

ABROAD
by Paul Fussell

(Oxford University Press, 246 pp., \$14.95)

Mark Caldwell

Paul Fussell wants travel writing out of the backwaters and in the mainstream of literature. Examining the spate of good travel narratives that appeared in England between the First and Second World Wars, he tries to erect around them a vocabulary of serious literary criticism by which they can be discussed not as ephemeral entertainments but, rather, as works of art with their own proper aesthetic canons.

And in fact the penultimate chapter, "Travel Books as Literary Phenomena," does offer provocative if hasty notes for a future poetics of travel literature. Travel books are sustained, Fussell contends, neither by narrative nor by the character of the narrator, but by their commitment to liberty and anomaly, to experiences and hence to literary structures that dispel "the shades of the modern prison house,...the passports and queues and guided tours and social security numbers and customs regulations and currency controls." Thus freed from the constraints of storytelling and character-painting, travel books indulge a form lately fallen into desuetude, the personal essay. The sites and sights often serve as cues for detailed and reasoned discourses that readers wouldn't tolerate in a less beguiling context. And finally, unsurprisingly, in what now seems at least the hundredth boring year of the reign of Northrop Frye over literary criticism, travel books represent an avatar of literary romance. A hero sets out, suffers rites of initiation, encounters adventure, finally returns to rejoin the culture from which he first set out. Thus, Fussell asserts, the travel narrative relives a deep-rooted myth and, in so doing, touches us at the same visceral level as does a good novel or poem.

But real, if debatable, ideas like these huddle together miserably in one thirteen-page chapter. The rest of the book is boring, embarrassing, and out of control. There are mundane accounts—summaries, really—of a number of English travel books from the '20s and '30s, by D.H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, Robert Byron, and others. These punctuate *Abroad's* dominant and most annoying feature, a series of

obtrusive, condescending, and graceless personal asides. Travel, Fussell snorts, is a thing of the past. The "transatlantic lovelies" (ocean liners to you and me) are gone, and with them the likes of lumpishly whimsical fantasy.

"I saw myself lolling at the rail unshaven in a dirty white linen suit as the crummy little ship approached Bora Bora or Fiji in a damp heat which made one wonder whether death by yaws or dengue fever might be an attractive alternative."

Shipboard sex, Fussell archly leers, might be helped on by "the proximity of all the passengers to the piston-and-cylinder principle, which, when you get to thinking about it..." What everybody's old grandmother knows ("No surprise,...the tendency to admit that for all his faults Mussolini at least 'made the trains run on time'") is spouted as if it were the product of a sophisticate's knowledge or a scholar's research. There are stillborn epigrams ("It's a rare American who, asked 'Where you from, Sir?' will venture 'Screw you' instead of 'Boise.'") and rotten jokes ("A very popular easy read in the early '30s was Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, which, if written today, would have to be reconceived as *Grand Motel*.").

The source of all these lapses is not, I think, ignoble. They are signs of stress. For *Abroad* opens with an evocation of Fussell's splendid *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which brilliantly rediscovered the terrors, brutalities, and paradoxical felicities of the First World War through the ephemera to which it gave rise. The guns of France could sometimes be heard in London; every city department store had a "Trench Requisites" section; an officer could drink tea with his mother in the morning and be back in the mire and blood of the front by evening. These and a carefully researched tissue of other details poignantly recreated the war and its literature by reacquainting us with its forgotten things, and in the end we saw an old story told completely anew.

Fussell aims at reproducing this method in *Abroad*. The first chapter, "Frozen Oranges," half-seriously proposes the praise of oranges in postwar travel books as an image of the postwar disgust with cold, rationing, deprivation. The trouble with this, as the infirmity of the book soon reveals, is that the '20s and '30s simply lacked the apoc-

alyptic definition of the war years. The war was such a horrifying, devouring, consuming fact, so pervasive and rapacious, that it transformed even the most fugitive details of daily life into small images of itself. But the '20s and '30s merely drifted. Virginia Woolf caught their spirit in the title of the novel she wrote about them: *Between the Acts*. They were an intermission, a pause in the action, never coming together around a central fact or a defining event. So their trivia remain trivia, either meaningless or only weakly significant. The Depression might have measured up to the method, but in the moiety of effort that Fussell devotes to the attempt to make oranges, sun-worship, passports, and peripatetic sex mean something, *Abroad* falls apart.

MAO: A BIOGRAPHY
by Ross Terrill

(Harper & Row, xi + 481 pp., \$17.50)

Howard Goldblatt

Few individuals have influenced the course of modern history as profoundly as Mao Zedong. Like so many major international figures, much of Mao's life is shrouded in mystery; his role in China's epochal metamorphosis from a backward, semi-feudal, virtually toothless dragon to a world power well on the road toward modernization is veiled in myth and misunderstanding. Ross Terrill has done an admirable job of demythifying Mao in what is probably the most readable and comprehensive biography of China's Great Helmsman available in English. Terrill's task has been simplified by China's ongoing reevaluation of Mao following the fall of the Gang of Four and by the officially proclaimed bankruptcy of the Cultural Revolution. The final word on Mao's legacy is assuredly some distance away, but Terrill's contribution takes us substantially closer to understanding than most of what has preceded it. That is not to deny the invaluable contributions of Terrill's predecessors, for in many cases their work is the acknowledged foundation of his. Terrill has made the life of Mao more accessible to the nonspecialist by recapturing the human dimension of a man who has been generally pictured as superhuman by some of his Chinese biographers,