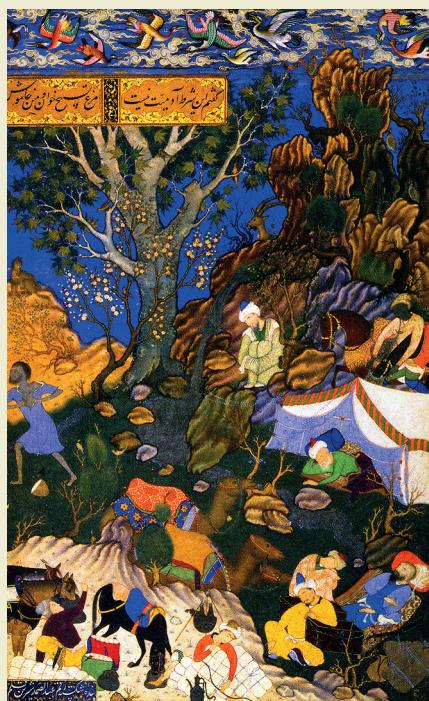


Association pour la Promotion de l'Histoire et de l'Archéologie Orientales
Université de Liège

m é m o i r e s n° 7

TROPICS OF TRAVEL 4. HOMES

*Proceedings of the International Conference
Organized at the University of Liège (January 13-15, 2011)*



Edited by

Frédéric BAUDEN

Peeters
Louvain · Paris · Walpole (MA)
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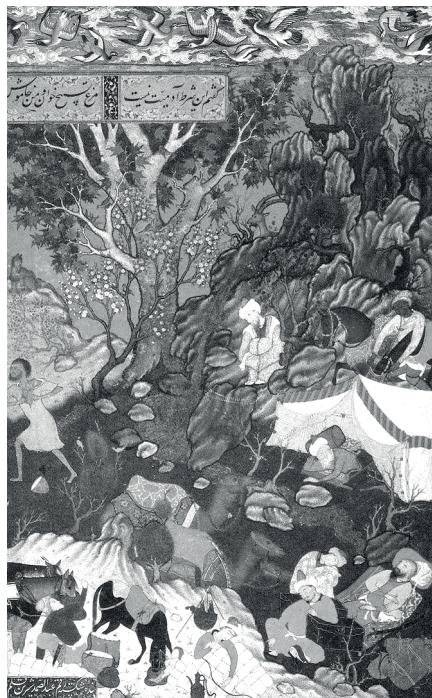


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INTRODUCTION

Frédéric BAUDEN

Fa-alqat ‘aṣāḥā wa-staqarra bi-hā l-nawā

ka-mā qarra ‘aynan bi-l-iyāb al-musāfirū

Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*¹

Bilād bi-hā nīṭat ‘alayya tamā`imī

wa-awwal ard massa jīlī turābuhā

Ibn Battūṭa, *Tuhfat al-nuzzār*²

This volume gathers together the proceedings of the conference which took place at the University of Liège from 13 to 15 January 2011. The conference was part of the project *Tropics of Travel: Travel in Arabic Writings* that took the form of four international symposia held in Venice (2007), Paris (2008), and London (2009) and jointly organized by the project leaders: Aboubakr Chraïbi (INALCO, Paris), Antonella Gheretti (Università Ca' Foscari, Venice), Wen-chin Ouyang (SOAS, London), and myself. From the start of a journey to its end, the project has encompassed the different stages that give birth, in the mind of the traveler (and of the author), to mixed feelings expressed in a great variety of ways in the accounts. Each symposium was devoted to one of four travel-related tropes that we wanted to see investigated by the participants: departures (Venice),³ encounters (Paris),⁴ utopias and dystopias (London),⁵ and homes (Liège).

Travel is arguably a central metaphor of man's search for his proper place in the world and the ways in which he is grounded in and effects reality. Accounts of travel, fantastic or real, at home or abroad, are a familiar subject in cultures and

¹ IBN JUBAYR, *Rihla*: 348.

² IBN BATTŪṬA, *Tuhfat al-nuzzār*, 4:327.

³ The proceedings are published in *Tropes du voyage: le voyage dans la littérature arabe. I. Départs*. Actes du Colloque international qui s'est tenu à l'Università Ca' Foscari de Venise, ed. Antonella Gheretti ("Annali di Ca' Foscari", vol. XLVIII, 3, Serie orientale, no. 40, 2009).

⁴ The proceedings are published in *Tropes du voyage: Les rencontres*, ed. Aboubakr Chraïbi (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).

⁵ The proceedings are published in *Utopias, Dystopias and Heteropias: The Spatiality of Human Experience and Literary Expression*, ed. Wen-chin Ouyang (special issue of *Middle Eastern Literatures Incorporating Edebiyāt*, vol. 15, no. 3, December 2012).

literatures worldwide, so too, travel has been a staple narrative motif in Arabic writings. *Tropics of Travel* sought to examine travel not simply as a process, but as a central trope, a figurative matrix that is driven by the quest for knowledge and geographical discovery, that depicts historical narratives, religious accounts of pilgrimage, spiritual journeys of transcendence, or that presents official records of diplomatic missions, literary journeys of transformation, and cross-cultural dialogues. More particularly, the *Tropics of Travel* symposia aimed to explore the importance of new forms of knowledge in the definitions of identity, community, and home that were created through the mediation of travel. It looked at factual and fictional Arabic writing that takes ‘travel’ as its main theme or motif from a comparative and multi-disciplinary perspective so as to involve scholars of literature, geography, history, anthropology, religious studies, art, art history and cultural studies. The act of writing, an inexorable process for travelers seeking to share either their experience or their knowledge, provided the core material to be analyzed.

From Venice to Liège, some one hundred participants in total, with some of them following us in our journey through Europe, looked into works that came down to us from the medieval to the contemporary period. The results, materially conspicuous in the four volumes of proceedings, went well beyond our expectations.

The Liège conference took the other destination of travel, home, as its subject and looked at the ways in which travel may revise notions of self, community, and home, and inscribe significance of ontological and epistemological dimensions into the journey of homecoming. The following questions were meant to, if not direct, at least nurture the participants’ reflections with regard to the concept of home in terms of travel.

- In what ways do tourism and relatively long sojourns ‘abroad’ produce divergent articulations of subject and community?
- Is it possible to speak of ‘migration,’ as we know it today, in the pre-modern context?
- How might modern knowledge gained in studies of massive population movements refine our understanding of travel and homecoming in pre-modern eras?
- Is the shape of home necessarily drawn by homesickness and nostalgia?
- What role does alienation abroad play in the imaginings of home?
- What meanings do the differing experiences of travel and residence abroad inscribe on the journey of homecoming, and therefore, on home?
- What becomes of home?

- Is return possible?
- What are the possible trajectories of homecoming?
- How is travel remembered, thought of, and reinterpreted?
- Are there dreams or nightmares about travel? Or are there simply memories?
- How do these various forms of remembering shape travel writing?
- When does ‘home’ become ‘exile’?
- How does ‘travel’ mediate between alternative visions of community?
- What role does the material culture of travel (preparations for it, transportation, objects brought back, etc.) play in individual, communal, and cultural transformations?
- Is it possible to speak of a ‘cosmopolitan’ culture and economy in the pre-modern world?
- What impact does cosmopolitan culture and economy have on notions of travel and definitions of home?

This volume includes nine articles that we selected from the seventeen papers that were read at the conference. They are organized according to the alphabetical order of the names of the authors but, rather strangely and conveniently, this ordering is almost chronological in terms of the material examined by each author.

The first author, Daniel Bodi, tackles the issue of homecoming in an original way, by scrutinizing a vast corpus in terms of time and space. By comparing various patterns of homecoming identified in three examples of the literatures of the Near East dating from antiquity up to the medieval period, he pinpoints the ways a particular motif was reused by religious communities. His point of departure is the first great work of literature from the seventh century BCE: the *Epic of Gilgameš*. At the end of his journey, the hero discovers that his unsuccessful quest for immortality brought him only one certainty: his inescapable status as a mortal being. Through esoteric knowledge, Gilgameš reaches a personal equilibrium and understanding of the necessity to enjoy life. The second literary tradition is a selection from the *Talmud*, where the story of the voyage of four rabbis to Paradise is narrated. It relates the visionary, inner journey that ends in tragedy, as only one of the rabbis returns ‘home’ unscathed. The last example comes from the Islamic literary tradition and concerns similar voyages carried out by Sufis.

The return home, at the end of a real or mystical journey, thus tallies with a positive or a negative outcome. Gilgameš reaches a state of inner peace or balance, while the Sufi masters reach, through a visionary voyage of initiation, a heightened state of consciousness which is of benefit to the whole community

because they have acquired the power to heal and perform miracles. By contrast three of the four rabbis end their mystical trip with the tragic discovery that, as mortals, true happiness is inaccessible because death is the inexorable result of life. In this case, homecoming corresponds to permanent exile. Interestingly, Bodi singles out a common feature in these three literary traditions, that is, a particular position adopted by each voyager (the positioning of the head between the knees) which recalls the fetal posture. Though its interpretation may differ according to each tradition, it constitutes a medium through which each protagonist achieves a constituent part of his voyage.

Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa and Brigitte Foulon examine the issue of homesickness in the Arab and Islamic cultures through the lens of al-Kisrawī's treatise on nostalgia (*Risāla fī l-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*). The notion of homesickness postulates that we clearly understand what home meant to the Bedouins first and, after the spread of Islam, to Muslims. Foulon usefully surveys the Arabic words used to refer to the place a person is born or lives. Cheikh-Moussa and Foulon agree that with the term *wātan*, the Bedouins referred to the place where one established himself/herself. As a consequence, nostalgia, as expressed in poetry, refers to the homeland as the place where one's family settled rather than the fatherland, or place of birth. Whenever the poet pines for his *wātan*, in fact he pines for those who inhabit it, those whom he left behind, not for his birthplace, the soil. With the appearance of Islam, a serious shift took place because the communal bonds put forward by the *ummā* tended to outweigh familial ties. Whenever someone felt himself in a stage of *gurba* (to feel alien), the reason was sought in the feeling of alienation experienced by the traveler who finds himself among persons who do not share the same belief. Over time, the idea of *wātan* came to represent the oneiric fatherland, the land that was lost with the sedentary lifestyle, i.e., the increasing urban settlement that came with the spread of Islam.

In her study of the ontological dimension of homecoming in 'Abd al-Rahmān Munīf's novel, Rosella Dorigo ushers in the modern period with the problem of alienation experienced by the author himself, as Munīf, a displaced person, continually changed nationalities. His character, Rajab, personifies the dilemma of homesickness in various ways: while in prison he longs for home, and realizes that the time he spent incarcerated in a confined space changed his perception of home, and he finds that he has no choice but to leave for a foreign country, in Europe. Only in deciding to get away from his home, to alienate himself from his community and from himself will he be able to come back and face reality. In this, two women, his mother and his sister, are essential. Dorigo's article echoes the message of Cheikh-Moussa and Foulon, who also highlight the importance of family ties in the notion of homeland.

While in Dorigo's article exile is seen as a necessary process to feel again at ease at home, it is exactly the contrary for Stephan Milich, who focuses his attention on exile as a migration forced on 'Irāqī poets after 2003. In this case, "feelings of nostalgia (*hanīn*) are strikingly absent from the creative output of

these young voices.” For them, exile is no longer perceived as “an enriching ‘motif of culture’” because their homeland is associated with traumatic experiences. Accordingly, their only wish is to forget their home country. The political situation that prevails in some parts of the Arab world since the beginning of this millennium has impacted the traditional concept of the *Dār al-Islām*: now, one must try to feel at home wherever one is.

Trauma is also a central theme in Nada Nader’s study of a selection of three of Ghassan Kanafani’s novels: in this case, she examines the recurrent loss of a home or a son. Of course, the Palestinian author represents the quintessential expatriate. The three characters all leave a land (the desert or city) and undergo feelings of estrangement, which they try to overcome by recapturing symbols of their homeland: prosperity, mother, land, and trees. Once again, nostalgia takes them back to the past and travel is thus a journey in time more than space.

Wen-chin Ouyang, in her analysis of al-Tahtāwī’s travelogue, identifies (based on his exposure to the world of Paris) the seeds of modernization the author would like to see planted in his own country, Egypt. Ouyang rightly stresses that al-Tahtāwī’s travelogue preceded by two decades the four major works he later devoted to various questions that deal with essential aspects of his country. In a way, we can see from his written rendition of his French experience that he had not yet internalized his views. As such, the travelogue must be appreciated in light of his later writings because his ideas developed in a reflexive fashion: his look backward to his travel to and time spent in a modern country is at the core of his reflection on the future of his own country. In the particular case of al-Tahtāwī, departure from home and return home are embodied in the way he sees the future of his homeland.

Maria Elena Paniconi provides a compelling parallel to Ouyang’s article, as her chosen author, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, also traveled to Paris where he studied for several years. The novel she analyzes is based on a character, Muhsin, who had engaged earlier in the nationalistic movement that shook Egypt at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Himself a migrant in Paris, Muhsin recalls his home with a sense of trauma because of the 1919 revolution in which he took part. Being far from his country and facing another reality, Muhsin realizes that “the impossible return to the imagined East is thus the objectification of the fact that ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are nothing more than a *simulacrum* of ideologies represented in contradictory terms … of the historical period in which the novel was conceived.” Placed in its historical context, the novel expresses the feeling of disillusionment (Muhsin realizes that his idea of the East does not in fact exist) which is on a par with the aversion to Westernization that prevailed in Egypt in the 1930s.

Richard van Leeuwen’s intuitive study of Tayyib Ṣāliḥ’s novel narrating a story of migration to the North (England) followed by a return home (to Sudan) draws our attention to the fact that “the concept of home is a construction, an invention, an imagined incongruity between a sense of self, social relationships and a spatial setting.” He also stresses that this concept is ambiguously connected

to the opposing notions of immobility and mobility: home does not necessarily correspond to one's birthplace. For a place to become a person's home, "it has to be brought into a relationship with the outside world," i.e., one's return from a journey can be identified as an initiation process, something van Leeuwen names the 'adventure chronotope'. In the case of the novel's character, it appears that he was unable to renounce his alienation once back in his village.

Van Leeuwen's article provides at the same time a very opportune conclusion to this series of studies on 'home' in Arabic writings where we have tackled the concepts of home as the family's place or the birthplace, as homecoming after an experience abroad, either after exile (forced or undertaken willingly) or a journey. All this and more can already be found in the testimony of the fourteenth-century globetrotter Ibn Battūṭa, who expressed his feelings for home in these terms: "notwithstanding the nostalgia I felt for the fatherland and the desire to reunite with my family and my friends [it is] the country I love that is, in my point of view, superior to anyone else" (*ma'a mā šāqqanī min tiḍkār al-awṭān wa-l-hanīn ilá l-ahl wa-l-hillān wa-l-mahabba li-bilādī llatī la-hā l-fadl 'indī 'alā l-buldān*).⁶

Indeed, travel is a metaphor of life just as life is a journey. Having arrived at the conclusion of the project and of this volume, I, and perhaps also my co-leaders, can say that this experience has greatly improved our understanding of the tropes of travel we had selected and at the same time, we each separately and jointly appreciated the impact this project had on our research.

In my role as organizer of the last of our series of conferences, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the institutions that offered financial support in setting up the Liège symposium. These include the F.R.S.-FNRS, the Patrimoine and the Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, both of the Université de Liège. Last but not least, it is with great pleasure that I acknowledge my debt to my co-leaders, Aboubakr Chraïbi, Antonella Gheretti, and Wen-chin Ouyang, for assisting me in putting together the wonderful program we all enjoyed in Liège four years ago.

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⁶ IBN BATṬŪṬA, *Tuhfat al-nuẓẓār*, 4:326.