RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Write On

David Lodge

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Also by David Lodge

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Write On

Occasional Essays ’65–’85

David Lodge

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Foreword

All the pieces collected in this book were prompted by an invitation or impulse to “write on” something or other: a new book or an old film, an author’s anniversary or a trip to a foreign country. They also witness to a compulsion, which virtually defines the professional writer, to write on, period. To go on writing, to keep the muscles of composition exercised, on whatever topic comes to hand.

The contents are divided into two sections, “Personal and Descriptive” and “Literary and Critical”, but the compartments are not watertight. There are few essays in Part I that do not contain some literary allusion, and several of the essays in Part II include an element of personal anecdote or affirmation. My previous collections of essays, *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971) and *Working with Structuralism* (1981) belonged essentially to the discourse of academic literary criticism. Most of the pieces in this book were written for a wider audience, and although some of those in the second section employ the dreaded jargon of “structuralism”, they do so, I trust, in a generally accessible manner. This book will, I hope, interest or amuse readers who know me primarily as a novelist; and indeed several of the pieces in it concern the sources or composition of my novels.

These essays and reviews are selected from a span of twenty years’ occasional writing, and it hardly needs to be said that I would not in every case express myself in the same terms if I were writing today. I have silently corrected errors of fact in the original texts; I have made cuts and small stylistic changes in the interests of readability; and I

have in some cases restored passages deleted on first publication because of limitations of space. But I have not attempted to revise my opinions retrospectively. Where an explicit qualification seems called for, it is stated in a postscript to the relevant article. Otherwise, the dating of each item should allow the reader to make due historical allowance for the views expressed. For instance, the somewhat defensive posture adopted in the first essay towards an older generation deemed to be prejudiced against the American way of life would now be more appropriately turned towards the young. And if I were comparing British and American fiction today, I would probably not be quite as deferential towards the latter as I was when I wrote the essay that opens Part II.

"My Joyce", commissioned for a centenary collection of essays that never appeared, and "Pillar Plant" are published here for the first time. The first publication of the other items (sometimes under different titles) was as follows: "The Bowling Alley and the Sun" in *The Southern Review* (Baton Rouge); "The People's Park and the Battle of Berkeley" in *Alta* (Birmingham University); "Memories of a Catholic Childhood", part of "The Bowling Alley and the Sun", and "Why Do I Write?" in *The Tablet*; "The Catholic Church and Cultural Life" in *The Church Now*, ed. John Cumming and Paul Burns (Gill & Macmillan); "Strictly Confidential" and "Shakin' Stevens Superstar" in *New Society*; "Don's Diary" and "The Limitations of the Movement" in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*; "Polish Notebook", "What There Is To Tell" and "Dam and Blast" in the *London Review of Books*; "Small World: An Introduction" in *The Listener*; "Anglo-American Attitudes" in *Commonweal*; "Mailer and Female" in *New Blackfriars*; "Family Romances", "Fitzgerald's Fear of the Flesh", "Bourgeois Triangles", "From a View to a Death", "Getting at the Truth" and "Readings and Lessons" in *The Times Literary Supplement*; "Suck Cess" in *The New Review*; "Structural Defects" in *The Observer*; "American English" in

The Times Educational Supplement; “Robertson Davies and the Campus Novel” and “Life Between Covers” in *The New Republic*; “The Art of Ring Lardner” as the Introduction to *The Best of Ring Lardner* (Dent); “D. H. Lawrence” in *The Guardian*; “The Human Nature of Narrative” and “Rabbit Reviewer” in *Encounter*.

All the author’s royalties from sales of this book will go to CARE (Cottage and Rural Enterprises), a registered charity that builds and maintains sheltered communities, or “villages”, in which mentally handicapped adults live and work – in particular, to the appeal fund for a new CARE village to be built near Ironbridge in Shropshire. My publishers, Secker & Warburg, are donating an additional royalty to the same cause. I am very grateful to them for their generosity in this respect, and to my agents, Curtis Brown Ltd, for waiving the usual commission on their services in this instance.

Purchasers of this book may like to know a little more about CARE and its aims. It was founded in 1966 to establish rural communities for the life-long residential care of mentally handicapped adults, and has by now created six villages in various parts of England, looking after some two hundred and fifty residents.

“Life-long” is a key term for parents of the mentally handicapped. In the last two decades, social attitudes towards and provision for mentally handicapped *children* have improved spectacularly. In particular, it has been generally recognized that even persons of very limited intelligence can still be educated if enough patient and systematic stimulation is applied from infancy onwards, while the moderately handicapped can achieve a surprising degree of independence. When our son Christopher was born with Down’s Syndrome in 1966 we were told by a Health Visitor that he would never learn to read or write and advised to consider placing him in a mental subnormality

hospital. At nineteen, having lived at home, stimulated by family life, while attending excellent state special schools, he can plan his own television viewing from the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, and write or type his own letters to the producers of “Dallas” and “Dynasty”, offering to perform the more heroic male roles and marry the most attractive female stars. He can also travel to school and college by public transport, shop for his own records and tapes, cook his own supper, play a mean game of snooker, and swim a mile (which is nearly a mile further than his father can manage). Such feats are, as he would say (he has a creative way with language), “as easy as a doornail”.

But what happens when Christopher’s formal education comes to an end? Clearly he, and many youngsters like him, are capable of being taught certain work skills. In the present economic climate, however, with widespread unemployment, it is unrealistic to suppose that they will ever compete for jobs on the open market. In any case, they need continuous, if unobtrusive supervision to protect them from danger and exploitation. Parents inevitably grow old, ill, and die. Siblings acquire problems and responsibilities of their own. State provision is often excellent, but geographically variable and in the long term unpredictable.

CARE villages, and other charitable enterprises like them, offer one solution to what for many parents is the all-important question: what happens to our mentally handicapped child when we are no longer able to look after him or her? It offers an environment in which the mentally handicapped can fulfil whatever potential they have for useful work, rewarding recreation and meaningful personal relationships. Villagers enjoy the privacy of their own “bedsitters” and are given an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the community. They are engaged in an active social life and are encouraged in both work and play to develop their limited skills.

Any reader who would like to know more about CARE and its villages should write to the organization’s Head Office at 9a Weir Rd, Kibworth, Leicester LE8 OLQ.

PART I

Personal and Descriptive

The Bowling Alley and the Sun (1968)

OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE AMERICA

THIS IS A reflective essay about my first experience of America, the opportunity for which came to me through the good fortune of being awarded a Harkness Commonwealth Fellowship in 1964–65. The essay was first written a year after my return to England, and since then I have read it through occasionally, revised this passage, tinkered with that. Now seems an appropriate moment to let it have its chance in the world; for by the time it is published I hope to have visited the United States again, and shall then inevitably begin to doubt the validity of my first impressions.

The validity claimed for them now, I hasten to add, is entirely personal. Nothing I could offer by way of factual objective description would have much interest or novelty. The America I discovered has been discovered thousands of times before: every summer deposits on the shores of the New World a fresh wave of academic Columbuses, clutching like talismans the documentary proof of their fellowships, visiting professorships, or writer-in-residenceships. I want to avoid, so far as possible, the delusion of the pushy Oxford graduate in one of John Updike's stories, who "had already been published in one of the liberal British weeklies, and . . . seemed to imagine that visiting the transatlantic land mass constituted a journalistic scoop". But to discover a foreign country is also to discover oneself; and this is always new, if not news.

What is, perhaps, in a loose sense, news, is that Englishmen who came of age since World War II have increasingly gone to America to discover themselves. In the past, the educated Englishman sought to broaden his horizons by spending a year or two in Europe – in Italy, Germany, or France. Nowadays, his education is incomplete without a year in the States and the Grand Tour goes via New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. The reasons for this trend are obvious enough: the cultural and intellectual dominance of America since the war, its wealth of research facilities and resources, the financial rewards it can offer, and so on. One might speculate, too, that for the generation that recognized a spokesman in the author of *I Like It Here*, America has offered a means of travelling without joining the cult of Abroad. But the reasons which push the young English intellectual towards America are perhaps less interesting than what happens to him when he gets there, and how this affects him subsequently: the experience of America must test and modify his sense of his own identity, values, and possibilities. Considering the scale on which the experiment is being tried, it is a cultural phenomenon of some significance; and, if the following account has any representative interest, it will be in that respect.

Essentially, the point is this: I liked America very much, and I believe that most British visitors of my type have liked America very much. And although there are obviously and inevitably many things we haven’t liked about America, we don’t feel in the least superior on that account. This is something that an older generation of British intellectuals, educated in the Europe-orientated tradition, and a large number of American intellectuals, caught up in the occupational hazard of alienation, find difficult to understand. They may find what follows illuminating, though probably not edifying.

First, a word or two about the title of this essay. Early in my casual reading in American literature, I came across a poem by the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poet, Edward Taylor, the poem in praise of God's creative power which forms the preface to *God's Determinations*. It advances by a series of rhetorical questions:

Who blew the Bellows of his Furnace Vast?
Or held the Mould wherein the world was Cast?
Who laid its Corner Stone? On whose Command?
Where stand the Pillars upon which it stands?

The second line of one particular couplet stuck in my mind:

Who Spread its Canopy? Or Curtains Spun?
Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?

The poem is about the cosmos; but the image of the bowling alley, by an anachronistic association, made the line seem peculiarly American in reference, and, in its daring combination with Sun, to concentrate for me two salient characteristics of the American experience.

The Bowling Alley, the modern bowling alley, that curious place of popular resort and recreation, where half the fun of the simple and repetitive game lies in watching the machinery set up the pins and return the balls – this stands for everything in American life that is designed to tickle and appease our appetites as consumers, everything that seems to make the ordinary humdrum business of life require less effort and yield more pleasure than it does in England: motels and supermarkets, big cars and big refrigerators, central heating and ice cubes, showers, urban expressways, heated open-air swimming pools. And the Sun stands for itself (for one sees so much more of it in America), but also for all the natural wonders of that vast and infinitely various country. Much of the exhilaration which America yields,

particularly to the visitor, derives, I think, from a tension between the Bowling Alley and the Sun. Though there is a launderette on the rim of the Grand Canyon, and the bears of Yellowstone beg for food at the roadside, there is still a sense in which America is an untamed land, palpably older than man, and apt to turn upon him in a cruel and awe-inspiring display of power – tornadoes, blizzards, floods, and droughts. One is aware of this latent power even as one cruises at a steady seventy miles an hour between one comfortable motel and the next. One has the sense of participating in a civilization which has applied technology to provide its citizens with unprecedented comforts and conveniences, but which, rather excitingly, still has only the most precarious fingerhold on the face of Nature. Curiously, urban America has created its own, grimmer, version of this drama. The streets of Manhattan are rightly called canyons – the sheer, towering walls of the skyscrapers daunt and diminish individual man as does the scenery of the Southwest; and the safe enjoyment of New York's sophisticated pleasures depends on the observance of a code of behaviour as elaborate as any wilderness-dweller's: don't walk in Central Park after dark, don't ride empty subway trains late at night, keep a chain on the door of your apartment . . .

The second part of my title refers to the fact that it was a long time before I was sufficiently able to throw off a constitutional – and perhaps national – predisposition to worry, to realize how much I was enjoying myself. My American readers, particularly Jewish ones, will no doubt scoff at any pretensions to a controlling interest in worry, but I fancy we should be disputing about two different things. The American worries about sex, politics, religion, and death – the ultimate direction of his worry is metaphysical. The Englishman is more empirical: he worries about whether he is on the right train, about how much to tip the taxi driver; he gets up in the middle of the night to

see if he turned off the light in the living-room. The American is characteristically always prepared to gamble the present on the prospects of the future; the Englishman thinks the future will probably be worse.

It therefore takes a great effort of willpower for the Englishman to get himself off the ground and onto the boat or aeroplane in the first place. I well remember how my (non-academic) neighbours in Birmingham received the news that we were going to America for a year as a matter for commiseration rather than congratulation, and how there were dark moments when I thought in my heart that they were right. In particular, I quailed at the prospect (a condition of the Fellowship) of travelling extensively in the United States for three months out of the twelve, as I was taking with me, as well as my wife, my two children, then aged four and two. Looking back, I tremble to think how close I came to passing up, on this account, one of the great experiences of my life out of sheer timidity: first by hesitating to apply for the Fellowship at all; and secondly by contemplating doing most of the three months' travelling on my own. Not only would this latter plan have been a very lonely experience for myself, and a great deprivation for my wife; it would have cost me the great sense of achievement, the enormous expansion of the frontiers of personal possibility, that came from safely and enjoyably transporting my family 15,000 miles across America and back.[1]

We left Providence, Rhode Island, where I had been based for the first seven months of our stay, at the end of March, and drove to California by the following route: New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado; after spending a week at the annual Conference on World Affairs at Boulder,[2] we headed south through the Rockies to New Mexico, then west through Arizona, Nevada, and California, where we went as far south as San Diego, before driving up the coast,

via Los Angeles, to San Francisco. The trip, which we spread over eight weeks was enormously enjoyable, educative, and surprisingly painless. The children were generally happy, healthy, and well behaved; the food and accommodation were good; and the miles slipped by effortlessly. Yet I still regarded the whole venture as a daunting and demanding challenge, and certainly never would have contemplated it if the conditions of my Fellowship had not stipulated something of the kind. But there came a day, towards the latter part of the trip, when I finally ceased to regard it as an ordeal, when I learned to stop worrying and love America.

This epiphany came, fortuitously, as such things do, in a pleasant but undistinguished little town called Kingman, in Arizona. We arrived there in the late afternoon, having driven from the Grand Canyon, where we had spent the last few days. It was the end of April and very warm. We had been enjoying warm weather for most of our trip, but it so happened that Kingman was the first town we visited where the motels had their swimming pools in operation. We duly checked in at a motel so provided and enjoyed our first, euphoric swim of the season. Thus refreshed, we went out to eat one of the best Chinese meals I have ever had. Back in the sleek, comfortable motel room, I wrote up my diary as the children slept head to toe in one of the two double beds. I wrote: “V. pleasant day. When we left Providence I looked on this trip as an arduous duty or obligation; now I see it as the vacation of a lifetime.” That moment of realization not only enabled me to get the most out of our remaining months in America; it involved the preceding months in a glow of retrospective appreciation.

The point I am trying to get at is that America is a country peculiarly rich in euphoria, and one becomes more and more conscious of this the further one drives west (a British friend and I amused ourselves in California with the creation of a mythical university on the western seaboard called

Euphoric State; the syllabus was to include credits for sun-bathing, surfing, and water-skiing). The emphasis I give to the hedonistic aspects of American life may seem unedifying, but I believe it looms large in most British visitors' experience. It comes out, for instance, in most of the novels about Englishmen-in-America, such as Julian Mitchell's *As Far As You Can Go*, and Malcolm Bradbury's *Stepping Westward.* It is a product of the Bowling Alley and the Sun again – a combination of great natural resources and the material means of enjoying them.

I have a certain coloured snapshot in which I can narcissistically study this euphoria. It portrays me in profile against the incomparably beautiful background of the California coast between Santa Barbara and Monterey. The green, softly contoured mountains slope down to the steep cliff-face, and the blue Pacific gleams in the sunshine. In the foreground, California poppies wave in the breeze, and in the middle distance a tiny white bridge carrying the coastal road gives an idea of the vast scale of the whole landscape. My face is tanned, my attitude relaxed – I exude health and well-being. This sense of well-being was, however, compounded not only of physical health and the enjoyment of natural beauty, but also, trivial as it may seem, of the clothes I am wearing in the picture; a tapered, button-down shirt of muted orange, blue, and grey stripes in Oxford cotton, which I bought in Gimbel's bargain basement for $1.50, and the cool, well-fitting Dacron slacks which I acquired in Palm Springs. It included things outside the picture, things like the handy little Instamatic camera that took it, the huge, fast, reliable Chevrolet (generously provided by the Fellowship) that had brought us to this peak in Darien, the picnic chest in the trunk that, packed with ice obtained from the machine in the last night's motel, kept our food fresh and inviting. It was capped by the confidence, by now taken for granted, that wherever we happened to find ourselves at the end of the day, we were sure of a

clean, comfortable room, a hot shower, and a good meal attractively served. I can't think of any other place in the world – certainly not England – where *all* these ingredients could fuse to make one experience. When I looked at that picture later, from out of the shadow of an English winter, pale and jaded and feeling the draught come under the door, it seemed like a snapshot of paradise lost.

To many readers these sentiments will seem absurdly superficial and self-indulgent, unrepresentative of America and unflattering to myself. Nevertheless I will stick by them. I know America is not all like California Route 1 – I have driven through Buffalo on a late December afternoon; and I know there are millions of poor and underprivileged Americans who will never see and enjoy what I saw and enjoyed in their country. The fact remains that the kind of satisfactions I have been talking about are peculiarly American, and their easy availability is one of the things that most impresses a visitor. Almost imperceptibly, he acquires an education in the art of consumption; and this, given the nature of the modern world, is not to be despised.

As will be obvious by now, I had (*pace* Randall Jarrell) a happy heart in the supermarket; and much of the moral scorn poured upon the role of consumption in American life leaves me unmoved. If American society is materialistic, it is so in a more innocent and healthy way than the affluent democracies of Europe. Americans are enormously *acquisitive*, but they are not *possessive*. They are buying things all the time, but they are discarding things at the same rate. The European buys fewer things, and hoards them – the houses of Europe are cluttered with possessions which have long degenerated into junk. As every British visitor will gratefully acknowledge, Americans are wonderfully generous in lending or giving away all kinds of equipment, and it would be unjust to ascribe this generosity merely to their affluence. They really attach much less importance to the ownership of material goods than we do.

Of course affluence comes into it, but it is more an attitude of mind. Even affluent Europeans have inherited a tradition of caution and penny-pinching which vitiates the simplest pleasures of consumption. It is built into our very institutions. Compare, for example, the American practice of having a single fare on urban public transport, a flat rate charge for telephones with unlimited local calls, and an all-inclusive price on restaurant menus, with the British practice of delicately graduated fares, accumulative charges for telephone calls and menus on which every single item of food down to the last pat of butter has its own price tag. I doubt whether the British system is any cheaper for the consumer in the long run, but it provides endless opportunities for theoretical economies, and compels him to examine his conscience before every single purchase. If the experience of America has improved my character at all, I would like to think it has made me less mean.

When I look back on my year in America, it falls into four parts: the first seven months which we spent in Providence, where I was attached to Brown University; the trip out to the West Coast; the three summer months we spent in San Francisco; and the three-week trip back to New York.

Providence was a gentle introduction to America. Old, historic, but seedy and run-down, its charming campus and the tree-lined streets of the university quarter hemmed about by tracts of decaying property, disused factories, and dull canals, Providence seemed pitched halfway between the Old World and the New. There had been some kind of compromise, one felt, between the modern American way of life and an older, more European way; and the apparatus of the former had to fit itself into the structures of the latter: discount stores are housed in the shells of disused mills; the wide, raft-like automobiles must be navigated with care through the narrow streets; and modern apartments are carved ingeniously out of the interiors of the large, high-

ceilinged houses of a more spacious age. Ethnically the links with Europe are still more obvious. The population has large and identifiable Italian, Irish, and Portuguese elements, and not far from Providence there is a community that speaks only French. Our landlords were first-generation Italian immigrants, and our apartment was next door to an old Armenian shoemender.

The Providence winters are supposed to be generally damp and overcast, but ours was filled with the crisp, cold, sunny days characteristic of the rest of New England. That combination of bright sun, and cold, dry air, is particularly exhilarating to anyone used to the damp, depressing winters of the English Midlands. It is epitomized for me by the memory of a visit to Walden Pond in December. There had been an ice storm in the night, and a heavy fall of snow, but now the sun was shining brilliantly. Every leaf and twig was covered with a thick coating of crystal, and glittered in the sunlight. Every bush and tree was an inverted chandelier.

We came back again to Walden Pond in early March, to picnic with some friends. The temperature was freakishly up in the sixties, but the pond was still thickly frozen. We sat in shirt-sleeves, drinking beer and eating delicious smoked fish, while the children ran about on the ice stripped to the waist. Later, two young couples walked out to the centre of the pond, stationed themselves with deliberation in the form of a large square, and stood for a long time, apparently quite silent, black immobile silhouettes against the white expanse. What they were doing, I do not know; perhaps experimenting with the pattern of their elongated shadows, thrown across the ice by the afternoon sun. But it was almost as if they felt the occasion required some ritual recognition. It seems appropriate that two of my most vivid memories of New England should be associated with Thoreau’s shrine.

We were very happy in Providence. But Providence – although it is near Boston and within easy reach of New York – is a provincial city. I didn't want to leave America without the experience of living in one of its big, cosmopolitan centres. Naturally, we chose San Francisco.

I say naturally because everyone speaks so highly of San Francisco. We thought it could never live up to our aroused expectations – but it exceeded them. San Francisco – that is where the Bowling Alley and the Sun are perfectly realized, perfectly combined.

What has preserved San Francisco from the usual fate of modern cities – strangulation by suburbia – is that, being situated on a peninsula, it can only expand in one direction. Hence, if you can contrive (as we did) to live near the end of the peninsula, you can have all the resources of a big city at your fingertips, yet by crossing the Golden Gate Bridge you can be out of the city in minutes, exploring the wooded hills and sandy beaches of Marin County. But the praises of San Francisco have been sung so many times that it is difficult to recite them without sounding like a tourists' brochure. How to convey the quality of life there – the sense of living on the very crest of a civilization, serene and poised as a surf-rider, that graced the simplest experience: riding the steep, roller-coaster hills, browsing in the City Lights Bookshop, seeing a ship slide past the end of a city street, having tea in the Japanese Tea Gardens, watching the white sea fog creep in through the Golden Gate like a living thing, wondering idly, what shall we do this evening, shall we go and see Lenny Bruce, or hear Charlie Byrd, or have a Mexican meal, or call up some friends and invite them over?

Truly, by this time I had learned to stop worrying and love America. I made lots of friends, I called up people I hadn't been introduced to, I went cheerfully on radio and television to talk about a novel of mine (*Ginger, You're Barmy*) that had just been published, and donned headphones to answer

questions phoned in by old ladies about the British Army, I did a lot of work, I smoked cigars, I spent prodigally on babysitters, I drove fast with the radio playing rock music, I bought sherry by the gallon at the supermarket and developed a taste for the rum-and-raisin ice cream you could get from a place near the Marina, the Marina where we often went on Sundays to watch the yacht racing, and where we joined in a kiteflying competition on Independence Day . . .

Then, suddenly, it was time to go home, time to turn the car east and traverse all those thousands of miles again. I suffered a temporary return of the qualms that had beset me before our westward journey, but once we were started I began to relax. Perhaps relax is the wrong word. This time we were aiming to cross the States in less than three weeks, including stops of a few days at Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks, and at Madison and Chicago. This meant that we had to maintain a fairly high daily mileage, which lent a certain urgency and drama to the trip. By American standards it was, of course, quite leisurely; but to us it had a quality of daring and endurance. When the skyline of Manhattan finally heaved itself above the flat wasteland of New Jersey, I had the absurd feeling of having accomplished some notable feat.

It’s a feeling that one scarcely gets from travelling in Europe, where indeed such an attitude to travel is entirely inappropriate. The much mocked American practice of doing Europe in ten days derives, I suspect, from a quite understandable tendency of American tourists to treat European space as if it were like American space. Of course, the two are quite different. American space is mostly empty, and lacking in human appeal. Sometimes it is very beautiful in its inhuman way, like Arizona; often it isn’t even that, like Kansas, and then its only interest is how quickly you can get through it. You can’t explore a state like Kansas, you would

go mad if you tried, for it is all the same, flat, inscrutable, endless, resistant to human comprehension. You assert your humanity by driving across it as fast as possible. “That’s Kansas,” you say with satisfaction at the end of the day, and mark off another three inches of your map with a felt pencil. You couldn’t do the same to Warwickshire or Provence.

Talking of maps, nothing symbolizes the difference between travelling in Europe and America more strikingly than the routes supplied by the British Automobile Association and the American Automobile Association, respectively. The British AA routes usually have trouble fitting in more than about twenty miles of twisting road on a page; there are complicated, homely directions like, “at the market square bear right, turn left at the Bricklayers’ Arms, over hump-backed bridge, then take third exit at the next roundabout”; comforting landmarks such as telephone kiosks are noted at intervals of about one-and-a-half miles so that you can be sure you are on the right road. The AAA routes we found usually had about two hundred miles to the page, as often as not a dead straight line traversing an empty space, with a few towns strung out along it like lonely beads. And how small some of those towns, which look quite important on the map, turn out to be – a post office, a general store, a motel and a gas station. “Come again,” they say at the gas station, without obvious irony; but how can they mistake the glazed look in our eyes, fixed on the eternal horizon, as we wait impatiently for our change?

To avoid the heat which we expected in August, we travelled early in the morning: we rose at about 3 a.m., carried the children, still asleep in sleeping-bags, to the back of the car, and set off in darkness to do our day’s stint of driving before breakfast. In fact we encountered no great heat, but we kept to our plan, for it was pleasant driving quickly along empty roads with the children asleep in the back, talking quietly and sipping black coffee picked up from an all-night café, watching the dawn spread across the sky

as we drove straight into the rising sun. We saw many tremendous dawns, angry red and yellow over Nevada, sad pastel shades over South Dakota. We climbed the 10,000-foot Powder River Pass over the Bighorn Mountains, Montana, in the dark; but when we got to the plateau at the top it was dawn, and as we began to descend it was like being in an aeroplane, we were looking down on the cloud cover, and the startled deer looked at us from the sides of the road. We have many such memories of the trip, unforgettable experiences all concentrated and packed together by the speed of our progress, so that one had the impression of great riches in a little room, though objectively the reverse is the case.

Speed, then, the physical conquest of physical space (air travel, though much faster, lacks the physical dimension) is the essence of American travel, the area where the Bowling Alley and the Sun confront each other most dramatically. The superhighway system, with its supply network of motels, drive-ins and gas stations, is the front line of man's struggle to subdue nature. Of course the struggle is, in a sense, over; it was fought and won by the pioneers, and we are living on the interest of their bitter and heroic endeavours. Nevertheless there is a mythic dimension, a sense of adventure, to be found in transcontinental travel even today; and it is possible to feel imaginatively some vestiges of the awe, helplessness and panic that must have occasionally subdued the spirits of the early pioneers, lost on the endless prairies. Perhaps the modern American's concern for speed and mobility is a way of exorcizing those feelings. By keeping on the move you create the illusion of a destination. Vladimir Nabokov, supreme poet of modern American tourism, seems to be expressing some such thought when the narrator of *Lolita* says, "By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give [Lolita] the impression of going

places, of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight."

For us, having a destination was no problem. As we pushed further east, our mileage crept up, and once we got onto the turnpike system at Chicago we did four hundred miles a day, as if England, like a tiny magnet, were beginning to exert a little more force the nearer we got to it.

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England. It wouldn't be the same, would it? After all, there had been a change of Government since we left. It said in *Newsweek* that two hundred British shipbuilders walked out the other day because they were forbidden to make tea with water from the ship's boilers, but that was just *Newsweek*, wasn't it? American journalists loved it when England lived up to its stereotypes. But those stereotypes never were true, anyway, were they? Were they?

"I shouldn't imagine there was any need to change this evening, should you?"

An unmistakably British voice cuts through the babble of French and American accents at the great bar of the *France*, as Long Island slides past the windows. The voice of the public school, the officers' mess, the London club. Addressing me.

"No," I assure him, surveying his navy-blue blazer, dark flannels, white shirt and club tie.

"I remember, coming over, on the first evening it was a pretty scruffy show, sartorially."

"Mmmm."

Is he real? I listen mesmerized to that resonant, clipped voice, that one had imagined Jimmy Porter had silenced for ever.

"Frightfully hot in Washington. Rather embarrassing really. I was absolutely melting most of the time, but I simply refuse to walk about a capital city without a suit."

“Quite,” I mumble. “Oh quite.”

Will I feel a pang at the sight of English soil, I wonder? In the event it is more of a shiver than a pang, for it is raining hard at Southampton when we dock early in the morning. The immigration officials are late arriving to check passports, and we are behind schedule when we step ashore. We are disconcerted to pass, on the way, our baggage still heaped on the decks of the *France*, guarded by moody sailors. Evidently there are no dockers about to receive it. We scuttle across the wet railway lines and into the waiting-room that adjoins the customs shed. Various theories are circulating about the delay of the baggage. A barmaid volunteers the opinion that the dockers are on strike. An AA official believes that it is their breakfast hour. Several dockers are to be seen mingling with the passengers at the bar. Of course, I remind myself patriotically, Britain isn’t the only country with labour problems. But is there any other country, I wonder, where you can’t discover what the problem *is?* From time to time we are addressed over the loudspeaker; but the voice – the characteristic voice of British officialdom, fussy, adenoidal, using vocabulary a little above its understanding – offers no explanations. Instead it chides – there is no other word for it – chides *us* for being restless and impatient and blocking the exits. The Americans, who find it quaint to be chided, laugh and clap. The British automatically form queues for newspapers, currency, cups of tea, spread their coats on the floor and lay their children to sleep, and generally behave as though they are back in the Blitz.

At last a few men turn up on the quay and begin to receive the baggage. I take the children to watch it coming down the conveyor belt. When the trolley is full, the conveyor belt stops. (There is another trolley somewhere, but it never seems to return at the right time.) Holding a child in each hand, I watch the rain slanting down on our oldest suitcase, arrested halfway down the belt. A docker

rubs his hands together, and sends me, across the gleaming railway lines, a huge, shrugging grin, as if seeking to implicate me in the two great national emotions of nothing-you-can-do-about-it and never-say-die.

"Die" seems all too likely to prove the *mot juste* a few hours later, as, squashed into a flimsy-seeming hired car, we take the narrow country lane that connects the major port of Southampton with the capital city. Occasionally, this quaint, meandering little road bifurcates into a heady stretch of dual carriageway, but I have no sooner accelerated than I am frantically braking under the urgent summons of numerous road-signs: ROAD NARROWS – SLOW – TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD – BEND – HUMP-BACKED BRIDGE. There are roads marked CLEARWAY – NO STOPPING with bus stops on them. There are roadside cafés without parking lots sited carefully in no-parking areas. (We draw up outside one such café, next to a greengrocer's. A man comes out of the latter carrying a box of lettuces. "Is there anywhere we can park?" we ask. "We want to go to the café." He puts down his lettuces. Ah, British courtesy. "Yes," he says. "You can pull round behind there." "Round there?" "Yes, just pull round there." "Thanks." "I shouldn't go to the café, though, if I were you." "Oh? You don't recommend it?" "No, it's been closed for three months." British humour. Or is it understatement?) On, on, through the downpour. We seem to be averaging nineteen miles an hour. There's always the M1 of course. We drive up it a few days later. The trouble with the M1 is that the road can't stand up to the traffic (great stretches of it are under repair, though the repairs aren't actually going on, since it's a Saturday afternoon) and the traffic can't stand up to the road (the shoulders are littered with broken-down vehicles, and my own makes a funny noise at seventy). We could have travelled by rail, I suppose, but I'm glad we didn't. "Railwaymen: Go Slow Latest," the newspaper placards said in London. "Go Slow Latest" – I like that oxymoron.