

Aspects of Contemporary British and American Auto/biography

“Autobiography on the Move”

EMMA & ECLLA

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We wish to continue our exploration of contemporary British and American Auto/biography by focusing on the affinities between autobiography and travel-writing. It is useful to remember that the Latin root for movement is “*mot*” also at the origin of words such as motor or locomotion and emotion or motivation, linking mobility and subjectivity. Yet, the relationship between travel-writing and autobiography is and has always been problematic.

One may argue that, at least as far as content is concerned, there is not much common ground between the two: travel-writing is moved by the quest for the “not-me”, the exotic, the unfamiliar, when autobiography is supposed to center on the I. And the travelling self is often very different from the ordinary self: it encounters the extraordinary, the public realm, whereas the ordinary self which autobiography centers on is more private. Besides, travelling accounts very rarely give a unified vision of a stable self over a long period of time, which is precisely what traditional autobiography is all about.

Yet it is undeniable that both genres have drawn closer to each other to the point of overlapping or intermingling. Simon Cooke looking at the history of travel-writing sees the Grand Tour as conducive to the “emergence of a more reflectively autobiographical form of travel writing” and acknowledges the influence of Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* in the movement towards introspection, leading to “the inward turn of the 18th century.” Late nineteenth century female travel-writing has effected an even more pronounced shift from travel-narratives as outward-looking texts devoted to the discovery, mapping and “scientific” description of the outside world, to inward-looking texts, registering the effects of the encounter with the Other upon the self, rather than just the Other. While women dared leave the domestic sphere, they nevertheless remained close to domestic preoccupations in their narratives, for fear of being accused of crossing symbolic and real boundaries too daringly.

Both travel-writing and autobiography can now be said to belong fully (but still not unproblematically) to the well-charted realm of life-writing (and Simon Cooke’s article entitled “Inner Journeys, Travel-Writing as Life-Writing” in Carl Thompson’s 2016 seminal *Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* has certainly done much to make generic boundaries move). As Vita Sackville-West argued in her introduction to *Passenger to Teheran*, “travel is the most private of pleasures” (29), and as a life is rarely spent in the same location, any autobiography must necessarily record this dislocation, whether it be temporary or permanent. Conversely, it has been argued that discovery and self-discovery are simultaneous possibilities and a basic condition of the travel guide (Kinsley 69). The comment made by Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey in their introduction to *Representing Lives: Women and Autobiography* that

“autobiographical writings are often situated at the crossroads of the generic matrix” (XXVII) also applies to the travel narrative. Both forms are a mixture of correspondence, diaries, journal letters and it is precisely this generic slippage and their hybridity which is worth exploring: paraphrasing Patricia Meyer-Spacks about 18th century fiction and autobiography, we may say that travel-writing and autobiography cannot in any way be distinguished from one another but rather “invite contemplation of the multifarious and often surprising affinities that exist within the context of manifest difference” (314).

So, just as Vesna Goldsworthy suggests that Rebecca Wests’ autobiography *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. A Journey through Yugoslavia* can be read as a modernist account of a Journey through the Balkans, as a subjective account of a region and its peoples *and* as testimony to the subjectivity of its writer, we may also want to look at other 20th and 21st British and American autobiographies and travel narratives to see how the following topics may be relevant:

— Journeys embraced or imposed and their effects on the psyche. What happens when the desire to write one’s own life takes place while moving, whether the move is chosen or not? What happens to those who write while being displaced (migrant’s autobiographies) and what happens to their texts? To be compared and contrasted with tourist narratives. Autobiography of displaced people, expatriation, migration, exile, possibly written in a different language than the mother tongue.

— The experience of otherness, estrangement, uprootedness and the way they are conveyed in the autobiography/ travel-narrative. Nomadism, deterritorialization/ reterritorialization.

— Journeys actual or metaphorical, explorations real and intellectual, spiritual, psychological and emotional. The travel of the body may encourage mental journeying: accounts of spiritual awakening, upheaval, the pilgrimage, the transformative power of transculturation, the transformative experience of travelling and of writing. Experiences of liminality (both spatial and psychological). Representations of space, geography of the self, link between geography and psychology: being moved inwardly as a consequence of moving outwardly.

— Intermedia or transmedia autobiographies and travel narratives.

— Both autobiography and travel-narratives intersect with fiction: Auto-fictional travel-narratives.

— The question of identity/ identification and differentiation/ alienation.

Exhibition of oneself/ of the other/ as other vs self-erasure. The other as a means to encounter a different self. In the particular context of travel is the Other used as a foil to the “I”, and how is the encounter translated onto the page? Is the narrative “selfish”, does the “I” resist to the encounter or does it yield to it? What kind of strategies does the self find to allow the other some kind of space? The “relational self” (Eakin).

— Role of photography in both the autobiography and travel narrative.

A FEW USEFUL REFERENCES:

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