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What Makes Travel Literature?

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Abstract:

This article identifies and describes several characteristics of travel literature as a genre. The article starts with a diachronic survey writing to establish when and how travel literature was born and continues with a synchronic description to identify present features and future perspectives of the genre. Posing that a persistent characteristic of travel literature is the textualised authorial presence, the article traces the progress from a rhetoric of objectivity to a rhetoric of subjectivity and the correlation of the outer and inner journey as means of achieving a specific reading pact of authenticity and concludes on the centrality of the travel author.

Keywords: travel, egowriting, genre, rhetoric, subjectivity, objectivity

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1. Introduction

Travel literature has a long history, but not that long as usually presumed. Early travel accounts like Herodotus's *History of the Persian Wars* (approximately 440 BC), Strabo's *Geographica* (around 23 AD) or Pausanias's *Guide to Greece* (about 170 AD) are often said to lie at the foundation of travel literature. However, despite Herodotus's paternity of history, he has not also fathered travel literature, as some scholars claim (see, for instance, *Travel Fact and Travel Fiction* edited by Zweder von Martels in 1994). Mary B. Campbell made a good feminist case for Egeria, a South European nun of the 5th century AD who embarked on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as the first true travel writer (see Campbell's 1988 *The Witness and the Other World*); indeed, the remains of Egeria's correspondence reveal an organizing consciousness specific to what is nowadays recognized as travel literature and which is not displayed by Herodotus's *Histories*. Whereas travel writing in general accounts of empirical journeys and is classified rather as (pseudo)scientific than literary, what I call here travel literature presents a peculiar characteristic: an element of personal involvement, i.e. the *textualised presence of the author*. The presence of this organizing consciousness makes the difference between a scientific travel report and a literary travel account.

By the 13th century, travelers – mostly missionaries and merchants – had pushed much farther the geographical and textual boundaries set by the historian Herodotus and the pilgrim Egeria. The far-reaching travel pursuits of the 13th to the 15th centuries can be epitomized in the very different figures of two Western discoverers: Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus. Both were determined to travel to the margins of the world, though by opposing routes, and both offered narratives of their voyages. In his *Il milione* (approximately 1299), Marco Polo promises “many remarkable and extraordinary things,” and it is a record of the extraordinary that his travel text provides. Whereas the mystic Egeria sanctified everything she saw, estranging the familiar, the cosmopolitan Marco Polo materializes everything under his gaze, familiarizing the strange. Conversely, the imperialist Columbus responds to the aesthetic beauty of exotic surroundings by assessing them as property in his letters.

2. From Objectivity To Subjectivity

At the root of not only Columbus's, as argued by Mary B. Campbell (M. Campbell 1988:209), but also Egeria's and Marco Polo's different contributions to the birth of travel literature lies their assumption of a right to possession over and interpretation of the traveled people and places – through their respective rhetorics of familiarizing the exotic, commodifying the foreign or spiritualizing the familiar. The authorial persona of each of these three travelers responds in full voice to the surroundings and does not refrain from using the first person singular pronoun, in an intense personal inscription mediating the representation of the world. This incipient *egocentering* of the travel experience by privileging the gaze and voice of the traveler marks the birth of the travel author: “It was in the self-love of conquering heroes that the travel memoir is born” (M. Campbell 1988:209). In ignorance or disguise of their shaping subjectivity, the early travel narratives usually appear as ship logs, diaries or travel correspondence in which the people and places of the outer world are described in an apparently objective, disinterested way, while authorial thoughts and reactions are effaced from the surface of the text; the focus thus appears to be placed on the object of travel. Nevertheless, in time, the travel account will acquire a more explicitly subjective focus, which comes to characterize what is commonly identified today as travel literature.

The 16th and 17th centuries saw thousands of conquering heroes traveling to the newly discovered regions of the world and reporting their adventures in a very relative faithfulness to fact as, for instance, in the case of Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of*

Guiana (1595). This kind of travel writing, which appears occasionally in the Renaissance, opens the door for a more 'literary' travel account. It is at this time that a change appears "in the apparent subject of the narrative from the things seen to the person seeing them, and... a movement of the narrator toward the experiential center of his narrative" (Spengemann 1989:38). In the late Renaissance, travel literature begins to identify with the products of two apparently different authorial positions: the traditional objective log books and journals of explorers collected for an eager reading public, and the newer, more subjective narratives whose author comes to the forefront of the travel story. The result of the changes during the second half of the 18th century was a concurrent kind of writing that foregrounds the subjective author in a sentimentalizing effort to glorify his (for the traveler is predominantly male) experiences; thus the inner world is increasingly focalized over the outer world.

This progress from the *rhetoric of objectivity* to the *rhetoric of subjectivity*, from the masking to the unmasking of the author, characterizes the history of travel literature, but also reveals, beyond its rhetorical oscillation, a permanent feature of the genre: *authorial centrality*. At the centre of the modern travel book lies the mediating consciousness that monitors the journey, reflects, confesses, and sometimes changes; travel literature as known today begins when such a consciousness textualizes its presence.

This means that travel literature, as opposed to "pretravel", is the function of a self-consciousness on the part of the author that is said to not have been fully acquired or made evident until after the Renaissance and which, as Casey Blanton maintains, did not develop much until the 18th century concern with sensibility (Blanton 1995:4), contemporary with the emergence of what Foucault calls the rationalist, Enlightenment episteme. This central authorial consciousness specific to travel literature is a relatively new ingredient, but it is an essential one; despite the changes in form and purpose, what emerges ever more evident throughout the history of travel literature is the central consciousness of the travel writer and the development of travel literature is related to the affirmation of this central authorial presence.

3. Of Authenticity

Oftentimes, the authorial presence becomes explicit in a textual justification of the travel and writing pursuits. "Why travel, why write?" is a question that the travel writer addresses through the text and in the text. This self-justification of the author is so inherently specific to travel writing that a travelogue most often than not will include an explanation of its own poetics in a paratext and/or in the text proper. To reach and captivate its ideal reader, travel literature has to situate, justify and promote itself; in short, it needs to determine its literary position and to account for its author(ity). Moreover, in order to be recognized, the travel author has to be certified: travel literature thus requires the conclusion of a special *reading pact of authenticity*.

In the early 19th century, the authenticity of travel writing is often certified by its objectivity, attested in its turn by a non-literary/nonfictional lineage. Thus, travel writing is situated in the aftermath of the encyclopaedic tradition and is hence defined as a scientific undertaking in opposition to literature. However, the encyclopaedic certification of travel writing as didactic text quickly gives way to the impression that the subject is exhausted and the sources dried out. Once thus convinced, the late 19th century traveler is discouraged from competing with his or her predecessors, especially in the field of information; s/he accepts to take on the role of the perpetual epigone that arrives too late and is left with nothing to write anew. Consequently, the desire to know reflected in encyclopaedic travel writing is replaced by a desire not to know and to enjoy the advantage of ignorance; the traveler will behave ever more as a simple visitor or tourist cut away from local realities. Travel literature adapts as a consequence: subjectivity, even idiosyncrasy becomes the condition certifying the authenticity of vision.

As the purpose of underlying travel shifts from political and economic exploration to travel for its own sake, the substantial changes that occurred in the resulting travel narratives appear, as C. Blanton observes, at the nexus of the traveler's concern with inner and outer worlds (Blanton 1995:3). The modern traveler gives up referring to a general truth and insists, on the contrary, on the real-life detail, manifesting an authenticity of the particular that will become the specialty of travel literature. Aestheticizing the voyage gradually results in bringing forth the character of the traveler, yet paradoxically rendering it invisible. In fact, contemporary travel literature ceases to develop in the sense of egowriting, i.e. writing of one's self; the authorial persona casts a sovereign gaze with which the reader can identify. The type of journalistic or impressionist subjectivism thus developed volatilizes all interiority, involving the apparent disappearance of the travel subject. The ideal reader is no longer confronted with a subject and a subjectivity, on the contrary, s/he is invited to satisfy together with the author a desire for the cosmopolite vagrancy of the flaneur. Thus the voyage comes to no longer correspond to an outer purpose, but an inner necessity.

Like the autobiography, which it resembles most in form and substance, travel literature continuously needs to question, in order to justify, its finality. Contemporary travel literature is embarking on a deconstruction of its own code in order to accommodate a space of freedom where it could again textualize an objective/subjective vision. It has become clear by now that travel literature cannot authentically render the reality of the world; however, it claims the privilege of being able to create a new world, by authentic aesthetic inscription. One can only conclude, together with Jean-Claude Berchet, that the moment travel writing ceased claiming recognition as a literary genre, it became literature itself (Berchet 1994:15).

4. The Outer And Inner Voyage

Given the diachronic overview above and its emphasis on authorial centrality and authenticity, it seems that to synchronically describe travel literature one simply needs to isolate the specific characteristics of a distinguishable group of post-Enlightenment travel texts. Such chief characteristics have made the subject of previous scholarship (Casey Blanton's *Travel Writing* is one prominent example), which demonstrates, however, the pitfalls of such an undertaking. Thus, travel literature was said, first, to suppose a narrator/traveler who travels for the sake of travel itself (Blanton 1995:5) – but the claim of travel for travel's sake is debatable, since from Egeria's pilgrimage to present-day post-tourism, travel can be argued to serve as a re-enactment of the mythical quest. Second, travel literature was deemed to display a narrative style that borrows from fiction in its use of rising and falling action, character and setting (Blanton 1995:5) – but plot, character and setting are functions of any storytelling, fictional or

nonfictional, literary or not. Third, travel narratives presuppose a conscious commitment to represent the strange and exotic in ways that both familiarize and distance the foreign (Blanton 1995:5) – but signifying is defamiliarizing, establishing a distance between subject and object. Fourth, a writerly concern with language and literature is posited as an identifying feature of travel writing (Blanton 1995:5) – however, a mere concern with language is insufficient for the intentional or fortuitous leap of travel writing into travel literature. Finally, travel literature is said to carry thematic concerns that go beyond descriptions of people and places visited (Blanton 1995:5) – nevertheless, the form and substance of travel literature is based, irreducibly, on an account of empirical travel.

One observation about the journey that constitutes the formal and substantial material of travel literature is that it may be an outer or inner journey and it is ideally both: as Fussell quotes Norman Douglas, “the ideal book of this kind offers us, indeed, a triple opportunity of exploration – abroad, into the author’s brain, and into our own” (Fussell 1987:15). In fact, this *correlation of the outer and inner voyage* is the specific achievement of travel literature, containing a tentative balance of the objective and subjective, exterior and interior, impersonal and personal. Successful travel literature, maintains Paul Fussell in *Abroad*, “mediates between two poles: the individual physical things it describes, on the one hand, and the larger theme that it is about, on the other” (Fussell 1987:126). Then, what travel books are about is, indeed, travel, that is, the interplay and negotiation between the traveler and the travelee. Travel is not just employed as a symbol or a motif; travel literature dwells in an actual journey and propels it into myth. As Janis Stout suggests in an explanation reminding of J. Campbell’s description of the quest monomyth, the mythical power of travel tales resides in “the relation between subject and object, knower and known” (Stout 1983:14), as the bifurcation of the traveling self into “considering subject and considered object” (Stout 1983:14) allows for the experiences of the outer world to be transferred to the self that is being scrutinized, thus converting the observation of the world into introspection, and therefore establishing a correspondence between the outer and the inner world. This suggests that travel literature is not only diachronically characterized by the shift from objectivity to subjectivity, it is also synchronically motivated by a negotiation of exteriority and interiority on the itineraries of travel.

5. Conclusion: Authorial Centrality

If one looks at the long history of travel literature with a focus on the authority of the ‘I’ and the distance between the traveler and the travelee, it becomes evident that the shift from objectivity to subjectivity and the negotiation of interiority and exteriority are paralleled by an ever growing concern with the ethical problems of representing the other fairly. As a result, the how instead of the what of representation becomes the subject of travel literature. The climax of this concern is relatively contemporary, in a context where, as Edward Said notes in his article “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors” (1989), the entire issue of representation is seen as problematic in the late 20th century. Having lost the belief in stable essences such as truth or ideals that can be described or symbolized through language, the representation of places and people in travel literature and not only has come to be seen as a dubious effort at best and as a tentative hegemonic inscription at worst.

However, the more attentive the travel writer grows to the issue of representing the other fairly and to the competing identities of his/her inner others, the more fragmented and disjointed the representations of (travel) literature become. Nevertheless, the increased attention of contemporary travel literature to the ethics of representation, with its aesthetic implications of fragmentation and incoherence, does not affect the centrality of the author. Even if aware and maybe weary of egocentrism, the travel writer cannot fully forsake Identity, for this would mean forsaking language and narrative. Thus, it appears that even the most self-effaced travel writer will remain at the center of his/her narrative and positionally capable of the egocentrist tropes that are part of the heritage of travel literature, restlessly re-presenting the quest.

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