

LITERATURE AND TRAVEL: VOYAGES AND VISIONS, PILGRIMAGE AND PROPHECY

Felicidad P. Galang-Pereña

Faculty of Arts and Letters/Research Center for Culture, Arts and Humanities
University of Santo Tomas
nenetgp@gmail.com

Abstract

Travel is considered a metaphor for life, as embodied in many texts of the literary canon from Dante to Defoe, Bunyan to Baudelaire, The Epic of Gilgamesh to The Life of Pi. This paper takes a look at the travels taken by both fiction and non fiction writers (voyages) and the perspectives discovered (visions) along the journeys taken, both outward (physical) and inward (psychological). Narrative non-fiction writer, Gary Krist, distinguishes two kinds of travelers: one whose journeys are primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world (whom I call a voyager) and another one whose journeys are more outwardly projected investigations of the world (whom I call a visionary). Travel literature, like all literature, has always gained dimension by revealing as much about the observer as about the observed. Recording what the eye sees and discovering what the imagination knows" comprise what Paul Theroux identified as the crux of the travel literature's task. The writer assumes the role of a prophet when we hear his utterance in the theme as an inspired declaration of divine will and purpose, and as a prediction of something to come, like Paolo Coelho in the novel The Alchemist and Karen Blixen (Isaak Dinesen) in the memoir Out of Africa. This paper supports the trope of travel as an avenue to well-being, in particular through the aegis of self-discovery, as opposed to merely promoting physical well-being through engagement in activities such as walking or experiences in nature (Italy, 2017). This paper aims to see beyond the places and people encountered and to look as the writer as a prophet with an eternal truth to tell, and to behold his person's journey as more of a pilgrimage yielding a perspective and philosophy that makes life awesome in its spiritual serendipities.

Keywords: travel; visions; voyages; prophet; pilgrimage; The Alchemist; Out of Africa

A. Introduction

Writing and travel have always been intimately connected as the traveler's tale is considered as old as fiction itself (Young, 2002). The understanding of narratives is closely tied up to the experience of travel, with the different types of the journey—the quest, the odyssey, and the adventure, serving as powerful master plots in literary narratives during Greek's heroic epic age (Mikkonen, 2007). Writing and travel have always been intimately connected as the traveler's tale is considered as old as fiction itself (Young, 2002). But from the 20th century to the present, writers increasingly focused on their inner journey, following a long tradition that dates back even before biblical times (McWha, 2018).

A pilgrimage is a journey embarked on—typically in the context of religious practice—of personal or ritual significance. The journey can be external and physical (as in the case of the pilgrims paying obeisance to Thomas Becket's tomb in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*), internal and

spiritual (as in the case of Christian, who narrates his own allegorical vision in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan), or both. The tradition dates back to antiquity as scholars have found relics and records of various forms of the pilgrimage that date back into the dawn of civilization. Most major world religions have honored some form of sacred travel in their practices and rituals, but pilgrimage is not purely a formal religious phenomenon. Many "pilgrimages" in modern times—arguably including such secular activities as tourism, symbolic political action, and journeys of personal self-discovery—testify to the lasting power of ritual travel as a manifestation of human yearning and the search for meaning, even in an era ostensibly dominated by a culture of scientific rationalism (Citizendium, 2021).

This paper takes a look at the places travelled (voyages) and the perspectives discovered (visions) along the journeys taken, both outward (physical) and inward (psychological). Narrative non-fiction writer, Gary Krist, distinguishes two kinds of travelers: one whose journeys are primarily expressions of the self against the background of the world (whom I call a voyager) and another one whose journeys are more outwardly projected investigations of the world (whom I call a visionary) (Krist, 1993).

Furthermore, this paper sees the role of the writer through two prisms: Prophecy and Pilgrimage. In the first, the writer is harbinger of an unequivocal truth about life, fate, sufferings and the whole gamut of human condition. In the second, he offers a way to surrender to a sense of continuity and connection through a spiritual journey that symbolizes both the search for connection and the progression of life itself.

B. Voyages and Visions in Travel Literature

Having been born and raised in the Orient, the vision-quest motif is part of my psychological grounding, but having been educated by the Occident, the voyage-query of the physical spaces also consumes and motivates me. The two-pronged goals (voyages and visions) of travel literature are the main concerns of this paper. Thus, it will first seek to discern how the writer vividly describe the external world—"the feel of the sun or the wind, the rain or the snow and conjure the sensations of stone or sand or mud or turf underfoot (Murphy, 1992). But also, it will strive to discover what values the writer learns from the journey—the perspectives of his inner world.

The Biblical Moses was appointed to rescue the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt and journey to Sinai, where he and his people met the God of their covenant. Their escape was replete with the intervention of God, dramatized by the parting of the Red Sea, which also symbolically divides the travel narrative into two parts (Chapters 1-19 and 20-40). The theophany (manifestation or appearance of the God of Israel) is accompanied by storms, earthquakes, heavy rains, thunder peals and lightning flashes making the saga of the chosen people both frightening and liberating.

Gilgamesh the King of Uruk (located in what is now Southern Iraq) travels to Utnapishtim, seeking immortality after the unacceptable death of his former nemesis and later friend, Enkidu. His dangerous journey led him past the boundaries of the familiar world, to distant places known only in legend such as "the great mountains...which guard the rising and the setting sun." Not only does the quest take him over the edge of the world, but backward in time to an unimaginably ancient past. Even his appearance drastically changes, becoming like a wild man.

Dante the pilgrim begins his journey on Good Friday, the commemoration of Christ's crucifixion and ends on the vigil of Easter Sunday, the celebration of Christ's Resurrection, as the spiritual quest of the Divine Comedy transpires over three days--the number three being central to Dante the poet's conception and execution of his works. The harrowing of hell through its nine circles was a master stroke by the Medieval poet, who used vivid imagery stimulating the senses. In describing the passage over the River Acheron for example, Dante evokes the staggering numbers of the damned, comparing them to autumn leaves and flocks of birds. He used personification, hyperbole, anaphora and allusion to mythical and historical figures to heighten the horrors of hell in the allegorical journey.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) marked the beginning of realistic fiction but also manifested the close link between the novel and travel writing. This was presented as an autobiography of the title character (Robinson Krutznaer), a castaway who spent 28 years on a remote tropical island near the coasts of Venezuela and Trinidad, where he encountered cannibals, captive slaves and mutineers before being rescued. There is an inference that the story was based on the life of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish castaway who lived for four years on a Pacific island called "Más a Tierra", now part of Chile, which was renamed Robinson Crusoe Island in 1966. The novel has gone on to become one of the most widely published books in history, spawning so many imitations, not only in literature but also in film, television, and radio, that its name is used to define a genre, the Robinsonade—desert island story or a castaway narrative.

And so on, through time, the travel novel shares more about the author and his written memories of the journeys taken than it does the location being visited. Travel literature, like all literature, has always gained dimension by revealing as much about the observer as about the observed. Philip Krummrich enumerates three stages in good travel writing: the anticipation, which begins the first time the writer ever hears of the place and continues in ever-changing forms even after arrival; the experience, which incorporates continuing anticipation and also the first attempts to find words; and the reflection, which includes explorations of memories and half-legible notes; long, baffled stares at blank sheets of paper; and the writing of draft after draft, culminating in a finished piece (Krummrich, 2001).

As undisputed American travel writer Paul Theroux comes to the end of his Asian train journeys, he realizes "that the difference between travel writing and fiction is the difference between recording what the eye sees and discovering what the imagination knows" (Glaser, 1989). Physical spaces become triggers to psychological spheres, the voyages evolving into visions. But all the while, the writer is the creative agent of the explorations and experiences. From the heroic age to the present, the journey intensifies from the outer to the inner locus of the imagination. And no matter what degradations we perpetrate on the places of the world, there will always be new and different eyes to witness the atrocities (Krist, 1993).

C. Prophecy and Pilgrimage in the Novel "The Alchemist" and the Memoir "Out Of Africa"

Brazilian author Paulo Coelho first published *The Alchemist* (Portuguese: *O Alquimista*) in 1988. Originally written in Portuguese, the allegorical novel became a widely translated international bestseller. The narrative follows a young Andalusian shepherd in his journey to the pyramids of Egypt, after having a recurring dream of finding a treasure there. Believing the dream to be prophetic, he asks a Gypsy fortune-teller in the nearby town about its meaning. The woman interprets the dream as an augury, telling the boy that he will discover a treasure at the Egyptian pyramids.

The book's main theme is finding one's destiny, explicit in the advice given to Santiago that "when you really want something to happen, the whole universe will conspire so that your wish comes true" (Coelho, 1988). It is both a philosophy and a motif embedded in a dream that is central to the plot. Santiago's dream is the novel's incentive moment that sets the narrative in motion, taking him from Spain to Africa thru the Sahara desert, the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco until Egypt and back.

The name of *The Alchemist's* protagonist, the shepherd Santiago, is significant as it is the Spanish derivation for St. James — that is, the apostle James, one of the twelve original followers of Jesus. Santiago is the patron saint of Spain, and Roman Catholics believe that his remains are interred in the Spanish town of Santiago de Compostela, which is considered the third-holiest city after Jerusalem and Rome. Since the Middle Ages, millions of Roman Catholics have made a pilgrimage to the grave of this apostle. Thus the name is associated with pilgrims — seekers after spiritual connection.

The episode of King Melchizedek introduces intriguing concepts: the Personal Legend, the world's greatest lie, the mysterious force, the Soul of the World, the principle of favorability (beginner's luck),

and following the omens. These concepts will recur throughout the novel, motivating Santiago's actions and explaining to him many of the apparently inexplicable things he experiences.

The name Melchizedek is Hebrew for "righteous is my king," and comes from the Old Testament, in which a character by that name is identified as the king of Salem (another name for Jerusalem) and a priest of God in the time of Abraham. The Melchizedek of *The Alchemist* recalls charging Abraham his one-tenth fee, thus it can be assumed that he is the same Melchizedek.

Other than Santiago himself, Melchizedek is the novel's most important character-- a contradictory figure, urging self-reliance and discouraging passivity but at the same time interceding for those, like Santiago, who are in danger because they fall short of wit and self-reliance—virtues crucial for a traveler on a quest.

In *The Alchemist*, Santiago grappled with fate in the pursuit of his Personal Legend, refuting the passivity of the crystal merchant, whose motto is *maktub*: "It is written." He was fortified with the unconditional love of Fatima that sustained the ups and downs of his journey. Coelho tells us that without love, our lives are incomplete but with love, there is little that we cannot accomplish. This makes the novel a true questromance—the story of a hero setting out for a treasure for which he undergoes trial (Dann, 1999). Unlike the crystal merchant who served as Santiago's foil (an example of how not to live), the shepherd would pursue the active, questing ideal. The crystal merchant is not a flawed man, just ordinary, but it is precisely his ordinariness that the novel warns against.

In Tangier, Santiago is wizened by experience as he was swindled by an unscrupulous man he met in a bar. Prior to this episode, Santiago learned mainly from books. What he learned firsthand is that people deceive themselves about the world and the way it works. More significantly, Santiago inferred that he can continue to be a passive receiver of the events of his life, a victim — or he can embrace his experiences and move forward with purpose, thereby becoming an adventurer.

While travelling with a caravan, Santiago saw *maktub* in a positive light: It is our duty to take what life gives us, and make the best of it, as Coelho seemed to be saying through the character of the camel driver.

In the Oasis episode, there is a sudden change in the novel's setting, that is, becoming physically and emotionally dramatic. Previously, the action transpired in difficult terrain — the hilly pastures of Andalusia, the crowded, winding streets and alleyways of Tangier, and the unforgiving Sahara desert. Now the environment is benign, allowing the characters to focus on other concerns and to relax, eat, drink, and talk.

In the shelter of date trees in the oasis (a premonition of coming grace), Santiago encountered Fatima, who will prove to be his greatest treasure. It is under these conditions, when Santiago is helping the Englishman search for the alchemist, with no thought to pursuing his Personal Legend, that he found love. Previously, Santiago's only concern was finding the hidden treasure in far away Egypt, not knowing that it is right there in his heart, waiting for the right girl.

As Santiago and the alchemist continued silently to cross the desert towards the pyramid, the alchemist advised Santiago to listen to his heart, despite the fear that Santiago's heart often expresses. The protagonist learned to understand what his heart is telling him, and to listen to it patiently, despite the fact that his heart is often fearful.

Out of Africa is a memoir by the Danish author Karen Blixen (Isaak Dinesen). The book, first published in 1937, recounts events of the seventeen years when Blixen made her home in Kenya, then called British East Africa. The book is a lyrical meditation on Blixen's life on her coffee plantation, as well as a tribute to some of the people who touched her life there. It provides a vivid chronicle of African colonial life in the last decades of the British Empire. Blixen wrote the book in English and then rewrote it in Danish. It has sometimes been published under the author's pen name, Isak Dinesen.

The narrator tells the story of a farm that she once had in Africa, located at the foot of the Ngong hills in what is now Kenya. It sits at an altitude of six thousand feet, where coffee is grown, although only part of its six thousand acres is used for agriculture. The remaining parts of the land are forest and bushes for the natives (mostly from the Kikuyu tribe) to live on. In exchange for living on the farm, they labor on it a certain number of days per year. There are many other tribal Africans nearby. The

Swahilis live in Nairobi and down the coast. The Masai live on a large Reserve just South of the farm. Many Somalis live in the area as well, including Farah, the chief servant who helps the narrator run the entire farm. The narrator never gives her name while telling her story, although it is mentioned in subtle ways as "Baroness Blixen" and once as "Tania."

The narrator weaves her memories of Africa like a tapestry, shaping a magnificent landscape that resembles paradise. On her own farm, she lives in harmony with the natives and even some of the animals. At one point, a domesticated deer, Lulu, comes to live with them, --- a symbol of the connection of the farm to the vast Kenyan landscape. The theme of contrast frames the narrative: dry and rainy season, town and country, Christians and Muslims, Africans and Europeans.

The narrator insinuates that Africa is superior to Europe because it exists in a more pure form, without the encroaching influence of culture. As such it is closer to what God initially intended, when he created man-- a veritable paradise.

After describing life on her African farm as idyllic, the narrator concludes the tale in dark tones. The farm went bankrupt because of the difficulties of growing coffee at such a high altitude. When the bills cannot be paid, the narrator sold the farm to a foreign firm who plans to divide it up for residential development. She bid the people she has come to love in Kenya a sad goodbye to go back to her own people who are strangers to her now. Towards the end of her book, Karen Blixen writes that by taking over the "native land," you take more than just their land. "It is their past as well, their roots and identity" (Blixen, 1937). The pilgrimage once over, the narrator settles back on a life of reminiscence for her lost paradise--not just the farm-- but Kenya itself after the white man's pillage.

Belief in God is a motif that recurs in *Out of Africa*. God created the paradise that is Africa, kissed by the sun and rain, abounding in flora and fauna. When the narrator flew in a plane, she marveled at the experience akin to looking at creation with the eyes of God. When she noticed that her mule actually looks like a spoon, she inferred that God, in his omniscience, certainly would notice this shape as well. When the narrator wrote her stories, she compared herself to God who was able to breathe life into Adam. The frequent references to God served to highlight Dinesen's idea that Africa is in the East of Eden.

Both Blixen's autobiographical account of her years in Africa and her unwavering bond with the continent withstood the test of time, as the book is said to have assumed a cult status. *Out of Africa* broke into greater global fame with the film adaptation by director Sydney Pollack, which won seven Academy Awards in 1985.

D. Conclusion

A travel writer is judged by what he/she takes in, the quality and inclusiveness of his/her embrace, by the courage with which in his/her ignorance he/she proceeds, his/her ability to make himself/herself into a vessel that a foreign life can imprint (Magowan, 2001). Understanding new people and places leads to understanding of one's self. As Magowan posited:

It has been theorized that if there is an art to travel writing, perhaps it consists in conjuring ever more ingenious ways of stripping the self so it can be cracked open. This alone lets the writer understand new people and places, not to mention the old self, the old world of home. In all traveling, there is a constant two-way tug, a constant reference to a life, a readership, left behind (Magowan, 2001). Having set out first on physical journeys and then on imaginative reconstructions of them, American writer Edith Wharton recognized in the narrative version of herself a woman who had undertaken a spiritual quest and had found her most authentic self (Schriber, 1987).

This paper illustrated the trope of travel as an avenue to well-being, in particular through the aegis of self-discovery, as opposed to merely promoting physical well-being through engagement in activities such as walking or experiences in nature (Italy, 2017). It also looks at travel recounted in Literature more as a prophecy and pilgrimage.

In *The Alchemist*, there is consistency in the tonal transformation from the mostly realistic to the mythic in Santiago's contact with the Soul of God and his transformation into the wind. The tribal chief is deeply impressed and the alchemist allowed Santiago to make the rest of his journey to the pyramids alone. Certainly he has demonstrated that he can fend for himself. When Santiago's heart tells him to dig where his tears fall, we are reminded that we must not only depend on our intellect, but also on our emotions.

In the Epilogue, Santiago's journey ends where it began. The material treasure was literally under his nose, but he had to travel across a continent to find it. But the real treasure was there in his heart all along, in the love that blossomed for Fatima.

At the outset, Karen Blixen's memoir started out as "a collection of dinner party anecdotes, 'short, quite truthful' autobiographical sketches, travel writing; perceptive but romantic amateur anthropology". But the true beauty of the narrative is not the documentary account of Blixen's stay in Kenya, but the poetry of her vision of a land far away where she discovered her true self. The narrator described her farm at the very beginning of the book's first chapter, "The Ngong Farm" (Blixen, 1937):

"Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be."

The narrator makes this statement at the end of the "A Fugitive Rests on the Farm" segment, which is located in the third section of the book, "Visitors to the Farm," which highlights Dinesen's belief that the primitive and the aristocrat share an innate nobility that allows them to transcend cultural differences (Blixen, 1937).

"It was and is becoming, I thought, that Emmanuelson should have sought refuge with the Masai, and that they should have received him. The true aristocracy and the true proletariat of the world are both in understanding with tragedy...They differ in this way from the bourgeoisie of all classes..."

French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) fervently yearned for an exotic and idealized alternative world, expressed in *Invitation to the Voyage*. This conjured reality became the salvation of the young man Pi, in the coming-of-age travel novel by Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, published in 2001. Pi survived 227 days in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat with an adult Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The unlikely pair depended on each other to withstand the infinite dangers of being adrift at sea with few provisions. Within the frame tale are the grand themes of spirituality and religion, self-perception, family, the nature of humans, animals and what constitutes truth.

In the latter part of the novel, Pi attempts to dispel the fear that is building up in him by anthropomorphizing it, calling his fear a "person" with whom he wants no association. The discussion Pi has with Richard Parker when they are both temporarily blind was a moment of epiphany. This best illustrates how Pi eventually considered Richard Parker not as a tiger but as a companion with human traits—including the ability to carry on a conversation. This alternate reality is perfectly conveyed in the movie version by Director Ang Lee (2012), as the phantasmagoric journey of the odd couple finally ended with rescue in Mexico.

Pi sees his faith as a manifestation of God's love, although he suffers powerful negative emotions: anger, despair, perhaps even hatred for the Frenchman who attempted to kill him. Instead of despairing over these challenges, however, he chooses to focus on those experiences that reaffirm his faith, such as the appearance of a school of fish for his food or the arrival of a storm for his drink. He pondered (Martel, 2001):

"Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it was so hard to love."

The Prophecy of a Personal Legend and of a Paradise on earth in *The Alchemist* and *Out of Africa* were the outcomes of the voyages taken by the fictional Santiago and the factual Karen. Their travel stories evolved into an Odyssey as they encountered perils they must survive, both outwardly and inwardly like Pi and the tiger. Their voyages transformed them, enabling them to realize the vicissitudes of their lives and to make a resolution that they must always abide by what is true.

Their enlightened vision also transformed their travels, elevating them to the nobility of a ritual and metaphor—a Pilgrimage, paying homage and seeking verification of what is good. Travel in these literary works enabled me to see beyond the places and people encountered and engaged me towards the perspective and philosophy that makes life awesome in its deeply spiritual serendipities.

E. References

- (2021, September 11). Retrieved September 11, 2021, from Citizendium: en.citizendium.org
- Blixen, K. (1937). *Out of Africa*. London: Putnam.
- Coelho, P. (1988). *The Alchemist*. New York: HarperCollines.
- Dann, G. (1999). Writing out the Tourist in Sapce and Time. *Annals of Tourism Research Vol 26 No. 1*, 159-187.
- Glaser, E. (1989). The Self-Reflexive Traveler: Paul Theroux on the Art of Travel and Travel Writing. *The Centennial Review Vol. 33 No. 3*, 193-206.
- Italy, J. o.-b.-D. (2017). Jennifer Laing, Warwick Frost. *Tourism Management Vol 62*, 110-119.
- Krist, G. (1993). Ironic Journeys: Travel Writings in the Age of Tourism. *The Hudson Reviw Vol. 45 No. 4*, 593-601.
- Krummrich, P. (2001). Dreaming, Going, Writing: A Three-part Course on Travel Writing. *CEA Critic Vol. 64 No.1*, 21-24.
- Madelene Blaer, W. F. (2020). The Future of Travel Writing: Interactivity, Personal Branding and Power. *Tourism Management*, 1-10.
- Madelene McWha, W. F. (2018). Travel Writers and the Nature of Self: Essentialism, Transformation and Online Construction. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 14-24.
- Magowan, R. (2001). Writing Travel. *Southwest Review Vol. 86 No. 2/3*, 174-185.
- Martel, Y. (2001). *Life of Pi*. Canada: Knopf.
- Mewshaw, M. (2005). Travel, Travel Writing and the Literature of Travel. *The South Central Modern Language Association Vol. 22 No. 2*, 2-10.
- Mikkonen, K. (2007). The Narrative is Travel Metaphor. *Narrative Vol. 5 Number 3*, 286-305.
- Monga, L. (1996). Travel and Travel Writing: An Historical Overview of Hodoepories. *Annali d'Italianistica Vol. 14*, 6-54.
- Murphy, D. (1992). Reflections on Travel Writing. *The Wilson Quarterly Vol. 16 No. 3*, 122-129.
- Ocasio, R. (2013). Personal Reflections on Travel Writing as 21st Century Scholars in the Information Age. *South Atlantic Review*, 31-34.
- Schriber, M. S. (1987). Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self Discovery. *American Literature Vol 59 No. 2*, 257-267.
- Witold Gomrowicz, J. O. (2007). Travelling is Being and Seeing: National Identity . *Russian Literature Vol 62 Issue 4*, 453-468.
- Young, P. H. (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. London: Cambridge University Press.