

THE QUEST MOTIF IN THE TRAVELOGUES AND MEMOIRS OF MIGRANT WRITERS

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Drawing on the analysis of travelogues and creative non-fiction by migrant subjects, this essay explores the multifaceted symbolic and metaphorical patterns of the quest motif, intended both as an anthropological urge for discovery and knowledge and as a more intimate psychological need to reshape identity and come to terms with the past and present.

Il motivo della quest nei racconti di viaggio e nelle memorie dei soggetti migranti

Attraverso l'analisi di racconti di viaggio e memorie autobiografiche di soggetti migranti, si esplorano i molteplici significati simbolici e metaforici del viaggio, inteso sia come necessità antropologica di scoperta e conoscenza, sia come un più intimo bisogno psicologico di riplasmare l'identità e confrontarsi con il passato e presente.

Introduction

Travel, whether for pleasure or migration, plays a key role in constructing and transforming identity. Indeed, the encounter with the foreign engages the traveller in a pursuit of the self, which destabilizes fixed notions of selfhood and otherness, forges transcultural identities¹, and raises questions on one's relation to place, memory and culture. As Genni Gunn states in the foreword to her travelogue *Tracks*, «when one travels, the unknown awaits to be discovered – about one's self, about others, about one's relationship to time and place» (8). The outer journey through un / familiar landscapes is thus also an inner journey, a quest for personal identity, which leads «towards greater self-awareness as well as greater knowledge» (Bassnett 238).

In this “age of migration” (Castles, Hein and Miller) and globalized travel it is not surprising, therefore, to witness a proliferation of travel writing and of academic interest in this once neglected form of expression, which comprises much more than factual personal accounts of physical journeys through other geogra-

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¹ Cf., for example, *Mobile Narratives* (Arapoglou, Fodor, and Nyman).

phies. Kowalewski highlights, for instance, how it has a «dauntingly heterogeneous character» (7) and includes a multitude of genres: from travelogues, memoirs, autobiographies, letters, journals and diaries to journalistic reports, poetry, novels and field notes. Bassnett suggests that it blurs the boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional since it hinges on self-conscious «fictionalising processes» (235) where the autobiographical traveller constructs a persona similar to a character in a novel. By virtue of this overlapping, travel writing also incorporates elements of the quest motif usually discussed in relation to fictional or mythological works. Indeed, since travel writing is «a “map” of the self travelling» (Heaps 11)², it charts the traveller’s search for self-discovery and self-knowledge.

Among the distinctive features of contemporary migration and travel trends, Castles, Hein and Miller also highlight the «feminization of [...] migration» (16) and the notable increase of women on the move. Equally, the experiences of women travellers are ever more often recorded in self-reflexive written accounts which reveal feminized quest patterns³. This essay examines some of the salient features of these gendered quests in the works of two Italian-Canadian migrants whose diasporic experience has turned them into restless, inveterate travellers. In particular, the analysis will focus on Genni Gunn’s travelogue *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* (2013) and Rosetta Rosati’s memoir *Maples & Chestnuts* (2017), two texts which, albeit diverse, combine the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the journey through space and time to negotiate plural subjectivities, peripatetic family histories and matrocentric lineages.

Performing Identity: The Quest for Selfhood

Travel, migration and identity are interrelated concerns in contemporary women’s travel accounts which are foremost autobiographical narratives of personal experiences by self-conscious authors who deliberately textualize the self⁴. As self-representational texts, their main interest is to foreground the impact that moving between places and cultures has on the development of different subjectivities, rather than to provide informational descriptions of the sites visited. Like autobiography which Eakins claims is «an integral part of a life-long process of identity formation» (34), travel writing too is a quest for, and construction of, selfhood.

² Viewing travel writing as an autobiographical narrative Heaps draws on the cartographic metaphor created by Buss (1993) who reads autobiographical texts as maps of the author’s subjectivity.

³ For a discussion of the feminized quest in literary texts see Heller (1990).

⁴ On the association between travel writing and autobiography see, for example, Duncan (2002).

The sense of self that emerges in each text results from the travellers' unique experiences and hinges on an intermingling of diverse ideological discourses. In the case of our writers the shared experience of migration and their cultural kinship account for some common traits such as a marked gender-consciousness and a self-reflective awareness of identity as a plurality of selves. For both women, who were born into Italian families in the mid-1900s and emigrated to Canada as children⁵, travel and the subsequent writing about the travel experience are part of their broader obsession with self-definition and are propelled by «the search for connection» (Gunn 10), a need that springs from their experience of displacement.

In *Tracks* Gunn explores the connection between identity and place through a series of essays about her travels across three continents which she has undertaken over the span of her lifetime. Her restless need for travel as movement, to escape the trappings of place and venture into the possibility of discovery unleashed by the unknown, is central to her performance of identity, which is «constant metamorphosing» (8). Indeed, motion counters the stasis and fixity of identity grounded in the politics of location and allows for an ongoing recreation of selfhood in the dialogical, relational encounter with other people and places.

In her travelogue the performative nature of identity implies both a positioning of traveller and travel writer as two distinct personas and the presentation of different fictionalized selves that mirror a fragmented sense of selfhood. As travel writer, Gunn assumes a variety of different subject positions: i.e., that of the ethnographer who describes the women with face tattoos in Myanmar or Buddhist monasteries in Thailand; of the historian who chronicles the protests and political changes in Burma; of the geologist who explains the formations of the earth; of the sociologist who reflects on evolving gender relations; of the art critic who describes her sister and mother's paintings; and of the «forensic anthropologist» (59) who scavenges the histories of her relatives in Italy. As a result, the identity of the woman as traveller conveyed is as multidimensional as the journeys she embarks on.

While disrupting the sense of unitary selfhood, such multiple impersonations also destabilize conventional ideas about authorial identity and foreground a self-aware authorial persona who discursively re-invents herself through the writing process. By performing the role of autobiographer, the travel writer engages, in fact, in a process of ongoing self-creation that urges her to construct identity in the interplay of experience, memory and agency. As she recounts

⁵ Gunn was born in Trieste in 1949 and moved to British Columbia at the age of seven after having spent most of her childhood between Rutigliano (Apulia) and Udine (Friuli). Rosati moved to Montreal from Calabria at the age of eleven in 1959.

her real life journeys through the prism of memory, Gunn exposes the fictionalization of self-representation, as well as the fictive strategies of textual (de) construction that she employs to question both the reliability of her memories and the cultural categorizations of identity. This metafictional reflexivity is, for instance, signalled through the use of photographs, which are manufactured images, «inventions for the camera» (13), rather than trustworthy textual self-images⁶. The autobiographical selves displayed in the text are thus illusions of memory, like those «indelible illusions in 8-minute segments» caught by the camera's eye (13).

Among Gunn's performative strategies there is also the self-conscious construction of a gendered identity that comprises the representation of the traveller as female, a discursive strategy which enacts a feminine quest to re-appropriate traditionally masculine roles and subvert the classical opposition between the wandering Odysseus and the waiting Penelope. Gunn boldly usurps the male quester's role by «imagining [her]self Odysseus» (45) as she journeys across the Strait of Messina to visit the Sicilian volcano Stromboli, also known in *The Odyssey* as Aeolia, «the home of Aeolus, the keeper of winds» (48). The extended intertextual reference to Homer and other mythological elements (gods, monsters, dragons etc.) conveys a mythical dimension to her physical journey which legitimizes the female traveller as an epic questing hero. Hence, in a sort of parodic reversal, Gunn, a cross-eyed female Odysseus with «no depth perception» (49), courageously hikes up to the top of the volcano, regardless of perils and the fury of Aeolus, to be rewarded with «one of Earth's most spectacular amaranthine natural performances» (50). Indeed, «to explore new landscapes, the sea, the sky, the natural world» is, Gunn tells us, one of the reasons for which she travels because nature is «as close to perfection [...] as anything could be» and «a perfect metaphor for memory, for (e)motions, for relationships, for all that is in endless motion and change» (8). It is in the magnificence of the natural elements and their perpetual transformations that Gunn finds a connection and locates her deterritorialized sense of self.

As metaphorical signs, landscapes and the natural world are also correlatives for the traveller's inner, emotional and psychological quests. Gunn's urge to constantly test herself in dangerous environments is her way of addressing, of exorcizing, her innermost fears, including death, separation, loss, the «secrets within the caves our own bodies» and foremost «the fear of being buried alive, both physically and metaphorically» (56). Thus, whether she enters the depths of the ocean or those of the earth, it is a symbolic coming to terms with her

⁶ For a discussion of photographs and their (un)truthfulness see Tagg (1988).

body and the depths of her consciousness. In the limestone caves of Thailand, for instance, she struggles for breath as hot air sears her lungs, an extreme bodily experience which returns her to her «primal self» and a heightened perception of her physicality, but also plunges her into an exploration of «the hollow inside me, the isthmus between life and death» (61). Skilfully embedded in the narration of this voyage is the memory of another journey to the Italian Grotte di Castellana, where in front of the ecstatic beauty of the white alabaster stalagmites she learns that her aunt is dying. Like the mythological Persephone and the medieval bard Dante whom she evokes, Gunn metaphorically descends into the underworld to confront «the emotions associated with death» (58), painful memories of the past, and the insidiousness of secrets which prevent knowledge of the self and the other, leaving abysses, «disconnection, longing» (57). Facing her fears and overcoming them, she is rewarded with the treasures the cave / self conceals and re-emerges endowed with the promise of new beginnings and new journeys in search for yet other unexpected, extraordinary and miraculous discoveries. Every journey is thus a symbolic enactment of death and rebirth: «I leave home. I travel. I return» (8).

Re-membering the Past: The Quest for Home

Because writing about travel is self-exploration, the travel writer's authorial quest hinges on an engagement with memory and with remembering past selves. This journey into the meanders of memory is, however, difficult and dangerous not only because memory is as unstable and shifting as identity, «in constant formation, mutation» like the earth (Gunn 10), but also because it is a fictive narrativization – as Gunn says, an imaginative «re-envisioning of the unknown» (103). The recounting of remote childhood memories, such as those of her early childhood in Italy spent between Friuli and Apulia, or of the Sunday picnics in the wilderness of British Columbia, is filled with gaps and depends on continual (re)construction through a sharing of memories with other family members such as her sister Ileana or her aunt Ida. Other times, it relies on the family films produced by her father, which offer only «a whimsical rendition of truths» (13) and are thus as unreliable as memory.

In her memoir, *Maples & Chestnuts*, Rosati similarly acknowledges the «multidirectional» nature of memory which is subject «to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing» (Rothberg 3). The text, she admits, is indebted to the reminiscences of other family members; it is thus a re-membering of history through fragments of memory. Written in 2017 as part of her quest for roots, it charts the

immigration saga of her family⁷ through the recounting of her grandfather's first voyage to Canada in 1908, followed by his wife Concetta in 1911; that of her grandmother's return to Calabria with her five young children in 1924; her own relocation in Montreal with her parents in 1959; and her return to Milan as a young bride in the 1970s.

The accounts of her two autobiographical return journeys, one from Montreal to Milan in the chapter "Searching for Home" and the other from Milan to Sault Sainte Marie in "My 'Soo' Roots", represent Rosati's attempt to make sense of her rootlessness and dual (un)belonging. While the first is a return immigration to her native country, a homecoming of sorts, which does not generate alienation but ensures a sense of wanted connectedness with the city of Milan, the second is a sentimental journey into unfamiliar territory in search of her mother's childhood home and of her own «roots in Canada» (2017: 34). When, after long and tedious research through the online street directories, she finds the house and travels to Sault Sainte Marie to buy it, she feels she has completed both her own and her mother's quest for home: «Finding the house was what I had needed to balance my lopsided existence. It had felt like forgiveness from above» (40). The journey thus enacts her desire to situate herself in a physical ancestral home, because this will enable her to retrieve the stories her mother told her which remain «hidden in some remote shelf of [her] memory» (33).

Return journeys, however, seldom offer a healing of the fracture between self and place. Instead, they lead to the realization that home is only an idealized memory that dissipates the possibility of locating home in any specific place. Relating about her various return journeys to Italy, Gunn emphasizes how her first childhood homeland is «a utopia» (103), «a mythical *home*» (10) she is drawn to in search of memories of her past selves that can enrich and change her present relations with herself and others. The quest for home is thus a «shimmering and enticing» illusion, «like trying to catch a mirage on a hot desert highway» (7).

Writing the Migrant Self: The Quest for the Mother (Tongue)

The quest for origins involves a search for the mother and the maternal which is symbolically a quest for connection, language and creativity. For both writers coming to terms with the mother is a necessary stage in understanding their (im)migrant selves and the relentlessness deriving from the experience of displace-

⁷ By virtue of the relational quality of memory, however, her role as family biographer broadens to include that of historical chronicler of the collective history of Italian-Canadian emigration.

ment. Gunn acknowledges, for instance, that her compulsive need for travel, for eternal vagabondage, is a family legacy that derives from her mother's being «in constant movement» (87).

The mother is also the source of Rosati's uprootedness and the inspiration for writing her memoir which develops along a matrocentric trajectory centred around Biondina and her family. The act of recounting the immigrant journeys of both her mother and grandmother provides Rosati with the opportunity to explore the maternal relationship retrospectively and to give voice to her beloved mother's trauma of dislocation, to the loneliness and longing she experienced upon moving from Canada to Calabria as a young child. Rather than conveying feelings of accusation and resentment, the narrative tone is compassionate and forgiving, moved by a willingness to set up a dialogue with her female ancestors. As a sort of cathartic moment in the daughter's quest for self-knowledge, the writing process, thus, elicits an understanding of these women's lives which fosters a sense of interconnectedness and allows her to make sense of some of the «indelible imprints» (2017: 12) that blur her identity.

Central to the migrant writer's quest for, and performance of, identity is also the relation with her (mother) tongue(s). Rosati foregrounds her linguistic selves in the text through the use of code-mixing between English, Italian and some Calabrian dialect, especially in relation to her mother Biondina, but also publishes the Italian self-translation of the memoir (*Aceri & Castagni* 2019). Gunn, on the other hand, expresses her authorial persona in English only, with the exception of the verses from Dante's *Inferno* which she recites with her dying Zia Ida, her surrogate mother.

In both texts mothers are represented as powerful role models, «examples of courage, love, intelligence, generosity and passion» (Rosati 13), but also sources of female empowerment, both personal and artistic. In the final section of *Tracks*, Gunn completes the process of identification with several mother figures who have shaped her life and sense of self: her aunt Ida, with whom she spent her early childhood in Apulia, Zia Ninetta who connects her with the Friulian language of her father's ancestral home, and her mother Verbena, the artist/painter whose creative mastery, independence, and transgression she admires and mimics in her own eclectic career as writer, poet, translator, musician and performer. Her final realization as both woman and artist is that self-construction is necessarily relational and cannot escape the relentless and pressing urge «to map new soils» (158).

To conclude, I would like to quote Gunn's description of her sister's painting *Origins*, which aptly summarizes the quest of migrants, for whom the endless movement of travel seems to be the only placement possible:

It [...] depicts the skeleton of death as a new beginning; two cows dying of drought, like immigrants who are not nourished in the new place; three trees, their roots visible on the surface, reach to the depths of the earth; and viewed from the back are Ileana, my mother and me, squatting in a semi-circle, staring at something unseen on the ground. “Mom, in her old-fashioned dress, represents the past; the semi-naked me in a bikini is between the two worlds, while you are fully dressed in pants and T-shirt” (113).

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