

Bruce Chatwin.

Anatomy of Restlessness. Selected Writings 1969-1989. Ed. Jan Borm and Matthew Graves. Harmondsworth, Middlesex; New York: Penguin, 1996. p. IX, 205. ISBN: 0-224-04292-0

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When a writer of great promise dies early, literary and biographical mythmaking commences almost immediately. In the case of Bruce Chatwin, there is the question--raised for example by his friend Paul Theroux ("Chatwin Revisited" 15)--about the novelist's sexual orientation; there is the perhaps related question of his mysterious and lethal illness; there is his habit of travelling around the globe and telling tall tales to individual listeners and larger audiences; and most of all there is his clandestine joy about shrouding his own writerly persona in the druidical mist of (pseudo-)biographical data which he loved to disperse to his steadily growing world of readers via interviews, via his contributions to a puzzling variety of publications (e.g., in limited editions, exhibition catalogues, prefaces, postscripts, reviews, and articles in a host of different periodicals), and via the kind of travel writing which almost obliges critics to indulge in the vice of 'biographical fallacy'.

What Am I Doing Here (published in 1989), a collection of Chatwin's shorter writings selected by the author before his untimely death, already provides some help for those who want to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between Chatwin's vita and his texts. Borm & Graves's volume is an even more revealing source about some of Chatwin's fascinating peculiarities and fields of interest: The first story in the collection reprints an essay entitled "I Always Wanted to Go to Patagonia." On p. 9 of this essay (for a German translation by Anna Leuben see Hanser Publishers' volume 27 (1988) of *Bogen*), which is a veritable treasure of details about Chatwin's reading of his family's and his own history, there is a paragraph which satisfies literary scholars' particular desire for the writer's literary origins: "The first grown-up book I read from cover to cover was Captain Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World*. This was followed by John C. Voss's *The Venturesome Voyages of Captain Voss*, by Melville's *Omoo* and *Typee*, then Richard Henry Dana and Jack London. Perhaps from these writers I got a taste for Yankee plain style? I never liked Jules Verne, believing that the real was always more fantastic than the fantastical." While critics have noted these titles and names as possible influences (see, e.g., the entry on Chatwin in the 1988 edition of the *Current Biography Yearbook*), no one has yet applied that knowledge to Chatwin's wild claims about his portrait of the young man on his path toward becoming a writer. In several interviews and statements Chatwin had maintained that, in 1966, when working as director of the impressionism department at Sotheby's, "he suffered a severe recurrence of his psychosomatic eye problem. An ophthalmologist assured him that nothing was organically wrong but suggested that he might stop looking

too closely at paintings and turn his attention to 'horizons'" (*Current Biography Yearbook*, 109). While only the ophthalmologist and Chatwin ever knew what was actually diagnosed and said at the doctor's office, a section early on in Richard Henry Dana's adventure classic, *Two Years Before the Mast* (first published by Harper and Brothers in 1840, and recently reprinted in the Penguin Classics series) adds a new perspective. Dana's autobiographical voice describes the reasons for his decision to become--temporarily--a sailor: "The fourteenth of August was the day fixed upon for sailing of the brig Pilgrim on her voyage from Boston around Cape Horn to the western coast of North America. As she was to get under weigh early in the afternoon, I made my appearance on board at twelve o' clock, in full sea-rigg, and with my chest, containing an outfit for a two or three years' voyage, which I had undertaken from a determination to cure, if possible, by an entire change of life, and by a long absence from books and study, a weakness of the eyes, which had obliged me to give up my pursuits, and which no medical aid seemed likely to cure" (*Two Years* 40). While Chatwin might have invented his own 'story' in variation of the motif of the blind poet, the close resemblance with Dana's explanation renders a later aestheticizing of this admired literary influence on his adolescent dreams of a migratory existence highly probable.

The editors of this collection have created a good mixture of intersecting Chatwinian themes: "Horreur du Domicile" contains the essay just discussed as well as "A Place to Hang Your Hat" (in which he traces his own idiosyncratic thoughts about the necessity of owning an apartment as well as some objects in it), "A Tower in Tuscany" (which describes Gregor von Rezzori's medieval writer's abode in which Chatwin penned parts of *On the Black Hill*), and "Gone to Timbuctoo" (which evokes Chatwin's typical way of suddenly disappearing to some far-off place); "Stories", the second part of the volume, contains four texts ("Milk"; "The Attractions of France"; "The Estate of Maximilian Tod"; "Bedouins") which all show Chatwin as the master of slice-of-life-like surprising and exotic observation; the three texts in the section entitled "The Nomadic Alternative" ("Letter to Tom Maschler"; "The Nomadic Alternative"; "It's a nomad *nomad* world") are excellent admission tickets to Chatwin's eccentric theory of evolution, his half-serious belief that all human life once began as unaggressive and migratory and that many of the problems of modern civilization are due to our increasingly sedentary and thing-oriented life styles; a group of four "Reviews" (of Wilfred Thesiger's *Desert, Marsh and Mountain* (1979); Osvaldo Bayer's *Los Vengadores de la Patagonia Trágica*(1972-76); James Pope-Hennessy's 1974 biography of another tireless traveller, *Robert Louis Stevenson*; and Konrad Lorenz's *The Year of the Greylag Goose* (1979) again present the writer's transdisciplinary fascination with questions of travel and anthropology; and finally, the two texts in "Art and the Image-Breaker" ("The Morality of Things"; "Among the Ruins") seem to sum up his experiences among the world of art collectors which he also miniaturized so unforgettably in his novel, *Utz* (1989). Perhaps "Among the Ruins," written in 1984 for *Vanity Fair*, may provide us with just another surprise glimpse at one of the potential intertexts for Chatwin's indefatigable pleasure of literary self-invention: One of the three men whose fascinating lives and architectural creations on the island of Capri he describes in this essay is 'Curzio Malaparte' (Axel Munthe, 1898-1956) who, "[o]n Sunday, the eleventh of November [scil. 1956], (...) fell ill with fever in Peking. The doctor who attended him said, 'You have caught a gentle

little Chinese microbe which has given you [...] a gentle little Chinese fever. Nothing serious.' It was an incurable cancer of the lung. On his deathbed he converted to Catholicism and received the final absolution" ("Among the Ruins" 169). In the late eighties, Chatwin spread rumors about his severe illness asserting that he had a rare Chinese fungus of the bone marrow which he had caught when inhaling the dust of bat dung in a cave in southern China, a specimen so rare that it was believed to have attacked "only a few Chinamen and a beached whale, all of whom died" (Plante 190). Another version, reported by Edmund White without further comment, states: "As an adventurer, Bruce lives by extremes. A few months ago he contracted a rare disease and nearly died from it. (He won't spell out the nature of the illness, which bores him, but he suggests that a doctor speculated he got it by frequenting either Chinese peasants or killer whales.)" ("A Nomadic Heart" 190).

And these are only some impressions of the wealth of clues this selection of Chatwin's writings affords academic critics and the general reading public alike.

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