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## **We Don't Know What We Want": The Ups and Downs of Global Travel in Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002)**

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**Abstract:** Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002) can be read as a (post) modern voice in the ongoing debate on educational, transformative and redemptive potential of foreign travel for the young Americans in the late 1990s. The article focuses on representation of global travel experience in the novel employing American Old World journey conventions on the one hand and tourism-travel dichotomy on the other. The backpackers in Eggers's novel can be characterized as drifters. Their encounters with otherness most often result in confusion. All in all, the novel downplays the role of travel in the globalized, homogenized world at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** global travel, international theme, Dave Eggers, backpackers, tourism, travel writing

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### **1. Introduction**

Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002) narrates the adventures of two young Americans who circle the world in one week. In the post-9/11 world such carefree journeys belonged in the past. Perhaps this sense of belatedness was one of the reasons behind the novel's positive but not very enthusiastic reception. The praise was much less lavish than in the case of Eggers's memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of a Staggering Genius*. In fact, as Susanne R. Samples has observed, no critic ever reviewed Eggers's *Velocity* without comparing it to the author's Pulitzer prize nominated debut (5). The effect of the second book syndrome has also been manifested in the scarcity of scholarly research devoted to the novel (Samples 5). Indeed, it still remains the book in Eggers's oeuvre which has garnered the least critical attention since its initial publication in 2002, especially while compared to

his later works. This article aims to fill the gap in the existing scholarly analyses of *Velocity*, which either discuss the novel's connections to his other works (Gower 27–42), consider its significance in the development of Eggers's career as an independent publisher (Hamilton 65–83), focus on unreliability of the narrator and metafictional elements in the novel (Samples, Clements) or explore its paratextual contexts (Brouillete). Alike Varvogli has compared Eggers's novel with J.S. Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (also published in 2002), arguing that both narratives engage with the issues of globalization and the Americanization of the world, and represent travel as a disappointing venture, because of Europe's insufficient "otherness" (2006, 83–95). My aim is to analyze to what extent *You Shall Know Our Velocity* can be read as continuous with the tradition of Old World travel in American literature. Does encountering the world beyond their shores still function as means of self-fashioning for young American "innocents"? What may be the significance of the round-the-world travel in the globalized world at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Drawing on the distinction between tourism and travel, the paper also inquiries into the roles of sightseers and philanthropists that the characters play during their voyage.

Will Chmielewski and Francis "Hand" Wisniewski, the two main characters of *Velocity*, are representatives of lower middle-class, provincial America. They come from Milwaukee and have not traveled much in the USA before setting out on a whirlwind tour of the world. Will, a traumatized, brooding introvert, is the narrator, and "the mind" behind the whole project. Hand, his traveling companion, functions as Will's opposite – he is talkative, practical and helpful, as his nickname suggests. They have been best friends since childhood, and at 27 they are still single, with no stable relationships or permanent jobs and no definite plans for the rest of their lives. Apart from circling the world in a week, Will and Hand want to give out \$38,000 to the poor people they would meet on the way. The money is roughly half of the sum earned by Will a few years back when his silhouette was used as a logo on a package of a new type of electric bulb. Will feels guilty and confused about acquiring this "easy money" and believes getting rid of most of it "would provide clarity" (Eggers 4). Reading this confession in the light of the writer's biography, one reviewer has suggested that through Will's charitable project "Eggers is exorcising the demons of his own recently minted celebrity on the page. Certain descriptions of Will's anxiety over his capriciously acquired money sound much like an over-toured author, wondering if he'd made some sort of Faustian bargain" (Freeman). However, it is also possible to interpret the novel as an allegory that "deals with guilt and grief on the part of the first world, particularly the United States, confronted with staggering disparities between wealth and poverty, privilege and hardship" (Hamilton 67). Eggers has confirmed the latter interpretation explaining in an interview that "[y]ou can draw parallels to American foreign aid, on one level, at least; it's rife with complications and it always pisses someone off" ("Dave Eggers...").

Another set of ethical questions the novel addresses is connected with tourism as cultural practice. Though Will wants to be a tourist he nevertheless has doubts because: “that money could be used for hungry stomachs and you’re using it for your hungry eyes, and the needs of the former must trump the latter, right? And are there individual needs? How much disbelief, collectively, must be suspended, to allow for tourism?” (Eggers 231). Will’s musings reveal he is well aware that as an American tourist in developing or post-Soviet countries he will always occupy a privileged position. The plan to give away money to the individuals in need can be thus read as an attempt to appease one’s guilty conscience by feeding the “hungry stomachs.” As Gower observes: “Will is [...] someone who is struggling to overcome his privilege and to find a new language for encountering the ‘other,’ even if his efforts often seem circumscribed by his position and limited in vision” (33). In other words, he wants to be a tourist who notices the needs of individuals and shares with them what he possesses.

## 2. Voyages to the Old World

Represented as an important educational and formative experience, the voyage to the Old World was a frequent motif in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literature. According to William W. Stowe, European travel in that era was a highly conventional activity, almost a “kind of secular ritual, complete with prescribed actions, promised rewards, a set of quasi-scriptural writings” (19). Following into the footsteps of other travelers, whose books they had read prior to the journey, American men and women would visit places immortalized in literature or associated with great historical figures, admire magnificent works of ancient and Renaissance art and seek inspiration for their own writings. As a cultural and social activity, European travel was also inseparably connected with reading and writing; transatlantic pilgrimages were described in countless letters sent home and then published as travel narratives or fictionalized in novels exploring “the international theme” (Stowe 16). Collectively, both non-fiction and fiction have helped to shape the complex idea of Europe in the American imagination as the place admired as “the great museum of humankind” on the one hand but criticized as “the stronghold of backward feudalism and undemocratic evils” on the other (Freese 10). According to Malcolm Bradbury, “[l]ike America itself, [the Old World] was much more an idea than a real place, a generalized image rather than a spot on the map, and one thing it did was to help define what made American existence and character so different” (7).

Aesthetic appreciation of European sights, monuments and landscapes was most prominent in the writings of learned upper-class travelers who, like Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Adams and Edith Wharton, presented themselves as “passionate pilgrims” on a Grand Tour. In contrast to them, a new class

of common middle-class tourists was rising in importance. Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* (1869) catered to the expectations of these bourgeois readers and promised them a relief from the usual "profundity" and "incomprehensibility" of travel books. Twain declared his account to be "a record of a pleasure trip" where he would look at foreign reality "as if he [i.e. the reader] looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him" (xvii). Consequently, he and his travelling companions were cast in the roles of ignorantly innocent American tourists who may occasionally feel at a loss when faced with European antiquities and art but believe firmly in the superiority of American political and social institutions over European ones. The opposition between a real traveler, who stages himself as an amateur historian and connoisseur of art and a common tourist, who seeks just pleasure and relaxation, already discernible in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American travel literature, continues to be evoked in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century travelogues.

In their writings on Italy, James and Twain exemplify two different ways of interpreting European travel: "James prefers a status quo that preserves the Old World as old, the common preference of the American tourist" (Decker 129). In his eyes, European countries are picturesque and rich in cultural possessions, while their undemocratic governments and economic underdevelopment are facts which remain beyond the scope of his interest. In contrast, Twain in his satirical travelogue uses comedy and ridicule to downplay the significance of European rich cultural heritage. From the perspective of a common American, proud of his country's achievements, Italy remains feudal, poor and backward.

World War I changed the relationship between the Old and the New World as it contributed to growing importance of the United States in the political and economic spheres. In the post-war decade, thanks to American expatriate writers of the "Lost Generation" who settled there, Paris "became the capital of American literature" (MacShane 15). For expatriate writers, European travel functioned an escape from middle-class mediocrity and materialism, offering freedom of artistic expression. In general, travel became one of the most prevalent literary metaphors in the 1930's, with writers turning their voyages "into interior journeys and parables of their times, making landscape and incident [...] the factual materials of *reportage* – do the work of symbol and myth – the materials of fable" (Hynes; qtd. in Fussell 215). Ernest Hemingway's novels and short stories, based on his actual travels in France, Spain, and Africa, are a good illustration of such an approach. The motif of travel as escape and rebellion continues to be present in travels of the 1940s. In Henry Miller's non-fictional *Colossus of Maroussi* (1940) and Paul Bowles's novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) rejection of America stems from a profound belief that it caters solely to people's material needs while neglecting their spiritual and intellectual growth. Thus, both Miller and the characters in Bowles's novel engage in search for a new spiritual center of their personal world in more 'primitive' lands. Henry Miller finds enlightenment and personal transformation

by returning to Greece, the cradle of European civilization. Port Moresby, the main character in *The Sheltering Sky*, hopes to find answers to his existential questions in the Sahara, but he dies in the desert. According to Robbins, Bowles revised “the tradition of Hawthorne, James, and Fitzgerald, which made Europe a dangerous playground for the rich and aimless, by moving beyond Europe and playing up both the danger and the aimlessness” (1101).

In the postwar years, the number of American visitors to Europe, both tourists and commercial travelers, increased considerably (MacShane 17). Western Europe ceased to be an attractive destination since it became more and more ‘Americanized.’ Consequently, it could no longer successfully function as America’s Other. For that reason, some literary critics claim the motif of European journey has become exhausted in postwar American fiction, leading only to repetition or parody (Boddy 245). However, Zetterberg Pettersson argues that for some countercultural writers of the 1960s and 1970s, including William Styron, Mary McCarthy, John A. Williams and Erica Jong, such journeys still functioned as occasions for questioning conventional constructions of American national identity (11–17). Later, the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 had a profound influence on American travel experience in Europe, opening access to Eastern and Central European countries (Decker 142). In their political and economic transformation, post-Soviet countries relied on Western guidance and welcomed English-speaking experts and entrepreneurs which even led to establishment of American expatriate communities in Prague and Budapest. The 1990s – the decade of economic growth and prosperity in the USA – was also the golden era of backpacker tourism, since global travel was safe and affordable for young people. In the vein of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Grand Tour, a “year out” for world traveling was often treated as a way to complement one’s formal education, gather “cultural capital” and, last but not least, achieve a sense of personal self-fulfillment (Desforges 175–195).

However, the era of carefree backpacking ended after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA. Subsequent American military involvement in the Middle East prevented leisure travel to many regions of the world and made tourists more wary in their choice of destinations. Continuing security concerns and economic recession in 2007–2009 further limited opportunities for foreign travel for many young Americans. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be treated as a watershed in the development of world tourism. The threat of terrorism after the 9/11 attacks profoundly affected modes of traveling and travel destinations (Baker 62). It is precisely at this peculiar historical moment that Dave Eggers’s first novel – *You Shall Know Our Velocity* – may be located as a literary and cultural artefact. Though the first edition of book was published in 2002, and the second, revised version in 2003, the journey Eggers depicted in the novel took place in the late 1990s.



### 3. In the Footsteps of Phileas Fogg, or How to Go Around the World Without Seeing It

A project of circumnavigating the globe in the shortest possible time evokes Jules Verne's young-adult classic *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872). There are obvious, if indirect, intertextual references to Fogg's literary journey in *Velocity*. First of all, Verne's novel made "the idea of circling the globe in a fixed time [...] an indispensable part of modern mythology" (Verne xi) and Will and Hand clearly want to re-live this myth. Also, while planning their original timetable, Hand discovers the existence of the international date line while Fogg's servant, Passepartout, makes the same discovery soon after their return to London. It is also noteworthy that both novels rely on the "[a]nnihilation of time and space topos," which first appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western discourse of travel as a result of a belief that "[m]otion was no longer dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on a mechanical power that created its new spatiality" (Schivelbusch 10). While Fogg's world journey in 1872 was conceivable thanks to the completion of such big projects as the Suez Canal as well as cross-country railway systems in the USA and India, Will and Hand's adventure in the late 1990's is possible thanks to rapid development of air travel in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The transportation technology has evolved, but what the two texts have in common is a fascination with fast movement across the globe. As Marzena Kubisz has observed, in the modern Western world, speed "has acquired the status of a 'cultural dominant' and has become a factor that powerfully determines and shapes the quality of people lives [...]. The world is divided into the Fast and the Slow and it is one's access to speed that determines which world one inhabits" (63). In this respect, both the 19<sup>th</sup> century representative of the British Empire and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century representatives of the USA, a global superpower, remain privileged envoys of "the Fast" world, while the peoples and countries they visit belong to the "Slow" part.

In both novels, the voyage around the world becomes a race against time, though the strategies chosen to win are very different. Phlegmatic Fogg is well-organized and methodical. Determined to prove his point about the possibility of circumnavigating the globe in 80 days, he plans and executes his every move with mathematical precision. Unlike him, Will and Hand proceed in a chaotic or even frantic manner. Neither are they fascinated by timetables, challenged by the details of transport or consider the necessity to get a visa. Will and Hand change their route four times, and when they finally set out from Chicago, the weather conditions prevent them from flying to Greenland. On a whim they decide to fly to Dakar. As the narrator explains, "All we wanted was another continent, as soon as possible" (Eggers 26). Later on, he adds: "[t]he grand design was movement and the opposition of time, not drinking, hiding, sleeping" (156). Eventually, their original project of circumnavigating the world is reduced to visiting parts of Senegal, Morocco, Estonia, and Latvia. It is noteworthy that Will and Hand's race is

paralleled by the Paris Dakar rally in the novel, broadcast worldwide. Even though the two friends happen to be in Dakar during the rally, they never treat it as a ‘must-see’ event. Nevertheless, in every hotel room they stay at for the rest of the trip, they are compelled to watch cars racing across the desert. The rally, designed and advertised as a global attraction, serves as one more reminder that the world has shrunk and become an interconnected ‘global village,’ with villagers watching the same news and sports events.

Another similarity between Phileas Fogg and two young Americans in *Velocity* is that neither of them is really interested in making discoveries or exploring the unknown during their global peregrinations: “Verne would have his readers comprehend the imperial Englishman not as a bold explorer but as a somewhat negligent, if chivalrous, sightseer, availing himself of frequently comfortable modes of transportation” (Sinnema 141). Will and Hand can also be interpreted as ‘negligent sightseers’ because they do not have any specific expectations as to what they wish to see (with one exception – the Great Pyramid). Since their journey is a race against the clock, the countries they drive through in rented cars function only as a background to their adventure. Thus, the whole project questions two fundamental tenets of leisure traveling, namely the choice of a place motivated by personal preference and the desire to get to know that place well.

#### 4. Travelers/ Tourists/ Philanthropists, or the Roles They Play

Trying to assess Will and Hand’s travel experience against the traveler-tourist dichotomy reveals that they do not really belong to either of these groups yet possess some select features of both. In academic debates and pop-cultural representations tourists and travelers have been frequently represented as polar opposites. A traveler is active, he or she seeks people, places and experiences not only for adventure and thrill of discovery but also because the journey possesses some deeper personal significance for them. Modern day travelers or travel writers – as these two roles tend to be conflated – frequently emphasize that their task goes beyond visiting and describing a foreign place. In the age of globalization and YouTube “it is not enough anymore simply to describe a landscape – we must root out its meanings” (Swick 37). Or, as another practitioner of the trade has expressed it: “A [travel] book has the capacity to express a country’s heart, as long as it stays away from vacations, holidays, sightseeing, and the half-truths in official handouts; as long as it concentrates on people in their landscape, the dissonance as well as the melodies, the contradiction, and the vivid trivia” (Theroux 53). Obviously, in order to discover the essence of any place, travelers need time to become participants rather than only observers of local life (Swick 38).

At the same time, neither travelers nor tourists can escape anxieties caused by the globalization and homogenization of cultures at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How

do you justify writing about your travel experiences if there are no blank spaces left on the map and no alien cultures? What kind of language should you employ to describe the 'Other'? In colonial times, Western travel books were produced and read in the context of an imperial discourse which sought to subordinate 'the Other' politically and culturally. This troublesome legacy continues to affect the genre in the post-colonial world, even though overt racism or a sense of cultural superiority are no longer accepted and thus seldom openly expressed. Debbie Lisle argues there are two tendencies discernible in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglophone travel writing, which she defines as a "colonial" versus a "cosmopolitan vision" (3, 4). On the one hand, there are authors who resemble their colonial predecessors in "categorizing, critiquing and passing judgements on less-civilized areas of the world" (3). In contrast, other authors "make deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the genre's implication in Empire by embracing the emancipatory possibilities created by an interconnected 'global village' [...]. Unlike their colonial predecessors, these writers frame encounters with others in positive ways – they reveal moments of empathy, recognitions of difference, realizations of equality and insight into shared values" (4). This is the "cosmopolitan vision" at work (4).

The young travelers in Eggers's novel are ill-prepared to go beyond stereotypical binaries of West/East, self/other, us/them. Their innocence or ignorance make the "cosmopolitan" vision impossible so they frequently resort to relying on familiar stereotypes. Like most Western tourists on short-time trips, Will and Hand lack accurate information about the socio-economic realities of the peripheral countries they visit. As Will admits "I knew nothing, basically, but couldn't bear the fact that of the nations of the world, I had only ill formed collages of social studies textbooks and quickly-flipped travel magazines" (69). Obviously, these "collages" constructed out of textbook facts, stock images and TV news lack precision and veracity so that, paradoxically, all provincial, impoverished countries blur into one: "When I heard the word Portugal, I, thought of Madagascar, scrubby, dry, poor, the trees crowded with lemurs" (69). Morocco, which they imagined as similar to Tunisia, is surprisingly green but reminds them of the Balkans. Although they have never been to the Balkans, they have an idea of how the region must look like after the last Balkan War: "The crumbly buildings, the people with the earthtone garb, everyone walking around, the fires everywhere [...], it looks like it was hit by tanks" (145). Not all first impressions are disappointing. Landing in Dakar, they react to the geographic otherness of Africa with youthful enthusiasm: "Did you feel that air? It's different. It's African air. It's like mixed with the sun more. Like our air isn't mixed as well with the sun. Here they mix it perfectly. The sun's in the wind, the sun's in your breaths" (43). However, quite soon, the initial thrill wears off and the foreign reality becomes too overwhelming: dirty children, begging mothers, swindling taxi drivers and cheeky youngsters who demand money.

While the characters may delude themselves that they are not typical tourists, they act like them and are treated accordingly by the local people. Depending on

circumstances, the two friends become a laughing stock and/or a source of easy money. In Casablanca, the first man whom they talk to spins a tall tale about killer Tuaregs in the Sahara and then calls them "stupid" for believing in it; a moment later the taxi driver and his companion quarrel in French "on the best way to fleece [them]" (147). Similarly to most tourists, Will and Hand speak only English and a bit of French and the communication barrier makes them feel uncomfortable and sometimes also physically vulnerable in a foreign place. In Senegal, their rented car is stopped by the police for no apparent reason, later on they get chased, accosted by aggressive hash traffickers and repeatedly called "faggots." At times, they are even afraid for their lives. Singing travelers cheques on a taxi driving them to Dakar, Will makes sure "no one was watching, no one who would tell their buddies in Dakar that there were these tourists made of money [...] who should be robbed and stabbed and later dragged around by their penises" (39). Some of these fears are certainly exaggerated but they reveal that the characters perceive African countries as unpredictable and potentially threatening to a white visitor. However, it is their money not their lives that the local people are after. Tellingly, one danger that is never mentioned in the narrative is the threat of a terrorist attack. This fact firmly situates the novel in a pre-9/11 world, in which American political, economic and military dominance has not yet been questioned. Will's and Hand's round-the-world trip is based on the premise that the globe is a friendly and safe place for young American backpackers.

In his 2011 essay on new developments in the post-9/11 American global novel, Bruce Robbins has identified two tropes for describing an incomprehensible foreign reality beyond USA: "Absurdistan" and "The Museum of the Misshappens" (1009). According to the former, "the foreign is the absurd or an inevitable object of satire," while the latter concept is based on representing foreign history as a succession of atrocities (1010). The narrator of *Velocity* resorts to both perspectives, depending upon the geographical region. As an American visiting post-colonial and post-Soviet states, Will depicts some aspects of reality as absurd and comic, other as grim or tragic. Why does a man at a bar in Tallin cries "Hail Hitler" when they enter? Why do people at a gas station in Latvia look menacing? In an internal dialogue with one of them, Will imagines the following explication: "We have been overrun for centuries. The Swedes, the Germans, the Russians. Then the Germans again, the Russians again. In the last thousand years, we have known twenty years of peace. You have no place to judge. You know nothing [...]. You can't ever guess at life, at pain" (265). In the Baltic states, the burden of the past makes American tourists feel guilty about their privileged status; they are intruders with no right to judge the people whom history has treated so poorly.

Though Will complains about his ignorance of the world, he does nothing to learn more about the countries they visit. The only guidebook he and Hand buy cannot be considered a reliable source of information. According to the book, Estonians are so prosperous that everyone owns a cell phone, a surprising fact

which later on turns out to be a fabrication. Hand, who has imagined the country would look more like war-ruined Sarajevo, assumes they need to visit provincial areas in order to find the real, i.e. poor, Estonians to give them money. The idea that ‘real’ Estonians should be poor and live outside Tallin reveals that Will and Hand rely on stereotypes of Eastern European countries. It may also indicate that young Americans are in search of authenticity and believe – like many tourists – that ‘real’ life is to be found in provincial areas. In fact, their ‘sightseeing’ strategy – whether intentional or accidental – is based on avoiding typical tourist attractions such as resorts, museums or national parks. They usually rent a car and leave a major city by a randomly chosen route, which allows them to reach areas avoided by mass tourists. It is there that they try to get closer to the people by giving them money.

According to MacCannell, the “desire to share in the real life of the places visited, or at least to see that life as it is really lived” is an important component of modern tourist experience (96). Many visitors want to see “the back regions” (92) of the kitchens, workshops, and warehouses, realizing that “the front regions” (92) such as reception desks, parlors, and hotel lobbies offer but a version of foreign reality: standardized, sanitized and beautified. At the same time, tourists are criticized if they are not able to fraternize with the locals. In *Velocity* this criticism has been internalized as the narrator himself recognizes the impossibility of crossing certain boundaries between an outsider and a local:

I wanted to meet them, would kill to meet them, would want to spend a day with them, a month, have them build a lean-to beside their house for us, share meals with us, show us the land, the care of their goats. But we wouldn’t meet them because it was an invasion, and because I could not leap this gap. I could hope for good things for them, and tape a pouch of money to their wall, but I could not shake their hands, and could not show them my face. (120)

Will is thus fully aware that due to lack of time, his embarrassment, shame or reluctance to reveal his role as a benefactor, the contact between him and the local people is minimal or non-existent. Incapable of facing the poor as individuals, Will and Hand rarely pass money from hand to hand, developing instead an elaborate system of “textual mediations” (Brouillette 4). In a series of antics evocative of Tom Sawyer’s and Huck Finn’s adventures, they play the role of secret benefactors and enjoy themselves while drawing treasure maps, writing cryptic notes, attaching money to walls or domestic animals. Such activities allow them to “diffuse their guilt without confronting the poverty that is its cause” (Brouillette 5). For the readers, these incidents point to the characters’ youthful naivete and playfulness.

Last but not least, though the pair wishes to project the image of benevolent do-gooders, they nevertheless tend to judge, offend, and humiliate the local people. One such unpleasant exchange, which betrays a lack of balance between the hosts

and the guests, takes place when they refuse money to a young man who insists on getting it:

“You are not such the clever guy,” said Hand. “Your brother he got all the brains, eh?” Hand was getting overconfident; the man knew no English, but continued nodding eagerly. “But you know why,” Hand continued, “we gave to your brother three hundred of the dollars American? Because he didn’t ask for it. You, you are crass – you know of this word, crass? – so no money you have coming.” (118)

In this dialogue, the Senegalese teenager is reduced to the position of an arrogant and misbehaving child who needs to be taught a lesson. The black man remains silent while listening to the rant delivered by the rich white tourist. The fact that the boy even nods as if agreeing to what is being said about him, clearly points to his inferior position in this exchange. This scene – and several other similar incidents in the novel – reveal that sometimes tourists resort to colonial patterns of interaction in a post-colonial reality.

The double motivation for the trip, which is simultaneously a race with time and a charity project, creates an internal dilemma for Will and Hand who have to reconcile two distinct roles they are playing. On the one hand, Will and Hand are ‘innocents abroad,’ young bungling tourists who have ventured out into the wide world for the first time in their lives. They want their trip to be a unique and unforgettable experience, hence they crave for the excitement which comes with speed and spontaneity. On the other hand, they act as self-appointed benefactors “who have chosen money as their language of communication” (306) and deep down they expect that the act of giving alms will allow them to transcend barriers of race, class and culture. Paradoxically, money does not facilitate contacts with the locals but rather causes further moral dilemmas because it is impossible to bestow gifts on all those in need, nor is it possible to decide whose needs should have priority. As a result, Will’s and Hand’s “half-baked, ill executed scheme is neither genuine philanthropy nor self-indulgence,” since hedonism is generally hard to reconcile with altruism (Varvogli 2012, 53). Towards the end of the story, the characters themselves begin to doubt their mission and its positive effects.

## 5. No Escape, or Traveling in the New Empire

What may Will’s and Hand’s journey tell us about the American experience of global travel in the late 1990s? The narrative confirms that airline connections and processes of globalization have changed the relationship between home and abroad, the familiar and the foreign. The British Empire has fallen only to be replaced with another, equally powerful, global empire whose products and values reach the most distant parts of the world. As Pico Iyer observes: “In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,



the British famously sent the Bible and Shakespeare and cricket round the world; now a more international kind of Empire is sending Madonna and the Simpsons and Brad Pitt" (n.p.). All the nightclubs or hotel bars visited by Will and Hand are designed to resemble typical American nightclubs and bars. The regulars and visitors alike listen to American music and gaze at posters from American movies, which decorate the walls. Young people in Morocco and Tallin speak English, know some American songs and bands, and are interested in American baseball or basketball players and dream of visiting New York.

The discovery that foreigners in distant parts of the world know more about American life and pop culture than vice versa is both surprising and frustrating. When Will and Hand pick up a hitchhiker in Estonia, they end up chatting with him about American rock bands: "That Taavi Mets seemed in every way someone we knew in high school was a natural thing and a reductive and unfortunate thing. Or maybe this was good. What did we want? We want the world smaller and bigger and just the same but advancing. We don't know what we want" (248). The narrator seems both pleased and troubled by the fact that the world has become more homogeneous, that young people in distant countries know so much about American bands, songs and celebrities. While familiarity is reassuring and it may give a traveler the much needed sense of home away from home, it may also be disappointing because it simultaneously robs him of the possibility to confront 'otherness' and to learn something about himself in the process.

The sense that the similarities outweigh the differences reaches its climax near the end of the trip. While driving through the Estonian forests, Will discovers with amazement that this landscape reminds him of Nebraska:

Estonia could look like Nebraska and Nebraska could look like Kansas. Kansas like Morocco. Morocco like Arles. On and on. Growing up I thought all countries looked, were required to look, completely different – Congo was all jungle, robust and wet and green, Germany was all black forests, Russia was white, all of it Siberian. But every country now seemed to offer a little of every other country, and every given landscape, I finally realized, existed somewhere in the U.S. (231)

As a child, Will liked imaginary travels and, as the passage quoted above indicates, created his own version of Congo as a "jungle," Germany as "black" and Russia as "white." When these dream visions clash with reality, Will reaches a perplexing conclusion. Since every country has elements of other countries in it, there is no need to travel the world. Since every landscape can be found somewhere in the US, all you need to do is to return home. There is no escape from sameness; the 'otherness' of distant lands is illusionary. Caren Irr argues that such a blurring of distinctions between the landscapes of home and abroad distinguishes early 21<sup>st</sup>-century expatriate travel writings from its early 20<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors. In modernist literature, Americans paid attention to the "local particularities of

place and scene" in foreign countries because the hero could be "temporarily and therapeutically released" from his domestic constraints in an unfamiliar, alien landscape, far away from home. However, contemporary fiction portrays "a relatively continuous, tendentially homogeneous world space" that emphasizes "the inescapability of the cultural matrix of origin" (666).

However, there is still one place in this global village which has preserved its unique, original status – the Great Pyramid of Giza, the last existing wonder of the ancient world, one of the world's most important tourist attractions, a monument that, despite centuries of archaeological research, still hides many secrets. While planning their trip, Will and Hand insist on ending it right there. They would bribe the guards and climb the pyramid at dawn to admire the sunrise from its top. The dream is as romantic as it is unrealistic as tourists are not allowed to climb the pyramid. Should it be read as an expression of anachronistic imperial fantasies in which Will and Hand symbolically conquer the most important monument of antiquity to manifest their power? Does the dream express longing for a symbolic climax of the whole adventure? Obviously, Will and Hand never reach Cairo and the Great Pyramid; they lack time and connecting flights. A trip based on the rules of chaos and coincidence cannot end with a grand gesture, planned in advance. Perhaps this failure suggests that glamour and exoticism of global travel is gone at the beginning of the 21st century. Words like 'excitement,' 'adventure,' and 'romance,' routinely associated with great journeys of the past, became empty signifiers used only by tour operators to sell package tours. Thus, the only conclusion to the whole enterprise is Will's parting remark: "It was a good week." Hand replies "I'm glad we did that" (306). Paradoxically, seeing the world changes nothing in the characters' lives. If some lessons have been learned, they are not spelt out to the readers, leaving them in doubt as to the sense of the whole adventure.

## 6. Conclusion

As a genre, travel writing has been traditionally indebted to both "rationalist" and "romanticist" aesthetics: "One narrative register inclines toward the acquisition of information, description of detail and an omniscient point of view; another favors sentiment, the minutia of human subjects and the dramas of subjective experience over the scientific certitude of informational orders" (Levin 2). In his study of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Anglophone travel novel, Levin identifies a third trend – "literature of 'negation,'" manifested in the books which portray travel experiences in the globalized, decolonized world, dominated by mass culture and the logic of late capitalism (2). Though the young characters in contemporary adventure travel novels may possess some features of heroic explorers or introspective seekers, the resemblance is superficial. The young backpackers in Eggers's novel are neither passive tourists nor bona-fide world-explorers seeking authenticity or



beauty in ‘off the beaten track’ locations. Occasionally, they may approach either a tourist or a traveler *modus operandi* but their encounters with ‘otherness’ most often result in confusion, superficial admiration or naive amazement.

Neither is their trip a fulfillment of a dream about entering a new stage of life, where characters are transported from the mundane life in the USA to the exotic, magical lands beyond the ocean and then return home with “cultural capital” to build a bright future. Such a rhetoric of European travel as a realization of a dream and as a rite of passage was a staple of 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American travel books. However, in contemporary adventure narratives the completion of travel does not lead to identification with the social order and incorporation into the adult society on one’s return. It seems self-fashioning through travel is problematic and limited in the era of globalization, and these novels “reveal a subculture of travel in which self-annihilation emerges as a viable alternative to re-incorporation into the social order” (Levin 3). This is indeed what happens to Will when he sets out on another journey and dies. The second, extended version of the novel reveals that he and Hand did not manage to settle down or start a meaningful relationship. According to Hamilton, both *Velocity* and several stories in the collection *How We Are Hungry* (2004) portray confused young Americans trying to find the meaning of life: “Eggers’s fiction identifies the way that travel has become a lifeline for such characters, offering them a pre-packaged quest narrative ready for their digestion” (89). Yet if these characters are seekers, they do not really know what they are seeking. As a result, their quests remain inconclusive and do not bring personal transformation or spiritual enlightenment.

Traditionally, travel can also function as relief and escape, a thread which Eggers explores to some extent. When they set out, Will is trying to come to terms with the sudden death of Jack, his best friend. Images of Jack’s mutilated face and body – his car was crushed by a speeding truck – continually haunt Will. Internal monologues reveal that he is unable to get out of a vicious circle of anger, grief and depression. The trope of travel as self-therapy is a fairly common motif in autobiographical travel writing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in women’s memoirs (Rutkowska 100). However, such journeys are usually planned as solo ventures and require prolonged physical effort. Time is a necessary prerequisite for reflection and mental healing. The speedy trip across the globe in Eggers’s novel is unlike any journey described in contemporary travel-as-therapy memoirs. It is the opposite of a solitary spiritual pilgrimage into oneself because, instead of facing and accepting the loss of a friend, Will simply wants to banish sad memories by living on the edge. Again, Eggers offers no conclusive evidence to prove that travel-as-therapy has been effective.

Is it the global reality at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that prevents the characters from successfully completing their quest? As Gower claims, Will and Hand “operate in a seemingly random universe that offers them little hope of control [...]. Their general ignorance raises the possibility that a larger order could exist. That order might simply lie beyond the protagonists’ ability to perceive it. So,

in a fairly conventional postmodern maneuver, the text holds out the possibility of closure even as, in practice, truth is always deferred, displaced, or otherwise denied” (31). *Velocity* shows that globalization may have erased some barriers between young people from distant parts of the globe but there are still political, economic and cultural borders which make some connections – both literal and metaphorical – impossible. Alternatively, the fault may be on the side of characters, representatives of Generation X, also referred to as the “Slacker Generation.” The slacker manifests with his lifestyle that he “is only in the world but not a producer of it, that he is nomadically infringing on the system, not supporting it” (Sweet 161). In their travels, Will and Hand remain drifters, carried by randomly selected planes across the globe much like leaves carried by the gusts of wind. Their life decisions speak of a similar lack of control or commitment, they never consider settling down, looking for a stable employment, or starting a family. They prefer to opt out of the system, living for the moment.

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