

# WALKING AMONG PALM TREES: BEAUTY, CULTURE, GEOGRAPHY

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32

-1-

The Spouter-Inn, in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, affects Ishmael with foreboding. There is the dark, be-smoked painting of what most beholders think is an exasperated whale "impaling himself upon the three mastheads" of a foundering ship. And, on the wall across from it, the "heathenish array of monstrous clubs and spears" makes Ishmael wonder "what monstrous cannibal and savage" (21) could ever have used such implements. Then the Spouter-Inn's landlord informs him that, if he wants to spend the night, he'll have to have a harpooneer for a bedfellow, a "dark complexioned chap" who only eats steaks "and likes 'em rare" (24). Ishmael, who lets it be known several times in the chapter that he does not like to sleep two to a bed, and that even sailors at sea do not sleep two to a bed, gets more and more nervous at the thought of sleeping next to the harpooneer, his anxiety fed by the landlord's stories of this harpooneer's trade in embalmed New Zealand heads. Getting to bed first but not being able to sleep, Ishmael hears the harpooneer enter his room and, by the faint light of a candle, sees him undress—a horror of largeness, blackness, and tattoos. With Christian forbearance Ishmael tries to temper his fear for the heathen: "It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin" (29), but every newly discarded piece of clothing reveals new abominations. "Still more, his very legs were marked [with tattoos], as if a parcel of dark, green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country" (29-30). After intervention of the landlord, however, Ishmael spends a quiet night lying next to the harpooneer, Queequeg, and in the morning he finds "Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been

his wife” (32).

That it is the trunks of palm trees that help convey the message of complete, un-Christian foreignness is of a piece with much in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing and imagination: palm trees are a motif of strangeness. The motif is seldom entirely unambiguous, though. Strangeness can lie close to fascination and for all of Queequeg’s shocking ugliness in Ishmael’s eyes, there is a note of caress—preparatory to the conjugal image to follow—in how Queequeg’s legs strike Ishmael as the trunks of *young* palms.

In their utter strangeness, palm trees can also express longing. Heinrich Heine writes in a famous poem of a pine tree (or spruce, or fir: the German tree is a *Fichtenbaum*) who, on its icy northern plane, dreams of a palm tree who grieves, aware of distance, on its faraway burning rock.<sup>1</sup> This mutual longing for communion acknowledges the impassable distance between environments, between cultures too far outside each other’s remit. To be without awareness of such impassability is to be sentimental. Gustave Flaubert makes fun of Emma Bovary’s sentimentality on numerous occasions, never more cuttingly than when, in chapter 6 of book 1, he has Emma recall the keepsake books that the girls at her convent school gave each other with illustrations of landscapes with palms *and* pines in them. Emma now thinks fondly of her convent school days because those were days of daydreaming, of dreaming of escaping the convent. Daydreaming is the erasure of longing by imagined fulfillment and now, as a married woman, Emma makes that old daydreaming the object of new daydreaming, of dreaming of escaping her married life and erasing the years that led up to it.

The strangeness of palm trees in the Western imagination clearly is also a matter of colonialist and patriarchal biases, biases described in great and convincing detail in Felicity Nussbaum’s 1995 book *Torrid Zones*. Palm trees, it is true, do not actually occur in Nussbaum’s book: she is too occupied with discovering the Enlightenment’s sexual-societal ideology. But in the temperate imagination palm trees are implied as staffage of the Torrid Zone.<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum develops the notion of a sexual geography in which “torrid zones” signify “both the geographical torrid zones of the territory between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, and the torrid zone mapped onto the human body, especially the female body.” The encounters of early modern traders and explorers with other peoples followed a depressing pattern that makes “the contrasts among the torrid, temperate, and frigid zones of the globe... formative in imagining that a sexualized woman of empire is distinct from domestic English womanhood” (7). Reflecting on Adam Ferguson’s 1767 *Essay on the History of Civil Society* Nussbaum writes, “the torrid zone exists in an eternal past, permeated with sexual passion. Traveling from hot places into northern regions fosters a move into history, industry, and politics....In Ferguson’s representation, sexual passion varies according to the world’s topography and climate, yet its unrestricted expression is predictably linked to the torrid zone’s failure to nurture civilization or political freedom” (8-9). Ferguson’s points broadly tally with observations on climate

and mores by Montesquieu, Hume, and many other Enlightenment thinkers: “each connects climate and sexual desire to define a temperate, civilized Europe that possesses the sexual constraint necessary to engage in the work-discipline productive of political liberty and civic virtue, in marked contrast to the libidinous and indolent torrid zones” (10).<sup>3</sup> Or, as Lord Byron puts it with joyful flippancy in *Don Juan*, “What men call gallantry, and gods adultery / Is much more common where the climate’s sultry” (I, 63).

In a very different strain—more primitivist than colonialist—palm trees are figured as paradisiacal. Katharine Manthorne, for instance, collects a wealth of reflections and depictions by nineteenth-century artists and explorers who see Central and South America as the place where the Garden of Eden can still be found, either literally (the Garden, by Medieval legend, had survived the Flood) or metaphorically, because of the fertility of the tropical vegetation there. “Increasingly,” she writes, “this concept of the prodigality and fertility of these regions converges on the image of the stately palm, the most typical of its botanical specimens” (376). North American artists such as Frederic Church and Louis Mignon claimed Spanish America as “the New World Eden, distinct from the Arcadia of the Old World” (378) and depicted it in much more accurate detail than was customary in the Italianate landscape tradition formulated by Claude Lorrain. This very attention to precision in the depiction of the American paradise also led to dissolution of the Edenic myth. Comparing Church’s 1877 painting “Morning in the Tropics” with his “Heart of the Andes” of 1859, Manthorne remarks that the later painting “corresponds not to the Garden of Eden as Adam and Eve knew it but rather to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s modern description of ‘that paradise of dampness and silence, going back to before original sin’” (381; the reference is to Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

The strangeness of palms in the instances cited above is linked to ideas and prejudices that imply geographic awareness. To Enlightenment thinkers and explorers geography is a self-flattering explanatory device for differences among peoples and an exculpatory one for exploiting others in various ways. To nineteenth-century painters, travel to Central and South America turns the region from a palm-dominated Eden of the mind into a magical primeval reality. Heine’s poem is all about unbridgeable geographical distance; Flaubert’s mocking of Emma about blithely bridging unbridgeable distance. Ishmael, about to embark on a sea journey because the sea shows us the “tormenting, mild image” that Narcissus saw in the fountain, “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to all” (14), is ready to lose the bearings of a landlocked life and its racial and religious divisions and can therefore sleep two to a bed with someone who, in the morning, is no longer a tattooed savage.

But the most striking reference I know to palm trees as an index of strangeness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occurs in Goethe’s 1809 novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (*Elective Affinities*). It is a novel without any geographical awareness or specificity, an echo chamber of sentiments not so much felt as assumed

at second hand, a novel into which no “Other” ever penetrates. This also makes it a novel in which no self can emerge out of contrastive energy; selves in this novel slowly fade into their generic cultural background and all occasional encounters with those who know or appreciate foreign lands turn out traumatic. Even the gardener in the novel dislikes “the new ornamental trees and fashionable flowers, and the limitless world of botany then opening up and all the foreign names buzzing around in it filled him with a sort of timidity, which made him cross” (176). The novel is a structuralist’s dream, in which a number of men only known by their function in the world—the Captain, the Architect, the Assistant—take turns at fulfilling the position of second male person in the household of Eduard and Charlotte.

To briefly summarize: In this novel, cool and stilted, an aristocratic married couple invites a friend to help them landscape their grounds. The husband, Eduard, and this friend, the Captain, get along very well. This “affinity” between the two men draws the husband away from his wife, Charlotte. To remedy this, Eduard suggests that they invite a fourth person into their affective equation, Charlotte’s young and beautiful niece Otilie. This arrangement works for a while before the laws of chemical attraction and repulsion, as applied to human affairs of the heart, cause a rearrangement of the affinities between the four, so that the Captain and Charlotte are attracted to each other as are Eduard and Otilie. Just as this switch in mutual attraction takes root, Charlotte invites her husband Eduard to her bed; a child is conceived that, remarkably, turns out not to resemble either parent but, instead, the Captain and Otilie, the two people, that is, uppermost in the adulterous imaginations of the husband and wife while they were conceiving their child. It is as if Goethe wanted to go Montaigne one better in an example of the power of the imagination.

With the entry of Otilie into this novel, there is a moment of promise that the novel’s remarkable coolness, the way it reduces human affective life to chemical laws, will give way. Otilie is infinitely kind, patient, and helpful and quickly makes herself indispensable to the household. Will she become the novel’s moral center, corrective of the governing amoral chemical processes? Posing the question is betraying one’s liberal-humanist bias; Goethe is not having it. Otilie has to go through the novel without a positive personality of her own and can therefore become exactly what Eduard makes of her. Her handwriting, so much criticized at school, becomes indistinguishable from Eduard’s own and when she writes him a note agreeing to see him, Eduard clumsily drops the letter; his wife picks it up, glances at the handwriting, and returns it to Eduard assuming it to be something he wrote himself. In the face of Eduard’s insistent passion Otilie shuts down, stops speaking, stops eating, eventually dies—her corpse performing a saintly miracle—and thus, negatively, dissolves her participation in the experiment.

Even long before she stops speaking, Otilie’s main function in the conversations between the various characters in the novel is to record what strikes her in them in her diary. “Thus the remarks, observations, the quoted maxims and whatever else may appear all become quite peculiarly the writer’s own and significant for her,” the

novel's narrator tells us, turning them into "a thread of love and devotion which unites everything and characterizes the whole" (124). In saying this, however, the narrator glosses over the fundamentally secondary nature of Ottilie's diary; that she makes the various remarks and maxims peculiarly her own is less a feat of transmutation than a mark of original emptiness. The diary is really a commonplace book and helps characterize the whole of this novel as a string of maxims and aphorisms, a fund of unquestioned cultural verities. *Elective Affinities* is a sort of wisdom literature, but the wisdom it imparts never becomes an event in the novel itself. It is in her diary, agitated by a book of monkey portraits that resemble people that her cousin—Charlotte's daughter—exhibits on a whirlwind visit, that Ottilie writes "Es wandelt niemand ungestraft unter Palmen": "Nobody lives among palm trees unpunished," and she continues: "and it is certain one's sentiments alter in a country where elephants and tigers are at home" (169).

- 36 Ottilie reports here the words of the Assistant—assistant to the principal of Ottilie's boarding school, now living in the Eduard-Charlotte household as replacement for the Architect (who himself replaced the Captain). The Assistant (as quoted by Ottilie) begins by stating that "we should know nothing about the natural world except what we have as our immediate living surroundings" (168). Native trees, birds, and flowers are "our true compatriots," but isn't it the case "that every foreign creature, torn from its own environment, fills us with a sort of uneasiness which only familiarity will relieve? We should have to live very tumultuous and colourful lives to bear the company of monkeys, parrots, and blackamoors." A "longing for exotic things" used to come over the Assistant but he noticed that "the traveller who sees such wonders in a living and daily connection with other wonders...becomes another person" (169); thus, nobody walks among palm trees with impunity.

In *Elective Affinities* people are not going to dream of baboons and periwinkles. That cultures should not admit foreign elements the Assistant supports by point-missing references to two Alexanders, natural scientist Von Humboldt and English poet Pope ("The proper study of Mankind is Man"). Ottilie absorbs and augments the Assistant's pedantic wisdom in her diary, thrilling to the horror of foreignness and the certainty of punishments. "Heart of Darkness" comes to mind here, since the real fear Ottilie expresses is that of altered sentiments: punishments may lose their effectiveness, tigers and elephants may grow familiar and transgressors may go native. Ottilie's outburst-in-quotation is brought on by the book her cousin brings. People as monkeys—is her outrage concerning the descent of man a displaced disgust at the adultery of which she is part? Does she feel that her sentiments, too, are under threat of altering and is she suppressing jealousy for her popular cousin, a person who seems to escape all forms of punishment and who lives without any burden—financial, temperamental, moral—in a universe of constant amusement and novelty? In any event, punishment comes for Ottilie, and it is self-inflicted: silence, anorexia, death.

Suppose we could forget about climate zones and moral bias, about tigers and elephants, suppose we could look at palm trees from an aesthetic point of view—are they beautiful? Elaine Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), deals with that question. She writes of an error in aesthetic judgment she once made: “I had ruled out palm trees as objects of beauty and then one day discovered I had made a mistake” (12). That one day she is standing on a balcony, looking out on a palm tree “and its huge swaying leaves are before me at eye level, arcing, arching, waving, cresting and breaking in the soft air, throwing the yellow sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side, running its fingers down its own piano keys, then running them back up again, shuffling and dealing glittering decks of aqua, green, yellow, and white. It is everything I have always loved, fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, open—lustrously in love with air and light” (16). Scarry wonders, why didn’t I see this beauty before and how many more errors in beauty am I making? She speculates, plausibly, that unfamiliarity through distance is to blame: the palm tree is “a tree whose most common ground is a hemisphere not my own” so that the error “may seem to be about the distance between north and south, [US] east [coast] and west [coast], about mistakes arising from cultural difference” (17).

Before Scarry, on that balcony, came to see the beauty of palms, she undercredited them for many years. As she points out, there also exists the opposite error: overcrediting the beauty of something or someone, and then having to retract one’s judgment. Scarry believes that she has not made that error with regard to palms, but there is no guarantee that some future retraction might not be called for. “The signature of a palm is its striped light” (34), Scarry observes elsewhere in her book, with wonderful perceptiveness and in the flush of discovery, as she diagrams Henri Matisse’s Nice paintings in their stripy essence (diagrams reminiscent of the pencil drawings Frederic Church made of palms, and that Katharine Manthorne reproduces in her article). But there are many kinds of palm trees—the Wikipedia article “Arecaceae” mentions 202 genera with some 2600 species—and they do not all sway, or rake the light. To ask whether palm trees are beautiful is akin to asking whether people are beautiful: to be sure, some are to some. Besides, familiarity may be as destructive of beauty as cultural difference. Having lived in the Torrid Zone now for many years, I know palm trees with fronds that seem made of the nastiest plastic and trunks like poured concrete; no frogs climb their trunks and, against code, they are not on beaches but mirror the jerrybuilt apartment blocks around them, mocking them even as the buildings crumble while they themselves endure in their concrete semblance. In their haughty selfishness these palm trees not only do not give beauty, they also refuse the usefulness of producing coconuts or even shade.

I wonder about that balcony on which Elaine Scarry had her palmic epiphany. Was it a hotel balcony, perhaps, in California, with a beach, and the light of a setting sun striped by palm fronds? California, Nice: these are the kinds of places where East-

Coast Americans and Nordic Europeans find their palm trees and their attenuated paradises. Getting to these places is fast and easy now, and affordable for most. Palm trees have certainly lost geographic unattainability and utter foreignness. Still, unattainability is so much an object of longing in itself, and palm trees so traditionally the means of objectifying this that they, in a different manner, continue to signify it. Whereas palm trees once by connotation signified unattainability, they can now do so by association. Not all palm-fringed beaches are the same; some come with movie stars and starlets as on Nice's topless beaches while in the Palais des Festivals a film wins the Palme d'or. Some others come with package holidays. Palm trees move from the unreachable exotic to the aspirational luxurious, from the impossibly faraway to the associative exclusive, from striped light to flash photography. It is no longer palm trees per se, but their closeness to desirable lives and beautiful and famous people that defines unattainability now, as part of a cluster of desirable markers such as makes of cars, brands of clothes, designs of houses, and much more: all things that can, by

38

a few, be bought and that promise an essential belonging that they may not deliver. Daydreaming wins the day over longing, and daydreaming becomes expensive. The Roxy Music song "Beauty Queen," from their 1973 album *For Your Pleasure*, captures this new associative power of palm trees beautifully. In the song a girl, Valery, is so beautiful that only being a film star will do, with "swaying palms at your feet" while her "swimming-pool eyes," fluttering in sea breezes, "heavy-lidded they shed coconut tears." Valery, thus exotically twinned with a coconut palm, spins out of the orbit of accessibility, all the way to "the stars, in the sky" for the bleatingly plaintive singer, Bryan Ferry, whose plan to twin his life with hers is thus superseded by her chance of a glamorous life among Hollywood palm trees. All this receives irony from Bryan Ferry supposedly referring in this song to Valery Leon, a former girlfriend of his who was a UK beauty queen, and is a successful British actress, but who never became a star in the swaying palms sense of the word.

The notion of "errors" in judgments of beauty is odd; Scarry mostly seems to think of them within a personal aesthetic canon so that an error is something retroactively established when an earlier judgment of beauty needs to be revised in the light of later insight. The need for revision, though, suggests something more fundamental than simply a change in personal taste: it suggests an offense against a universal standard of beauty that is only gradually, but never completely, revealed to the one making judgments of beauty. Scarry ties her notion of error with that Kantian knot that makes an individual assume that his or her judgment of beauty ought to be taken as universal. Wondering about how she can have been blind to the beauty of palms for so long, she mentions unfamiliarity and cultural distance, but she frames those, not as essential but as accidental factors. Beauty is the essential power: it can fight through obstructions of culture and overcomes them by a beholder's generosity, a willingness to consider unfamiliar cultural traditions and judgments under the aspect of beauty. It is not so, Scarry rightly observes, that people have only a given amount of room for beauty in their sensorium, and that a new appreciation

of the beauty of palms means that, say, that of the sycamore must suffer. Seeing the beauty of one thing, indeed, “normally seems to heighten, rather than diminish, the acuity with which one sees the next” (18). Unfamiliarity and cultural distance limit the range of potential beauty with which one can come into contact and are causes of regret and facts of human limitation, the overcoming of which is the task that the ideal of *Bildung* sets the individual.

Scarry’s generous hunger in adding to her store of things she sees the beauty of is commendable; I actually feel a bit reproached for not having more of this hunger myself. Equally sympathetic I find the way she gives shape to the Kantian “ought,” the tendency to universalize one’s judgments of beauty: she does so with a glorious and poetic precision in describing her perceptions. This is where one part of my sense of being reproached comes from: Scarry’s perceptiveness can make one feel obtuse by comparison. The other part has to do with the ethical imperative that Scarry sees bound up with increasing the field of potential beauty beyond given boundaries of culture and geography: this increase is to her a matter of fairness, of doing justice to beauty. I am less sanguine than Scarry that beauty and fairness are sufficiently commensurable for the one to carry over into the other (except by wonderful coincidence). The ardor of Scarry’s book makes me feel the poorer for it. True, it is certain that one’s sentiments alter in a country where elephants and tigers are at home; for Ottilie one’s sentiments become coarser and regressive there, for Elaine Scarry one experiences an “increase in being” (the term is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s) that allows one to do justice to more of the world’s beauty.<sup>4</sup> The increase in being is real, I agree, but it comes with the sobering worry that when one is generous and out of one’s depth culturally, an error of overcrediting is easily made.

-3-

But what happens if beauty encounters no bias of culture and geography at all? This question is theoretical for Scarry: for all her altered sentiments she remains aware of limitations. But can human consciousness take on a form in which perceptions are not impeded by boundaries of culture or geography?

I think I have found someone with such a consciousness, and someone who feels that such a consciousness is already quite customary and will increasingly become so. I am thinking of Pico Iyer. In his book *The Global Soul*, published in that millennial year 2000, Iyer demonstrates how, by accidents of birth and upbringing spanning three continents right from his start in life, he grew up without cultural or geographic particularity. And so many people he meets—in the airports, diasporic communities, hotels, and shopping malls where, always en route, he spends so much of his time—find the conversation starter “Where do you come from?” as antiquated an inquiry as “What regiment do you belong to?” (11). Iyer believes that a new form of Emerson’s “universal soul” is emerging, a “Global Soul” made up of “fusions



(and confusions) we had not seen before: a ‘Global Soul’ in a less exalted (and more intimate, more vexed) sense than the Emersonian one” (18). Iyer gives a composite picture of what such a being might look like: a person, perhaps, grown up in many cultures at once, or living and working in a world “that propelled him from tropic to snowstorm in three hours” (18); “she might have a name that gives nothing away about her nationality (a name like Kim, say, or Maya, or Tara), and she might have a porous sense of self that changes with her location” (18). The new Global Soul would live “in the metaphorical equivalent of international airspace (the human version of cyberspace, in a sense): his currency might be ‘airmiles’...and the main catechism he knew by heart might involve ‘fastening your seat-belt low and tight across your lap’...Lacking a binding sense of ‘we,’ he might nonetheless remain fiercely loyal to a single airline” (19). Iyer writes before cyberspace proved surprisingly adaptable to human social interactions (and quite unlike airspace which, in comparison, still is heavy with physicality), but his idea is clear: for more and more people, loyalty and attachment can flourish, and the sense of immediacy can remain intact, without a shared physical presence. Iyer worries, though: “A lack of affiliation may mean a lack of accountability, and forming a sense of commitment can be hard without a sense of community” (24). The question, “Where do you come from?” may be hard to answer, but how about “Where do you stand?” (25).

Iyer feels powerless to answer his own question. To be able to make a life as a Global Soul, one needs to give up particularity for universality, albeit a universality by default. In one of several almost feverish attempts to capture himself in customary patterns of definition, Iyer ends up in categorical miscegenation (never held a job in the country where he lived; never had a partner of the same race as he himself; born from Hindu parents, educated in Christian schools, he now spends his time in Buddhist lands, or rather in rural Japan, if he isn’t on extended retreat in a Catholic monastery). No lack of particularities there, but in the aggregate they do not add up to a recognizable pattern: he is a “Nowherian” (24). Visiting his friend and fellow “off-shore being” (22) writer Kazuo Ishiguro one day in North London, he discusses with him their shared uncategorizability, and Iyer remarks, affectionately using Ishiguro’s nickname, how “Ish deliberately keeps all colloquialisms and local references out of his books” (21).

Small wonder that Iyer does not know where he stands and feels most at home among the growing crowd of people with whom he shares no particular commonality except that their particularities, too, confuse the bundled markers by which many other people recognize each other. To capture this negative commonality, Ishiguro writes books like *The Unconsoled*, a book about “a state akin to jet lag, a nightmare of disorientation and disconnection” in which the main character “at some level, doesn’t know where he is, whom he’s among, or who he is taken to be” (21).

Iyer is the poet of jet lag. Jet lag is very much his metaphor for the Global Soul’s state of being. In “Nightwalking,” a 2002 essay collected in *Sun after Dark* (2004), Iyer describes jet lag as something that, no matter where one goes, always makes one

arrive in a “deeply foreign country” (158), something that is so much part of his life now that “I tell myself I will make the most of it—attend to it, enjoy its disruptions, as I would those of a geographically foreign place” (161). Jet lag is “a place that no human had ever been [to] until forty or so years ago, and yet, now, a place where more and more of us spend more and more of our lives. It’s not quite a dream state, and yet it’s certainly not wakefulness; and though it seems another continent we’re visiting, there are no maps or guidebooks to this other world” (158-59).

Under jet lag, geographical foreignness returns as a self being out of sync with the world. “Things carry a different value, a different heft, when you’re jet-lagged, but there’s no counter on which exchange rates are posted” (164). To Iyer, jet lag is, on balance, a welcome distortion of the self or, at least, a distortion to which he has become attached. Jet lag “can release me from the illusion of the self” (165), it is “the dissolution of the self, the release from normal boundaries that flight induces.” “Infidelity,” Iyer tells us, has always been “part of the sales tax, part of the lure, of travel,” and boarding a plane is becoming a different person: “A girl in a long dress is serving up an elixir of forgetfulness. The music numbs us into a kind of trance state. Lethe—the Sirens—is available on every corner in the global order” (167).

*The Global Soul’s* subtitle is “Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home.” The notion of “home” is very much something the Global Soul—sentiments always altering in jet lag-induced loss of self—has to carry within that lambent self by not being foreign anywhere. Extremes touch here, because that very heavy notion of home contained in the German notion of *Heimat*—the one Otilie and her Assistant insist on—is just as much something that is carried within the self and that combats the horror of being foreign. Peter Blicke’s wide-ranging book *Heimat* explains *Heimat* as “both a spiritualized province (a mental state turned inside out) and a provincial spirituality (a spatially perceived small world turned outside in)” (7). If one replaces “province” with “cosmopolitanism” the formula works for the Global Soul and in both cases the implied opposite is simply negated. Thus the Global Soul does not know provincialism because he lives in places—airports, shopping malls, food courts—that do not and never had a provincial counterpart, just as *Heimat* “puts the nursing of a lost sense of belonging in place of all the emancipatory promises with which the Enlightenment invested reason” (7). *Heimat*, Blicke explains, is an antimodern idea, a “longing for a return to a state in which anxieties about reason and the self, essence and appearance, thought and being did not yet exist” (27). To the Global Soul, a postmodern being, these anxieties no longer exist.

Iyer’s book reports on the Global Soul’s new universality and discovers in its superficial thinness (this universality can only manifest itself in such places as airports, shopping malls, food courts, and big cities’ new immigrants’ quarters, places that take up ever more space in the world) the depth and drama of hidden complexity, of particularities coming loose. It is never a specific particularity that one Global Soul can share with another, but only the fact of complex confusions. In this way, Iyer understands every offshore being he meets in an understanding both utterly

superficial and deeply sympathetic. There is a version of “elective affinities” at work in the interactions of global souls, that chemical contradictoriness that Goethe already played with: global souls freely veer toward each other, but that freedom is determined by the fact that only they recognize each other.

It is Iyer’s unflagging sympathy and unwavering kindness that stands out in the account he gives of his interactions.<sup>5</sup> His style of living and writing is “neutral” in Roland Barthes’s sense: it baffles paradigms and categories in an unaggressive, non-assertive, and non-demonstrative way, a way Barthes saw embodied in traditions Iyer, too, refers to: Eastern philosophies, the silence of the monastery, and all sorts of mysticism. The neutral is a synthesizing force, and does not expend its energies on distinctions and discriminations, comparing and contrasting, judging and rejecting.<sup>6</sup> The gain in affability is a boon to society, a soothing of the weariness that comes with abrasive cultural prejudice. The loss is a loss of definition: beauty gets lost without discrimination, goodness becomes merely an impression on the part of an

42 observer, and truth that cannot be established becomes something that might as well be abandoned. Face value is all there is to go on. In Roxy Music’s “A Song for Europe” Bryan Ferry, in geographical despair for a continent (“through silken waters my gondola glides, and the bridge—it sighs”), wearily sings, “Though the world is my oyster, it is only a shell / full of memories.” This difference between promise and disappointment, the oyster and the shell, is lost on global souls.

Iyer does not discriminate or judge because he discards matters of culture and geography as determinants of taste, character, or temperament. Otilie’s culture-bound fear of the world of palm trees or Scarry’s self-imposed cultural task of stretching boundaries of culture are projects without relevance for global souls. Watching new immigrants arrive at LAX, Iyer muses how these newcomers do not, as they may think, arrive at some place but are part of the latest plane load that makes the place over. LA is not essential, it is backdrop: “beaches and bikinis and palm trees and sun” (*Global Soul* 65).

## NOTES

1. Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam / Im Norden auf kahler Höh. / Ihn schläfert; mit weißer Decke / Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee. // Er träumt von einer Palme, / Die, fern im Morgenland, / Einsam und schweigend trauert / Auf brennender Felsenwand. In Hal Draper’s translation: A pine is standing lonely / In the North on a bare plateau. / He sleeps; a bright white blanket / Enshrouds him in ice and snow. // He’s dreaming of a palm tree / Far away in the Eastern land / Lonely and silently mourning / on a sunburnt rocky strand.
2. In fact, there are some palm fronds in Nussbaum’s book after all, and precisely as staffage. Fig. 2 in the book reproduces an eighteenth-century print that shows Africa personified as a naked woman, palm fronds on a rocky outcrop behind her, a lion at her feet, the devil next to her, and personified Enlightenment beckoning her from the sky with in the background pyramids and a pharaoh’s head.
3. Nussbaum’s book focuses on how, in literature, eighteenth-century women in England were viewed and their sexuality controlled in contrastive relation to “other” women of the emergent British Em-

pire. This emphasis makes that she finds little cheer in recounting what Enlightenment thinkers had to say about peoples in the Torrid Zone. Still, in many other ways Enlightenment thinkers had considerable appreciation for the civilization and political development of many peoples in the Torrid Zone. China especially (which I think for eighteenth-century anthropological purposes can be located in the Torrid Zone) was admired for its advanced state of ethics, politics, civilization, and culture. Isaac Vossius, Sir William Temple, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Voltaire were all Sinophiles. See, for instance, Fokkema, especially chapters 5 and 6. In the epilogue of her book, Nussbaum engages in a stimulating discussion (very much characteristic of the last decade of the last century to which her book firmly belongs) about whether perhaps we would be better off replacing Enlightenment epistemology with postmodernism's anti-essentialism. She ends her book by putting Enlightenment on probation: "The Enlightenment belongs to those who revise and reclaim it, but the very relevancy of Enlightenment to a "worlding" of the eighteenth century remains to be charted as a postcolonial global feminism animates a mode of inquiry that is flexible and capacious enough to encompass the narratives of maternity and sexuality, not just of Europe or the West, but of the world" (210).

4. The term "increase of being" is a translation of Gadamer's "Zuwachs an Sein," and appears on page 140 of the revised translation of *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*. Gadamer roughly uses the term to refer to the effect of being intensely immersed in something—a work of art, thing of beauty, a form of play. Swept up in something like this, one becomes what one is swept up in and experiences a temporary loss of self. The self emerges again, of course, but increased by what it gained from its temporary otherness.
5. Iyer is also admirable in not being self-dramatizing. He refuses, for instance, to think of himself as an exile and to claim with that designation the romantic connotation of the sensitive, intellectual, and urbane outsider. I stress this aspect of modesty in Iyer's notion of the Global Soul in "Fading into Metaphor."
6. Roland Barthes develops his ideas of the "Neutral" most fully in *The Neutral*. For an assessment of Barthes's "Neutral" see my "An Epoch of Rest."

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