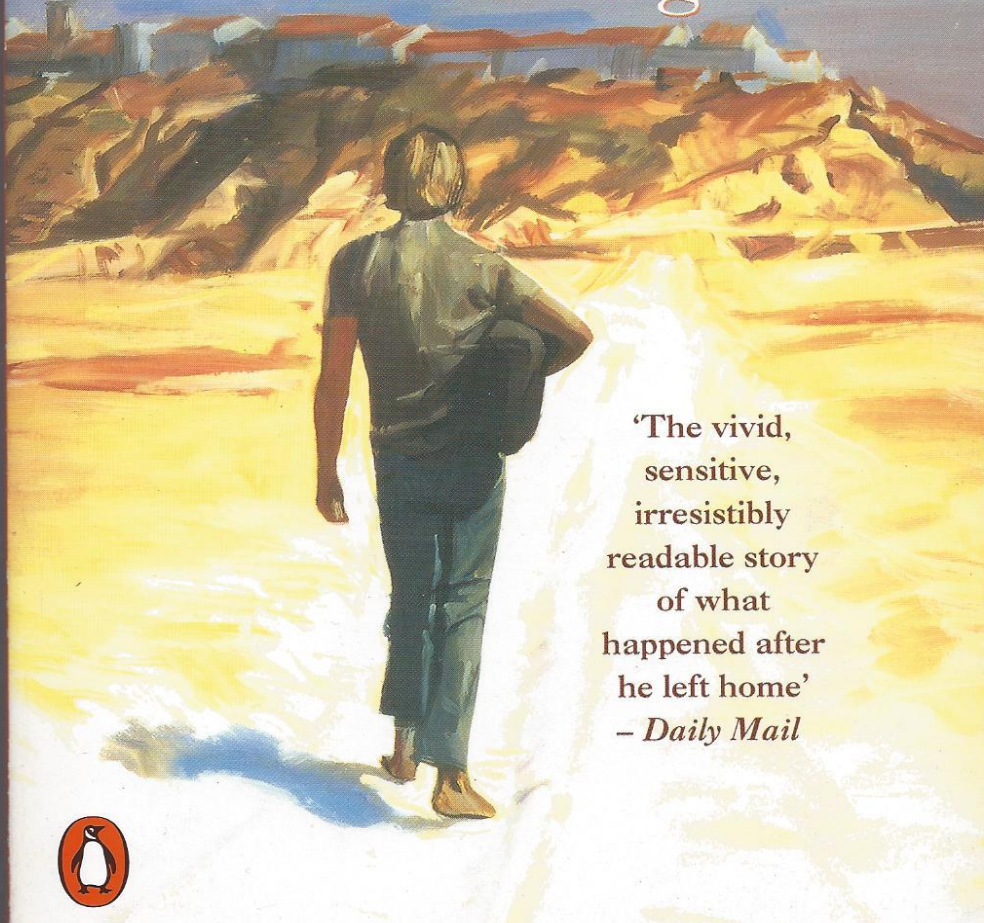


LAURIE LEE

As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning

A painting of a man walking away on a beach towards a coastal town. The man is seen from behind, wearing a dark shirt and trousers, carrying a bag. The beach is bright yellow and white, and the town in the background has red roofs. The sky is blue with some clouds.

'The vivid,
sensitive,
irresistibly
readable story
of what
happened after
he left home'
- *Daily Mail*



'The novel is ethnography': *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*, by Laurie Lee

Jake Threadgould

'As an ethnographer, I am not the people I work with and write about, even when I am writing about myself' (Jones 2002:51).

As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning, first published in 1969, is the second installation of Laurie Lee's, chronologically written, autobiographical trilogy. It recounts the journey of the author at nineteen years old in 1934, leaving his Cotswold roots - where *Cider With Rosie* concluded - following him through the South of England before traversing Spain, on foot, where he is caught up in, and subsequently evacuated from, the Spanish Civil War - to which he returns in *A Moment of War*. Lee's account became renowned for its poetic and often acutely observational portrayal of a pre-war Spain, tracing a line from north to south, describing the changing shades of culture alongside his personal feats and failures throughout an ever-changing landscape.

Thus, from an anthropological point of view, and in discerning whether a novel could be considered ethnographic, would this aforementioned summary, albeit rather subjective, not allude to a work seemingly teeming with anthropological data? Does the fact that the novel was written over 30 years after the journey make it unreliable and potentially riddled with over-embellished, faded memories? Or does this become inconsequential, if we could suggest that the novel is multi-faceted and can therefore be interpreted through different approaches? From an ethnographic point of view, the novel and literary style within it, seem to give rise to certain key factors essential to our task; (i) the role of poetry for the description of people and places and how, as anthropologists, we can interpret this; (ii) the extraction of autoethnography from an autobiographical account; (iii) the situation of the 'self', or, *Lee within Lee*. Using these three themes as guidance, and with an anthropological reading of the text, this essay will set out to examine and discuss

whether Laurie Lee's *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* is an ethnography or whether, conversely, this suggestion could be made redundant.

In simplistic terms, the driving force behind anthropology is to understand, and interpret 'the Other': other people and other ways (Daniel 1996:2). However, the debate lies in *how* one goes about this. The Writing Culture movement put the relationship and the possible intertwining of the long established conventions of purportedly objective ethnographic approaches with literary styles into question; an aspect which until that point had been deemed to have no place in ethnography (Clifford 1986:5). Presently, we have reached a time where ethnographic experimentalism has gained an established credibility in academia, where self-awareness in ethnographic literature is no longer restricted to memoirs (Bruner 1993:4), and where the anthropologist themselves can take the role of a central character in their work. In light of these revelations, what standing does Lee's novel have in the framework of anthropology?

From the outset, we can immediately establish a link between the nineteen-year-old Lee and an anthropologist in the field. It is the taste for 'other' that fuels their curiosity - a desire to experience and understand something foreign to them, but to also, somehow, live within this 'otherness' and in turn, represent it (Turner 1993:28, also see (Bruner 1993:4)). However, it is the factor of representation that is key to our understanding of how Lee relates to his new and foreign surroundings. A perpetual example that allows us to analyse Lee's descriptive style arises as he approaches new cities. What we find, perhaps due to the scale of the journey, is a poetically condensed but nonetheless detailed account of what he observes before him:

[On his approach to Seville]– *'...a thousand miniature patios set within inexhaustible fountains which fell trickling upon the ferns and leaves, each a nest of green repeated in endless variations around this theme of domestic oasis. Here the rippling of water replaced the coal-fire of the north as a symbol of home and comfort...'* (Lee 1968:169).

The poetic imagery employed here strays dramatically from what would have conventionally been acceptable in an ethnography. Lee has produced a subjective and metaphorical *essence* of Seville – describing something with an aspect of temporality (Stewart 1996: 135). What we can envisage comes from the imagery produced by Lee rather than what could be a factual geographical depiction in a strict sense. These *strict facts* are undeniably embellished: '*inexhaustible... endless variations*' (Lee 1968:169), but is there no room for poetic license in ethnography (Bruner1993: 2)? We are able to deduce, from the poetic embellishments, the emotions that may have been evoked by the first view of the city, perhaps an overwhelming of the senses to such an extent that any other approach would not suffice to convey the atmosphere (Richardson 1992:125). What we can understand through the reading of these poetics is a doubly faceted representation – where the essence of the city and the sentiments incited are inextricably linked, and that only a poetic representation can render the desired representation to the audience (Crapanzo 1986:57). Moreover, the preliminary depiction provides us with a setting that not only summarises Lee's emotions, but, gives a domain from which we can understand the people (Richardson 1992:131) – a standard ethnographic technique ((Turner 1993: 28) also see Pratt 1986:42).

A second issue that this quotation raises is analysing how it is possible to interpret Lee's subjective imagery anthropologically. One could suggest that Lee understands his new surroundings through a contrast with what he has already experienced: '*rippling of water replaced the coal-fire of the north*' (Lee 1968:169). He recognises a distinction from the areas through which he has already travelled. And in his endeavour to quantify that, he assigns a central key example of how the new culture differs from the last, in this case with water as opposed to fire.

However, to elaborate further on the point of the poetic, it is necessary to examine its use in the description of people within the landscapes. On his way south from Madrid, and away from old Castille, Lee comes to the Sierra Morena mountain range, marking the frontier between the '*Gothic North*' and '*the spiced blur of*

Andalusia' (Lee 1968: 167-168). It is here that he is taken to meet the inhabitants of a peasant's village where he documents their reaction to his violin:

'I remember the villagers as they listened, blanket held up to their throats, dribbles of damp lying about their eye-brows. I felt I could have been with some lost tribal remnant of seventeenth century Scotland... the children standing barefooted in puddles of dew, old women wrapped in their rancid sheepskins, and the short shaggy men whose squinting faces seemed stuck somewhere between a smile and a snarl' (Lee 1968:167).

Although being less poetic than the descriptions of the landscape, his acute social observations are evident. From it we can draw a detailed image of the scene through Lee's eyes (Richardson1992:135) (or at least through a memory of what he saw). We can understand from the lead-up to the description that these people were isolated: *'At last we pushed through the peaks and came to a misty plateau with a chill breeze blowing across it'* (Lee 1968: 167). It is also possible to observe through this passage that these people were probably economically poor, perhaps seen by Lee as living outside of the Spain he has since got to know- portraying them as geographically and culturally isolated.

Poetics aside, however, we can further elaborate on the aforementioned and recurrent way in which he understands the scene in front of him. Similarly to his division of north and south in the description of Seville, we see here that Lee relates the villagers in terms of something that Lee already *knows* – the image of a 17th century Scottish tribe. This style of travel writing demonstrates that Lee uses his *known* as the central point in understanding what is thus far *unknown* to him- a way in which Lee can render a personal contextualisation (Ronai 1992:103). Thus, at the heart of his endeavour to comprehend lies the "author's own real home" (Bakhtin 1981:103) through which he perceives what is presented before him. Moreover, this reflection of the unfamiliar onto the familiar serves to promote a more easily translatable account for the reader. An element that arguably shares a common goal

with much ethnography on that is endeavours to translate the foreign (Crapanzo 1986:51-52).

Considering this evident mode of comparison in anthropological terms exposes an added dimension that leads one to inquire further about *who* we can understand from the passage. Being an autobiographical text, as readers we get to know Lee getting to know others. But, could the autobiographical question serve an autoethnographic purpose? One could suggest that the evident self-reflexivity, which appears more explicitly in some passages of the novel, allows us to turn our ethnographic gaze back on the author (Ronai 1992:103). Do we learn as much about Lee as we do the people he portrays? In this part of the discussion we shall investigate how certain, perhaps more ambiguous elements within the written text, outwith the author's control, (Clifford 1986:7) can shed light on possible autoethnographic outcomes.

Lee is our storytelling character, and thus the focal point of every action, whether enacted by him or him being acted upon. It is Lee who contextualises the people he meets and conveys what they say, in his own subjective terms (Richardson 1992:131). A perpetual action that could, in a literary analysis, be allocated to the thematic, is the use of the violin as a mediator of information between Lee and his audience(s). Busking with the violin along the way is the principle way he is able to make a living throughout his journey and an act that repeatedly puts Lee at the centre of attention. The documentation of the varying reactions to the violin throughout the ever changing, regional cultures, allows us, as ethnographic readers, to not only gain awareness of the nuances in said cultures, but perhaps also to develop a deeper understanding of how Lee himself assimilates them (Clifford 1986: 107).

Alongside his accounts of the varying reactions lie self-reflexive anecdotes of his own learning curve:

[In Valladolid] ‘*According to my experience in England, money should then have been dropped into the hat; but it didn’t work like that here...*’ (Lee 1968:106).

From an ethnographic point of view, one could argue that this renders the violin, or the act of busking, as a significant, multi-dimensional means of understanding.

That is to say, that not only do we take into account the cultural responses towards the foreign traveller, but that, equally, the instrument acts as an axis of reflection. We are able to use it in order to understand multiple relationships: we can both *look out* to the audience within the text, observing its effects, or, *look in*, towards its relationship with the author. His ability to learn the tricks of his new found trade directly correlate with his continual ability to relate to the people he plays for. He simultaneously documents observations about himself as well as those around him: ‘*I learned some other lessons, too... any Spanish tune worked immediately...while any other kind of music – Schubert excepted- was met by blank stares and bewilderment...*’ (ibid: 107).

As a result of these perpetual observations of self and other throughout his journey, we, are able to think of Lee’s journey in terms of cultural milestones that have been deciphered and assigned through the existence of the violin. Furthermore, considering the novel as a whole, we can envisage an itinerary, upon which pockets of subjective cultural distinctions have been plotted, thus allowing us to deduce not only the way in which Lee understands the shift in cultures but how he relates these experience of the country back to himself. In a way, we are able to inhabit Lee’s subjectivity – a position that enables us to objectify the personal experiences of the author (Jones 2002: 52).

Returning to the auto-ethnographic question, then, would it be absurd to suggest that Lee’s desire to portray his observations are directly correlated to an endeavour to reveal more about his ‘self’ (Stewart 1996: 135)? However, rather than being a clarification or exemplification of what we find, this suggestion merely deepens the investigative trench. We must now consider the autoethnographical question along side the autoethnographical *problem* – which of Lee’s ‘selves’ are we getting to

know? The idea of a disparity of 'selves' is implicitly denoted in the novel on a number of occasions. This final section of the essay will analyse whether the pertinence of a perceived auto-ethnographical dimension of the text can be upheld despite the years that had lapsed between travelling and writing.

With reference to a photo of himself, taken just before his journey into Spain, Lee writes:

'I still have a copy before me of that summer ghost... He wears a sloppy slouch hat, heavy boots... tent and fiddle slung over his shoulders, and from the long empty face a pair of egg-shell eyes, unhatched and unrecognizable now' (Lee 1968:21).

From an ethnographic vantage point, this triggers a possible dilemma in relation to the narrator of the novel. The overall style in which the novel is written suggests that the observations, descriptions and anecdotes are accurately portrayed, in the sense that they *could* be narrated by the young Lee directly. Furthermore, it is through these styles, or guidelines, that the readership can interpret *how* to read the text (Atkinson 1990: 36). On reflection of this added entity, then, and within the framework of an autoethnographical view, we are led to inquire which 'Lee' we are discovering? What we see in this excerpt is a momentary distancing between the subject of the novel and the author – a separation of selves. We have already established that Lee's use of poetics allows for a certain degree of a (perhaps understandable) embellishment of facts. But could this new distinction of two 'selves' denote an embellishment of possible *partial truths* (Clifford 1986:2)? An ethnographic investigation of an accepted fiction novel could possibly dismiss this feature as merely part of the pre-recognised elements of the undertaking. But in considering a deduction of the autoethnographical from the autobiographical, it may give rise to certain connotations paramount to our discussion.

The fact that large parts of the novel will be made up of embellished *partial truths* is almost indisputable, but where does this leave us (ibid: 2)? We must consider a slightly ironic option that this may even strengthen the notion that *As I Walked Out*

One Midsummer Morning is an auto-ethnographic novel. Returning to the preliminary quote allows us to reconsider this added element of what could be understood as a second autobiographical narrator. Jones denotes that even when writing about herself in an auto-ethnographical context, the self about whom she writes is different from the self who writes (Jones 2002:51). What this suggests is that the observations perceived by the character of the 'self' within the text have since been reinterpreted, reevaluated and reproduced. This may be effectively applied to the novel at hand – considering that despite being written over thirty years after the events, its credibility can still be upheld through this paradigm if we are able to maintain an anthropological interpretation of its reinterpretation.

Furthermore, despite the fact that these reinterpretations by the author lead to a text containing embellished faded memories, or *partial truths* (Clifford 1986:2), are we not able to still withdraw ethnographic *facts* of a 'given reality' (Atkinson 1990:35)? Through the eyes of an anthropologist the novel presents itself in such a multi-faceted way that it can be understood, ethnographically, on a number of levels. This essay has purported that some aspects of the text lie outside the author's direct control (Clifford 1986:7). Its autobiographical element dictates that the events *happened* and the dilemma that comes from inquiring their accuracy, in term of an ethnographic reading, are neither detrimental nor inconsequential, but rather, significant and useful. The added dimension of the second narrator (Lee at the time of writing as opposed to Lee at the time of travel) allows us to envisage an author who deliberates over the *partial truths* that he perceives to have existed. Therefore, not only is the readership looking back in time at the events that came to pass, but the author too is looking back at himself.

However, as aforementioned, for the ethnographer of literature, this merely adds an extra element of interest. Despite this multiplicity of selves and regardless of the *partial truths* projected from the subjective viewpoint of a partial white male, (political bias, of course, being that unavoidable but apparently non-existing part of the classic ethnography (ibid:7)), we, as anthropologists can always interpret its data. We are able to study the book from within, analysing objects, picking over

ethnographic themes for which the author had no intention of including, we can divide 'selves', impose categories, decipher perceived cultural traits and apparently examine, in this case, the relationship between the author and the author. This leads us to propose our final and closing question. If we can interpret a novel ethnographically, what use do we have for labelling it an ethnography?

A facile suggestion, in light of this essay's inquiries, would be that *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* functions as an autoethnographic novel in that we learn about both Lee and the people he meets. But is this not restrictive? We recognise that the novel contains elements of what could be perceived to be autoethnographical; but, its literary styles throw up such multi-faceted points of ethnographic interest that to categorise in such a way it would defeat the point of the initial debate that opened this re-consideration of ethnography. It would assign a category. A set of guidelines that, in turn, dictates the way by which people understand how to read a text (Atkinson 1990: 36). It also confines its possible use as an objective anthropological source. Leaving the categorisation ambiguous, then, allows to not only conclude that the book can take on the role of an ethnography, but to acknowledge an open and continual anthropological interpretation. After all, the suggestion that 'a novel is an ethnography' purports that any work of fiction (or *partial fiction*) has the potential to be an ethnography. Supposing that this were the accepted case, and here on reiterates the use of *potential*, could we not equally suggest that everyone is an anthropologist? Seeing that everyone has the *potential* (in a very loose sense of the word) to become an anthropologist, and thus the potential to consider a novel anthropologically.

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