

Jonathan P. A. Sell 2006: *Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560-1613*. Aldershot: Ashgate. viii + 215pp. ISBN 0-7546-5625-X

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One of the commonest approaches modern criticism tends to use while dealing with early modern travel writing has to do with the correspondence of actual fact and the way it is coded in texts (see, for example, Martels 1994). These accounts usually exploit ideological critiques to expose ideologically biased modes of experiencing reality. This approach has grown almost to become a vice, due mainly to the all-pervading neo-positivist perspective which post-modern criticism has encouraged throughout the last decades. Even now, when travel writing criticism seems to be thoroughly engaged on issues of race, gender and class (Pratt 1992; Hulme and Youngs 2002) as well as on the way contemporary travel texts represents these realities (Hulme and Youngs 2002: 8-12; Hooper and Youngs 2004: 1-2), critics tend to overlook the difficulties post-modern criticism faces when they get to grips with old travel writing texts. Different ages require different sorts of readers, and any critical analysis – of any kind whatsoever – would be incomplete without this premise being considered. Travel writing criticism should then welcome Jonathan Sell's *Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560-1613* as an effective reminder of this critical circumstance, however naïve it may sound in the first place. Sell's essay offers an alternative approach which arguably calls into question – if not overtly condemns – the critical obsession of “concentrating on ideology” (6) which modern critical corpora reveal. Moreover, the author carries out his task while articulating an in-depth yet quite eloquent analysis of the ways early modern readers understood travel writing in particular and rhetorical expression in general.

Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560-1613 comprises five chapters crowned by an epilogue. The main argument spreads quite straightforwardly throughout the five chapters, the overall structure resulting in a well-balanced critical overview of travel writing rhetorical strategies in the Renaissance. The volume also provides a List of Illustrations, a Preface – rather, a letter of dedication – a comprehensive list of references which abounds in titles of the last two decades – especially the nineties – and a Select Index which might well have been qualified as *Analytical*, since it includes references to both authors quoted and subjects dealt with in the text.

Sell's book builds a very precise argument based, mainly, on the grounds of *wonder* as both guiding principle and chief means of creating meaning in the travel writing of that period. Sell contends wonder is a somewhat predictable hermeneutical space shared by authors and early modern readers alike. Contrary to modern, positivist travel texts, early modern travel narratives do not just give a plain, straightforward, seemingly scientific account of an empirical reality, but rather present the reader with an enactment of a cultural “consensus” (32) which favours “vividness” to “verisimilitude” (32). This ‘vivid’ element is central to understanding Sell's point: his analytical model

allows contemporary readers and critics alike to grasp the emphasis early modern traveller-writers placed on wonder through rhetorical means.

This emphasis represents, actually, the starting premise of the book. In the Introduction ('Wonder, Rhetoric and Travel' [1-22]) Sell identifies the inextricable semiotic grounds defined by wonder, rhetoric and travel writing. Undoubtedly, wonder lies at the core of the experience early modern texts on travel convey, but then again, as the author cleverly points out: "it [would be] inconceivable that an English traveller-writer of the second half of the sixteenth century or the first half of the seventeenth would have written in any way but rhetorically" (13). Rhetoric depicts, represents and, ultimately, enacts wonder in a way contemporary readers and critics should not overlook, lest they lose the appropriate perspective to assess the kind of truth early modern traveller-writers (and readers!) were concerned with. In an age "when education from grammar school to university was synonymous with rhetoric" (12), the representation of truth becomes as important as the emphasis authors put on persuasion, thus making rhetoric an "effective ally of wonder" (4). The reason for this lies in the fact that wonder, in early modern travel writing, serves a double purpose: on the one hand, it enhances a somewhat emotive force in the text, and, on the other, Sell states, wonder constitutes "the handmaiden of cognition" (3), that is, a source from which many cognitive processes begin. Having stated this, Sell moves on to depict a prototypical reader whose response to travel-writing is structured through a very definite "hermeneutic expectation" (16) traveller-writers were quite familiar with. Present-day readers who fail to see this will not quite grasp the issues at stake in these texts, their assessment of the corpora being, necessarily, faulty.

Sell is fully aware that the unavoidable key to this approach hides behind the question about the nature of Truth depicted through the early modern period. The faulty approach I mentioned before springs from the almost all-pervading postmodern critical attitude which assesses most travel-writing in terms of their factual / fictional quality, whether it is to prove a specific ideological stance or to debunk it. Sell cleverly avoids this method by ruling out the question about "what [travel writing is true] to" (2) and concentrating upon the very nature of truth represented by early modern travel texts.

Hence, in chapter II ('The Truth of Travel Writing' [23-56]), Sell develops his theoretical framework from the notion of *consensual truth*. Taking Edward Webbe's "outlandish bestiary of fabulous animals" (23) as instance, the author arranges a neo-historicist approach by positing the concept of *consensual truth* as the main functional realm of meaning within the corpora of texts he studies. Sell cleverly manages to set limits to the postmodern preoccupation concerning the fact / fiction dualistic approach present-day travel writing criticism seems obsessed with by defining common grounds of 'hermeneutic expectations' early modern traveller-writers created for their readers to decipher. These expectations constitute "a prime store and conduit of consensual knowledge and consensual communicative strategies" (30-31) made up by common beliefs and ideas shared by both authors and readers alike.

Consensual truth represents then a basic ground of associative experiences whose validity has already been assessed by readers. Truth, in this way, does not rely on a one-to-one correspondence between discourse (i.e. fiction) and reality (i.e. fact), customary to the positivist approach, but on texts which are oriented to “win the assent of the community because they will be probable in terms of its body of resources” (28). A message becomes consensually true whenever it is persuasive enough to make the reader believe it functions as a sort of textual mark, that is, a device deployed to shape the sense of exoticism and wonder texts are expected to convey. Once this strategy is accepted, it should be no wonder (for present-day readers of travel-narratives) that “the rhetorical textbooks [...] [advised] embellishment of the truth, or plain lying, by means of the insertion of fictitious elements in a description in order to lend it vividness” (32).

On the basis of ‘consensual truth’, Sell develops an outstandingly coherent analysis of all cognitive bases that sustain the genre in a wider sense, even drawing, when necessary, on the origins of travel prose to establish the intellectual significance of the genre. Strategies derived from this analysis lead to quite eloquent conclusions about the way travel-writing in the early modern period should be tackled:

The reader had not to map verisimilitude out of the text and on to some materially existing piece of reality, but needed to assess the probability of representation in terms of his own mental resources, chief among which were the topics, tropes and texts themselves of the memorized literary heterocosm and the emotional responses stimulated by the figures of affective rhetoric corresponding to culturally structured *gestalts*. The truth of the representations [...] is not always, if at all, to the external world of objective reality, but to the relevant parts of the consensus as replicated internally in the mind of the reader, the zodiac of his wit. (32)

In chapter III (‘Wonder Texts’ [57-90]) Sell gives a thorough, complex, very rich account of the different uses of rhetoric traveller-writers deploy throughout the period. Due to a proper arrangement of particular rhetorical elements, traveller-writers activate certain hermeneutic expectancies in the reader’s frame of mind in order to ascertain the afore-mentioned consensual truth, that is, the rhetorical space in and by which this sort of narrative functions. Sell’s concern, is, literally, “with how a text may use rhetoric, above all various topical cues, to put the reader in contact with the experiential *gestalt* of wonder as a first step towards achieving consensual truth” (57). To carry out this task, the author concentrates chiefly on the analysis of a particular rhetorical device, the *captatio benevolentiae* (literally, capture, seizure of good will). And examines it in different texts in order to compare, assess and discuss the common way some traveller-writers (Thomas Harriot, Edward Webb and, most notably, Sir Walter Raleigh) endorsed their own material.

There arises another key notion in Sell’s argument: the idea of *ethos* as opposed to that of *pathos*. Drawing from Quintilian’s distinction of the two (59), Sell manages to locate the concept of *ethos* (a sort of ideological programme based on an already fixed ‘wonder *gestalt*’ [38]) at the core of the *captatio*, thus depicting the very strategy traveller-writers deploy in order to grade different levels of consensual truth. The way this strategy works is as follows: by relying on “standard” rhetorical “topics” (78), the

reader's range of belief stretches in such a way that suddenly he or she is willing to harbour the less likely stories writers account for. In this context, Walter Raleigh's account of his expedition to Guyana (1596) stands out among the texts Sell examines. Raleigh's failure in his search for gold in Guyana, arguably a dishonourable feat, turns out forgivable in view of its relative likelihood when put in a milieu of rhetorical wonder. Thus, as a matter of fact, it is fair to contend that Raleigh's embellishment of his narrative serves more structural than ornamental purposes: "Raleigh has put the Ewaipanoma [men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders] in his text not to attest to his own belief in them or to invite the reader to believe in them, but in order that his tales of gold will sound comparably less improbable in a context of relativized wonder" (78).

Once the *captatio benevolentiae* has established and exploited (albeit perfunctorily) the *ethos* of the genre, the narrative itself develops. In chapter IV ('Inventing and Elocuting Wonder' [91-134]), Sell concentrates on the analysis of Arthur Barlowe's, Anthony Sherley's and Edward Hayes' narratives, all of which enhance a proper sense of wonder by carefully avoiding detailed descriptions. Viewed from a positivist perspective (let alone a post-modern one), the relatively unknown spaces those travellers explored arguably demand a much more thorough depiction than the account provided by the afore-mentioned authors (most notably by Arthur Barlowe's account of his expedition to Virginia in 1584). The spaces dealt with in these narratives represented a "conceptual blank" in readers' minds, "which required filling in" (92). And in order to fill in these blanks, Arthur Barlowe, for instance, drew on rhetorical strategies (which Sell traces back to Homer, Ovid, Chaucer or Spenser, to quote a few) that help him create the illusion of a seeming heavenly *topos*, that is a sylvan scenery readers could relate to by continually renewing their acceptance of the strategies used by the author during the process of meaning construction, i.e. the establishment of the 'consensual truth'.

In chapter V ('Composing and Acting Wonder' [135-80]), conversely, the core of Sell's analyses shifts from the construction of meaning in narratives themselves to the means and methods used by traveller-writers in order to enhance the sense of veracity and verisimilitude conveyed through the experience of wonder. Travellers achieve the highest degree of persuasion, Sell contends, by posing their own scarred bodies as evidence of their experience of wonder ("a token of truth inscribed with the scars of encounters with new worlds beyond the consensually known and knowable" [146]). A writer like Raleigh had to "present himself to his readers as a travailed body" (149), for "In the absence of gold, all he [could] bring back from the other world to this one [was] his own body, on which that the new world's impress might [have been] read" (149). Sell's argument here takes a seemingly risky yet quite effective turn from the rhetorical-pragmatic analysis to an assessment of travel narratives of a performative sort. Traveller-writers had to perform three different tasks in order to build up both the consensual truth and the hermeneutic expectancies travel narratives embodied. That is, authors like Raleigh, Harriott or Webbe needed to be, at once, travellers (i.e. explorers of wonder), writers (i.e. rhetoricians) and *actors* (i.e. they had to enact the sense of wonder they tried to convey, that is, they must needs become physical evidence of their own experience): "the representation of new worlds relocated the site and source of wonder

from those new worlds to the body of the traveller, now reconstituted as the traveller-actor" (161).

As I suggested before, the strategy Sell adopts here might appear risky at first, insofar as it seemingly stresses material evidence as corollary to the reader's rhetorical frame of perception (the 'hermeneutic expectancies') Sell depicts in his analysis – an idea that runs contrary to, if not cancelling completely, his anti-materialistic approach to early modern travel writing. Judging Sell's work in this way would be most unfair and, it seems to me, would only constitute an unwarranted attack to the reliability of his analysis. The author does not judge the material evidence provided by 'travailed', 'scarred bodies' in absolute terms, but rather as yet another rhetorical (albeit idiosyncratic) device with a specific function in the process of representing the experience of wonder. Sell contends that "only when rhetoric proved inadequate to the representation of the new worlds did the traveller-writer start to squeeze the body back in by making it part and parcel of the signifying process" (154) and goes on to argue a "relocation of wonder from the world beyond the traveller's body to the traveller himself" (163). Nevertheless, such a shift somehow mirrors that "of rhetoric's *modus operandi* from words to drama" (163), the cultural milieu branded by 'consensual truth' thus remaining unaltered under the same umbrella of rhetoric. In point of fact, Sell never abandons the rhetorical analysis, even though this ultimate approach may suggest the contrary. Still, the author is very consistent in this respect. Sell just wraps up his argument by articulating the way rhetoric shifted its mode from narrative to dramatic, but never actually leaves the rhetorical context. Verisimilitude (material proof, as it were), in Sell's argument, does not constitute a value in itself, but a rhetorically graded principle. Those who might criticise such a line of argument should not overlook this conceptual distinction.

Final evidence of Sell's coherent stance arises in the epilogue of the book (181-92). There, the author presents quite an original reading of *The Tempest*, which he interprets as a dialectical field, that is, a realm of tension articulated between two bodies: on the one hand, that of Miranda, which largely embodies the metaphorical epistemology and, on the other that of Caliban, which enacts a new empirical, almost scientific, mode of perceiving and coding the world. Ultimately, Sell contends, the play sets in motion the slow waning process of the rhetorical mode of the understanding of travel writing and the arrival of a new, modern empirical way of travel narrative. In this way, Sell manages to put his argument in historical perspective, thus projecting the limits of his essay towards the boundaries travel writing criticism shares with other fields of literary studies, most notably, the history of ideas. All in all, Sell lays the foundations of a new critical approach to rhetoric in travel writing which, far from overlooking, stresses, rather, the real value rhetoric had in the early modern philosophical context. If only for this, *Rhetoric and Wonder* deserves, in its own right, a privileged spot in early modern travel-writing criticism.

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