

*Lost and Found*  
*Learning to Travel in Petra*

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1. *Santayana's Question*

In the Winter 1964 issue of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, George Santayana poses the question, “Has anyone ever considered the philosophy of travel?”<sup>1</sup> His response, essentially, is that no one has, or, at least, that no one has considered the question adequately enough. One could, in fact, make a case that the problem of travel is available to the reader in the earliest textual records drawn from several traditions, and that it is confronted, theorized, rejected or embraced (as an art or a skill) since, arguably, the originating currents of the history of philosophy. Ancient philosophers, from Greece to China, are often overtly beset with the anxiety that the prospect of travel provokes in them. Plato sets a dire set of limitations on who can and who cannot travel and allows for only the most restrained itineraries, lest the traveler become itinerant.<sup>2</sup> Confucius speaks with a similar clarity: “While parents are alive, one does not travel (*you* 遊) far. If one does travel, it must be to a fixed destination” (*Lunyu* 4.19). And more generally for Confucius, the wise person knows to avoid the injurious enjoyment that comes with “idleness and wandering (遊)” (16.5). There are, of course, proponents of travel, those who celebrate a wanderlust that is seen as a rewarding and transformational experience. The Daoist Zhuangzi and the *keśin* or “long-haired ascetic” of the *Rig Veda* belong in the same fold here, celebrating a life of radical wandering that leaves every conventional apparatus, every order of epistemic and ethical categories, in a shambolic mess. The wandering sage always gestures a set of truths—in words, deeds, dance!—through this centrifugal movement.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, we still owe Santayana a debt. Even if the history of philosophy, broadly construed as a global history, attests to the question of travel, the question nevertheless often appears to sit at the

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<sup>1</sup> “The philosophy of travel,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 40, no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the discussion of *Laws* 950d-951a in R. Sikri, “The Skilful Wanderer: On the Risks and Rewards of Travel in Plato and Zhuangzi,” in *Skill in Ancient Ethics: The Legacy of China, Greece and Rome*, ed. Tom Angier and Lisa Raphals (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Rig* 10.136 in B.A. Van Nooten and G.B. Holland, *Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text with an Introduction and Notes* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 557. For a translation, see W. Doniger, *The Rig Veda* (Penguin, 2005), 137. For an anthropological analysis of how the philosophical models of the Upanishads, the earliest precursor of which is the figure of *keśin*, are lived through a practice of travel and wandering, see S.L. Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas* (Indiana University Press, 2007).

bottom rung of a ladder of philosophical concerns. Plato does not have a dialogue devoted to the philosophy of travel, though he might have strong positions on the subject that he assumes peripherally. The same is true of Confucius, and later, of the Enlightenment thinkers of early modern Europe—many of whom are either vastly traveled or eschew the (mis)adventure of travel but stop short of thematizing the issue as of central philosophical concern. Their concerns touch on travel as a locus of subsequent problems, dilemmas and exercises that issue forth from the strictly philosophical diet of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethical concerns. To Santayana's point, then, this theme—the philosophy of travel—has rarely gained a foothold in the philosopher's imagination beyond its status as a topic worthy of tangential claims and strong opinions. Perhaps it is, after all, all too mundane—all too worldly—an exercise.

But this curious blend of marginality (of the question) and vociferance (of opinion) should give us pause. What is it about travel that has so vexed the minds of some philosophers and delighted others? As an invitation to consider the topic of travel, I propose here an exercise that, while it is perhaps unconventional (by the standards of disciplinary discourse), might nevertheless lead to creative collaboration. Can each of us answer this seemingly simple question: Who am I as a traveler? And perhaps a not so simple question that follows in the wake of this first one: How does the world make itself known to me in or through travel?

We could, in searching for answers, turn to the many typologies available in the realms of texts that have anything to say, whether explicitly or implicitly, about the experience of travel and identify *our* type. Consider, as an example, Santayana, who, in the same essay quoted above, will enumerate a list of traveler-types (*migrant, colonist, explorer, wanderer, tramp, merchant, tourist*) to which we might offer additional versions that accommodate experiences now shaped by a hypermodern world (*influencer? digital nomad?*). Where do we belong in the matrix of circumstance, space, locomotion and desire that manifests in each of these unique profiles? Or, perhaps, are we more a patchwork of habits that constitute us as travelers in today's world, a *bricolage* of personal histories, traumas, economic wealth or poverty, and various other conditions that make available a spectrum of possibilities for experiencing worlds defined by their otherliness? Does travel, then, also involve, at least in principle, a choice between extending or withholding empathy and compassion for such worlds?

Rather than adopt a conceptual schema, I offer a starting point of discussion from within the recesses of a situated experience. At Petra, I did not capture an essence. At Petra, I did not come to any fuller understanding of a history or a people. At Petra, I did not bridge what I had read in Diodorus



Siculus with the excavated mounds of rock and stone. But at Petra I did linger. I did gaze at a place that itself had a gaze turned outwards, towards its many visitors, looking at them from the constructed theater of one of the *Seven Wonders*. Petra looked at me in a way that I could not help staring at, fascinated as I was with its parts—its tangible stone, its daily occupants, its intangible history—Orientalized and commodified to sate the tourist's appetite. But I was also identified by many local residents in a comedic waving of hands and legs as Raj Kapoor, a dated reference to the early days of Hindi cinema and its most well-known actor to whom I bore no resemblance at all but for the kind of imagined kinship that pigmentation often provokes. And thus, there I stood, a keen observer of an exotic landscape that appropriated me in a further act of exoticization. I was left with an awareness that places generate questions for us. I understood that Petra presented me with a set of choices—choices that could tell me perhaps a little about where I was but potentially much more about who I am as a person situated between myself and the world.

## 2. *Petra*

As you walk past the turnstiles at the entrance to the ancient site of Petra, you are met with what appears to be a leftover film troupe, as if some extras from the filming of *Lawrence of Arabia* have simply refused to return to their post-production lives. There are horse-driven carriages bounding up and down a gravel promenade, presumably showing off the speed and agility with which they can take you to the sites that lie deep within. Horses and camels, dressed in the dark hues of Bedouin blankets, stand in clusters, looking aimless or confused, while their owners either lounge on a nearby rock or else approach you with a 'best price.' But the most miserable in this animal economy are surely the donkeys, diminutive in size and stature, and in the charge of young teenage entrepreneurs - a snotty bunch, perennially with whip in hand, goading their donkey wards mercilessly.

When Petra comes into being and when it falls out of the annals of history is not clear. What is known is that it is built as early as the mid fourth century BCE by the Nabataeans, a local tribe of nomads in the deserts of south Jordan with certain airs and aspirations to greatness; that these desert folk capture the flow of commerce by exploiting their unique position at the crossroads of trade south to Aqaba, north to Damascus, and east to Arabia; that their aspirations witness a short-lived fruition in the capture of Damascus, and their airs a grand achievement in the adoption of a Hellenistic taste; that the hostility of the desert, or the cataclysm of an earthquake, or the shifting winds of commerce, and most likely a combination of all three, drive out Petra's inhabitants sometime around the fourth century CE.; that the city remains 'lost' to the western world until it is found again by Swiss explorers





in disguise in 1812; and that Petra only recently has ascended to that grand pantheon of global package tourism, the *Seven Wonders of the World*.

But, to most visitors, the appeal of Petra lies less in its esoteric past than in the visual delight of its natural sandstone walls and its precise masonry. Both nature and artifice discombobulate the eye here - one, with its shades of orange, purple and red all bleeding into each other, its surface rippled in improbable shapes and curves, all ambiguous in their form; the other, with its alarming accuracy, its sharp angles, its perfectly built pillars, its entirely unambiguous realization. Nowhere is this delight more frenzied than in the *Siq*, or 'Shaft,' a two-kilometer grand causeway that runs through a naturally formed gorge with steep walls burning a bright orange in the midday sun. There are no angles to be seen in the *Siq*, just monoliths of fluid rock piled one on top of the other, all curving with the memory of water that has gushed forth here in some Biblical time.

As you exit the gorge, at a point where it narrows to just a few meters in width, something seems amiss. For the past half hour, you have been walking in a natural wonder, mesmerized by colors and shapes that transcend a human hand. But through the final twists and turns of the sandstone of the *Siq*, what appears through a sliver in the rock ahead is a facade so precise in its construction, so bold in its proportions, that nature stands interrupted and your wonder utterly stolen. This is the *Khazneh*, or 'Treasury,' a grand colossus built in Hellenistic style, with wind eroded statues of pagan deities and deified Nabataeans perched high on its upper stories. The scene in the courtyard in front of the building is comprised of a motley crew. Standing frozen, with necks craned, are the disbelieving visitors, shocked at the audacity visible in the stone. Their faces, their performances of awe and amazement, must hardly be any different from those of the early Swiss explorers who 'found' Petra for us. Perhaps Petra is lost and found again each day, precisely at this moment when you exit the *Siq* and are confronted by the *Khazneh*, where you stand astounded and marveling at the will of the ancient Nabataeans to tame the natural, unforgiving rock. The barometer of your shock is to be seen in the hoards of rascal boys and girls, rushing at you as if to say, "I know! There is something preposterous at work here!" They are young enough, light enough, to harness your fascination, to rejoice in it a little with you, before they beseech you to buy a trinket or two. Less excited are their older brothers, fathers, and uncles, who will bide their time while you are busy being overcome. And then there are, once again, the ephemera of an oriental imagination, as if some Hollywood movie-set dropped some of its artifacts on its way out. Camels, beautiful camels, sit right in the middle of the clearing, serving no discernible purpose. Empty carriages with patterned curtains are yoked to sleeping horses, who face





random nooks in the rock as if they are punished children. And, finally, the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism employs what must be its most senior citizens on site to pose in Roman costume, as if what was missing here was a sense of authenticity.

The trail continues onward from the Treasury through burial mounds, ‘high places’ of sacrifice, theater complexes, and a ruin of a palace once believed to house the engineer who solved Petra’s water woes, thereby taking the King’s daughter’s hand in marriage and this once plush estate. Today only its giant outer walls stand, silent, half crumbling, as most of the traffic continues to walk past. From here on, the trail rises steadily into a fold in the rock cliffs ahead, where, out of sight, sits another reputed treasure – *Ad Deir*, or The Monastery. The climb is hard work for most, and, knowing this, the path is crowded with men whose searching eyes, lined in kohl, scan the scene for the aged, the infirm, and the unwilling, whom they might put on horseback. While the men work the lines of transport up and down the main drag of Petra, ferrying both its human and physical freight, the women command the stalls of trinkets and souvenirs. Dotting the climb up to the Monastery, their chances of commercial success are brightest with each panting, halting tourist, who must linger in the shade of their enterprise more out of necessity than choice. They offer you tea from their sooted kettles, which rest all day on wood fires. They sell you all manners of Nabataean memorabilia, though made in China. With their faces covered, their language comes to rest in their eyes as they sell you a special ‘morning price,’ and then, as the day wears on, an ‘afternoon’ price, an ‘evening’ price, and finally, it is ‘happy hour’ if you still don’t relent.

As you approach *Ad Deir*, those on the return journey encourage you onwards whether or not you are in need of encouragement. There is a sense that what you are about to see is special, even essential, to this visit, and so presumption on your state of wellbeing is the least of offenses. It is like a countdown to the final show, and indeed, as you crest the hill, you are jolted by what you see. The *Monastery* is built to be as grand as the *Treasury* and, in similar style, it marks a sharp contrast to the surrounding natural rock out of which it is built. In the evening, as the sun sets, it glows yellow, and then orange, as if it were kindle burning a fierce light across a vast, inert desert. But should you climb higher to one of the rock outcrops and survey the scene, from where all of Petra, both its natural form and its grand artifice, comes into view, perhaps your initial impressions of the greatness of the human will might stand revised. For Petra can be understood not as a testament to the submission of nature, not as the triumph of the will, but rather as an understanding or a symbiosis between the natural stone and the hand that breaks it. These spectacularly precise constructions are indeed a human marvel. And



yet they have been built with adding very little to the rock face. Rather, these pillars and columns and arches appear to emerge from the natural sandstone, like punctuations in the rock. Their greatness lies in this sense of economy, in the judgment of the hands that brought them to life from within the rock as if they were always there, just hidden, waiting to be excavated for the very first time.

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