The Poet's Progress: Persona, Perspective, and Perception in Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*

Jon Barry Sanders & Yuko Sawabe

In 1983, exactly between his first two volumes of poetry, *Mappings* (1981) and *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), Vikram Seth published a travel book, *From Heaven Lake*.[1] In doing so, Seth began what was to become a pattern of producing critical, popular, and award-winning successes in a succession of surprisingly different literary forms.[2] Seth's first commercial success, and the book which gave him confidence as a writer, was not just a radically different genre from his earlier volume of poetry, but it won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award for 1983 when it was first published in England.[3]

Not bad for one's first effort as a travel writer, but Seth adopted a public pose of almost casual nonchalance, insisting to Eleanor Wachtel that he did not keep "journals" of his trip, "just a notebook, and odd scraps of paper."[4] Seth also glosses over the effort involved: so many relatives and friends wanted to know about his trip that he typed out his notes, then when his father suggested he write a book, Seth found a publisher and did it, attributing the book's publication, popularity, and Thomas Cook prize to "good luck."[5] This is a time-honored pose, of course, and Paul Fussell points out that Robert Byron labored long and hard to give *The Road to Oxiana*, his masterpiece of travel literature, the feeling of casual spontaneity.[6] However, there are signs that Seth had a literary purpose in mind

from the beginning. Contrary to what he implied to Wachtel, the last sentence of the book's brief "Introduction" declares: "This book is based on the journal I kept while I was on the road." And late in the book, when Norbu suggests, "'You should write a book about this,'" Seth's reply is revealing: "'I'm keeping a log. Maybe something will come of that'" (157).

Something certainly did, of course, but we can be sure the achievement required a great deal of effort, not just typing out some notes and having good luck with a publisher. For one thing, we know his initial protest to his father's suggestion: "'I'm not going to spend six months writing a book when I don't have a publisher.'"[7] It does not take six months to type up notes, and we also have testimony as to how hard Seth labors at his literary tasks.[8] In fact, *From Heaven Lake*, which can be read with ease and enjoyment, can also be deceptive, for unless the reader is alert to poetic nuance, much of the book's brilliance may be overlooked. Indeed, the book's short concluding section seems to be a subtle test of the reader.

A. Persona

A travel narrative might seem to be a rather straightforward literary task, but writing a travel book presented Seth with a particular problem. In his poetry, Seth most often assumes the posture of a distanced observer, even in love poems, as the title of "A Little Distance" (*The Humble Administrator's Garden*) informs us. In sharp contrast, in his travel book Seth must present himself as the main character, and thus the first thing he must do as a writer is work to establish the persona of Seth the traveller, which is why the early pages of *From Heaven Lake* are filled with revealing examples of the

narrator's character.[9]

When we first meet Seth, he is already travelling, in the midst of a three-week tour that has been organized for the foreign students at Nanjing University. They are in Turfan, an oasis town in the northwest desert province of Xinjiang (Sinkiang), and Seth is feeling restive. When the bus stops at some ruins, Seth walks away by himself (3), and he is the last to get back on the bus, which, as the guide complains, looking at his watch and sucking in his breath, is usually the case (4). Seth is chafing under the restrictions of a well-organized group trip. Seth would much prefer to be alone to follow his own inclinations to explore, and he finds the imposed restraints to be particularly irksome: "I do not think that I will be able to tolerate the limitations of group travel much longer" (6). Later, on his own on a train headed back towards the northwest, he enjoys the freedom of a solitary traveller: "It is pleasant to be travelling by myself" (35).

Only a few of the other Nanjing students are mentioned—Claire (3), with whom he has a later farewell dinner in Nanjing (34), and John, who had the idea to go to Heaven Lake (20)—and later in a Lhasa guest house he briefly meets four other travelling foreign students (153), but for the most part Seth is alone, a solitary traveller who encounters various individuals of different cultures. These encounters are central to Seth's experience, and he rightfully dedicates *From Heaven Lake* "To the people I met along the way."

The traveller is the narrator of the travel book, and it is important for the reader to know the qualities of the narrator in order to gain fully from the experiences (including mistakes) that the narrator relates, so Seth the writer quickly delineates his characteristics as a traveller/narrator in a series of short vignettes.

For one thing, Seth the traveller is not always intrepid. The breathtaking heat of Turfan in July is enervating, and when Seth wonders about what caused the Buddhist ruins they are taken to see, he cannot rouse himself to pursue the answer: "I should ask, I suppose; but it will mean a walk back to the guide; and the heat is so intense that I decide to sit in ignorance in the shadow of a wall and stare at a stone" (4). However honest a description of the moment, this would seem to reveal a grave defect in a travel narrator, but it serves as a memorable low point. As we quickly learn, this tendency to sit and stare in ignorance is quite *uncharacteristic* of Seth.

Another memorable low point soon follows, but this one demonstrates just the opposite qualities, Seth's usual inquisitive and impulsive nature. Seth is impressed by the *karez*, the irrigation tunnels that bring water to Turfan from the far-off mountains, and when the guide, Abdurrahman, points out an entrance where the farmers can enter to make necessary repairs, Seth is intrigued:

> The water is too tempting. "I think I'll be an honorary commune member," I murmur, as I take off my shoes, slip off my shirt and drop my legs over the edge of the well. "See you at the mouth of the *karez*."
>
> Abdurrahman drops his avuncular air. "No—no—" he exclaims, "there's nothing of interest inside. I wouldn't go down." Then, yielding to the inevitable as I disappear downwards with a splash, he adds, "Be careful!" (7)

This misadventure is not quite a disaster, but it is certainly revealing. Seth finds himself plunged into darkness, and the slippery

walls make it impossible for him to get back out. As he stumbles along groping for the walls and bumping his head, in water up to his shorts that is so cold it is numbing his feet, Seth begins to feel a growing panic in the "unguided blackness." Finally, rounding a bend, he sees the faint light of the mouth of the tunnel, but even his hurried last steps into the sunshine do not bring complete relief, for he is "chased . . . by a small swarm of wasps whose nest I must have disturbed at the mouth of the *karez*" (8).

This episode is not only amusing, it is also informative and instructive. It is, first of all, another small but significant revelation of character, and we can smile with a sense of superior prudence at the price Seth pays for his rashness. However, Seth is neither foolhardy nor incapable of learning from the experience, as is shown soon after when Seth threatens to swim in the Grape Gorge's "fast-flowing stone-lined canal." The guide is "disappointingly indifferent," but Seth realizes, after a further look at the water, that it would be too dangerous. When Seth declares, "'I think, after all, perhaps I won't take a swim,'" the guide's reaction shows that he knows Seth has learned from his earlier impetuosity: "Abdurrahman allows himself a fleeting smile and turns away" (16).

The *karez* incident reveals more of Seth's character, and the Grape Gorge parallel shows that Seth can learn—and quickly—from his mistakes, but the *karez* episode also carries a metaphoric weight that persists throughout the book. Namely, the attempt to get to the bottom of things may plunge one instead into unnerving darkness. An inquisitive, impulsive traveller might choose to take risks in order to gain the reward of knowledge, but the venture might not pay off . . . or it might pay off in unexpected ways, as Seth discovered on

an earlier guided visit to the Mogao grottoes at Dunhuang:

> When I was there last month, I finally gave up listening to the guide and wandered around the orchards. Standing on a friend's shoulders I later managed to climb into a walled-up cave which the guide had ignored. It contained Tantric murals of a powerful and somewhat gymnastic sexuality. (47)

Wandering, in fact, is the keynote of the early pages, for Seth, who prefers to walk away by himself (3), feels frustrated by the restrictions and obligations of an organized trip (5). Moreover, the movement of foreigners was "tightly controlled" in China at that time, with travel passes approved by the police required for every place (5). As Seth remarks of the peculiar status of a "foreign guest" in China at that time: ". . . it must be closely watched at all times so that it does not see too much, do too much on its own, or influence the behaviour of the local inhabitants," and that is because "officialdom is disturbed by too much contact between Chinese and non-Chinese" (9). Nevertheless, Seth gains rare permission to travel to Tibet because of a song about a wanderer and his own propensity to wander.

When some local musicians perform at the guest house, the students make their contribution, and Seth sings "the theme song from *Awara* (*The Wanderer*), a sentimental Indian movie from the 1950s that is astonishingly popular in China" (11). The next morning, as he wanders with Claire to the market (11), he notices a police station and impulsively goes to see if he can have his travel pass

stamped for Lhasa (12). He is taken to the General Police Station, where a young officer named Akbar is the only one who can stamp his travel pass. When Akbar arrives with a friend, it turns out that Akbar must telephone to Urumqi for permission. Akbar returns to find his friend, who had been in the audience when Seth sang, absorbed in conversation with Seth about *Awara* and Indian movies. Akbar joins in, and the three of them "talk in eccentric and exhilarating circles for another twenty minutes" (14). The telephone line to Urumqi is down and Akbar has been unable to get through, but when the disappointed Seth says that he will not be able to wait, as his group is leaving the next day, Akbar's response is beyond expectation: "'Oh, well. Then I will endorse your pass now'" (14). It is obvious that this generous response is due to the friendly atmosphere created by the lively conversations about Indian movies. That, in turn, owes to Seth's engaging personality, but also to his impulse to wander and to his euphoric performance of "The Wanderer" (14).

Wandering can have both positive (serendipitous good fortune) and negative (straying, blundering) connotations, and it is true that Seth, like any traveller, makes his share of mistakes and experiences failures, but it is much more often the case that Seth gains unexpected rewards precisely because of his nature, because of who he is. His talents and abilities, his qualities of personality and intellect, especially his poetic sensitivity, combine to make him particularly disposed to benefit from unexpected encounters. For example, Seth's ability to write "Hindustan" on his palm in Urdu causes a dramatic change in the annoyed demeanor of the old Uighur owner of a cap shop: "The old man readjusts his spectacles, catches hold of my wrist tightly and peers at the writing. Urdu and Uighur share the Arabic

script; as he reads it his face lights up" (27).

Seth had noticed the small, dark shop and had gone in to buy a blue cloth cap to protect his head in Tibet. The old man had held up three fingers to indicate the price, but after his delight at seeing "Hindustan" in Arabic, the old man bursts forth in "a smiling salvo of Uighur" and lowers the price by one yuan, which Seth refuses to accept, and the incident takes a bizarre turn:

> He refuses to take it, and I refuse to do him out of a yuan. Suddenly, with an exasperated gesture, he grabs the cap from off my head and begins to rip it apart. I am horrified. What is he doing? What have I done? Have I insulted him by refusing his gift? Fifteen young boys suddenly appear at the door with Hussain at their head. They gather at the open entrance in a jigsaw of heads and gaze unblinkingly at the man from India. They are all speaking at once, and I am even more concerned and confused than before. (27)

Finally, Hussain, a twelve-year-old who has learned Chinese at school, translates the old man's shouts: "'My father says he will make the stitching firmer for you because you will be travelling a long way'" (28). The old man does so, ignoring Seth while he works. When he returns the strengthened cap, the two no longer need a translator to negotiate a language barrier that has been overcome by the thoughtfulness of the gesture. What might have been an embarrassing, awkward, or even unpleasant cross-cultural encounter ends with the moved Seth taking his leave in the most fitting way possible:

> With a restrained smile, and a faint snort of satisfaction, he stands up to put it back on my head, gently, and adjusts it to the correct angle. He says a few more words, but I am too moved by his kindness to think of asking Hussain for a translation. As I nudge past the fifteen spectators at the door, I turn to say "salaam aleikum," knowing that he will understand this. (28)

In similar fashion, when Seth visits the Grand Mosque in Xian, it is his respectful attitude that attracts the notice of a young man. After undergoing some rough questioning by a suspicious gatekeeper, Seth enjoys sitting in the courtyard, "imbibing the evening calm, the beauty of the place" (30). Even when the service is over Seth does not enter the main hall, as from the entrance he notices a few worshippers inside, and this leads a young man to approach him: "'I've been watching you for a while . . . You have a very respectful attitude'" (30). Thus, due to his manners, Seth gains the approval of this young man, who in turn provides Seth with one of his first insights into the human cost of the Cultural Revolution.[10] Though appearing uncomfortable at the admission, the young man acknowledges that the mosque was closed down, there was some destruction by the Red Guards, and services were forbidden during the Cultural Revolution. Services were still held secretly in private homes, but the young man suddenly says: "'The whole flavour of our life changed during those years'" (31).

Sometimes, however, a wanderer may benefit from simple good fortune. When Seth's travel pass is unexpectedly endorsed for Lhasa,

he writes, "I can hardly believe my good luck" (14), yet we realize that his singing performance and his ability to discuss Indian movies in Chinese had a lot to do with producing the friendly atmosphere that encouraged the abrupt endorsement. On another occasion, it is a family photograph that produces a similar magical result. Having arrived at Germu at 1:00 a.m., Seth is awakened at 3:15 and taken for questioning by a stern police officer. Since Seth should have reported immediately upon arrival—"'Regulations are regulations'" (78)—the questioning is quite severe and starting to probe Seth's plans for travel beyond Lhasa . . . until a dramatic change occurs when Seth is asked for his passport:

> I hand it over. As I do, a colour photograph of the family —Papa, Mama, Aradhana, myself—drops out of it onto the table. The officer looks at it—at my father's kurta and pyjama, my mother's tika and sari, my disheveled hair, my sister's slight frown as she looks into the sun—and, for the first time, smiles.
>
> "Your family?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> His whole attitude changes. (79)

In fact, the whole atmosphere changes, with the now friendly officer asking Seth about his family and studies, telling him that he can go, that the registration forms will be sent to him in the morning, and wishing him well: "'Have a good sleep, Mr Xie [Seth's Chinese name]. And a good journey'" (79). This time it is not Seth's singing, fluency, or manners that have won him favor, but the simple fact that

he is part of a family, and thus recognizable as a fellow human, not just a creature subject to regulations. The good luck is that the photograph fell out when it did.

B. Perspective

At the beginning of the book, Seth is already in Turfan, and that is where he receives the unexpected permission to travel to Tibet. After a side trip to Heaven Lake from Urumqi (chapter 2), Seth rejoins the school trip for the eastward train journey to Xian (chapter 3). He then makes hasty preparations in Nanjing and returns by train via Beijing to Liuyuan, the truck terminus for the road to Lhasa, 1,800 kilometers to the south (chapter 3). The bulk of the book is about Seth's hitchhiking journey from Liuyuan to Lhasa, but the early chapters are essential to establish the character of Seth the traveller. We hope the narrator of a travelogue will be as free of distorting bias as possible, and we are given ample evidence early in the book that Seth is a traveller who conducts himself without any blatant bigotry or prejudice.

Moreover, since *From Heaven Lake* is the response of a single mind to the experiences it records, it is important to know the qualities of that mind, and that is the reason for the confessional aspects of the early chapters. The more we know about the nature of the narrator, the more clearly we can see what he is showing us. In a sense, the traveller turns his eye upon himself as a way of sharpening our focus. It is to our advantage that Seth brings his poet's perspective to the task, a perspective that enables him to see accurately and perceptively, noting revelatory details that others might overlook or ignore.[11]

Although Seth is small, slight, and darkhaired, wears Chinese clothes (for the most part), and speaks Chinese—that is, he does not stand out in any blatantly obvious way—he is keenly aware of his status as an outsider and sensitive to being an object of curiosity: "One is often conscious of a minute examination of one's dress and behaviour upon first acquaintance; the impression is that one is considered not merely foreign, but in some sense weird" (9). People may stop and gape, and children may shout in excitement, as Seth depicts in one of the poems he occasionally uses to distill a situation:

> "Papa, an Outlandman!" the toddler shrieks,
> Tugging his father's sleeve. "Look, look," he says,
> Gaping in shock at the unshaven cheeks,
> Long nose and camera and Outlandish ways.
> "Look, look, a Midlandman," I smile and say
> (In Midlandspeech). The toddler starts to cry.
> "He spoke! He spoke! What is he anyway?"
> "He is an Uncle," is the sound reply. (9-10)

In this case, any possible tension is relieved by the smiling and sound responses of the two adults, but it can be uncomfortable to be the object of such intense curiosity. Ironically, Seth occasionally has problems because he is taken for Chinese, as happens when he meets Claire for dinner at a hotel his last night in Nanjing. He is wearing Chinese clothes, his hair has been cut, and he has new Chinese spectacles, so the guard challenges him: "'Stop, comrade. . . . Didn't you hear me? What unit are you from? You can't go in there'" (34). It is only as Claire walks up that the guard realizes his mistake, though

Seth is privately pleased that he no longer stands out as a foreigner:

> The guard looks abashed, but I am pleased that with my loss of hair and gain of spectacles I do not now appear too emphatically un-Chinese. If I need to stress my foreignness I will fiddle with the knobs on my digital watch. (34)[13]

Seth the traveller is far from being a naive narrator. As a poet, Seth the writer is acutely self-aware, and this quality serves to make the narrator aware of himself, which includes an admission of any character flaws that might affect the narration. We have already seen how Seth's impulsiveness led directly to the comically but drastically narrowed tunnel vision of the *karez* (7-8). Seth cautions us again, charmingly, that we need always to be conscious of the visual acuity of the viewer. Back in Nanjing, Seth realizes that his glasses are "badly scratched," so he hurries to the optician, but rushing there on foot on a hot day leaves him feeling dazed:

> Below the broadleafed planes the sweltering street
> Contorts and shimmers in the miraging heat
> That like a melting lens now damps now swells
> The shrill cicada-choir of bicycle bells. (33-34)

In short order, Seth presents a virtual catalogue of warnings—badly scratched spectacles, opticians, miraging heat that contorts the view, a melting lens (which also causes auditory distortion!)—that we need to be conscious of and sceptical about the lens—the narrator—through which we view the narrated vision of the journey. But Seth

also reassures us: a test reveals that his "vision is the same in both eyes," and he leaves wearing a carefully fitted "pair of ready-made spectacles" (34).

Always conscious of his persona as the central character of his trip, Seth is also keenly aware of how he appears—or might appear—to others. Whether it is the shrieking child of the poem (9-10) or the tolerant guide who knowingly smiles when Seth decides, on second thought, that he will not, after all, try to swim in another canal (16), Seth realizes that he is often an object of curiosity. Though he can become irritated and even fly into a rage, Seth is never smugly superior nor demeaningly condescending towards others, even when he suspects he might be the victim of a joke. At Heaven Lake, Seth is again tempted to swim, but when he unties his shoelaces and asks if the lake is good for swimming, Mr Cao, the manager of the mess-hall, and the cook begin an elaborate cautionary exchange about "'the Beijing athlete'" who disappeared one day on his regular swim across the lake and back. Seth cannot be sure they are telling the truth, and later he takes a short swim close to the shore, but he manages his defeat and relates the incident with his usual grace:

> "But . . . how did this happen?" I blurt out.
>
> Mr Cao has gone back to his receipts. He looks up at the cook, who says, in a lugubrious tone, "Well, no one knows. He might have had a heart attack."
>
> "Or he might have got cramp," suggests Mr Cao.
>
> "Or maybe the water was too cold," adds the cook.
>
> "Or maybe it was a current under the surface. No one knows. His body was never found."

"Never found," mutters the cook as he heads back for the kitchen.

I retie my shoelaces. (23-24)

Of course, we are aware that the narrator's view of the world can be restricted or influenced by physical conditions. The debilitating heat of the desert is an early constraint (6), and the plunge into the "unguided blackness" of the *karez* momentarily eclipses all vision (8). The Dunhuang caves are locked up (47), the shops and dwellings around the Jorkhan temple are "deep narrow cells whose interiors can only be dimly glimpsed" (128-29), and there are regulations regarding foreigners entering the temple (129). Moreover, the traveller's emotional state has a great effect on how he sees things. At one low point in Liuyuan, when Seth is alone, depressed, and unable to sleep, he writes that "All signs and certainties / Are lost to vision now" (47). This state is exceptional, however, for Seth is usually attuned to any significant signs, and the book culminates in a series of visionary moments.

Likewise, we know that a person's physical and emotional states are linked, so the same Tibetan landscape might appear quite differently to the same viewer at different times. One time, when driving straight into the setting sun, a painful altitude headache produces a nightmarish effect: "The atrocious glare merges with my atrocious headache to give this beautiful landscape the quality of a scene in a nightmare" (97). The next day, despite the woeful effects of having spent two cold, cramped nights in a truck, Seth rejoices in the scenery: "But there is an exhilaration to being in Tibet, especially in this lush and beautiful area that we are driving through, that

predominates over all thought of discomfort" (101).

Similarly, Seth's first and final views of the Potala palace from a distance emphasize its grandeur, beauty, and loveliness (117, 149), but when he visits the Potala, feeling dizzy and his senses exhausted, Seth finds the experience so overwhelming that he has to sit down outside before retreating to the sanctuary of his room for the rest of the day (136-37). Of course, it is incumbent upon the narrator to tell us when and how his physical and/or mental condition is influencing his narration. A distorted view is not necessarily invalid or valueless when we know what is causing the distortion. A strong reaction may be extreme, but it can also be enlightening if we know what has produced it.

In regard to cross-cultural encounters, language can often prove to be a barrier to understanding. We may envy—and we certainly benefit from—the fluency in Chinese that gave Seth access to so much on his trip, but when he cannot understand the advice of an amused Tibetan yakherd (Seth has just been charged by the yak he is trying to photograph), Seth laments a lost dimension of experience:

> If only I knew some Tibetan how much more interesting this trip would be. As it is, I can only understand Tibet through the filter of those Tibetans who speak Chinese, almost all of whom are under forty. How their elders view the rapid and irreversible changes that have occurred since 1959 is something I have no way of comprehending. (102)

Initially, Seth's academic background influenced his view of China. After all, Seth was at Nanjing University to do economic and

demographic research on some Chinese villages for his Ph.D. in economics at Stanford.[14] Experience, however, has altered Seth's perspective and enabled him to correct a flawed vision: "When I first went to China I was far more blindly enthusiastic about its achievements than I am now. I now see that China's achievements are solid but have serious drawbacks . . ." (106). Seth has also learned that statistics do not necessarily "give one a clear picture" (80), a lesson that is spelled out in "Research in Jiangsu Province" (*The Humble Administrator's Garden*).[15]

In simplest form, the academic argument against travel writing is that any traveller is culturally biased and consequently imposes his own view on what he is ostensibly reporting.[16] Admittedly, any individual is limited by his selfhood (whether narrow or expansive) and the situation, but we also acknowledge that some individuals—poets and painters, primarily—are both more perceptive and more expressive than ordinary, and that is why they are so valuable to us.[17] With his multicultural background, language ability, receptive openmindedness, critical self-awareness, and poetic sensitivity, Seth makes an ideal travel writer. Not only does he provide the reader with an insightful overview of the trip he is narrating, but late in the book, among mountains and waterfalls, Seth's perceptions expand to the sublime level of visionary insight when he experiences a series of epiphanies.

Seth has described his persona as the narrator/traveller of *From Heaven Lake* in order to sharpen our view of what is reported, but the narrator also continually seeks out advantageous vantage points in order to improve his view. Very early on, when the Nanjing University group is taken to see some vast ruins, Seth quickly leaves

the guide and group:

> I walk away by myself, and climb a flight of collapsing steps to the top of a high wall. From here I watch a donkey-cart with a load of grass—green! green!—trundle through the baked ruins to a market in the small settlement beyond. (3)

The reward for his effort may not seem momentous, but Seth has gained a revivifying sight that is his alone, and this pattern is repeated throughout the book.

The soon-to-follow low point of the plunge into the *karez* tunnel is a sharp cautionary contrast (8), and a vantage point may turn out to be of little value, as when, having missed the bus to Heaven Lake, Seth finds himself "gazing from the top of a mound at the long and trafficless road into town" (21).[18] And at Heaven Lake, Seth cautions us that even with a superb view, not everything may be visible: "The pool is probably about thirty metres across; the stream that we assume must flow out from it cannot be seen—which is odd, because the whole pool seems to be visible" (24).[19]

Ordinarily, though, both the narrator and the reader reap benefits from Seth's wanderer's urge to press beyond boundaries and to ascend heights. After dinner at a commune in Dunhuang, Seth goes for a walk:

> I follow the canal, then a road, and finally a dirt track down to the boundary between the sand and the sown. In a field of corn surrounded by a deep green hedge of marijuana plants, I see a mud building that looks like a Buddhist temple. I cross

the field, and see that it is in ruins. Goats graze amongst the rubble. Weeds and a few sunflowers have overgrown it, and its rooms and cells are open to the sky. Stubs of broken beams protrude from the scorched walls. Someone has written a poem in Chinese in white chalk on these blackened walls:

> "This day Zhi Xiong came to the old temple.
> He came from far away with no other intention
> Than to see the ancient temple,
> And he saw it and wept."

I stand in that lonely place for a while, and feel like weeping myself. A line from Leopardi comes to mind—"And now above the cities the goat browses." But for him it was Vesuvius that destroyed and nullified the works of man, while here the burnt walls speak of a sadder, more purposeful, more purposeless destruction. (61)[20]

An old man he asks tells him that "the temple was pulled down and burnt in the Cultural Revolution, and the monks beaten to death or driven away," so it is directly due to his effort in going to the boundary and crossing the field that Seth has gained another valuable (and painful) insight into the lingering effects of the Cultural Revolution: "'No one,'" the old man tells Seth, "'has ever dared to build it up again'" (61).

After accepting a ride on the old man's donkey-cart, Seth gets off and walks toward the dunes: "I climb the ridge of the largest dune,

one from which I hope to see the sun set over the whole oasis of Dunhuang" (62).[21] Seth's hope is fulfilled with a lovely, tranquil view of "squares of harvest-ripe yellow wheat," a "crescent-shaped pool," and the whole flat world lying green and gold in front of him, "the poplars and corn ending abruptly in the distance, where the sand resumes," but Seth's elevation has gained for him something more than a scenic vista, for Seth's perspective now enables him to rise above the pain evoked by the ruined temple: "I look down towards the ruins of the temple. From here, this tall mound of sand, it is possible to be detached from human effort and human frenzy" (62).

Such detachment does not come easily or often, as for the most part Seth's trip is a physical ordeal. Again, Seth's demeanor and personality work to his advantage, as Quzha, a friendly Tibetan Seth chances to meet, arranges a ride for him on a truck to Lhasa.[22] Sui, the driver of the cargo truck, warns Seth that it will not be comfortable—the single road is terrible, only half paved, floods and landslides cause frustrating delays, and it is very cold on the Tibetan plateau (51)—and Seth has to squeeze into half of the cab with two other passengers, Xiao San, Sui's sulky fifteen-year-old nephew, and Gyanseng, a tall, thin, taciturn twenty-five-year-old Tibetan: "The driver's section, to the left, is divided off by the gear lever. The other half fits two people, but with three of us and a couple of bags and boxes at our feet, the discomfort is acute" (54).

Even when Xiao San leaves the truck at Germu, the situation is not improved—"With Xiao San gone there should be more space; but Sui has placed a number of additional bags and boxes at our feet, and these restore the equilibrium of discomfort" (87)—but the altitude brings Seth a "splitting headache . . . I feel my brains bursting

through my skull" (89), and a "night spent in the truck is distinctly unpleasant. We are cramped and cold" (92). The "odious" soup at a Transport Yard revolts Seth—"'But . . . lumps of fat, with bits of skin and hair still on them?'"—and he feels miserable: "By now I have the worst headache I have had for years, with fever and nausea thrown in" (94-95).[23]

Seth summarizes the experience of three days (and nights) on the Quinghai-Tibet plateau in a poem:

> The truck: two ravens caw.
> Yaks stare with panicked eyes,
> Then scatter. Wide plains draw
> Rays down from wider skies.
> The daylight, rising higher,
> Burns through this air to grass;
> At night globes of green fire
> Float on the pastured pass.
>
> Cold in the mudlogged truck
> I watch the southern sky:
> A shooting star brings luck;
> A satellite swims by.
> The Silver River flows
> Eventless through the night.
> The moon against the snows
> Shines insular and bright.
>
> Here we three, cooped, alone,

Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues. (97-98)

By itself, the poem would be too personal, too cryptic, to be satisfactory, but since we have read about the ravens (89, 96), the yaks (96), the mysterious "globular soft green glow" that "falls gently to earth as we approach a ridge" (97), the shooting stars (97), the Silver River (the Milky Way, in an earlier chapter, 62), and the sleeptalking (92), the poem provides a superb conclusion to the chapter, one that captures many of the most memorable experiences in meter and rhyme.

As uncomfortable as it is, it is the truck that furnishes Seth with his view of the countryside, and when the truck climbs out of the Chaidam Basin, providing Seth with a privileged perspective, he uses his poetic ability to describe and share the astounding sight:

> We cross the basin, rise gently for a while, and as we reach the point of maximum elevation, see in front of us a breathtaking sight: a vast slope, as far as the eye can see, as if the world itself sloped, a declivity that stretches for perhaps a hundred miles ahead of us; and this plain has ridges rising from its floor, but they are low, short ridges, and well-spaced, so that you can see the plain continue beyond

them. The ridges are of pink and slate and purple rock, with cloud-shadows falling on some of them—and the earth to the right is beige and ochre and fawn. On the tops of the north-facing peaks there is a touch of snow. A little later, snow and cloud are joined by a different white, that of stretches of salt undissolved on this arid plain. Then comes a feast of geological transformations: nude dunes, unconnected by sand, completely isolated one from another; then black hills, oily and stony, slowly becoming wrinkled and clay-like; later, lakes of a distant blue, with a band of sparse vegetation in front, and a red strip of soil nearest us, like the uninvented tricolour of an artists' republic. A sole gold mountain glows in the late light; camels graze on a green plain; the combed raked clouds are yellowed with sunset; and finally there is darkness, and a salt lake, and the distant lights of Germu. (72)[24]

Even when Seth is suffering from the altitude, he is usually able to appreciate the view: "Actually, even through my unsociable fog of pain I can tell that the scenery is very beautiful" (90).

Vantage points can be mental as well as physical, and an observer's cultural background can enable and free the individual rather than merely limit and prejudice his outlook. To take one example, viewing things from his multi-cultural background and his customary poet's stance as an outsider, Seth is very sympathetic toward the plight of minorities in China. Seth is barely one page into his book when he tells us that Xinjiang is what the Chinese call an "'autonomous region,'" an area "populated largely by minorities," but

over which "effective power is entirely in Beijing's hands" (2). In fact, at the time Seth was visiting Turfan and Urumqi, Kashgar was closed to foreign travel due to a " 'minority problem' in the area" arising from the Uighur and Kazakh communities that existed on both sides of the (then) USSR-China border (2-3). The Uighurs are Muslim, their language uses the Arabic script, and in features they look more like Turks than Chinese. Accordingly, as Seth blandly puts it, "Beijing is not unalive to the reality of minority disaffection and the need to appease or crush it" (3).

When Seth wanders to the Turfan market one evening, an old Uighur man invites him to sit down, and in their conversation Seth gains a shocked awareness of the profound consequences of Beijing's capricious control of minorities. Noticing signs in both Latin and Arabic scripts, Seth is told they are both Uighur, and the old man explains. Afraid people were reading Russian publications in Uighur, the Chinese government ordered the Latin script to be used in schools, though a generation later a new "'Minority Policy'" changed the script back to Arabic. The result, as Seth is horrified to realize, is that the old man and his grandson can write to each other, but the old man's son can write to neither (17-18).

At the Grand Mosque in Xian (31) and at the ruined temple near Dunhuang (61) Seth has gained other insights into the dire effects of the Cultural Revolution. Aware of the turmoil and scale of human suffering in Chinese history, Seth is unable to rhapsodize over the life-size terra cotta warriors in Xian, finding them to be as much a "testimony to the megalomania of the first great unifier of China" as to the "skill of artisans over two thousand years ago" (29). Seth prefers the beauty, peacefulness, and calm that he imbibes at the

Grand Mosque, which, despite its damage and disrepair, in its reopening holds out a tentative hope that things may now be better (30-31).

Seth is neither blinkered nor blinded by his multi-cultural background, and his poetic sensitivity to nuance and his academic training combine to give him a keen perspective. Despite his initial blind enthusiasm for China's achievements, Seth does not gloss over what he sees, even when they are "serious drawbacks" (106).[25] One example is his forthright condemnation of the Hans for despising the cultures of minorities, a quality that he finds both distasteful and inexplicable: "This attitude is not confined to those who have only received a primary education: many of my Chinese acquaintances, and, alas, some of my friends also share it" (107).[26]

Seth's greatest gift, both as a writer and as a person, is his extraordinary capacity for empathy. Not only is Seth able to empathize with others, but he continually tries to see and understand things from another's perspective. Apart from Seth himself, the most significant character is Sui, the driver, a man of "about thirty-five, an alert-faced and vigorous chain-smoker, compact in limb and confident in manner" (50). Seth quickly learns to appreciate Sui's practical competence, particularly when Seth's bag falls off the truck and is taken by a driver going the other way. When the loss is discovered, Sui immediately takes charge: he turns around, finds a witness, reports to the police, and even tracks down the driver. Later, Sui manages to get some necessary petrol after hours and, at 1:30 in the morning, arranges for beds in the full Transport Yard back in Dunhuang (55-57).[27]

On the other hand, Sui has some habits and quirks that do not

make the trip any easier. One is Sui's smoking: "Sui coughs and smokes and coughs." When Sui spits, Seth notices that the sputum is "green and viscous," and Seth feels "quite worried about him" (62). Seth tries "some classic nagging" to get Sui to cut down on his smoking, but Sui says he does it out of boredom—he has been driving the same route for years—and to help him concentrate. Starting to feel uncomfortable about the nagging and not wanting to sour their relationship, Seth soon quits his prodding (63). In fact, later in Germu, Seth buys Sui some good cigarettes to thank him for the care he has taken of his passenger and the suffering he has endured (being awakened at 3:15 a.m. by the police) on account of Seth's foreignness (81).[28]

Sui can become so absorbed in reading a comic book that he loses all track of time, which makes for curious hours and erratic departure times (63-64), and on the road Sui frequently stops—even at 3:00 a.m.—to visit friends and leave gifts (73, 97, 106). The innumerable interruptions can be grating, but Seth is able to see things from Sui's point of view. Seth realizes that Sui has become inured to the beauty of the landscape, just as he comes to realize that "his pleasures along the road are mainly social . . ." (73). Seth can even comprehend Sui's irritating indifference to his and Gyangseng's eagerness to reach Lhasa:

> For Sui, unlike us, this is not just a journey: it is a style of life. He spends more time on the road than in Lhasa, and it is the contacts and acquaintances along the route that lend relief and flavour to his hours behind the wheel. (96)[29]

Nevertheless, mounting tension finally erupts in anger. When they are within hours of Lhasa and Seth's spirits are soaring, Sui suddenly slams on the brakes near one of his favorite fishing spots and, over Gyanseng's protests, wastes two hours futilely fishing in the rain-swollen stream (107-108). Back in the truck again, the angry Sui drives very fast, but he is so "darkly obsessed" with the thought of catching fish that he leaves the main road, drives along a "pebbly country road" towards a stream, and gets the truck hopelessly stuck in soft mud (108).

The next morning, with the truck just as stuck despite hours of cold, muddy digging the night before, the irritated Seth—"lack of sleep, a continuous headache and a rising sense of frustration bubble over in an indignant outburst" (110)—refuses to do any more digging and declares that he will go on to Lhasa by himself. When Sui tells him to be patient, that his idea is ridiculous, Seth erupts again: "'And what do you think is a sensible idea?' I shout, 'Sitting here with you catching fish?'" (111).

Astonishingly, given the circumstances, the dismayed Seth is able to stop his outburst, he is able to recognize his own failing—"I have, I realise, made a most gratuitously cruel remark"—rather than dwelling on Sui's, and he is even able to penetrate his anger to gain a clearer self-understanding: "I walk toward the bridge, hoping to regain some clarity. A mind clouded with rage is fearsome even to itself. I look at the fishless stream, and try to understand why I feel so much rancour." Seth not only strives to see himself clearly, but in an extraordinary demonstration of empathy he tries to see through the eyes, thoughts, and feelings of another:

> It was his fixation that got us into this mess in the first place, I think. But even if I believe in the attribution of blame for our situation, is there any balance between his anger and irritability and my sarcastic and selfish explosion? Finally, if I am extenuating my actions by hauling in headaches and tiredness as excuses, can I imagine what it must be like for Sui, who is cold, hungry, and utterly exhausted? (111)

That Seth *can* imagine—that he can, in the circumstances, even think to imagine—is the quality that makes him such a superb writer and narrator. It also makes him quite a decent individual. Seth knows that if he likes Sui he cannot leave matters as they are, so, delighted by some butter-tea and *sampa* brought by a friendly Tibetan woman and her young children, Seth walks over to Sui and apologizes for what he has said. Sui, looking "both friendly and restrained," accepts the apology—"'Let's just forget it. I also said many things'" (112)—and they part on good terms as Seth struggles away with his bags in search of a ride.

It is due to Seth's self-control, empathy, and generous apology that their final unplanned meeting in Lhasa is such a pleasure. While walking back to the Guest House on his final weekend in Lhasa, Seth hears a furiously ringing bicycle bell and turns around to see Sui: "He dismounts, and for a few minutes we smile at each other without speaking" (154). They have a brief, friendly conversation, during which Seth risks a mention of fish and gives Sui a couple of packs of cigarettes he has bought for him, and they wave and shout cheerful goodbyes as Sui bicycles away: "It seems too short a meeting. But then we are lucky that it took place at all" (155).

C. Perception

The great value of travel literature, much more than just the entertaining descriptions of exotic adventures, lies in the perceptions gained and shared by the narrator. As the perceptive traveller progresses, assumptions are overturned, misunderstandings are resolved, mysteries are solved, and insights are gained. Of course, readers have to feel they can trust the narrator, so in establishing the credibility of his persona the narrator must demonstrate a perceptiveness about himself, including an awareness of any limitations and failings, and Seth does not try to hide his mistakes or ignore his misunderstandings.

Soon after his misadventure at the *karez* (7-8), Seth buys "something that looks like a crude wooden pipe" from a pavement hawker while wandering in the Turfan market. Thinking it might a good present, he buys two more, then, using puffing gestures and Chinese, he asks the Uighur woman if he is holding it properly. At the moment, Seth cannot understand the woman's incomprehension or the amusement of the gathering crowd: "Only later do I learn that the 'pipe' is a device for diverting a baby's urine out of its cot so that it does not soil its nightclothes" (12).

There was also the instance of Seth's moment of horrified confusion in the cap shop when the old man snatched the cap off his head and tore it apart (27). In Liuyuan, Seth runs into a clothing store to escape a downpour, only to find himself being gawked at with embarrassing intensity by two men who seem nearly simple-minded. It gets even worse when his watch-alarm beeps; Seth complains, the manager scolds the men, and they leave. Seth waits a few minutes

before venturing out, but he is astonished when the first starer, who has been waiting, first asks about his plans ". . . and then proceeds to give me sound and detailed advice on what I should do next. It is my turn to stand open-mouthed as he sketches out a plan of action." Seth admits that the encounter has left him dumbfounded: ". . . I do not know what to make of this bifurcated personality, this unexpected explosion of intelligence and helpfulness" (42-43).

Assumptions can also be overturned in amusing ways. Just after Seth gets the unexpected permission to travel to Lhasa and first thinks of hitch-hiking, yaks are one of the images that make up his "pleasant hallucination" (15). Later, while sitting in the stopped truck waiting for Sui to return from a visit, Seth is startled out of a reverie by the sudden appearance of a herd of yaks. Even though he can easily tell that the "black, thick-haired yaks . . . are huge beasts," his poet's eye for simile leads him to a false assumption: "Yaks look like Pekinese dogs or willow trees in the way that their hair sprouts downward off them. For all their largeness and solemnity, they are friendly beasts" (96). However, it is one of these "friendly beasts" that charges Seth when he tries to photograph it, to the amusement of both the yakherd and the reader (102).

Seth has many surprises, and some are unpleasant. For example, the prospect of crossing the Himalayas is exciting (16), the reality is painful (90). On the other hand, despite the official diatribes against "the corrupting influence of foreigners," Seth is pleasantly surprised by the openness of the passengers he talks to on the train to Liuyuan: "In general . . . people show a frankness and a curiosity that I had not expected when I first came to China" (36). Nearing Lhasa, Seth is surprised to hear from Gyanseng that *bidis* (small Indian cigarettes)

and alcohol are easily available there; Gyanseng, in turn, is astonished at Seth's ignorance (100).[30] One of Seth's biggest surprises in Tibet, particularly given what he knows about the destructive aftermath of China's entry into the country, is the Mao cult, all the pictures, badges, and quotations, with portraits of Chairman Mao often found hanging next to pictures of the Dalai Lama (100, 111, 134). This remains a mystery until Norbu explains that "deification worked too well" in Tibet: "Because of the precedent of the worship of the Dalai Lama, Mao is now seen by many [Tibetans] as another god-king . . . and what will Tibetans think of their Han rulers if they allow . . . the denigration of this most potent symbol of their rule?" (141-42).

Seth's character and personality enable him to deal smoothly with most situations, even when he is mistaken or impulsive.[31] He has the saving grace of being able to view himself critically and laugh at himself. His multi-cultural background and openmindedness allow him to learn and benefit from what he encounters. His academic training and intelligence make him easily able to absorb information and adjust his attitudes. Moreover, his poetic gifts have made him keenly sensitive to nuance and brilliantly able to convey his experiences and impressions on the printed page. As we have seen, Seth usually benefits greatly from his chance encounters. From the old Uighur man in the Turfan market (17-18), the young man at the Grand Mosque in Xian (30-32), and the old man with the donkey-cart near Dunhuang (61-62), Seth has learned more and more about the ruinous effects and disastrous human cost of the Cultural Revolution.

Seth gains a deeper insight from Sui, who turns out to be full of surprises. Unlike almost all Han Chinese Seth has met, "Sui is not Han-chauvinist . . . he has a way of treating people as individuals . . .

that precludes any sense of cultural superiority," and he has both Han and Tibetan friends along his route (74). However, although his sister is a doctor and Sui "reads omnivorously," education was completely closed off to him during the Cultural Revolution, as he regrets: "'We never studied, never did anything'" (74). Sui thinks the selfishness of young people can be attributed to the "viciousness" of the Cultural Revolution, when they were encouraged to turn against all authority, including parents and teachers: "All decency died during that time, he says, and half the cultural heritage of China—books, temples, works of art—was destroyed. People now care only for themselves" (76).

When Seth asks if anything good came of the Cultural Revolution, Sui is slow to reply, and his answer, when it comes, credits only a dark knowledge of human weakness:

> "Some good things came out of it, as they do out of every disaster. I learned a lot of things about life, and about how people behave: about how far, for instance, you could count on even your best friends to stick by you in times of trouble. Sometimes people wanted to but they didn't dare help. They feared for themselves and for their families." (76)

It is owing to these cumulative insights that Seth is able to generalize with authority on China and India (102-106). Even considered as the sort of periodic outbreak that is likely to happen in a tightly controlled system, the fearsome mania of the Cultural Revolution still seems inexplicable—

> Temple after temple, mosque and memorial hall and

> monastery, painting and screen and book and vase, artefact and artist; almost anyone or anything vulnerable or creative or non-conformist was damaged or smashed. Much of the brilliance and beauty of a great civilisation was in a few years destroyed by its ideology-infected children, the Red Guards—

and Seth trusts that "This is something that is not likely to happen in the democracy—however halting, hypocritical and hopeless—that is India" (104). Having overcome his early blind enthusiasm about China's achievements (106), Seth can now see more clearly the relative strengths and failings of both countries. At this point, the situation seems just the opposite of at the Turfan *karez*, for Seth's perceptions have heightened in the altitude of Tibet.

One of Seth's pleasant imaginings about Tibet—"I see before my eyes yaks, and trucks, and a huge image of the Potala palace" (15)—is fulfilled, as his first sight of the Potala, "monolithic and of an immense grandeur, white and pale pink and red and gold," from the back of a truck filled with sightseeing teachers, is spectacular: "In this late afternoon light it is so beautiful that I cannot speak at all" (117). Somewhat ironically, by the time he manages to get a room at the Number One Guest House, it is already dark outside, so the impressions of his first stroll in Lhasa are predominantly auditory—barking dogs, blaring truckhorns, chanting groups of pilgrims—and olfactory: "The smell of urine and yak-butter and burning aromatic herbs infuses the air" (122). Still, whatever else may happen, Seth is thankful that one of his dreams has been fulfilled.

Now that he has reached Lhasa, Seth discovers that he cannot

always cope with the overwhelming flood of impressions. While he is in a bookstore, staring in perplexity at a shrine to Mao, Seth nearly collapses: ". . . I feel a sudden weakness in my legs, and almost collapse, so that I have to support myself against a counter." Seth is still suffering the effects of the altitude—"headache, nausea and shortness of breath"—so he knows that he needs "to suppress all exploratory instincts" and "spend a day in bed." Yet even in this moment of extremity, Seth is able to achieve an amused perspective on how his condition must have appeared to others: "The shop assistants are alarmed at what must look like an overpowering spiritual revelation" (134).[32] Feeling better the next morning, Seth goes to the Potala, but the climb leaves him dizzy, and his impressions are blurred by the religious enthusiasm of the chanting, praying, shoving mass of pilgrims. Pushed along in the crowd, Seth finds the experience so "fervid and overwhelming" that he is left trembling and stumbling, having to sit down to recover before returning to the quiet of his room for the rest of the day (136-37).

Seth's visit to Drepung monastery the following day turns out to be much more rewarding, though not in a way he expected: "Though I have actually come here to see the temples, murals and statues, my four or five hours at Drepung take on the character of an extended walk" (138). Walking from the foot of the hill to the monastery, Seth views both scenes of destruction and temples that have been restored. However, to Seth, "an outsider . . . who knows nothing of the minutiae of their significance," the temples "are ultimately frustrating," and this leads Seth to question his worth as an observer: "My excuse about the fresh vision that ignorance brings to a complex environment now makes no sense to me" (138-39).[33] Seth claims here

that his outsider's perspective affords him no fresh vision, and thus the hillside ruins, "reminders of the fury of cultural intolerance," grant him only a dark vision of blight: ". . . even the peach trees nearby, their small fruit green and diseased, have imbibed the bitterness of this place" (139).

But in the very next paragraph Seth the writer goes on to show that the traveller is mistaken, though we have to be perceptive enough as readers to see what he is doing. The traveller laments the possibility of any fresh vision arising out of ignorance, but the writer immediately demonstrates that a different perspective can lead to a fresh perception. The traveller takes "a different route going down Drepung, behind the buildings, along a deserted path by a stream," and the view is dramatically different:

> Here there are no pilgrims, just those people who live and work in the monastery: a boy who is carrying a message to one of the temples; two men moving a large piece of glass; a man washing monks' robes in a pool along the stream. An arch of pale pink roses tenderly indicates the entrance of an apple orchard. The ground is spangled with tiny, deep blue butterflies. (139)

The traveller does not recant, but the book shows us that he has been wrong, as the dispiriting sight of ruins is supplanted by encouraging scenes of life, the bitter and diseased peach trees give way to the tender roses at the entrance to an orchard, and the painted prayers amid the ruins have metamorphosed into living butterflies.[35] Taken together, they provide a fresh and promising vision of life in Tibet.

To the reader's benefit and good fortune, the last several chapters of *From Heaven Lake* provide a series of remarkable insights and visions. When Seth goes to witness a sky burial, an event that makes up the entirety of the short but powerful chapter fourteen, perspective and perception merge to provide not only an affective description of nearly poetic density but also an admirable object lesson in cross-cultural encounters. Setting out hours before dawn, Seth arrives at the Sera monastery when the sky is becoming gray. He can make out the vast slab of rock where the ceremony will take place, but it is only later that he realizes that "the tiny saw-toothed serrations" on the skyline mountain ridge are the waiting eagles (147). Having been cautioned by a Tibetan friend, Seth does not venture too close, staying across a stream from the rock so as not to give offense. As the morning grows lighter, Seth can see that there are human corpses on the rock, and the bodies are being chopped up.

At this point, some Chinese from Shanghai arrive. Laughing and talking, they wade across the stream and "saunter up to the rock," as Seth sees it, "with insulting casualness." It is obviously insulting to the Tibetans, and when one of the Chinese begins laughing, the turbaned leader of the men performing the ceremony "picks up a human leg that is lying on the rock, and chases them to the river, roaring with rage and brandishing it at them" (148). However grotesque it might seem, the now wet and trembling Chinese thoroughly deserved their chastisement. There could hardly be a clearer contrast between Seth's respectful behavior in the presence of an alien custom and that of the insulting, disrespectful Hans.

On the rock, the cloth-covered skulls are smashed by a man wielding a large stone, the chopped remains are mixed with *sampa*

(barley meal), a monk blesses the meal, and the eagles are called down to feed. Seth has watched for two and a half hours, and as he walks back towards Lhasa, thinking and pausing, he gives a demonstration of open-mindedness regarding cultural relativism. Seth had feared what he was going to witness (147), but he realizes that Christian and Muslim burials could be thought of as a process of feeding the dead to worms. Close to home, culturally speaking, he knows that the Parsis of India feed their dead to vultures in ceremonial towers, though the bodies are left whole. Seth felt queasy when he saw the skulls being smashed, but he has to admit that "we Hindus also break the skull during the ceremony of cremation" (150). On this occasion, Seth has done some of his wandering in his thoughts, and, as has so often been the case, the wandering has paid off for both Seth and his fortunate reader.

Meeting Norbu and his family turns out to be one of Seth's most rewarding chance encounters during his trip, though it gets off to an awkward start. When Seth goes to Norbulingka Park on a Sunday afternoon (126), he finds the park is full of people and just as lively as Gyanseng had described it (100). Seth is taking photographs of playing children when a voice from behind asks where he is from. Seth reacts sharply to the unwelcome interruption, and though Seth immediately regrets his brusque response, he is fortunate that the young Tibetan man with friendly eyes is not offended. After a brief exchange, Norbu invites Seth to meet his family, which turns out to be an extended group of nearly twenty people whose "voices rise and fall in a joyful babble" (127). Seth is made welcome and given a bowl of wine. When everyone takes turns singing songs, Seth again relies on "Awara," and he leaves the park "filled with their contagious

happiness" (128).

The only hint of darkness in this bright family scene is the "curious frailness" that Seth notes in Norbu's tall, well-built father, and the lines from Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" that he feels compelled to quote in description—

> "As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage
> Of sickness felt by him in times long past
> A more than human weight upon his frame had cast"—

add a further hint that all may not be as it appears.[36] Nevertheless, Seth had no way of knowing that his meeting with Norbu was soon to result in a shocking revelation: "It was some days later before I become aware of the harsh backdrop against which this lighthearted scene had been played" (128).

A few days later, Seth bumps into Norbu on the street, and Norbu invites him to his house (141-42). Norbu leads the way as they turn "into a maze of little lanes," an action that in retrospect is potently symbolic, for Seth has no idea that he will shortly be profoundly shaken by what he learns. As he looks around the room at Norbu's house and notices a chest of drawers among the sparse but spotless furnishings, he has no notion of what it might be hiding (142). Seth is asking Norbu about the Dalai Lama and Chinese rule when Norbu's elder brother, who has just come in, dramatically breaks into the conversation:

> "Do you know what we have suffered, here, our family, because of the Chinese and their Cultural Revolution? . . . My

father spent thirteen years in prison, and I spent twelve, because of them. . . . An uncle of mine was killed when they invaded Tibet—and then their Cultural Revolution—you can't imagine what it did to our family. Our lives were ruined, mine and my father's—and my mother, when I think of her death, I can hardly bear to think of such things." (143)[37]

Indeed, an outsider can scarcely imagine such things, as Norbu repeatedly declares: "'. . . but you cannot imagine what it was like for us during those years. . . . What bitterness my family suffered you cannot even begin to imagine'" (143-44). Norbu has his sister bring the documents that are in a drawer, and Seth reads them "almost with disbelief" (143). The revelations have proven to be a powerful manifestation of the truism that appearances can be deceptive, as the profoundly shaken Seth admits: "'You know, last Sunday when we met in the park, it seemed to me that you were the ideal happy family. How can you manage to forget, even for a day, what happened to you?'" (145).

But, of course, they cannot, and when the sister hears a noise at the gate—it is just "Zashi, the young boy, going out to fly kites with his friends"—she peers through the curtains "nervously" (145). And instead of flying kites, as a young boy Norbu was learning the same bitter lesson as Sui, finding that the people in their neighborhood "'would turn away when we went past, would pretend not to know us . . . even those we had thought of as friends'" (145). Things are better at present, Norbu admits, but the price his family has paid has been ruinous:

"We're safe now, but we are ruined. We have almost nothing. Most of what we had was confiscated, and we got 300 yuan as compensation for what happened to us. And as for the family, look at my eldest brother, grief-crazed. And my younger brother is like a madman: he wanders around here and there and can't do any work. My father, too—you saw him on Sunday and he seems fine, but mention my mother, and he can hardly speak for grief." (146)

A subdued and enlightened Seth is led back to the main street, this time by the sister, but Norbu's shocking revelations have altered things for Seth. Just as a heightened perspective often leads to greater perception, so too can a greater awareness completely alter one's perspective. The day after he first met Norbu's family, the gold, elegantly sloping roof of the Jorkhan appeared beautiful to Seth (128). Now, leaving Norbu's burdened by the dark knowledge he has gained, the Jorkhan is symbolically darkened, too: "As I turn left . . . I notice again the angled roofs of the Jorkhan, no longer gold but black against the early night sky . . ." (146).

And the kite Seth sees is no longer an unambiguous image of bright and lively childhood, as it seemed to be when Seth saw children flying "kites from windows, bright with boxes of geraniums and fuchsias" (138), for now it too is weighted with a darker significance: "Between [two solitary stars] is a light paper kite, rhomboid, tail-less . . . a prisoner of string and wind, flying now in one direction, now in another, with no appraisable trend or endeavour" (146). For the sadder but wiser Seth, the kite's erratic motion now symbolizes the capricious and deadly political whims that have

shattered Norbu's family and left him in uncertain fear of the future: "'And who can say, a year, or two, or five, and policies will change again and people will look at us as before'" (146).

The final sentence of chapter thirteen also provides the book's answer to Sui's earlier complaint about poetry: "'Poetry,' he tells me, 'is pointless. I can never understand what poets are trying to get at —or why they bother to say things the way they do'" (74). *This* is why poets say things the way they do, as the sentence about the kite shows us. How can a writer convey the horrific human cost of something as formless as the Cultural Revolution? Well, one poetic way is to hit upon the precise image—in this case, an apparently incongruous image—that will startle the reader into a heightened awareness. Seth does his poet's work superbly in this instance, answering Sui and rewarding the attentive reader with the provocative image of the fitful kite, and in the remaining chapters, Seth's perceptions expand even further to include epiphanies and visionary insights.

As was the case earlier, Seth is again fortunate in the officials he deals with and in the unusual travel permission he receives in Lhasa. On arrival, Seth is directed to the Foreign Affairs Office, where he is questioned by Mr Ho, who is progressively "alarmed," "profoundly agitated," and "more and more upset" to learn that Seth is not with a group, has hitch-hiked to Lhasa on his own, has not yet reported to the police, and hopes to travel through Nepal (118-19). Mr Ho tells Seth that his plan is completely impossible, though for an unexpected reason: "'You see, the Lhasa-Kathmandu road has been destroyed by floods and the Friendship Bridge on the border has been washed away'" (121). Seth has appreciated Mr Ho's friendly manner and the

sensitivity that has shown through his perturbation, so, despite his upsetting situation, Seth can still manage to put himself in Mr Ho's position: "I feel sympathetic towards Mr Ho, who has been disturbed at home on a Saturday evening by an impoverished and importunate *waibin* with no place to stay, nowhere to go and who hasn't even reported to the police yet" (120). And Mr Ho, for his part, turns out to be both friendly and helpful, for he consoles Seth and arranges a room for him at the much cheaper Chinese rate (121). Later, Seth tells Mr Ho his new plan (132), and eventually Mr Ho is able to return Seth's passport with the precious exit visa for Tibet (151).

Mr Shah, the Nepalese Consul-General in Lhasa, is also friendly and helpful. Partly because they can converse in Hindi and reminisce about Patna (133-34), where both had lived for a time, they get along well, and it is Mr Shah who saves the trip with his unexpected suggestion that Seth could walk across the border, the surprising but ideal solution for an avowed wanderer. Seth will need a guide and it will take three or four days, depending on the weather and the condition of the paths, but it is a real possibility (125). The only remaining problem is that Seth will still need a Chinese exit visa (126), but Seth is running out of time, and the Public Security Bureau officers are dismissive about Seth's chances. They become suddenly more attentive when they notice Mr Shah waiting outside in his long black car for Seth (133), and Mr Shah's fortuitous appearance may have had a lot to do with Seth receiving the necessary exit visa in time. Mr Shah also relays a message to Seth's family (134) and writes a letter of introduction for use in Nepal (154).[38]

It is as Seth is walking in the mountains near the border that he achieves his grandest vision. From his elevated vantage, Seth has a

bifurcated view of waterfalls dropping hundreds of feet to the Bhotakoshi River, which "rages far below" him as the sun "shines calmly above" (163). There is ample evidence of the recent flood's devastation along the river (164), but Seth lingers to take in the view of eight waterfalls, one of them a thin strand that seems to vanish into mist and reappear as light: "There is enchantment in flowing water: I sit hypnotised by its beauty—water, the most unifying of the elements, that ties land and sea and air in one living ring" (165). As he muses in this fashion, Seth cannot help recalling the significance of water in Lao Tzu, the Upanishads, Genesis, and the Koran, for Seth realizes that water has unifying and universally symbolic qualities:

> The pulse of our bodies is liquid, as indeed all living pulses are. . . . It is this visible movement of water, whether of the concentric ripples on a lake, or of the "sounding cataract" falling whitely into chaos, that informs the purity of a uniform element with the varying impulse of life. (165-66)[39]

Just as in his poetry, Seth has a tendency to pull back from blunt assertion, and he qualifies his perception of water as a communal element—"its particles will become a part not merely of me but of everyone in the world"—as merely a "curious thought," but Seth has already achieved and described his vision:

> And the random blur of noise, the tumult of light at which I now stare is the author of more beauty even than itself: cirrus and cumulus, rainbow and storm cloud, the strata of

sunset, the indescribable scent of the first rains on the summer-baked plains. (166)

Here, Seth sounds the same notes as Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey," and Seth has subtly hinted at the correspondence by quoting the expression "sounding cataract" from the poem. Like the poet of "Tintern Abbey," Seth is seeing more than spectacular scenery, for among the waterfalls he too has gained a visionary insight "into the life of things" and is able to feel "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused . . . A motion and a spirit, that . . . rolls through all things."[40]

Whereas Seth's vision of the unity of all things occurs in a sublime mountain landscape, his next epiphany takes place in a mundane urban setting. And if the visionary insight amid the waterfalls seems to have impinged upon a receptive and responsive viewer, in downtown Kathmandu Seth actively and creatively invests a common sight with meaning. Having crossed the border (169-70) and taken a bus to Kathmandu (173), Seth delights in the vibrancy of the familiar and indulges himself in some shopping. He can finally relax and drift along, "allowing sight to follow sight, thought to follow thought," but he comes to a clear realization that he has, despite repeated renditions of "The Wanderer," "been wandering far too long . . ." (175).

Feeling exhausted and homesick, Seth buys a ticket for a flight to Delhi. On the way back to his hotel, he notices a fluteseller in the corner of the square. The man displays many bamboo flutes sticking out from an attachment at the top of a pole. The seller occasionally plays one of the flutes and occasionally sells one, in what Seth

assumes must be a daily routine, but now Seth, affected by his travels and his long absence from home, endows the sight with a surprising significance:

> I find it difficult to tear myself away from the square. Flute music always does this to me: it is at once the most universal and most particular of sounds. There is no culture that does not have its flute—the reed *neh*, the recorder, the Japanese *shakuhachi*, the deep *bansuri* of Hindustani classical music, the clear or breathy flutes of South America, the high-pitched Chinese flutes. Each has its specific fingering and compass. It weaves its own associations. Yet to hear any flute is, it seems to me, to be drawn into the commonalty of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force too is living breath: it too needs to pause and breathe before it can go on. (176)

Small things may indeed have grander implications, and Seth has once again shared an epiphanic moment with the fortunate reader. The pattern of repetitions continues late in the book. On the plane to Delhi, Seth finds that his two months of travel have already taken on a "dreamy quality," and the self-critical traveller feels he still knows "next to nothing" about Tibet (177). This should remind us of what Seth felt at Drepung, where he lamented his lack of detailed knowledge of the significance of the various temples (138). However, if we have learned from the example of Drepung, we know that the book can furnish a corrective to the narrator. At Drepung, the

correction came in a single illuminating paragraph (139); in this case, the entire book—the enlightening achievement of the writer—is the convincing refutation of the weary traveller's sense of futility.

The sound of the fluteseller's flute had evoked Seth's perception of the "commonalty of all mankind" (176), but when Seth allows himself to generalize a last time about India and China, he is forced to admit that amity between countries can be "constrained by geography" and other factors: ". . . neither strong economic interests nor the natural affinities of a common culture tie India and China together" (178). On the other hand, as a result of his own experience, Seth feels much more hopeful about things on a personal level:

> . . . to learn about another great culture is to enrich one's life, to understand one's own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add to that reservoir of individual goodwill that may, generations from now, temper the cynical use of national power. (178)

In contemplating such grand visions as the commonalty of mankind, "goodwill" might seem too mild a term to be of much significance, but time and again it is just this quality that Seth encounters and comes to value so highly. Whether it is the old Uighur man who asks him to sit down (17), the young soldier who gives him a lift on his bicycle (18), the old man who restitches his hat (28), the young man at the Grand Mosque (32), the gawker who gives such good advice (43), the old man who gives him a ride in his donkey-cart (61), or the friendly, hospitable Tibetan family (109, 112); whether it is Quzha (48), Sui (55), Mr Ho (120), Mr Shah (123), or

Norbu (128), in all such encounters Seth has met with an instinctive kindness that he values above all other qualities.

After walking down from Drepung, Seth is unable to hitch a ride back to Lhasa, but a guard at a compound flags down a truck for him, a helpful act that Seth regards as unexceptional: "Time and again, with no thought other than kindness, people have helped me along in this journey." Indeed, throughout his travels in China, Seth has felt the same thing:

> . . . a remarkable warmth to the outsider from a people into whom a suspicion of foreigners has so long been instilled. Directions, advice, meals, encouragement: what makes travelling in China so delightful is that you rarely feel the want of goodwill among the people. . . . (139)

It is this instinctive kindness or goodwill that allows Seth to hope—despite all the depressing evidence to the contrary—that mankind may yet discover, embrace, and celebrate its commonalty.

However, *From Heaven Lake* does not end with this final overreaching generalization. Instead, the book concludes with the following brief scene of Seth's arrival:

> We touch down in Delhi at noon. The customs officer looks dubiously at the rice sack I am carrying over my shoulder and at the bottle of Glenfiddich I hold in my hand.
>
> "Anything to declare?" He looks at the bottle.
>
> "No. I got this at the duty free shop in Kathmandu."
>
> "Please open that . . . thing."

I place the gunny bag on the counter, and take out the objects inside, one by one, like Santa Claus. He passes his hand gingerly over the stone with "*Om mani padme hum*" inscribed on it. He taps my soap-box thoughtfully. The photographer-bear goes through his paces, raising his camera and flashing away at the other now perturbed passengers. The customs officer looks at the bear with distaste.

"All right. You can go."

I am home in half an hour. (178)

From Heaven Lake is most certainly, as Jeremy Gavron has described it, "a charming and easy read."[42] At the same time, however, it is also an unobtrusively demanding book, one that is much more rewarding if given the careful attention it requires and deserves. Take the ending, for example. What are we to make of the final lines? Are they just the factual record of Seth's arrival, or is there something more to be seen? In fact, the brief, intriguing ending is, like much of the book, richer than it first appears.

Seth had bought the "bizarre" toy bear with camera—"its head nods, it lifts its camera to eye-level, and a light flashes"—on impulse as a gift for Mr Ho's little boy, but then realizes it might seem improper while his exit request is being considered (132). Seth decides it will only be appropriate if he does *not* get permission, and that is why he is still carrying it at the Delhi airport. While he is in Lhasa, Seth quickly becomes aware that the *Om mani padme hum* mantra, whether chanted, carved in stone, or painted on rocks, is "endless" and "ever-present" (136, 138, 139).[43] Again acting

impulsively, Seth buys a *Mani* stone: "Outside the Jorkhan a man sits by the road carving inscriptions on slate. I see an *'Om mani padme hum,'* and buy it without thinking. I will now have to carry it across the border of my back" (158). To make it easier to carry his things on the steep and slippery paths he will confront, Seth buys a gunny bag at the guest house in Zhangmu, the site of the washed-away Friendship Bridge (167). This is the bag and contents the customs officer regards with open distaste.[44]

The ending can be taken as perfunctory and factual, but it also seems to be a subtle test of the reader's perceptiveness. In fact, Seth appears to favor this sort of enigmatic ending, as he uses variations of the type in *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy.* In the present case, the *Mani* stone reminds us that the lotus rises from the mud, and the jewel is to be found in the lotus. At the customs counter, the distasteful gunny bag—"'that . . . thing'"—is the equivalent of the mud, but two objects emerge, the *Mani* stone and the toy bear. When Seth was challenged at the Chinese customs post in Zhangmu—"'Are you carrying any gold?'" (167)—the literal answer would have been "No," but Seth is most certainly carrying metaphorical gold.

If we read *From Heaven Lake* as mechanically as the photographer-bear performs, regarding it merely as a travel narrative, then it can be nothing more than a charming and easy read. And if we regard the literary aspects of the book with the same distaste the customs officer shows for the bag and its contents (or with Sui's disregard for poetry), we will never behold the true richness of the book, which has arisen from the trip in the same transformative and rewarding way that the lotus rises from the mud. But if we heed the lesson of the mantra and regard the book as a

literary work in which both the poet who writes it and the book he writes offer corrections to and enlargements upon what the wandering narrator reports, then we can hail and appreciate the achieved perceptions that are the true jewels of *From Heaven Lake.*

Notes

[1] *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983; Vintage-Random, 1987). All references are to the Vintage Departures edition.

[2] Among early laudatory reviews, see, for example, Jonathan Mirsky, *New Statesman* 106 (7 Oct. 1983): 25, who terms it "the perfect travel book" and Seth "a wonderful companion"—he has done what few have done, "and he notices everything and tells us about it." In a similar vein, Andrew Robinson, *British Book News* (Nov. 1983): 713-714, declares that Seth is a "sensitive traveller, delightfully alive to all that he sees and hears." The book conveys "the excitement of mixing with another culture," providing both "lively descriptions" and "interesting reflections." Later assessments are just as positive. Brian Abel Ragen, "Vikram Seth," *DLB 120: American Poets Since World War II, Third Series* (Detroit: Gale, 1992): 281-285, refers to *From Heaven Lake* as "an entertaining travel book" (281) that "gives a fascinating portrait of China in the years of relaxation after the upheavals of the cultural revolution" (282). Cynthia Ho, "Vikram Seth," *DLB 271: British and Irish Novelists Since 1960* (Detroit: Gale, 2002): 304-315, avows that *From Heaven Lake* "is stimulating travel literature at its best. . . . The liveliness of Seth's engagement with the experience and his linguistic ability to deal with people from various ethnic groups make it an engaging and stimulating account" (307).

[3] See Jeremy Gavron, "A Suitable Joy," *The Guardian* (7 Apr. 1999) 7 Jul. 2002 <http://doononline.net/highlights/seth/guard2.htm>: "Back in Delhi, his father suggested his journeys might make a book, and the resulting travelogue, *From Heaven Lake*, is a charming and easy read. It won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and gave Seth the confidence to start thinking of himself as a writer."

[4] "Eleanor Wachtel with Vikram Seth," *Malahat Review* 107 (Summer 1994): 89.

[5] In the interview with Wachtel, Seth says: "Yes, I had really good luck, both with the experience of the journey and the experience of publication and acceptance of the book" (89).

[6] *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980; New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 95-96.

[7] Interview with Wachtel, 89.

[8] Gavron offers the following eyewitness account of how hard Seth worked on *A Suitable Boy*: "At 35, in 1987, he returned to Delhi, settled himself in his parents' house, and began to write. In the novel he was working on, *A Suitable Boy*, he mocks himself in the guise of Amit Chatterji, a loose self-portrait, for sitting about all day staring out of the window. Family friends remember Seth's parents tiptoeing around him and providing all his needs, but they also recall him working as if possessed. 'He couldn't think about anything else, he couldn't do anything else,' says one, his Delhi contemporary William Bissell. 'Food, sleep, nothing else mattered. We went to stay with the family in Simla, where his mother was a judge, and he was closeted all day in his room. He would only emerge in the evening in his dressing gown clutching a batch of new pages.'"

[9] Here, for instance, is Pico Iyer on the persona in travel

writing: "In writing nonfiction travel, as much as in writing fiction, one has to construct a persona, which is a variation on the truth, but never a full embodiment of the truth. In order to make a story work, you have to construct a facsimile of yourself" (199). The statement is from "When Worlds Collude," which appears in Michael Shapiro's *A Sense of Place: Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration* (San Francisco: Travelers' Tales, 2004) 176-213.

[10] The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) "was an upsurge by Chinese students and workers against the bureaucrats of the Chinese Communist Party. It was launched by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong in 1966 to secure Maoism . . . as the state's dominant ideology. . . . Between 1966 and 1968, Mao encouraged Red Guards and rebels to take power from the Chinese Communist Party authorities of the state and to form revolutionary committees. In the chaos and violence that ensued, many died and millions more were injured or imprisoned. . . . The effects of the Cultural Revolution directly or indirectly touched essentially all of China's populace. . . . The start of the Cultural Revolution brought huge numbers of Red Guards to Beijing . . . Countless ancient buildings, artifacts, antiques, books, and paintings were destroyed by the Red Guards. . . . Elsewhere, the ten years of the Cultural Revolution also brought the education system to a virtual halt. The university entrance exams were cancelled during the period. . . . Many intellectuals were sent to rural labor camps. . . . According to most Western observers . . . this led to almost an entire generation of inadequately educated individuals. . . . China's historical reserves, artifacts and sites of interest suffered devastating damage as they were thought to be at the root of 'old ways of thinking.' . . . Western observers suggest that

much of China's thousand years of history was in effect destroyed during the short ten years of the Cultural Revolution, and that such destruction of historical artifacts is unmatched at any time or place. Religious persecution, in particular, intensified during this period . . . The Cultural Revolution was particularly devastating for minority cultures in China. . . . In Tibet, over 2,000 monasteries were destroyed . . . In Xinjiang, Koran books of the Uyghur people were burned. . . ." "Cultural Revolution," *Wikipedia* (15 Apr. 2006) 16 Apr. 2006 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cultural_revolution>.

References to the destructive effects of the Cultural Revolution appear on the following pages of *From Heaven Lake*: 31, 61-62, 74-76, 103-104, 129, 138-39, 143-46, and 152-53. Except when considering its damaging effects on a single life (Sui, 74-76) or a single family (Norbu's, 143-46), it is hard to comprehend the scale of the ruinous destruction caused by the Cultural Revolution. Paul Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train Through China* (1988; New York: Ivy-Ballantine, 1989), claims that Chen Jo-hsi's *The Execution of Mayor Yin, and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (1978; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), which presents harrowing stories of individuals caught up in the event, is the "best book" on the painful subject of the Cultural Revolution (74).

[11] Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), declares that "one of Wordsworth's poetic ambitions was to induce us to see the many animals living alongside us that we typically ignore . . . He invited his readers to abandon their usual perspectives . . . to shuttle between the human and the natural perspective" (147). In effect, he argues, Wordsworth's poetry "attracted tourists to the places that had inspired it" by revealing

what had been overlooked or ignored (135), in much the same way that the eye-opening power of van Gogh's art enabled viewers of his paintings "to see certain aspects of the world more clearly" (186).

[12] A similar situation is depicted in "The North Temple Tower" (*The Humble Administrator's Garden*). The boys in the poem are not toddlers, and though one of them is shocked to see a foreigner making faces at them, they are delighted to make faces back as long as the *waibin* is five floors up in the tower. When he descends, the boys, though polite, run away.

[13] Seth is not above using this ploy to gain results. Although his watch's alarm function once attracts unwelcome attention (43), his watch and Nikon camera lead to welcome and thought-provoking conversations on the train (39-40), and he shows his watch—"casually resting my left arm on the counter"—and lapses into pidgin Chinese ("... the better your Chinese, the worse the treatment you get from officials ...") to get the help of a bank manager on a Sunday (82-83). Later in Lhasa, he flourishes his Nikon to join a small group of American tourists who are being led into the closed Norbulingka palace (140-141). On the other hand, after he is angered and frustrated by the regulations restricting foreigners at the Jorkhan temple, he resolves that when he visits the Potala he will be sure to "shed all signs of foreignness" (129).

[14] See Neelam Srivastava, "Seth, Vikram," *The Literary Encyclopedia* (30 Oct. 2002) 14 Feb. 2005 <http://www.LitEncyc.com>: "After graduating from Oxford, [Seth] was admitted to the doctoral program in economics at Stanford University in California. . . . He began a Ph.D. in economics, which he never completed, on 'Seven Chinese Villages: An Economic and Demographic Portrait.' In

order to do research for his dissertation, Seth spent two years at Nanjing University in China."

[15] To state the lesson a different way, Seth learns that he can be so true to the (economic) facts as to be false to the (larger) truth.

[16] For example, see Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000). As is suggested by their demeaning title, Holland and Huggan follow a perversely masochistic form of political correctness that considers all Western discourse dealing with the East and other cultures to be necessarily and inherently an imposed perspective that distorts what it purports to report. Although they admit Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Pico Iyer to the short list of writers who are seeking "different ways of seeing the world that combat centuries of European prejudice," they find that the genre of travel writing is against them (65). Ghosh and Seth are credited with an "unorthodox stance" by virtue of "the perspective that they bring from a historically subjugated culture" (55–56). Since Seth was born in 1952, five years after India became independent, was raised in a privileged family, and spent many years abroad being educated in England and America, this last seems a dubious claim, at best.

Holland and Huggan follow Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992; London: Routledge, 2000), who argues that all travel books by Europeans impose an imperial view as a form of cultural domination (4). In her reductive view, even writers such as Paul Theroux are unable to take any other than a "commanding view," as they are "oblivious to limitations on their perceptual capacities . . ." (220).

It was Edward W. Said's enormously influential *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage-Random, 1979) that led to the explosive growth of the field of post-colonial studies. At the time, his persuasive argument that Western literature about and scholarship on the East were shaped by imperialism was a valuable and necessary corrective, but Said's writings were never characterized by a coarse reductiveness of argument. In referring to writers such as Sir William Jones, the noted eighteenth-century Orientalist, Said remarked: "The increasing influence of travel literature, imaginary utopias, moral voyages, and scientific reporting brought the Orient into sharper and more extended focus" (117). And "during the latter half of the nineteenth century," Said noted, "Even the most innocuous travel book . . . contributed to the density of public awareness of the Orient . . ." (192).

[17] This is de Botton's point throughout *The Art of Travel.* In sharp contrast to the reductive post-colonialists, in whose opinion a travel writer is capable only of imposing his own distorting imperialist view, de Botton offers the positive notion that travel can engender perception and understanding: "Journeys are the midwives of thought" (54). Artists and writers are more consciously aware than most people of the importance of noticing details, and it is due to their heightened sensitivity that objects, individuals, and situations reveal what de Botton refers to as their "latent layers of value" (247). In addition to Wordsworth and van Gogh, de Botton treats J. K. Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, Edward Hopper, Gustave Flaubert, Alexander von Humbolt, Edmund Burke, John Ruskin, and Xavier de Maistre.

In a similar vein, Paul Fussell, though making a sharp distinction

between tourism (bad) and travel (good), notes the value of travel and the travel book: "Before the development of tourism, travel was conceived to be like study, and its fruits were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of the judgment." Hence, the travel book could be seen in a very positive light "as a record of an inquiry and a report of the effect of the inquiry on the mind and imagination of the traveler" (39).

[18] There are other occasions when Seth finds no pleasurable or promising view, such as when he gets off the train at Liuyuan and looks around: "Liuyuan is a dusty, treeless, godforsaken depot, its main street merging with the road to Lhasa, now 1,800 kilometres away. But as I look down the empty street, it comes home to me that I don't have the faintest idea about how to get a lift" (40). Later, at the rim of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, when the truck stops long after midnight "at a Transport Yard located in the middle of nowhere" (87), Seth finds the early morning view little improvement: "Standing at the gate of the Transport Yard I look up and down the empty road. There are no houses, no people other than those manning the yard itself or the gas station a few hundred metres down. . . . There are no signs of humanity here, at the halfway mark between Liuyuan and Lhasa. Every few kilometers or so [when they hit the road again], a large and very glossy raven sits perched on a telegraph pole, karking desolately" (89). The next morning, after a cold, cramped night in the truck, which has become stuck in the muddy road, there is literally nothing to see: "The sky lightens slowly, but the whole plain is lost in mist" (93). In complete contrast, at the Potala there is so much to see that Seth feels overwhelmed, hardly able to take it all in, though he manages to convey his impressions very effectively (136-37), even

when he "finds it difficult to react to the clutter of incompatible stimuli" (141).

[19] Indeed, even something of such great geopolitical significance as a national border may not be apparent. When Seth has dinner with Quzha and his friend, Seth learns that Quzha was a soldier on the border during the Sino-Indian conflict: "'A strange task. You couldn't tell where the border was. One day it was here, another day there'" (50). Later, when Seth crosses the border into Nepal, his experience is decidedly a strange one, though infused with elements of comedy:

> A woman wearing a sari is washing clothes in a small stream. She looks up at us as we cross. The forest continues beyond. Suddenly a man steps out from behind a tree.
>
> "Stop," he says to Tenzing. "Put that bag down." He speaks in Nepali. I look at him, wondering what this is all about. Tenzing and he stare at each other. The man doesn't look like a robber; besides, he isn't armed.
>
> "Who are you? What is your business with us?" I ask him in Hindi. "The luggage he's carrying is mine."
>
> "I am a Government of Nepal customs officer," replies the man in excellent Hindi. "I must check your luggage. Are you an Indian citizen?"
>
> "But I didn't know we had crossed the border," I say.
>
> "That stream there, that's the border. You've just crossed it."
>
> "That . . .?" I look back at the stream. The woman is wringing out clothes over the water. Her soap lies on one rock, her washing on another. She couldn't care less which

country she is in. This is the first time a customs officer has stepped out from behind a tree to announce himself. (169–70)

[20] The line is from Giacomo Leopardi's "The Broom" ("La Ginestra") from *Canti XXXIV* (1831). The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which destroyed Pompeii in A.D. 79,

> . . . smashed and convulsed
> And covered over in a few moments of time
> These cities which the sea
> Washed at the edge of the shore:
> And now above the cities the goat browses, . . .

[21] The highest peaks have long been considered the homes of gods, as Mount Olympus in Greek mythology, or as a point of contact between humans and gods, as with Mount Sinai in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The convention of ascending a mountain to gain an expansive view or to attain a visionary experience is a time-honored literary device, and one especially favored by the Romantic poets. By travel writers, too, and Fussell notes Norman Douglas's "habitual practice" of "climbing up to an eminence whose height allows him to see something special in the prospect before him or to learn something inaccessible to ground-dwellers. . . . Over and over Douglas ascends to mountain- or hill-tops, and thence, like the speaker in an eighteenth-century prospect poem, surveys the land below, inviting it to serve now as a matter for metaphor, now as data for historical speculation, now as a trigger of associative recall" (129).

John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map*

the Past (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), begins his book with a consideration of Caspar David Friedrich's iconic painting, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Since one's field of vision is limited by one's senses, only a departure from the normal can provide a new perception, which is what Friedrich's wanderer gains from his mountaintop, "as have countless others for whom elevation, by shifting perspective, has enlarged experience" (4).

In Seth's poetry, the poet or speaker at times has an elevated view, as in "The Balcony" (*Mappings*) or from the modest "least moist rock" of "Abalone Soup" (*The Humble Administrator's Garden*).

[22] That so many of Seth's chance encounters turn out to be fortuitous ones is no doubt due to Seth himself—his non-threatening appearance, his (usually) friendly personality, and his respectful behavior.

[23] Although Seth does not dwell on it, the food available at the Transport Yards must have presented an ordeal in itself: "Breakfast at the truckers' yard was a few mouldering peanuts and a piece of steamed bread, or *mantou*, gritty inside and slimy outside. Lunch, at a small settlement where we arrive in the early afternoon, is much the same" (89). In Lhasa, he makes a mistake on the street outside the Jorkhan: "Women sell yak yogurt in plump glass jars at corners; also joints of yak meat, pieces of yak bone, tomatoes, spring onions and a dark hard cheese-like substance that I buy, to my almost immediate regret. A crisp cucumber helps me to forget the strange taste" (131).

Junk food and street-vendor corn may not be a culinary high point either, but it is a welcome change from mouldering peanuts and lumps of fat with hair, and Seth thoroughly enjoys them in Kathmandu: "I indulge myself mindlessly: buy a bar of Tobler

marzipan, a corn-on-the-cob roasted in a charcoal brazier on the pavement (rubbed with salt, chilli powder and lemon) . . . All this I wash down with Coca Cola and a nauseating orange drink, and feel much the better for it" (175).

[24] Seth gains his first view of the Potala from the back of another truck (117). Among his manifold literary talents, Seth is a superb descriptive writer, and *From Heaven Lake* is graced with numerous evocative descriptive passages, including (to mention just a few) the scenery at Heaven Lake (22), the first sighting of the Potala (117), and the waterfalls below Nilamu (164-65). There are, throughout, captivating descriptions of people, from the comical John (11, 24-25), to the practical Sui (50), to the sensitive Mr Ho (118), to the horrible Wu (158); of places, from Turfan (1) to Kathmandu (174); and of things, from the inside of a *karez* tunnel (7-8) to the overwhelming inside of the Potala (136-137).

[25] In this, Seth proves himself to be much less blinded by ideology than Mala Pandurang, *Vikram Seth: Multiple Locations, Multiple Affiliations* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001). In her chapter on *From Heaven Lake*, "The Poet and the Traveller in China," she faults Seth for his failure to analyze "the ideological principles that compelled practitioners of the cultural revolution to contest bourgeoisie forms of art and religion" (69). "Contest" seems a stunningly inappropriate verb for the wanton destruction of a nation's cultural treasures, whether of "bourgeoisie" origin or not. As is the case with most defenders of ideological purity, Pandurang omits any mention of the human cost of the Cultural Revolution, which is what Seth conveys so effectively in his encounters with the old man near the ruined temple (61), with Sui (74-76), and,

particularly, with Norbu and his family (142-46).

[26] On the train headed west, Seth's carriage is filled with travellers of different nationalities — Han, Uighur, Kazakh, and Mongolian—and Seth has the following observation on the Han:

> There are young people, returning resentfully to their far-flung outposts after a rare visit home to Shanghai. "We have been sent to New Zealand for life," says one bitter young man. "We could just as well be on the moon." "New Zealand" or Xin-xi-lan, is an acronym for Xin-jiang, Xi-zang (Tibet) and Lan-zhou. To be posted to any of these places, is, for most Han people, to be condemned to an uncomfortable and barbarous limbo. (39)

One favorable quality that particularly distinguishes Sui in Seth's estimation is the fact that he is not a chauvinist:

> Unlike almost all Han Chinese I have met (including many educated at university), Sui is not Han-chauvinist. He neither looks down on nor up to the Tibetans. He is not interested in their culture: despite the fact that he has lived in Lhasa for fifteen years he speaks almost no Tibetan. Yet he has a way of treating people as individuals rather than as representatives of types, that precludes any sense of cultural superiority. His friends and acquaintances along the route are Han and Tibetan, though naturally the Tibetans are restricted to those who can speak Chinese. Unlike some of his fellow drivers and army buddies he has not once indicated

any dislike of Lhasa or of Tibet or of Tibetans. For him it is not "New Zealand" but home. (74)

[27] Seth also praises Sui's "intuitive practicality," particularly his intimacy with the workings of his truck and his sensitivity to its various noises, and he is filled with respect for the "street-smartness that enables Sui to find his way about the system to utilize its flexibilities, to withdraw when effort is useless, to know when and how to bargain, whom to speak with when in trouble, how to get a concession here, a few litres of petrol (when necessary) there" (73, 75).

[28] Seth, who does not consider himself a smoker, has nearly become one through having learned in China not to refuse the offer of a cigarette:

> I don't usually smoke—I smoked perhaps one cigarette a year before I came to China—but I have learned in the villages where I carried out my research that a cigarette refused may be taken as a slight. In fact, a 555 or a Kent, exchanged for a Peacock or a Double Happiness, is a quick way to break the ice with people you have just met. At one time I was smoking, with no enjoyment and with some discomfort, more than a pack a day. (38-39)

[29] As in this instance, what is most remarkable about Seth is his ability to empathize with and consider matters from the perspective of those who thwart or oppose him. Later, when Mr Ho of the Foreign Affairs Office in Lhasa is alarmed by Seth's irregular means of travel

and insists that Seth's plans for Nepal are impossible, Seth is still able to "feel sympathetic towards Mr Ho" and his situation as an official dealing with irregularity (118–120).

[30] Seth has a few other surprises regarding Gyanseng. As they approach Tibet, the previously taciturn and self-contained Gyanseng begins humming, singing, and bursting into "monologues on odd subjects, like tea, or Lhasa" (95). Closer to Lhasa, the now livelier Gyanseng offers to sing a Tibetan song. To Seth, the song "sounds profoundly melancholy. . . . like a song of parting or unrequited love," but Gyanseng informs him that it is, instead, "'A drinking song'" (100).

[31] It must also be acknowledged that Seth, for all his virtues, is not an absolute paragon. He can be abrupt and rude when he thinks he is being used for conversation practice by those he calls "language rapists" (116, 127), though, typically, he also sympathizes with those who have little opportunity to speak English (116–117). Seth also has a formidable temper, and both Mr Ho, who suggests "that I be calmer in my approach to things" (129), and Norbu gently chide him about it: "'It doesn't pay to lose your temper'" (157).

[32] In an earlier variation in the Chaidam Basin, Seth thinks how strange they would appear to an observer who saw them digging for salt at night:

> Before moving on, we fill a few gunny bags with rock salt we shovel out of the surface of the lake; all of us get down to digging and hauling the stuff. A segment of railway track approaches Germu from the east, and we dig for salt beside it. It must be an eerie sight by the light of the moon. (76)

[33] Seth's earlier comment—his "excuse"—was back in Nanjing, before he left on his trip. Having received the unexpected permission to travel to Tibet, Seth is enthusiastic about making the journey, but he is also aware that he knows "almost nothing about Tibet" (32). Worried that the trip will be wasted if he does not know more about the country, but realizing he does not have time to read about Tibet, Seth justifies his enthusiasm and good fortune to himself: "Besides, I tell myself optimistically, the freshness of the vision may compensate for the ignorance of the viewer" (33). This is the excuse that Seth now claims makes no sense, and Pandurang, among others, notes Seth's apparent disclaimer (64). However, Pandurang stops with Seth's declaration refuting his earlier claim, apparently unaware of what Seth's next two paragraphs demonstrate, for the book goes on to show that the disclaiming traveller in fact achieves a fresh vision.

[34] There is a poignant depth to the bitterness of the scene, for the bitterness of the ruins (139) also includes the bitterness of the Tibetans: "To say that the Tibetans are bitter about the destruction of their temples and monasteries gives no idea of the depth of their feelings" (153). And there is a particular bitterness in the image of the blighted peach trees, as Seth is well aware, for in Chinese literature peach trees are always associated with the utopian vision of Wang Wei's "Ballad of the Peach Tree Spring," which Seth translated in *Three Chinese Poets*. Seth makes a brief mention of Wang Wei early in *From Heaven Lake* (19).

[35] Even amid the ruins there are bright, painted prayers, as Seth notes: "Yet even here, painted on the rocks in a rainbow of colour, one can see the ever-present *'Om mani padme hum'*" (139).

[36] Seth frequently alludes to and borrows from the Romantic

poets, particularly Wordsworth. Later in *From Heaven Lake*, among the waterfalls, Seth quotes two lines from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (105).

[37] As Norbu tells Seth, his father "'was in jail awaiting trial for three years, and then, after trial and sentence, served another ten. . . . My mother was bed-ridden for those three years; on the day of the trial she couldn't even get up. . . . After the trial, and the sentence of eighteen years' imprisonment, our mother got worse and worse, and died within a few months. She never saw him again from the time he went to jail'" (144).

[38] Unfortunately, in sharp contrast to his pleasant dealings with Mr Ho and Mr Shah, one of Seth's last encounters is with the odious Wu, a truck driver "of more than average irritability" (158). Seth buys a ticket for a ride in a truck from Lhasa to Zhangmu, on the China-Nepal border, and he is assigned to Wu's truck. Wu is a continuous grumbler who is prone to "rabid" attacks of bad temper (158-59). When Wu insists he will turn back despite Seth's ticket, Seth struggles to suppress his fury and his "growing inclination towards violence" (160). Seth only avoids what the reader feels would be a completely justified emotional explosion by recalling Norbu's advice about keeping his temper, but even under such extreme provocation Seth is able to look at himself with a critical eye: "How often of late have I been prone to these puerile bouts of rage" (161).

[39] The *Lao Tzu*, the Chinese classic, is one of the paperbacks, along with the *Chuang Tzu*—"Chinese, not Tibetan, classics"—that Seth packs to take on his trip (33), and he mentions reading it while in Lhasa (135).

[40] The relevant lines from "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above

Tintern Abbey" are 47-49 and 93-102:

> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.
>
> (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed., 700-701)

41 A similar mechanism can be seen in "The Walkers" and "The Balcony" (*Mappings*). In these early poems, the poet sees more from his privileged (and heightened) vantage than do those who are observed. The situation is similar here, though complicated because Seth is both observer and observed. Seth the traveller and Seth the writer are the same individual, but the traveller in the book is a persona who undergoes the travel experience, whereas the writer who crafts the book can perceive more than the traveller reports. In like fashion, as at Drepung or in its entirety, the book can go beyond what the writer claims for the traveller. Seth the traveller never

argues against Sui for the virtues of poetry, but the writer and the book offer their refutal in the superbly fitting image of the erratic kite (146).

[42] "A Suitable Joy." The relevant passage is quoted in note 3.

[43] There is general agreement that the mantra cannot be translated into a simple phrase or sentence, but it is usually rendered in English as "Hail the jewel in the lotus" or "Behold! The jewel in the lotus!" See "Om Mani Padme Hum: The Meaning of the Mantra in Tibetan Buddhism," *Dharma Haven* (29 Apr. 2003) 24 Mar. 2005 <http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/meaning-of-om-mani-padme-hung.htm>, and "Om mani padme hum," *Wikipedia* (16 Apr. 2006) 23 Apr. 2006 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/om_mani_padme_hum>. For the text of the Dalai Lama's lecture on the meaning of the mantra (and for the sound of the mantra), see Dalai Lama, "Om Mani Padme Hum," *Circle of Light* 24 Mar. 2005 <http://circle-of-light.com/Mantras/om-mantra.html>.

[44] Perhaps the customs officer's look of distaste took in Seth's appearance as well. As we learn from his mother's recently published autobiography—Leila Seth, *On Balance: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2003)—Vikram was at first refused admittance when he arrived home from the airport:

> When he finally did arrive at 7 Teen Murti Lane, the staff barred his entry. He was dark from trekking, thin from eating only raisins, unshaven, and—like a pedlar—carrying a jute sack on his back with all his belongings in it. On closer examination, our gardener Sona recognized him and let him in. (281)