces. Rather, the final image of the orange labels that Sackville-West provides for the reader suggests that all that is available for the audience at the end of the travel account is the name of the place traveled through and the *objet d'art* that this travel produces: the travel book.

Rather than be informative, Sackville-West believes that the audience and writer should "let [the travel book] be frankly personal, reflecting the weakness, the predilections, even the sentimentalities, of the writer; let him be unashamed; let him write to his public as a familiar friend" (31). An examination of her first travel narrative reveals that Sackville-West never intends to produce an informative book filled with technical knowledge about the places and people she encounters on her travels.

Passenger to Teheran, on the other hand, undoes what sense of familiarity with the East is present throughout the tradition of travel literature. While a general feeling of European superiority does remain in the text, particularly in regard to the technologies of mobility available to the European traveler that are absent in the East, the narrator's identity and subjectivity is affected throughout the journey.

Unlike other travel writers of the past who might be accused of embellishing the truth or outright lying, Sackville-West acknowledges the presence of her own subjectivity

in *Passenger*. In fact, the subjectivity of the traveler becomes a focus of the narration, along with the landscapes she travels through. The narrator is aware that she will only be able to report on the East as it appears, not as it exists in reality. While the text may include latent Orientalist tropes, it also seeks to unsettle the notion that the traveler can know a place or have authority over it. This seems to be a divergence from many travel narratives of the past, which purport to present a factual representation of the places and people being described. While Pratt's description of travel writing being a tool for "knowing the world, and being in it" (29) may hold true for most travel accounts produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sackville-West is engaging in a different project with her travel writing. The focus of the narrator is oriented inwards as much as outwards, and seems more interested in understanding the ways that travel promotes the creative and imaginative powers of the mind than in discovering any concrete, material knowledge of the world. In *Passenger to Teheran*, the traveler is impressed upon by the passage, gains fleeting impressions of the East, but unravels the traditional epistemology of travel writing which positions the traveler as an authority figure or the purveyor of scientific knowledge.

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Vita

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