The potentially harmful political implications of traveling and, more specifically, of travel writing, have been widely debated at least since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.¹ Travel writing is, first and foremost, about the aesthetics of difference, that is, about how other places and peoples appear to our senses. The aesthetics of difference, however, is closely interwoven with ethical and political considerations about distant strangers. The genre of travel literature contributes to the shaping of our collective sensitivity to differences between “us” and “others.” At the same time, there seems to be a growing market for travel writing, probably because the genre projects the ideal of an authentic mode of travel which is time-consuming and sometimes hazardous, but which also contains an ancient promise recalled by Walter Benjamin: “Distance is the land of wishes come true.”² Like popular

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biographies, travel books invite their public to join in the spectacle of the astonishing exploits, encounters and feats of endurance made by extraordinary individuals. Travel literature is a medium in which the modern cult of the individual is constantly celebrated anew. The traveling writer is a hero the reader would like to emulate. Where this has been ruled out, it is at least possible to adopt his views on what is going on in remote lands. Theoretically at least, this makes travel literature into a medium in which distant places and peoples can be thought of as potential beneficiaries of an expanded moral solidarity.

Before digging deeper into this problem, I begin by showing how the tradition of Critical Theory contains a number of models for reflecting on modern travel that can be applied to the criticism of travel writing. The critique of travel put forth by Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, is interesting not least because it anticipates in part the postcolonial criticism of the “Orientalist” slant of European world views (I). I then explore the figure of the modern traveler and Said’s critique of Orientalism—a critique that resonates with Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s criticism of Homer’s Odyssey. Since literary travel accounts continue to shape the public’s moral geographies of the international order, the genre is the object of mounting interest on the part of such branches of the social sciences as postcolonial studies, the study of international relations and political theory. As will become clear, what dominates the field is the critique of travel writing as neocolonial in the broadest sense (II). In the third section, I review and revise the critique of Said, Adorno and Horkheimer by offering brief readings of a few selected literary texts. The essence of my claim is that while the model of Orientalism may still apply to certain travelogues, it is otherwise an interpretive strait-jacket (III). More helpful in gaining a better understanding of important countercurrents in contemporary travel writing are some of Benjamin’s thoughts on the matter. In my conclusion I hope to show how these reflections might turn out to be useful for rethinking the connections between travel, travel writing and the contours of new forms of global ecumenical consciousness (IV).

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