Western *Flâneurs* in Asian Cities: Urban Descents in Orientalist Fiction at the End of the Millennium

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**ABSTRACT**

In the closing decades of the twentieth century a considerable number of novels were published in Britain, France, the USA, Australia, and elsewhere which depict Western journeys of discovery of self and others against the background of Asian megacities. Notable examples of this type of fiction are: Christopher J. Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) and *Highways to a War* (1995); Dominique Lapierre’s *The City of Joy* (1985); Timothy Mo’s *The Monkey King* (1978), *An Insular Possession* (1986), and *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995); Paul Theroux’s *Saint Jack* (1973) and *Kowloon Tong* (1997); and James Hamilton-Patterson’s *Ghosts of Manila* (1994). In many of these novels, the epic journey through the semi-mythical heart of darkness landscapes which characterized the fiction of Conrad, Kipling, Maugham, and other prominent writers of the colonial era is revisited as a kind of late twentieth-century descent into urban Hades. The purpose of this study is to examine this new literature of descent and concludes that, while much of it acknowledges post-colonial realities and in some cases even attempts to stand up for third world agendas, it still recycles familiar thematic patterns and commonplaces from the Western literature of travel, adventure, and empire and, as such, constitutes yet another chapter in the ongoing history of Western Orientalist fiction.

**KEYWORDS:** Orientalism, literature of travel, adventure, Empire, *flâneurs*, cities in literature, *fin de siècle*
In the closing decades of the twentieth century a considerable number of novels appeared in Britain, France, the USA, Australia, and elsewhere which center around the experiences of Western travelers and expatriate residents in Asian megacities. Notable examples include: Christopher J. Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) and *Highways to a War* (1995); Dominique Lapierre’s *The City of Joy* (1985); Timothy Mo’s *The Monkey King* (1978), *An Insular Possession* (1986), and *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995); Paul Theroux’s *Saint Jack* (1973) and *Kowloon Tong* (1997); James Hamilton-Patterson’s *Ghosts of Manila* (1994); and Simon Barnes’ *Hong Kong Belongers* (1999). The popularity of this fiction—many were bestsellers and some of them, including *The Year of Living Dangerously, The City of Joy*, and *Saint Jack*, were adapted into successful motion pictures—suggests that this was more than just a passing phenomenon, evoking a *fin de siècle* historicizing of contemporary developments at a time when the Eurocentric paradigms of the twentieth-century so-called Atlantic Age were being destabilized by the approach of an anticipated Pacific Age. In many of these novels, moreover, we witness particular types of cross-cultural adventuring which, though seemingly very different from the Western journeys of self-discovery in Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, and other prominent writers of the colonial era, constitute modern re-enactments of such journeys. Classic colonial fiction typically featured administrators, naval officers, missionaries, and similar protagonists who moved through a mixed setting of jungles, island archipelagos, native villages, and frontier stations. The new fiction, in contrast, works with recognizable late-twentieth-century scenarios and introduces expatriate journalists, medical experts, academics, consultants, businessmen, aid workers, etc. who have professional, rather than imperial credentials, and are active in urban locations such as Manila, Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong. In spite of this modern veneer, however, much of this fiction connects with older traditions of literary representation and essentially still depicts Asian societies as exotic versions of Hades, i.e., otherworldly or even underworldly domains which engage Western visitors in dark journeys of self-discovery.¹ In sum, though taking cognizance of new political realities and in some cases even trying to stand up for third world agendas, these writings recycle familiar thematic patterns and commonplaces from the Western literature of travel, adventure, and empire, and as such

¹ For the concept of exotic Hades, see Vynckier.
constitute yet another chapter in the ongoing history of Orientalist fiction.

In his *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (1994), Ali Behdad discusses late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century writers, artists, photographers, and intellectuals who made their way to Europe’s colonies in North Africa, the Middle East, and the vast regions of Asia “East of Suez” at a time when the latter had already been thoroughly mapped and appropriated following centuries of exploration and colonization. Under those circumstances, the search for authentic adventures and exotic thrills frequently ended with nostalgic disappointment and, yet, several generations of English, French, and other “belated travelers” continued to be gripped by a desire for the mysterious Orient. This contradictory situation, whereby a culturally constructed need for otherness asserted itself at a time when in fact no coherent framework for responding to this desire was in place any more, leads Behdad to argue for an “open-ended discussion of Orientalism as a tactic of critical opposition to the recuperative strategies of dominant discourses” (137). He also refers in this context to Gayatri Spivak’s championing of “the practical politics of the open end” (137). This practical politics, unlike drastic ideological interventions, does not achieve comprehensive or revolutionary solutions, but, says Behdad, constitutes a realistic and valid critical position for scholars. The current study argues that “open-ended” discussions of the kind proposed by Spivak and Behdad remain relevant at this time when the even more belated travelers of twentieth-century *fin de siècle* fiction affirm the protean capacity of Orientalist discourse to adjust itself to new sociopolitical configurations and return in ever new guises. In what follows, therefore, I first examine an early twentieth-century example of a belated traveler in order to clarify the antecedents of the fiction under discussion and then survey major examples of three types of late twentieth century Orientalist fiction about Asian cities: mythical, documentary, and comic.

**I. A Formosan Preamble**

“Japanese ladies never walk; only coolie-women walk” (Behdad 65). Such was the advice offered to Janet B. Montgomery McGovern, an English teacher from 1916 to 1918 in Japan’s island colony of Taiwan, and a good example of the type of belated traveler discussed by Behdad. McGovern was an anthropologist from the UK who came to Taiwan in 1916 to study the
island’s aboriginal cultures and was employed as an English teacher in a government school during her two-year residence. As she comments in her memoir *Among the Head-hunters of Formosa* from 1922, her job enabled her to finance her stay in Taiwan and also provided her with a secure position as a foreign expert affiliated with the Japanese colonial authorities. At the same time, it brought her under the close scrutiny of her employers and exposed her to the criticism of the Japanese Director of Schools, who offered her the advice on the cultural implications of walking quoted above. McGovern, as is documented in her memoir, was indeed an avid walker and spent much of her time in between teaching days exploring Taipei and its surroundings in search of picturesque sights such as temples, street scenes, markets, and characteristic figures that could be examined from close by and captured by means of snapshot photography. This interest of McGovern’s, though, was frowned upon by her Japanese superiors and colleagues as they considered such behavior inappropriate for a lady and especially for an English lady who was employed by a government school. Yet, though she was repeatedly urged to “do in Rome as the Romans do” (66), which in this context meant “when in Taiwan do as the Japanese do and take a rickshaw,” McGovern was not brought round to their point of view and continued her escapades.

McGovern’s behavior, to be sure, though culturally inappropriate to her Japanese hosts, was common enough for a European intellectual of her age. By the early twentieth century, major European cities; with their promenades, parks, museums, arcades, department stores, and moving picture theaters; had more than ever become the locus of cultural change, and Walter Benjamin celebrated the figure of the Parisian flâneur in his “Passagenwerk” (*Arcades Project*), composed from 1927-40. Indeed, the figure of the flâneur would become so intimately associated with Paris, the capital of modernity, that when asked to write a book about Paris, the American novelist and critic Edmund White entitled it *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* (2001). Not only Paris, but London and other European cities made important contributions to the vogue for urban adventuring as well. Less than ten years following McGovern’s walks in Taipei and only three years after the publication of her *Among the Head-hunters of Formosa*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for example, would begin with the famous opening line “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself,” thus launching Woolf’s heroine upon her memorable walk through Westminster and leading
her to reflect: “I love walking in London, . . . Really, it’s better than walking in the country” (1). Yet, while walking in the city may have been fashionable for both men and women in European capitals, to the Japanese administrators of an often rebellious frontier island with different gender and class concepts, climactic conditions, and modes of urban life McGovern’s culturally determined praxis as a walker was below her station and in poor taste.

Another passage in *Among the Head-hunters of Formosa* in which McGovern documents one of her sightseeing escapades in some detail reveals how, like other belated travelers discussed by Behdad, her own cultural yearnings and expectations essentially predestined her to be disappointed in her encounter with Asian society. Though she was eager for discovery and intellectual excitement, the industrializing colonial Taiwan which she encountered at the street level frequently displeased her, thus causing sightseer’s remorse and a nostalgic longing for a different, more natural and timeless Orient. During one of her excursions to the city of Keelung, for example, then already an important harbor, she comments: “My kodak was in my hand, but the idea of taking a picture in Keelung never occurred to me. . . . Keelung is a squalid and dirty town, with none of the picturesqueness of the open country or of the tiny peasant-villages. There was no temptation to photograph its ugliness, or the flaunting evidences of its vice—vice of the mean, sordid type of Oriental, sailor-haunted port-towns. I [hurried] through this hideous town as quickly as possible, in order to reach a stretch of open country, which I knew lay beyond, and which commanded a beautiful view of the sea and of fantastically rearing rocky islets” (62). Thus, notwithstanding her modern educated outlook and the fact that similar “sailor-haunted port-towns” existed just as much in her own culture, the English anthropologist here falls back upon a familiar Orientalist trope to justify her retreat from the contemporary social scene. Throughout the process, moreover, the camera, an iconic object with fetish-like powers, guides the insecure traveler through the unfamiliar terrain of the city, and sanctions her judgment that this is not a place worthy of her attention. In sum, while chided by her superior for her emancipated Western ways and devotion to urban walking, the Kodak-carrying McGovern was essentially a belated traveler who cherished a nostalgic vision of a picturesque land of the open country, the small human settlement, and the native Formosan peoples and this meant that she was

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1 For a cultural history of walking, see Solnit.
never able to embrace the contemporary Taiwan wholeheartedly.

McGovern’s articulation of her passage through Keelung and especially her reference to the “type” of Oriental town it belongs to, moreover, indicates her dependence on an existing tradition of cross-cultural representation in the literature, travel writing, and journalism of her time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, cities such as Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong, Jakarta, and other urban centers which played important roles in imperial government or trade came into view as significant locations of the intercultural encounter and it is in this context that the imagery of the “sordid type of Oriental” city begins to proliferate. Kipling’s “The City of Dreadful Night” (1891), his novel Kim (1901), and several stories in Plain Tales from the Hills (1888), for example, use Calcutta, Lahore, and other cities in the Indian subcontinent as the setting for richly detailed narratives of descent. As David Trotter comments in his introduction to Plain Tales from the Hills, many of Kipling’s tales make use of the “stylistic markers of cultural difference” and follow the same pattern: “departure from a police station, descent into the slums, a chronicle of filth and rot and miasma” (9). William Somerset Maugham would fully exploit the Dantesque overtones of this pattern in his novel The Painted Veil (1925), one of the first full-length modern novels to use an Asian city as the setting for an elaborate tale of descent involving European visitors. The novel, as he states in his preface, was inspired by some lines from Dante’s Inferno and takes the reader to an imaginary cholera-stricken city in the Chinese interior by the name of Mei-ta-fu.3 McGovern’s descriptions of her ramblings in and around Taipei and other cities in Northern Taiwan are, therefore, consistent with similar cross-cultural representations in late Victorian and early modern literature.

II. New Descents in Millennial Fiction

More than half a century following Kipling, Maugham, McGovern, and other writers from the age of colonial dissolution, a new generation of writers revisited the theme of urban descent in the context of elaborately constructed late twentieth century Asian cityscapes. The Australian Christopher J. Koch

3 More examples to complement this admittedly selective survey of Asian cities in colonial fiction can be examined in Asia in Western Fiction (1990) by Robin Winks and James Rush, which offers a fairly inclusive catalogue of images of Hong Kong, Indonesia, China, India, the Philippines, the Himalayas, Indo-China, and Japan in Western fiction up to the 1980’s.
contributed two prime specimens of the genre: *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), which takes place in Jakarta during the final months of the Sukarno regime; and *Highways to a War* (1995), which begins in Singapore, then moves on to Saigon and Phnom Penh, and ends in Bangkok. Dominique Lapierre, a French journalist and novelist, sketched a memorable picture of Calcutta in his *La cité de la joie* (1985), and achieved considerable global acclaim when his novel became an international bestseller in its English translation, *The City of Joy*. Another prominent literary explorer of post-colonial Asia is the English writer Timothy Mo, who contributed three novels relevant to this study: *The Monkey King* (1978), a picaresque tale set in Hong Kong; *An Insular Possession* (1986), a historical novel about the foundation of Hong Kong which takes us from Canton (Guangzhou) to Macao and then finally Hong Kong; and *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995), which is set in Gobernador de Leon, an imaginary provincial capital in the Philippines. Another celebrated name who may be included in this survey of relevant authors is the American travel writer and novelist Paul Theroux. In his *Saint Jack* (1973), Theroux narrates the adventures in the skin trade of a small-time American hustler and pimp in Singapore, whereas his *Kowloon Tong* (1997) of nearly a quarter-century later chronicles life in Hong Kong during the last days of British rule. Other, perhaps less prominent names may be added to this, admittedly, non-exhaustive, list. The British authors James Hamilton-Patterson, with *Ghosts of Manila* (1994), and Simon Barnes, with his *Hong Kong Belongers* (1999), for example, transport the reader to Manila and Hong Kong respectively. Still other writings, which also seem to fit in with this vogue for Asian cities in the closing decades of the twentieth century, though not in the same manner in that they evoke pre-WW II cities, are J. G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and Marguerite Duras’ *L’amant* (*The Lover*, 1984), which contain vivid portraits of the Shanghai of the 1930’s in the former case and of pre-WW II colonial Saigon in the latter case. It is to be noted, finally, that major examples of Asian-American literature, such as Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990), which is set in Manila, or Peter Bacho’s *Cebu* (1991), about the Philippine provincial capital Cebu; though again in a different manner from the examples mentioned above; also contributed their bit to the construction of an Asian urban universe in Western fiction in the 1990’s. Even *The Beach*, Alex Garland’s popular *Lord of the Flies* update from 1996, begins in Khaosan Road in Bangkok, an area of the
city much frequented by Western backpackers in search of adventure, before moving on to its tropical island setting.

It may be premature to attempt a final assessment of this body of fiction at the present time, but what can be said with certainty is that it captured the attention of a significant number of readers and had a forceful impact on the literary marketplace. Many of these novels, indeed, became bestsellers, and several were adapted into big budget motion pictures, including Saint Jack, The Year of Living Dangerously, The City of Joy, Empire of the Sun, and L’amant. Some were also critically acclaimed; Mo’s An Insular Possession, for example, was shortlisted for the 1986 Booker Prize and Duras’ L’amant achieved several French literary awards. It is likely, therefore, that this body of fiction played an important role in the formation of the West’s image of Asia at the approach of the millennium and should not be summarily dismissed as a trivial phenomenon of little or no significance. In sum, while many of these novels present themselves as modern and up to date, it is appropriate to consider their cultural and ideological assumptions and it is in this sense that the question arises whether they do not essentially form a continuation of the Orientalist tradition in Western culture mapped by Edward Said, Rana Kabbani, Lisa Lowe, Michael Dodson, Julie Codell, Chandreyee Niyogi, Ali Behdad, and other critics.

In tackling the identity politics practiced in this body of fiction, it is important to note that the majority of these novels develop similar storylines involving sympathetic Western protagonists who, while initially lacking expertise regarding Asian cultures, endeavor to immerse themselves in their host societies and become knowledgeable and acculturated. Yet, over time, as the visitors proceed with their explorations—whether as flâneurs or transported by rickshaw or other forms of local transportation that bring them in close contact with life in the streets—they confront perplexing social, political, and cultural events. This, in turn, triggers renegotiations of profoundly held personal beliefs and fosters the emergence of new, more complicated ways of seeing and relating to their host societies. In quite a few of these novels, moreover, the mythic overtones of the events are played up to such an extent that the visitors’ life in the alien city becomes a kind of descent into a cross-cultural underworld. As noted above, this use of the mythology of descent in describing journeys to non-Western cultures is not new and was practiced in various ways in earlier Western literature in, for example, Kipling
and Maugham, as well as Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Paul Scott’s *The Love Pavilion* (1960), and even Paul Theroux’s *The Mosquito Coast* (1982). What is new, however, about the latest type of descent narrative is that it veers away from the once dominant wilderness settings found in Rider Haggard, Conrad and others, and fully embraces the urban locales pioneered by Kipling and Maugham as cities, colossal, hectic, densely populated cities become the new frontiers of underworldly journeying. Nor are the Western visitors geographic explorers, colonial officials, or missionaries, but rather culturally insecure journalists, students, and other travelers whose sightseeing methods seem to have been copied from the *flâneurs* and other urban explorers of modern Western literature.

To capture the Jakarta of Sukarno’s last days in power or the Manila of the post-Ferdinand Marcos era or the Hong Kong of the days before the handover, indeed, calls for a different literary methodology than was appropriate for Conrad’s jungles or similar heart of darkness landscapes. To tackle this challenge, a ready-made solution was available in that Baudelaire, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and so many others in the modernist canon have worked steadily for over a century to create an array of urban images and modes of expression which can be drawn upon. Thus, modern literature, with its *flâneurs*, wandering poets, bohemian artists, impoverished students, underground men, and other urban explorers traversing the stony labyrinths of Paris, London, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and so on, offers a model of urban adventuring which can be superimposed on earlier heart of darkness fiction to create a new type of cross-cultural urban descent. In consequence, many practitioners of late twentieth-century Orientalist fiction, as their earlier avant-garde exemplars, readily make use of such themes as the urban poor, crowds, street performers, and street life in all its forms, crepuscular moods and sensations, the nightlife of the city, the view from below, city cemeteries, unexpected encounters, and the many “oddities” (“bizzarreries”), which, as Baudelaire states in his prose poem “Ms. Bistoury”, can be found in the city when one traverses its diverse neighborhoods.4 The exotic settings and myth-making tendencies of this twentieth-century *fin de siècle* fiction, therefore, mirror in some ways those of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* when Baudelaire, Mallarmé, J.-K. Huysmans, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, and

4 “Ms. Bistoury” is included in Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen (Le Spleen de Paris, 1869).*
others similarly drew upon Orientalist themes to capture the insecurities of their age.\textsuperscript{5}

**III. The Year of Living Dangerously and Highways to a War**

The descents into cross-cultural Hades in late twentieth-century fiction can be categorized under three types. The first type, of which Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* is a representative example, mixes elements from the adventure novel and political fiction, and concentrates on protagonists who achieve greater self-knowledge through descent-like immersions in tormented third-world societies. As such, this fiction may be considered neo-Conradian in its thematic reach and epic scope. The second type, of which *The City of Joy* is the best example, comprises documentary fiction about shanty towns or similar hells of poverty and exclusion, which, due to the rich humanity of the inhabitants, nevertheless deserve to be ranked, as Lapierre states, among “the most extraordinary places on our planet” (“les endroits les plus extraordinaires de la planète” 611). A third type, represented by Theroux’s *Saint Jack* and Mo’s *The Monkey King*, operates alongside the two major models and explores the comic and picaresque potential of the genre.

Koch’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* of 1978, as noted, is the prime example of a neo-Conradian descent narrative and may be used to gain a better understanding of the parameters of the genre.\textsuperscript{6} The protagonist is an Australian journalist by the name of Guy Hamilton who has just arrived in Jakarta on his first overseas assignment. When he leaves his hotel for an evening stroll in the city shortly after checking in, he is warned by his companion, the Chinese-Australian cameraman Billy Kwan, who is a long-term resident of Jakarta, that such excursions are unusual and are bound to attract the attention of the local people. Soon enough they are, indeed, followed by a crowd of curious locals and Kwan comments: “They can’t believe we’re going on foot” (Koch, *The Year* 16). The scene is certainly

\textsuperscript{5} For the urban tradition in Western literature, see Williams; Part I.3 on “The Geography of Modernism” in James and McFarlane, 95-190; Festa-McCormick; Pike; Timms and Kelley; and Part II on “Capital Cities” in Gregory, 209-313.

\textsuperscript{6} Margaret Yong comments on the Conradian dimension of the novel in “Explorations in the Heart of Darkness: Turning Landscape into Art in Slipstream and The Year of Living Dangerously” (*Discharging the Canon: Cross-Cultural Readings in Literature* [1986] 10-37). My analysis, while agreeing with Yong’s premise that the heart of darkness metaphor is relevant to Koch’s novel, highlights the way in which the theme of descent is applied in the context of a city and inspires Koch’s attention to such motifs as flânerie, crowds, street scenes, and the urban poor.
intriguing as the two foreigners who are in Jakarta to report on the city and its inhabitants now themselves become objects of the curious gaze of “they,” in other words, the street vendors, betjak drivers (bicycle rickshaw men), and urban poor. As the curious pair, the tall Hamilton and the dwarfish Billy, proceeds on its small adventure past dirty canals, shanty settlements, empty lots, night markets, and ever more new sights and sensations, the journey begins to resemble a katabasis, as the Greeks called a mythic descent into the underworld, and the literary markers of descent proliferate. Jakarta, with its darkened wastelands, blackish canals, distant flares, strange shouts, and noxious smells, thus takes on some of the colors of Hades, and the 29-year old Hamilton, who like Dante finds himself lost in the middle of the journey of his life, is guided into the underworld by Billy Kwan, his Chinese-Australian Virgil. The crowds of baffled, silent people in the alleys, markets, and hovels of the nocturnal metropolis, meanwhile, seem like a pageant of shades arrayed for inspection by the journeying heroes. As is generally the case with such descents into the underworld, of which several more will occur in the novel, the journey achieves some lasting value for the protagonists. Kwan and Hamilton, first of all, strike up a friendship which will lead to a fruitful professional relationship. Hamilton, in addition, discovers the true conditions of life in this city, which are not often covered in the international press, and realizes that the failure of President Sukarno’s rule during the 1960’s has turned Jakarta into a hell of poverty and exclusion for most of its inhabitants. Billy Kwan also confronts Hamilton in this respect with the fundamental question regarding such suffering raised by Luke 3:10 and similarly addressed by Tolstoy when he contemplated the life of the poor of Moscow: “What then must we do?” (20) The nocturnal experience, finally, initiates a process of personal development for Hamilton which will lead through various stages to professional success, friendship, love, betrayal, suffering, sacrifice, new commitment, and a second chance.

One of the dominant images in the novel is that of the betjak rider who keeps following Hamilton and Kwan during their little expedition and appears again several times in the novel. Hamilton notices the name of the bicycle cab, Tengah Malam, which is printed on the cab’s black canvas hood, but he does not fully grasp the meaning of these words, which mean midnight, till he is caught up in the Indonesian military’s seizure of power in 1965 and makes a hasty exit from Jakarta aboard a jet departing for Europe. Having disobeyed
a soldier’s order not to enter a government compound, he is stopped and punched in the eye with a rifle butt, thus suffering a serious injury which could lead to loss of vision in that eye. Yet, shortly after this event Hamilton seems to have achieved a new clarity. He boards the departing jet at the very last moment and is reunited with the woman he loves. Then, closing his one good eye as the jet turns in the sky and begins its journey to Europe, he sees in his imagination the dark shape of the bicycle rickshaw pedaling across his middle distance, thus revealing once again the words “Tengah Malam: midnight.” Hamilton, in other words, is not allowed to journey onward till he has completed and interiorized fully his season in hell and in his case his season in hell began that first evening in Jakarta in the company of Billy Kwan.

A very similar pattern is repeated in Koch’s Highways to a War (1995), which presents another season in hell played out in the Southeast Asia of the 1960’s and 70’s. Michael Langford, a small-town Australian press photographer, travels to Singapore in search of freelance assignments. Not having any contacts or introductions and realizing that his modest capital will not last long, he steers clear of the international hotels where other correspondents gather and takes a room in a shop house near a curve in the Singapore River known as “the Belly of the Carp”. The latter name recalls the popular image of hell as the Belly of the Whale and in this manner underworldly signifiers immediately creep into the narrative of Langford’s journey. Deciding not to be affected by this unorthodox start of his career as an overseas correspondent, he makes light of the situation and points out the advantage of getting to know the real Singapore, “I like the idea of getting to know Singapore from underneath” (69). He then begins to explore the streets of old Singapore with his Leica ever ready and is accepted by the locals, who view him as a kind of foreign Pied Piper, since he is invariably followed by a handful of street kids. At other times, he gets lost in the back alleys and “dense hot mazes” (82) of Chinatown, and, like Hamilton, becomes familiar with tropical twilights and “malam, the big Malay night” (70). Later, he runs out of money, becomes very ill, and is rescued just in time from his stifling room by colleagues. He then travels on to Saigon and the war zones of Southeast Asia, and begins a successful ten-year career as a war reporter, but at last disappears during a trip from Bangkok to Khmer Rouge-occupied

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7 The words are first mentioned on p. 22 and conclude the novel on p. 278.
Cambodia. Thus, Langford, who started his Southeast Asian explorations by going “underneath” in Singapore via the Belly of the Carp, proceeded to the hell of modern combat, and ended his life in the killing fields of Cambodia, “that tropical kingdom of Dis . . . beyond the Thai border” (68).

**IV. Ghosts of Manila**

James Hamilton-Patterson’s *Ghosts of Manila* of 1994 is another novel which attempts to recalibrate the Conradian project in a late twentieth-century post-colonial setting. In addition, as *The Year of Living Dangerously*, it alerts the readers that beyond the places usually frequented by Western visitors, in this case the airport terminal and the hotels, there is an urban heart of darkness waiting to be explored. He begins his novel, for example, by immediately juxtaposing two different Manilas in his Prologue, viz. the Manila of Aquino International Airport and the Manila of the ghosts mentioned in the title, and suggests that the latter is by far the much more real and representative city. The novel, namely, opens with the image of a Philippine Airways jet descending towards Aquino International Airport with an English PhD student in anthropology on board. As the jet approaches, it passes over a mixed area of farmland, vacant lots, heaps of refuse, and urban sprawl, and the narrator comments how the anthropology student superficially scans this landscape from above. The jet is then left to continue its descent, while the reader is whisked away into the surrounding countryside to a workshop in a simple concrete building near the airport perimeter fence. Here, not all that far from the gleaming airport lounges, the other Manila, a nightmarish, clandestine city ruled by shady businessmen, corrupt police officers, and other powerful ghosts, is encountered for the first time. The workshop, namely, houses a business specialized in the preparation and sale of “export-quality skeletons” (7) for overseas medical schools and natural history museums, and the narrator then proceeds with a methodical description of the different stages of the production process. First, a police van arrives and a body—the unidentified, unclaimed victim of a crime or perhaps of an extrajudicial killing by the police themselves—is handed over to the workshop assistants, who pay the police officers a fee for their services and take the body into the workshop. There the corpse is undressed, dismembered, and boiled for hours in a big cauldron, after which the bones are steamed clean and blown dry. Finally, the skeleton is methodically re-assembled and sprayed with clear lacquer and
joins a dozen other gleaming white skeletons on a rail in the stockroom. Every other minute, meanwhile, a passenger jet roars by overhead bringing tourists, business travelers, and English anthropologists. This tale of bones and Boeings makes for a gruesome prologue, to be sure, but the author’s intention may have been to evoke another famous trading story, namely that of the river steamers with elephant tusks and slaves traveling up and down the Congo river in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Once the reader finishes this sensational opening, he returns to the recently arrived protagonist, a doctoral student in anthropology and ex-documentary film maker by the name of John Prideaux. Prideaux has, what he jokingly calls, a mid-life crisis degree at stake, and spares no effort to gather materials for his dissertation about the Philippine capital. He, therefore, busily moves about the city and visits the many places where secrets are buried and ghosts congregate, including a waste lot where police officers carry out extrajudicial killings, the clandestine hiding places of urban guerillas, the shanty settlements of the poor, an immense cemetery for the Chinese community of Manila, the crumbling monuments of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’ rule, and an archaeological dig where the old Manila is being unearthed. When he completes his research toward the end of the novel, Prideaux leaves Manila and flies Westward in the night to write an unconventional dissertation, rather like a third person narrative with *dramatis personae* who are listed in alphabetical order and with himself as a character, “Prideaux,” in the tale. He justifies this choice by claiming that there was no other way to write the dissertation: “To deal with people was to deal with fiction” (12). At first sight, this may seem like a courageous admission on behalf of the social scientist that academic protocols have their limitations when it comes to doing justice to other societies and cultures. At the same time, it also leaves the door wide open for myth-making, fantasizing, sensationalism, and Orientalist epistemologies, and this is all the more problematic as the spokesperson for this approach is an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, i.e., someone who is supposedly more credible than the adventurers, traders, and old Asia hands who populate earlier Orientalist fiction. The sensational stories and questionable intellectual positions of *Ghosts of Manila*, thus, suggest the limits of this genre of Orientalist fiction; limits beyond which one cannot proceed without entering the world of pulp fiction pure and simple. Moreover, under the rationale of striving for
verisimilitude and providing local color in his depiction of Manila, Hamilton-Patterson overloads his narrative with graphic descriptions and, in doing so, undermines the credibility of his characters, as well as ruins whatever intention of formulating a coherent political stance he may have entertained.

V. The City of Joy: the Hell of Poverty

Dominque Lapierre’s The City of Joy, in contrast, dispenses with much of the psychological apparatus and mythic overtones found in Koch, but not so much the stark language and imagery of Hamilton-Patterson, and depicts in vivid colors the terrible deprivation and inhuman living conditions of the poor of Calcutta. His methods and purpose resemble those of major nineteenth-century social reformers and realist novelists such as, for example, Friedrich Engels (The Condition of the Working Class in England, 1845), Elizabeth Gaskell (Mary Barton, 1848; and North and South, 1855), Charles Kingsley (Alton Locke, 1850), and Charles Dickens (Hard Times, 1854) in that he uses the theme of descent as a vehicle for social, political, and cultural reportage and analysis. Lapierre personally spent two years in Calcutta conducting extensive research into the lives of the urban poor, and presents the reader with a detailed panorama of its congested streets, crowded slums, leper colonies, charnel houses, cemeteries, markets, and other scenes. At the same time, he copiously sprinkles words such as inferno, hell, the depths, infernal slums, Dante’s inferno, necropolis, catacombs, prison, death camp, inhuman city, terrible city, mirage city, and the ghetto of the damned all over his novel in order to drive home his message.

One passage which keenly illustrates the novel’s difference with sensationalist Heart of Darkness rewrites such as Ghosts of Manila is found in Ch. 64 when the terminally ill rickshaw puller Hasari Pal visits a skeleton export business in Calcutta and sells his body in advance of his death in order to finance his daughter’s wedding. It is a startling episode, but unlike in the opening pages of Ghosts of Manila, the purpose is not to shock or overwhelm the reader, but rather to demonstrate the desperate choices which poverty imposes on the urban poor of Calcutta. In addition to Indian protagonists such as Hasari Pal, Lapierre also introduces two foreign characters, viz. Stephan Kovalski, a French Catholic priest, and Max Loeb, a young American doctor

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8 See Lesser on working-class hells in selected Victorian novels, 81-90.
from Miami, both of whom take up residence in one particularly bleak section of the slum. Kovalski the priest and Loeb the doctor share the suffering of the people around them and offer aid and comfort where they can, but the novel is not primarily interested in their psychological development. The main function of these foreign visitors, rather, is to help formulate the book’s main message that, no matter how miserable this particular slum may be, heroism, hope, and brotherhood are possible in this City of Joy. Unlike Koch’s fiction, therefore, *The City of Joy* also does not aim at a gradual unfolding of mythic patterns. The novel, rather, is meant to appeal to a wide readership, to confront that readership with stark realities, to educate it regarding aspects of life in Calcutta and Indian society (hence, the author’s frequent didactic asides), to promote understanding and sympathy, and to encourage change. In doing so, the French priest, American doctor, and other heroes of *The City of Joy* also attempt to answer the question raised by Billy Kwan in *The Year of Living Dangerously*: what is to be done?

**VI. Comic Descents**

A third subset of novels retreats from the nightmarish atmosphere and stark social realities of the previous two types of writings, and develops the comic and picaresque potential of the theme of urban descent. Paul Theroux’s 1973 *Saint Jack*, for example, is the fictional memoir of an American jack of all trades, ex-sailor, trader, hustler, pornographer, and pimp, who operates in the shady fringes of the Singapore of the 1950’s and 60’s, and pursues a variety of subterranean adventures which are mainly of a sexual, alcoholic, and criminal nature. Thus, while the novel mainly formulates a picaresque satire on respectable society, it also has larger political overtones involving a clandestine world of government agents, spies, gangsters, and other shady intriguers who frequent the hotels, nightclubs, and other pleasure grounds of the Southeast Asia of the Cold War era. Another novel by the same author, *viz. Kowloon Tong* (1997), tells the story of a middle aged British factory owner in Hong Kong, who, after having lived an uneventful self-enclosed life for over forty years, is forced to come out of his safe colonial cocoon during the last days before the handover when the young Chinese employee whom he has been dating disappears, possibly due to the machinations of an unscrupulous mainland Chinese newcomer. He then makes some feeble attempts to rescue his employee and, in doing so, wanders about the city and
discovers aspects of the real Hong Kong which he had ignored all his life. Yet, though the factory-owner may achieve a bit more self-knowledge, he fails miserably in the role of a latter day Orpheus and is unable to retrieve his Eurydice from the depths into which she has disappeared.

The best example of a comic application of the theme of descent, though, is found in Timothy Mo’s picaresque novel *The Monkey King* (1978), which narrates the gradual rise to power in late colonial Hong Kong of Wallace Nolasco, a Macanese Chinese of mixed Portuguese-Chinese ancestry and the proverbial monkey king of the title. The comic descent into hell occurs in Ch. 12 and develops in the context of an afternoon excursion organized by Wallace’s father-in-law, a successful businessman, for the benefit of Wallace’s British superior in the Department of Public Works. The father-in-law hopes to involve the Englishman in a profitable, but corrupt scheme, and begins the day by wining and dining his guest in a restaurant. Following the lunch, the party proceeds to the Tiger Balm Gardens, a large public garden with trees and over a hundred porcelain statues, which was endowed by the inventor of the popular Tiger Balm ointment. At the highest point of the Gardens—notice the reversal of the traditional pattern of descent—there are some panels of scenes from hell:

> On the panels the damned were being tortured by fiends, indistinguishable in appearance from themselves, in a bleak early industrial landscape. A lorry, driven by a devil, had run over and almost severed the legs from the trunk of one of the unregenerate. Near this first torture, a woman had been seated on the mouth of a furnace chimney which belched flames and smoke. Someone else was having his head sawn in half. On the fringes of the frieze, fresh squads of apprehensive-looking sinners were arriving in hell from packed pick-up trucks. (Mo, *The Monkey King* 91)

Mr. Allardyce, the English civil servant, concludes that these scenes, which are progressively more graphic and harrowing, are representations of Taoist mythology and illustrate the Chinese view of the afterlife, while Wallace prudently refrains from informing his superior regarding the local interpretation, which is that “the tortured were foreign devils meeting a condign punishment: i.e., just for being *gwai los*” (91). *Gwai los* being the
Cantonese word for foreign devils/foreigners. Thus, unlike in so many of the novels discussed earlier, it is not the poor of Jakarta, Manila, or Bombay who are in hell, but rather the colonizers from the West. The joke is apparently on the foreigners for a change, the more so as Allardyce will pay a heavy price for his involvement in the father-in-law’s corrupt venture and be sentenced to prison. The politics of the Tiger Balm hell being ambiguous, however, the joke is possibly also on Wallace, as he is ignorant of his father-in-law’s schemes and will only be able to avoid arrest himself by going into hiding. It is also, one could further claim, on the wealthy endower of the Tiger Balm Gardens and his crude didacticism, and on all of colonial Hong Kong which doesn’t seem to have anything better to offer in terms of cultural tourism or spiritual guidance. Mo would return to this theme of urban perambulation in Ch. 6 of his An Insular Possession (1986), in which a small group of foreign merchants trespass beyond the Western Factories of the Canton of the 1830’s and go for a stroll on the walls of the Chinese city. They are forced to beat a hasty retreat as a large stone is thrown at them and an immense crowd of locals begins to pursue them at great speed shouting “Barbarian devils” and “Kill! Kill!” (49) The episode may serve as a historical gloss within Mo’s fictional universe as to why the tortured sinners of the Tiger Balm Gardens in The Monkey King came to be identified as foreign devils deserving a fitting punishment in hell.

Having examined the above fiction in a variety of its manifestations, it is apparent that, while much of it acknowledges post-colonial economic and political realities, it still recycles familiar patterns and commonplaces from the Western literature of travel, adventure, and empire. The Asian cities portrayed are so many underworlds or lands of the dead, and the reader is invited, by implication, to view them in relation to Western notions of heaven. By and large, therefore, this body of texts constitutes yet another chapter in the ongoing history of Western Orientalist fiction and reinforces already entrenched representations of non-Western cultures among Western readers. Whatever promise of a new understanding may have been offered by the close of one millennium and the approach of a new one, these writings lack true alterity and do not offer a satisfactory critique of Western modes of literary representation. The call for “open-ended” assessments of Orientalism, therefore, remains useful as ever more belated travelers appear on the scene and bring back tales from “East of Suez.”
Works Cited


