

“How Do You Go Back To Where You’ve Never Been?”

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Political changes in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union over the past decade or so have spawned a spate of travel-books that, even more so than the genre generally does, fall between the disciplinary cracks. Personal memoir, collective biography, political analysis, social and cultural history, and travelogue all at once, Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Honey and Ashes: A Story of Family* (1998), Modris Eksteins’ *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II and the Heart of Our Century* (1999), and Irene Karafilly’s *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey* (1998) pose a challenge to the classificatory skills of librarians and booksellers alike, as did Eva Hoffmann’s *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993) and Myrna Kostash’s *Bloodlines: A Journey into Eastern Europe* (1993). Cataloguing data for Keefer’s book for instance suggest five different categories, under autobiography, family history, social life and custom of Toronto, and life of twentieth-century English Canadian authors, while *Walking Since Daybreak* allows for shelving under World War II, with particular emphasis on refugees; twentieth-century Eastern European history; the history of Latvia between 1940 and 1991, and the history of the Eksteins family. Although, in these two books at least, “description and travel” is not even one of the suggested categories, all are also travelogues of a special kind, describing journeys back to an immigrant’s country of origin or that of his or her ancestors, often decades after the last of such personal visits has been possible for anyone in the family. In their far-reaching impact, these journeys amount to nothing less than a radical re-definition of personal and collective identities that, among other adjustments, may well require a revision of Canadian literary history to go along with it.

Just how seriously all of these writers have taken their journeys is reflected in the remarkable absence of the kind of disclaimers that (as I have discussed

elsewhere) tend to preface travelogues whose authors have also gone to political trouble spots, found themselves in situations with complexities beyond their grasp, but proceeded to write about the place anyway. Thus Susan Sontag proclaims at the beginning of *Trip to Hanoi* (1968) that “[b]eing neither a journalist nor a political activist (though a veteran signer of petitions and anti-war demonstrator) . . . I doubted that my account of such a trip could add anything new to the war,” while Doug Fetherling introduces *Year of the Horse: Journey Through Russia and China* (1991) with a rather flippant “I’m not a political analyst or economist but merely a gad-fly.” Sontag seeks to address her shortcomings by citing an impressive list of reports and books she has read to prepare herself for her trip and by engaging in such painstaking self-analysis that relatively little space is left to record her impressions of Vietnam. Fetherling, undeterred, passes judgement on the countries he visits, although the issues involved are frequently “too complicated . . . to go into here.”

By contrast, Keefer and Eksteins, together with the other authors mentioned earlier, have such strong personal stakes in their journeys that they pay equally scrupulous attention to historical research, to the mythic and actual realities of the places visited, and to their own response, however traumatic, to these encounters. In other words, the cataloguing data in *Honey and Ashes* and *Walking Since Daybreak* are not categorization run riot, but accurately reflect the multiple concerns of these books. Translating all of these perspectives into a narrative must have proven a considerable undertaking if it was both to reflect the complexity of the issues involved and to address a wide audience. After all, “coherence” seems a contradiction in terms in a context where, as Eksteins writes, “history has become at most histories, accounts that point less to the order of things than to their disorder.” On the other hand, perspectival relativism would have sabotaged the all-important project of collective recovery and the educational mandate that comes with it.

Authors have tackled the difficulty posed by their subject matter in a variety of ways. Hoffman’s *Exit into History* and Karafilly’s *Ashes and Miracles* adopt the most straightforward approach by employing throughout the chronological sequence suggested by a travel journal, its format providing a minimal temporal and spatial structure for a multitude of observations. However, the composition of tables of contents and individual chapters in Kostash, Keefer and Eksteins is a study in how to establish and undermine simultaneously even such skeletal outlines. Each chapter in

Bloodlines, for example, is prefaced with a chronology summarizing historical events, a factual scaffolding complemented by extensive bibliographical notes. In addition, each chapter receives two headings, one provided by time and place in the manner of a journal entry, the other thematic. While the journal format suggests progression, the chronology is in fact scrambled at times, when the narrative moves from 1988 and back again, or skips from "Kiev 1988" to "Kiev 1964." Some of the thematic headings create synchronicities ("Toronto, Aug. 21, 1968" and "Prague 1968"), others suggest a suspension of time ("Still Life"), or formulate questions about the viability of the entire enterprise ("How Do You Go Back to Where You've Never Been?"). Eksteins' chapter headings suggest the sweep of a foundational epic, with appropriate close-ups on individual characters ("The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," "A Man, a Cart, a Country," "Baltic Battles," "Displaced," "Bear Slayer Street," "Odyssey"), but each chapter is subdivided into numerous individual sections. Chapter One, which has seventeen of these sections, in turn provides biographical sketches of the author's great-grandmother in nineteenth-century Latvia, an impression of the author as he "sit[s] and write[s]," in 1990s Toronto, a juxtaposition of the Latvian situation in 1945 and 1998, a history of Latvia and the Baltics, reflections on the disintegration of Eastern European Communism, a scene from Frankfurt airport as the author boards a plane for Riga forty-nine years after his family last left Latvia, and several reprises of most of these items. The reader picks her way through the shoals of a narrative that mimics the devastation described in it and that in the process pulverizes the meaningful progression implied in the table of contents. Less radically disruptive than Kostash's and Eksteins' versions, Keefer's outline still suggests one thing while the book delivers another. A balanced four-part division ("The Old Place," "Departures, Arrivals: Staromischnyna-Toronto," "Journeying Out," "Journeying In") bracketed by Prologue and Epilogue in fact translates into three uneven sections, the first and the longest providing a history of Keefer's family in the Ukraine and in Toronto, the second discussing historical background, and the third recording Keefer's trip to Staromischnyna, her ancestral village.

Throughout, the books negotiate slippages between memoir and historical narrative, between one version of history and another. Maps, photographs, concordances, family trees, and indexes complicate rather than clarify the issues and relationships involved, as each additional documentation declares itself incomplete, provisional or manipulated. Thus, the family tree in *Honey and Ashes* bears the note that "[f]or the sake of simplicity, not all

marriages and children have been included . . . Some birth and death dates are approximate,” and the captions in the maps require a lengthy gloss to account for place-names changed as a result of border-shifts between Poland, Germany, and the Ukraine. A family portrait of father and mother flanking their two daughters is found to be a composite, joining an absent father to his family in the Ukraine. Passages across these numerous “cracks” are perilous undertakings. Eksteins, recording the fate of Displaced Persons in World War II, describes his family’s thwarted efforts to second-guess the elusive requirements for transit documents that are to help them cross equally unpredictable borders (Eksteins’ notes provide an ironic historical counterpoint to his family’s Kafkaesque dilemmas, by citing Allied dismissals of, and racist distinctions among, Displaced Persons. These documents belatedly “explain” the Eksteins’ nightmarish wanderings across borders and back again).

In these accounts of border-crossings emotion is carefully, sometimes strenuously, kept at bay to prevent the narrative from sliding into nostalgia. Confronted with her family’s idyllic village, Kostash resorts to a mannered analogy with photography (“Dzhurvic, birth-place of my mother’s mother, is tidy and colorful. I walk around it and take pictures. An abandoned blue cottage, overwhelmed by its ancient thatched roof and sinking somnolently into a yard gone wild with grasses and yellow daisies. Click. The field behind Katrusia’s house—the celebrated fecund private plot of Soviet agriculture—scrupulously clean of weeds and bordered by fruit trees. Click. A neighbour, stout, baggy-bosomed and kerchiefed, knee-deep in red and yellow tulips. Click.”) Not as bucolic as Dzhurvic, the ancestral village in *Honey and Ashes* proves to be a disenchanting place in which to “take photograph after photograph of nothing.” The increasingly elaborate and awkward metaphorical language of the book both reveals and deflects from the narrator’s emotional turmoil: “And as I fall,” she muses, preparing to leave Staromyschina, “I’ll be thinking not of how far or fast I’m flying downwards, but of how I’ll never be able to regain that cliff-top, the lush, flower-shot grass through which I walked to the very edge of falling.” Eksteins’ version of these nervously self-conscious renditions of personal response is to be taciturn and dry, sometimes to the extreme.

Their discomfort with anything that could be perceived a self-indulgence equips these authors to address larger issues in ways that set them apart from the solipsistic mind-games that make some so-called historiographic metafiction so insufferably insubstantial and irresponsible. While earlier Canadian writing describing immigrant lives tended to dwell on truncated

existences with little first-hand depiction of the communities left behind, Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* and its sequels have marked a significant change. In expanding their spatial and temporal scopes, Kostash, Keefer and Eksteins tackle the stereotypes associated with certain ethnic groups, with Displaced Persons and migrants. They do so not only by providing additional documentation about the victimization of such groups by whatever officialdom or mainstream society they confront (although there is plenty of such documentation), but also by exposing prejudices imported from the "old country." Kostash's *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1998), among other things a sequel or companion volume to *Bloodlines*, critically investigates the depiction of Ukrainians as "Blockhead" and "Slut" (or "Revolutionary Slut") in Canadian Mennonite fiction. All three authors bravely confront anti-semitic activities in their countries of origin, providing important complementary perspectives to Karafilly's and Hoffman's wrenching insider accounts. "It was," Eksteins describes the aftermath of the 1989 events, "as if we had returned suddenly, through time warp, to the moral and historical dilemmas of 1945, dilemmas that the Cold War had frozen in place."

In trying to distinguish "western" travel-writing from "non-western," critics have sometimes drawn a sharp line between the former as "privileged" and the latter as "enforced" activity. Inderpal Grewal, for instance, in her superb *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* (1996), claims that "migration, immigration, deportation, indenture and slavery" are mobilities exempt from "Eurocentric, imperialist formation," while the "trope of exile ... reinscribe[s] European hegemonic aesthetic forms." Grewal's observation (made in a text which, incidentally, insists on the crucial importance of cultural *specificity* in all post-colonial argument) may apply to certain comparative contexts, but its usefulness in describing Eksteins', Keefer's and Kostash's books is limited. Keefer has been taken to task for generalizing the immigrant experience and thus taking it away from those for whom it has been the defining factor. Her critics may remain unconvinced by her assertion, at the beginning of *Honey and Ashes*, that "though there are tremendous differences among immigrants—differences of culture and history, language and looks, that compound the difficulty of making new lives in strange countries—I believe there's a continuum of experience and, most of all, imagination that can bring us all, however momentarily, together," and dismiss it as humanist rhetoric. I doubt whether such a dismissal would be quite so easy *after* reading her book.