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“Antivoyages- Reflections on women travellers’ writings”.

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Antivoyages` Reflections on women travellers' writings

Srilata Ravi

Travel literature is as old as writing and yet there cannot be another genre that is more difficult to define. Adams (1983) claims that the travel narrative as a genre is as amorphous as the novel and is continuously evolving.¹ More recently, James Clifford (1997) makes a distinction between travel discourse and the narrow conception of literary travel born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He argues that the notion of "literary travel" was conceived against the "emerging ethnography" on one hand, and on the other against tourism. According to him the literary tradition of "sophisticated travel" whose death has been mourned by Fussel (1980) and Urbain (1991) has found a new lease of life in the works of Theroux, Naipaul, Chatwin, Moravia, etc. There is no doubt that the ambiguities and questions that the genre raises makes it all the more challenging for the literary critic and permits him/her to explore a gamut of possible issues while working with travel writings. Questions pertaining to the role of the narrator, authorial authority, travel and tourism, as well as those pertaining to gender make us aware of the unique position that travel writings hold in creative expression.

In James Clifford's words (1997: 64), travel is predominantly western dominated, strongly male and upper middle class. Said (1979), in his seminal work on European writings (mostly male authored) about the Other, has shown how discourses of Orientalism have dominated works that write up a different country or evoke different cultures, and have made us aware of the ideological features of the writing process.² Interestingly, recent studies undertaken by Kaplan (1994), Pratt (1992) and Mills (1991) have opened up a large comparative topic that looks into how women travelled, wrote and perceived the Orient. However, it has been observed that when it comes to dealing with concerns related to gender issues and cultural bias, such literary excursions could become effective power trips. Those believing in racial superiority however implicitly communicated when writing about the Other or those wishing to provide a feminist perspective, liberal or radical, of the Other culture run the risk of imposing blanket labels on representations in travel literature.

"Nowhere perhaps as much as in the field of travel writing, in fact is the fundamental ambiguity of "representation" more apparent. To represent the world is political as well as an aesthetic-cognitive activity. It is an effort both to put something alien into the words of a shared language for someone else at home and to put oneself in the Other's place abroad in order to speak on its behalf. One is at the same time *representator* and *representative*, reporter and legislator. And in all

that one writes one also inevitably (re)presents, however imperfectly, oneself.” (Porter 1993: 14).

Given the heterogeneous nature of the travel narrative’s relationship with other forms of expression and the various components cultural, linguistic, psychological and political that contribute to the creative processes of a travel text, I have decided to focus specifically on European women’s travel writings on the Orient for the purposes of this paper. I do not intend to offer a survey or to attempt to circumscribe women’s writings into a genre. My investigations will be centred on *L’Antivoyage* of Muriel Cerf (Mercure de France 1970)³ and the objective of the study is to look at the complexities of the creative processes that have produced the text.

Gouvier in *Without a Guide* laments (Gouvier 1996:xii) that travel literature shelves of most bookstores carry nearly nine books by men to every one by women in an age where the tourism industry and accelerated transport have multiplied possibilities and facilitated travel for the “fairer sex”. Even though, in recent years, the domain of critical scholarship on women’s travel texts has seen an increase in the number of studies undertaken, it must be mentioned that these studies are centred around women travellers and their writings in the 18th and 19th centuries. Critical discourse concerning contemporary women’s travel writings remains a vastly unexplored domain.⁴ In a preliminary section I’ll be presenting existing critical approaches to the question and textual /ideological conventions that have defined women travellers’ writings before I take up a detailed analysis of *L’Antivoyage* in the second section.

I

Women’s travel accounts can be framed within evolving patterns of travel literature, gender specific constraints (ex: gender specific textual strategies) and historically specific limitations of race and class⁵. A feminist response could look at the field as a unified whole reduced to one parameter: gender. In proto-feminist readings texts could be read as a display of strong role models who have managed to escape patriarchal structures. Critics have discovered that women travellers were obliged to conform, masquerade, or rebel discreetly within a set of “normatively, male definitions and experiences”. Furthermore, a biological approach could be used to deny allegations by male critics that these accounts were falsehoods or exaggerations. It could be possible to treat these accounts as an alternative history to patriarchal discourse. It is hardly surprising that most feminist critics have tended to concentrate on the Victorian period stressing on the feminine qualities of the accounts in order to provide an alternative history of Victorian women. Sarah Mills (1991) in advocating a feminist Foucauldian model argues that the texts are not different because they are female authored but because of their differences in production and reception. In her case studies she explores the constraining

factors in the writing process within the discursive formation of circulating discourses: texts are produced in situations affected by textual, economic, social, political, historical and personal factors and they are read according to the discursive structures circulating in society. (Mills 1991:108-122)

The travel narrative (male or female authored) is dominated by textual constraints. Most travel accounts draw close inter-textual connections with other travel accounts to serve as frameworks for their writings. Travel accounts have a distinct narrative figure. Pratt (1992) in her dialectic and historicized approach to travel writings distinguishes 2 kinds of narrators: "the manners and customs figure" and the: "sentimental figure" ⁶. The most common narrative structure is the adventure narrative dynamizing the masculinist ideology of the Empire. Of course women writers cannot adopt the male "hero" model with facility. Sarah Mills (1991) in her case studies shows how women travellers disclaimed heroics with humorous comments or they provided details of the difficulties of travel. Narrative incidents such as the panorama are also a part of the textual structure. Both Mills and Pratt recall Foucault's work on the panopticon when they analyse the act of describing landscape as an act of mastery over it⁷. Furthermore, Mills argues that women were not given the same discursive possibilities as male authors. (Mills 1991: 77-79) Women's texts were supposed to be amateurish and not scientific and authoritative. In an analysis of Lady Anne Blunt's *Pilgrimage*, Ali Behdad shows how "in the gendered field of orientalist power relations where women were either excluded or made to become men's traveling appendages, a women's representation of the exotic Other had to be authorised by a male orientalist." (Ali Behdad 1994: 95). Moreover the critics agree that travellers wrote only if they travelled to well-established places, or to non- places or if they chose a difficult means of transport. Mills argues that these conventions present masculine narratorial positions and descriptive patterns with which women writers have had to negotiate when they wrote their accounts. (Mills 1991: 86)

Both Pratt and Mills have shown that in travel narratives where women writers have drawn on textual conventions, discourses of femininity intersect with the discursive structures of Orientalism. In the late 19th and early 20th century discourses of femininity set out roles for women largely situated in the private sphere and hence Mills points out that in travel accounts women (while venturing into the public sphere) wrote mostly about the private sphere⁸. Pratt in her study of Flora Tristan and Maria Graham (Pratt 1992: 163) concludes that some women in contrast to objectivist ways of gathering knowledge based on static relations between seer and seen , construct themselves as aggressive interactive seekers of knowledge. Graham's account, she says, display the acquisition of knowledge as a participatory function from an infantile rather than a patriarchal position. Another feature of their accounts that Pratt earmarks is their elaborate construction of "feminotopias"-episodes presenting "idealized

worlds of female autonomy, empowerment and pleasure" (Pratt 1992: 167). In these texts, Pratt observes the tendencies of the "exploratresses" to "emplot quests of self-realisation and fantasies of social harmony" as against those displayed by male capitalist vanguardists who "tend to emplot their accounts as quests for achievement fuelled by fantasies of transformation and dominance"(ibid: 168).

Do such conventions continue to define contemporary travel writings? In an interesting observation, Pratt⁹ claims that the "monarch of all I survey scenes", inherent in the colonial discourse of domination and possession, are still dominant in postcolonial travel writings of such celebrities as Theroux, Naipaul, Moravia etc. She argues that in these writings one notices that cityscapes are created around grotesque and ugly sights and in contrast the evocation of rural landscapes has no meaning. She concludes that these post-colonial writers continue to claim authoritativeness for their visions like their colonial predecessors. Esthetification remains a key element but they discern aesthetic opposites and their impulse is to condemn what they see, trivialise it and disassociate themselves from it. Such continuities in textual conventions are also present in women's travel writings. A glance at the collection of contemporary travel narratives in *Without a guide-Contemporary Women's Travel adventures*, (Gouvier Katherine (ed.,) Minnesota, Hungry Mind Press, 1994), reveals how women are still a captive to the patriarchal narratorial conventions that characterised women's travel narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Apologetic prefaces, disclaiming of heroics, insistence on difficulties of travel, authentication by male "orientalist" experts etc., continue to be some of the regular features of these texts. In the '70s when *L'Antivoyage (AV)* was written, one is speaking deep in the post-colonial era of underdevelopment when degradation and counter commodification characterise the 'realist version' of post-colonial representations of the Other. The imperialist tropes continue to dominate but they are transposed into another historical context where the aesthetic key is modified. Written out of alienation, it would seem that the white (wo)man's lament is also the lament of the Intellectual and Writer, a reaction to the degradation of travel because of mass tourism and the loss of 'true' travel narratives. While Mills' and Pratt's theoretical models provide fairly satisfying frames to study 'Orientalist' texts of women travellers, I would agree with Porter (1991) when he says that a strict interpretation of the discourse theory gives rise to the "implication that there is no way out of cultural solipsism". In fact Porter (1991) proposes that the psychoanalytical theory is a particularly interesting approach to the questions of travel if we think of travel as "a promise to fantasise the satisfaction of drives that are one way or another denied us at home." (Porter 1991: 9) At the same time, travel is also driven by transgressive impulses since all borders are associated with taboos. Porter argues that the psychoanalytical approach permits the critic to look at the idiosyncratic fantasies of each writer apart from reading the culturally and historically specific ones.

According to him each individual traveller makes “specific psychic investments” on their individual journeys. Porter claims that travel in a foreign country “stimulates free association of a kind that is not reproducible in other ways.” (Porter 1991: 13). While Figueira (1994) in her study of the Western emplotment of India quite strongly rejects the master narrative of Orientalist criticism¹⁰, Porter is quick to add that the psychoanalysis is problematic since it is ahistorical and apolitical. Porter in his study does not include women writers because he feels he would have to theorise differently.

II

L'Antivoyage

Conventional scholarship on travel writing (mostly male authored) has been celebratory or documentary. More recently, studies have attempted to examine the artistic and intellectual dimensions of the travel narrative. Whatever be the approach, I believe that travel writings cannot be circumscribed into a monolithic genre. Motivations for travel are complex and one of the results of deconstructionist accounts of the recent decade has been to show that differences between entities are based on a repression of differences within entities. (Porter 1991: 7). For those (men and women) who work within traditional framework of travel writing, travelling in an era where science and technology have effaced distances and trivialised differences, becomes a deceptive exercise and they tend to imply that there is nothing worth travelling for. Jacinta Mathos¹¹ affirms that as a reaction against the perceived sameness of the contemporary world and the commodification of travel, writers have had to revise conventions of travel and travel writing. It is this perspective that accentuates my study of Cerf's narrative. The very title of the book *L'Antivoyage* is in denial-it's prefix brings into question the trope of travel and all the conventions associated with travel and travel writing. The title could signify a directional shift as in an inward voyage of self-exploration as opposed to an outward voyage of geographical discovery. Even though such a theme is common to several travel narratives specially those written by women, in this paper, my aim will be to look at the prefix *anti* as that which heralds a transgressive activity. In my reading of Muriel Cerf's *L'Antivoyage*, I propose to explore how Cerf's writing infringes upon the notion of travel writing as a literary convention, how she attempts to subvert the discourse of Orientalism and how she negotiates the discourse of femininity. My objective in trying to locate the *Orientalist, the Woman and the Traveller* in the text is to reveal how Cerf's creative processes, on one hand, refute the very desire to transgress in the geographical sense and on the other, produce an alternative language that challenges the idea of representation as the mirror effect of the symbolic order by daring it to go *behind* the screen of representation.

Is there an Orientalist in the text?

L'Antivoyage foregrounds a culturally specific female narrator in her twenties hailing from an upper middle class French family of the “neuvième arrondissement”. Written in the present, sentences fluctuate between short, organised entries that punctuate various ‘real’ moments of travel (arrival, departure, date) placing the narrative in a dynamic gear and lengthy paragraphs made up of extended sentences that cumulate a series of impressionistic images in a static mode. In form, the travel narrative follows a conventional division into 4 sections that represent the geographical itinerary covered during the voyage. Bombay, Nepal, Calcutta, Sikkim, Bangkok, Penang, Singapour. Bali, “étrange bout du monde” is the elusive final destination (it doesn’t make to a chapter status). Cityscapes featuring a Bombay (“une marmite d’enfer”), a Kathmandou (“imphotographiable”), Calcutta (“mer de dégeulis”) and Singapour (“paradis artificiel”) dominate. The exotic sub titles notwithstanding (“Ras Lila”, “Sweet Rains”, and the “aventure ramayanesque”), it’s the degradation and cultural commodification that is encoded in images such as “les Pommes frites de l’Armée du Salut” that feature in these descriptions.

The introduction begins with the classic juxtaposition of the Occident and the Orient in binary oppositional terms that extend the Orientalist imagery into post-colonial writings. The description that foregrounds aesthetic opposites (ugly statues instead of divine goddesses) subverts the conventional trope of a male Orient Vs a feminized Other by juxtaposing a feminized Occident and a feminized Orient: “tendres voyageuses, des poux et des étoiles dans leurs cheveux” make up a feminized juvenile Occident while “les enfants d’Asie “ and “les déesses védiques dégringolées” make up a feminized decadent Orient. It is interesting to note here that the Orientalist trope of the Orient as infantile continues to pervade the description but in this comparison it informs both the Orient and the Occident.

In the second introductory section, the narrator subverts the notion of travel as a geographical transgression of boundaries by admitting that her travel around the globe had already commenced in the confines of her rose-garden in Vendée where she lived out her fantasies to become a “victime de toutes les maladies du rêve, fièvre –passion-paranoïa”.

“Aller se balader du côté de la Grande Muraille de Chine ou de la mer de Java, je l’avais déjà fait cent fois. Il s’agissait seulement de vérifier.”

In the ensuing paragraph writing “hallucinates” and the unreal of the dreams becomes the “real” for the narrator as she sets out to verify its authenticity by undertaking a geographical displacement. This idea contradicts a preceding image that signals the exotic as an illusory quest:

“J’ai cru qu’elles étaient à moi toutes les Schéhérazades de mes puantes mille et une nuits, j’ai essayé de les retenir par le bord de leur sari ourlé de queues de comètes, je les ai senties palpiter comme des papillons captifs, j’ai ouvert les mains il n’y restait plus qu’un peu de poudre micacée.” (AV12)

The brusque swing between fantasy and materiality that informs the introduction announces the tone of the main text that defines the geographical itinerary of the narrator in a setting that is chimerical and confuses the lines between the real Truth and the imagined Truth.

Post-colonial Asia is depicted in the stereotypical imagery of a diseased society with its caste systems, where tradition and hierarchy have bound its inhabitants to immobility and decay. The representations of cityscapes recreate “ville fourmillière, “ville termitière” and “ville anti-musée” continuing the “panaromic” descriptive tradition of the imperialist discourse. The representations of Bombay, Kathmandou, and Calcutta are illustrative examples of Orientalist descriptions that posit a panoramic view revealing mastery over a citiscape, with the difference that language looks for aesthetic opposites to portray a grotesque city and irony translates the psychological distance that the narrator maintains with the Other. However, it is the ironic observation of the “malentendu Kafakaïen” suffered by the European traveller that appears to subvert the orientalist tone of the text:

“En voulant refuser toute forme de société organisée, ils tombent à pieds joints dans les plus hiérarchisées, les plus frustrantes, les plus sclérosantes du monde, celles de l’Inde avec ses castes...” (AV119)

This pattern of “subversion from within,” announced in the two introductory sections, that obscures oppositions and confounds the real with the hallucinated, is repeated incessantly through the narrative. In the narrative episodes describing the passive multitude awaiting the arrival of the Nepalese King, the description of the crowds denigrates and satirises the idea that “tout est sacré en Asie” and imprisons the inhabitants in the Orientalist cliché that pluralizes the masses into “tous ces yeux rigolards, confiants, mystifiés et heureux”. The crowd disconcerts and frightens but more than the numbers it is their confidence that perturbs the narrator. The account of the appearance of the Nepalese child goddess and the crowd’s reaction to her presence is also an illustrative example of post-colonial Orientalism. In a description that neither exoticizes nor eroticizes, nor attempts to understand or analyse the Other, the violence of the imagery leaves an indelible impression.

“Rien de religieux dans ce personnage mommifié, empaillé, malsain et pitoyable, cette déesse à la peau de papier mâché, ratatinée, parcheminée, fantôme atrophié prêt à s’effriter comme un squelette oublié dans une cave.” (AV141)

The Nepalese are catapulted backwards into the Middle Ages and encapsulated in an imagery that combines images that evoke disease and decadence. It’s the narrator’s violent reaction to the spectacle that surprises the reader and her subsequent desire to drink in Asian wisdom, deprive herself of ‘her rationality’ and become an idiotic and a happy zombie that renders the writing hallucinatory. Does she desire to live in the state of blissful inertia or is her writing conforming itself to the binary oppositional distinctions that contrasts a thinking modern west with an irrational chaotic, multitudinous, pre-modern East? The description and evocation of

the ambiguous relationship that the narrator has with the 6 year old Nepalese Moumdalou is yet another attempt at recreating the exotically different Asia. Moumdalou physically represents the half child–half man profile that defines the Oriental in Western imagery.

The introductory section with its exaggerated and satirical emphasis on the eroticism of Hindu divinities is manifestly an attempt to distance the text from the Orientalist discourse. Irony and sarcasm, the use of aesthetic opposites and denigration of the post-colonial tourist's desire to 'capture' the Other (through the lens of their Nikon) and commodify it dominate the narrative endlessly. While such a tone clearly undermines the Orientalist discourse of possession, one could argue that it ignores the fact that the degradation and deprivation is in fact an imperialist legacy.

In a more radical move away from Orientalist leanings, the Orientalist narrative of the viewing subject does give way at times to the ironic portrayal of the traveller as an object to be viewed and judged.

“Me voilà de nouveau sur la scène, décidément en Asie on est acteur, et premier rôle encore, dès l'arrivée. Tout le monde attend la merveille, s'étonne de votre façon de vous gratter le nez, de vous laver les pieds, et vous regarde avec un mélange d'adoration dévorante, de peur, d'ironie et de ravissement.” (AV 92)

Actually what subverts the Orientalism in the creative process is the destabilising of the notion of rationality that is intrinsic to the colonialist discourse: Cerf's writing blurs the binary opposition between rational and irrational. In one instance, a sudden foray into the introspective mode explaining the “rationality” of the racist discourse subverts an Orientalist narrative that opposes the author's Cartesian individualistic and reflecting self and the passive, idolising Nepalese crowds. It is this contact with the unnerving passivity of the Asian multitudes that she terms “un moment degeuelasse (enfin arrivé) où par peur ou instinct on devient raciste, bestial.” (AV 139) At the same time the imagery of violence and aggression associated with the “rational Cartesian progress” and the “irrational Oriental immobility” that effaces binary oppositions and reduces the concept of “rationality” to a linguistic construct.

“Devant ce formidable déploiement de force d'inertie, mon côté français, cartésien, emmerdant, individualiste et agressif m'explose à la gueule comme un pétard inattendu.” (AV 139)

In another instance she critiques the “rationality” of the Western discourse, which fails to explain the irrationality of “les aplats éclatants” de Gauguin to its rational “Cartesian” public, whereas the Tibetans (implicitly described as irrational) are capable of discovering “spontaneous harmony” in chaos without destroying “l'ordre du monde”. The logocentrism of Western logic has been subverted in a writing that confuses the differences between binary oppositions of the symbolic: confusion and order, harmony and discord.

“L'harmonie spontanée, éclate, triomphe dans le tablier de cette Tibétaine, avec des désaccords de couleurs pas complémentaires du tout, ni nuances, ni en

camafieu, mais violettes et pures comme celles des rizières et du ciel.....et tout ça parfait et ne dérange pas l'ordre du monde- alors qu'il faut toute une torture intellectuelle pour faire accepter à nos bons petits cartésiens les aplats éclatants de Gaugin, ici la première paysanne a trouvé ça toute seule." (AV 100)

One could conclude that what actually does corrupt the apparent Orientalism is language itself that is characterised as illusory and misleading. Frequent allusions to dream-like state of mind, hallucinatory and drug induced experiences, feverish visions and anguish at the inability to connect with reality that inter-space the descriptions disrupt the authenticity of the order created by language and decentre the truth that language "reflects". Evocations of sensual activities of eating and cleaning, the constant references to corporeal actions such as "se savonner", "prendre des douches" etc are the only events that remind the narrator of her material existence (AV 50). Otherwise everything is an allegory, a dream, un "conte d'exotisme bâtarde". The frequent recourse to corporeality and material description of female sexuality and the image of the voyage as a "retour au ventre de la maman universelle" (AV 86) makes us wonder if there is a woman in the text.

Is there a woman in the text?

In women's writings, descriptions are characterised by extravagance and excess. Language is metaphoric and its meaning is pluralized. Unstructured and uncontrolled sentences are made up of phrases and clauses that pile and spill over on to another idea to display creative abundance, playful excess and the physical materiality of the female body. (Morris 123) "In the Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous associates a *feminine* text with subversiveness. Cixous would see the refusal of a single identity, the attempt to bring language close to the bodily materiality of emotion and to capture in syntax and in rhythm the libidinal drive as part of a feminine writing practice. (Morris 123) Cerf's writing, her choice of syntax, her use of metaphors and her refusal to imprison herself within single identifiable parameters comes close to this form of writing practice. The choice of the present tense is significant because it gives the writing its force and spontaneity and at the same time destroys linear temporality characteristic of a travel narrative. The slide of pronouns between "je" and "tu" makes it impossible to pin down the differences between the multifarious "locations" of the Self.

Despite the various heterosexual interludes of the narrator, it is the fantasised relationship between the narrator and her female "companion" Coulino that dominates the narrative. Travel transforms into a "Carte du Tendre" taking the traveller and her imaginary companion figuratively and culturally into another time zone. Cerf explores new travel conventions that defy time, while at the same time she makes an ironic comment on the conventional patriarchal traveller and his female travelling companion by "creating" a female companion for the narrator. The privileging of the "lesbian" relationship feminizes the

narrative extending it beyond the conventional parameters of the patriarchal discourse on female sexuality.

“... Et on va s’offrir une dernière java où tu veux, toutes les deux sans Marcel ni Moumdalou ni personne. En amoureuses, en lesbiennes, en échappées de pensionnat...” (AV188)

In the *L’Antivoyage*, the split in the narrator’s identity into the real and the “fictive” is a narratorial technique that works, on one hand against the convention of travel writing, and on the other, it emplots a novel relationship that serves both as a reason to travel (to transgress social taboos and psychological limits) and the objective of travel (to experiment with writing).

“ D’une façon générale je suis sur le chemin d’un flip complet et je m’y laisse glisser gaillardement... (AV 76)

The “illusory” nature of Couline’s portrayal renders other feminist interpretations possible too. The narrative begins with the young narrator (in her twenties) setting off on her “voyage of verification” with her school friend Rita. As the narrative progresses, Rita fades away mysteriously from the narrative episodes and a new-found “petite Anglaise” encountered en route to Bombay becomes her “indispensable compagne de voyage”. A very precise description of Couline, her allure and her gait reveal an obvious physical attraction that the narrator feels for this “sublime créature”. The imagery used to “conjure” this figure (“apparition”, “Libellule”, “un petit visage rond et , porcelainé et si intact qu’on aurait peur d’abîmer la peau en y touchant”) and who appears like a “condensé de brume sur la Tamise”, lend a light, fragile and almost unreal quality to this character from the beginning of her insertion into the narrative. Moreover the use of the name as a “common noun” un couline gives further credence to the fact that Couline is more a concept than a real person. The split between the real Muriel and the imagined Couline as a fantasised perception and mirror image of the narrator produces a series of images that could arguably locate the woman in the text in the following terms: travel, as an exploration of the body and as an “exhilarating and not debilitating return to the womb”, the Self, as an androgynous split that ensures a multiplicity of expressions, and creation, as an idea of female narcissistic pleasure that defies a patriarchal discourse of female sexuality.

The recourse to the imagery of twins packed in like a puzzle, and allusions to their synchronised movements and blended breath further intensify the trope of travel as a reassuring return to the womb.

“Couline recroquevillons –nous en forme de jumeaux..., ne laissons pas de place entrer nos genoux...en sécurité....tout devient aussi simple que de s’endormir encastrées l’une dans l’autre comme un puzzle... (AV 86)

At the narrative level, *Le duc's* pursuit of the Muriel and Coulino's pursuit of a wayward fiancé separate the two women geographically. But, Cerf's writing brings the two together as Coulino becomes an inseparable part of the narrator's self-perception. Coulino is her feminine Other and her travel companion with whom she is undertaking a trip into the "la grande nuit maternelle".

"...on s'enroule dans la couverture qu'elle a montée de la chambre, dormir nous allons en plein dans la grande nuit maternelle" (AV91)

The return to the womb imagery is not "debilitating" but exhilarating, it does not symbolise confinement and fear but liberation and joy as "la grande nuit maternelle" gets transformed into "la douce nuit tropicale" that is to welcome the narrator/Coulino on their "moto étincelante comme un char de feu." (Return to the pre-oedipal for feminists like Kristeva is return to a language that is pre-symbolic). This imagery does not conjure an essentialist idea of female writing but that of a new form of desire and representation.¹²

The narrator frequently refers to herself as "le truc androgyne", "le page, léger et charmant" (AV 61). Mary Jacobus (*in Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p39), while referring to Virginia Wolfe's comments on androgyny writes that, "to recognise the split is not a naïve attempt to transcend that which transcends gender and culture, but rather as a harmonising culture, a simultaneous enactment of desire and repression by which the split is closed with an essentially Utopian vision of undivided consciousness." According to her, the repressive male/female opposition gives way to a mind that can be conceived as heterogeneous and open to the play of difference.

"He was the most beautiful of a woman, he was the most majestic of women, he was radiant with the majesty of a woman....
And more beautiful than a young man more beautiful than a knight of faith, she was noble with the power of a hero...." (Cixious in Susan Sellers (ed.) 1988: 44)

I am quoting Cixious from her essay on "Tancredi Continues" where she shows how gender identities are not fixed to one pole or other but mediate between them. Moving away from the doom-ridden concept of difference as opposition, difference is redefined not as male versus female-not as biologically constituted –but as multiplicity, ambiguity and heterogeneity which is that of textuality itself.¹³

This is true of Cerf's writing. While she refers to her androgynous split (references to herself as *Le duc's* page and to her own flat chestedness) Tendi and *Le duc* are also not represented as "masculine" in the conventional sense of the word. Muriel, the narrator feels as much desire for Tendi as she does for Coulino. (See AV158, 188). In an inebriated expression of desire for Tendi she says:

"J'ai un peu le vertige devant la brûlante histoire de désir qui s'ouvre comme une crevasse sous mes pieds...Envie de sombrer, de faire naufrage, de saborder mon

navire, de me laisser flotter sur l'océan accrochée à un bout de bois, légère comme un bouchon." (AV 158)

The feelings of desire for her exotic Tendi and the tender sentiments (almost of incest) that she feels for her travelling "papa," *Le duc*, alternate with the "flambées de passion" that overwhelm her when she is with Coulino. Multiplicity, ambiguity and heterogeneity inform the sexuality/textuality of the narrative.

The narrative refers on several occasions to the "admiration réciproque" (see AV 194) that the narrator and Coulino feel for each other.

"Combien de fois ai-je goûté le plaisir... de nous voir toutes les deux dans un miroir, narcisses, jumelles, complémentaires..." (AV 195).

"Jamais je ne comprendrai les flambées de l'amour féminins.
C'est comme si on tendait réciproquement un miroir..." (AV 196)

The narcissistic woman has enjoyed some acceptance as a point of resistance to appropriation to male desire and to the phallogocentric discourse that reduces women to man-minus denying sexual difference. I agree with Jacobus that the ultimate function of the narcissistic woman is to defend against the formlessness of female sexuality. In Freud's theory of desire, there can be only desire, the male that the woman mimics. The image of a narcissistic woman thus subverts the male intolerance of female self-sufficiency (Jacobus 1986:106).

Is there an ideal traveller in the text?

The distinction between genuine travel and vulgar tourism is a frequently occurring trope in *L'Antivoyage*.¹⁴ While the traveller/explorer moves towards the risks of the unknown, the tourist moves towards the security of the cliché. Jean Didier Urbain in *L'idiot du voyage-Histoire de touristes*, Paris, Plon, 1991 spells out the differences between the ideal traveller and the tourist.

"C'est ce vécu fantastique du voyage qui permet précisément au voyageur de s'élever au stade quasi démiurgique du Grand Témoin; ou, du moins, d'en revendiquer le prestige du rôle. C'est là ce qu'on peut nommer une constante de position du voyageur par rapport au monde. Elle fait de lui un observateur supérieur, un découvreur, un *révélateur du réel*. Le touriste, lui, ne peut être qu'un spectateur; et le tourisme, qu'une parodie d'exploration qui ne révèle rien." (Urbain 1991: 57)

The narrator in *L'Antivoyage* seems to be reaffirming the same position whenever she uses the 'tourist' imagery". In her ironic account of her stopover in the Middle East she says:

"J'ai raté les Pyramides comme on rate El Monte Blanca, trop tôt au trop tard ou du mauvais côté de l'appareil." (AV 31).

Further on she denigrates the “lies in kodak colour” to distance herself from those tourists and “journalistes bardés de Nikkon”, and their false realities: “Ce qui reste sur une pellicule photo d’une glandouille népalaise n’est plus que du delavé...” (AV 95).

The first section of the book is centred around two class-polarised hotel tropes: The five star and the Salvation Army hostel. As the narrator and narrative shifts between these two poles of modern travel, the first section comes to an end with the inevitable escape into the open spaces from the confines of the closed spaces that define Bombay and the Indian metropolis. This section is also characterised by the narrator’s double relationship with *Le duc* (the hotel Tajmahal) and Coulino (Salvation Army). Her eventual decision to flee Bombay with Coulino for “un rendez-vous d’amour” parallels the narrator’s acknowledgement that the only escape from “quatre murs et des angles droits” (symbolising the constraints of the post-modern traveller) is “hasch” (an alternative language). The narrative is dotted with the descriptions of the “étrange et ahurissant Nulle Part” that alternatively attract, horrify and seduce travellers. The text takes the reader on a tour of ‘les oasis grandioses du tourisme international’ thus expounding the complex situation of the narrator, a frustrated vagabond European, and the intricacies of a language that is unable to distinguish the real from the imagined.

The banality and the facility of the pseudo tourist places that she visits with *Le duc* leads the narrator to experience the frustration of a “voyage impossible”, (un voyage barricadé (AV 211)). She realises that there was nothing left but to explore *Le duc* (“la seule chose à explorer-le duc.” AV 220). She becomes apprehensively aware that her real voyage will be the one that will take her back: “Maintenant, si je reviens, je sais que je vais être bien plus malheureuse qu’avant...” (AV 223), for she cannot come to terms with the menace of Europe that she describes as “le ras-lila, le plus démoniaque, le plus ironique qui soit.”

The deception of travel as a voyage of adventure and discovery (see AV 246) coupled with the anxiety of return (see AV 249/251) to the haunting smells of Paris, suddenly pervades the writing. Muriel had set out to verify her dreams but reality (“le voyage-un formidable miroir aux alouettes”) has destroyed the illusions of her youth.” (AV 246) But in an ironic twist, the narrator draws our attention to the fact that it is not the “geographical truth” that has destroyed her illusions but the physiological reality (des microbes d’un millième de micron) of her physical sickness that is the real cause of her failure.

“J’étais révoltée contre la plus criante des injustices: comment les microbes... pouvaient-ils bousiller aussi complètement un être humain résolu à aller au bout du monde et de lui même.” (AV 248)

By deliberately adding that: “Après tout j’avais créé moi-même cette maladie”, she questions the Truth of her hallucinated deception. She splits herself into her physical state of ‘égout’ that parallels her false sense of deception and her essential being, her “souffle vital” that

clamours for another excursion to Indonesia that appears as a promise of a real 'voyage'. This split also parallels the identity split between Muriel (égout- the material) and Coulino (souffle vital- the ephemeral). Unable to achieve her solitary, romantic travel in Sikkim and Nepal, she believes that Bali would be the ideal destination. (The ultimate reunion of Muriel and Coulino; the material and the chimera.)

While the continuity of imperialist discourse in the text condemns mass tourism, trivialises other cityscapes, laments the death of literary travel, and tends to perceive travel as a voyage barricadé, a new form of expression that blurs the frontiers between the real and the unreal, between the rational and the irrational, is able to recreate the joys of discovery that travel can offer by keeping the destination forever elusive. (In the end what Muriel, the narrator experiences is probably a drug-induced trip, hallucinating her arrival in Bali.)

"Ce soir, tous les esprits de Bali hantent la chambre 831, au huitième étage du Hilton de Singapour où je m'endors sous l'oeil inquiet de Lo qui me voit glisser dans un abîme vertigineux..." (AV 304)

The narrative signals the death of travel as discovery, as adventure, as truth, as exploration. It negates travel as a spatio-temporal displacement but it re-ascertains the metaphor of writing as travel.¹⁵ The text reflects the narrator's difficulties in trying to encode in language her own experience. The two dimensional nature of the written word is inadequate to express her perceptions. In her writing, words take on an artificial incomplete, restrictive life of their own as they find themselves accumulating but never reaching the centre of truth. In an implicit parallel between travel and writing, her voyage "barricadé" becomes her écriture barricadée. The transgression of syntax and lack of control over imagery reveal writing's frustration to transgress the existing Law of the written word and to find a new medium of expression.

The narrator is aspiring for a utopian three-dimensional representation that would not just be visual but evoke all the senses and transcend space and time. Her frustration stems from the realisation that her present language is inadequate to represent her perceptions.

"Tout ça, impossible à obtenir avec les deux dimensions des caractères imprimés."
(AV166)

"Au fond les mots ne marchent pas, il faudrait coller dans un livre un tableau, avec des couleurs orgasmiques, une musique comme l'hymne à la joie de Beethoven, ou écrire un poème avec un langage nouveau, une langue d'extra-terrestre, frotter le papier d'essences appropriées au sentiment qu'on veut faire naître..." (AV 166)

In fact the use of inter-textual references defy the idea of chronological time and two-dimensional space. A reference to Rimbaud's "paletot" in the introductory section sets the tone of the narrative and is an obvious allusion to his "Bateau ivre" written when he was 17. Rimbaud's efforts to discover a new poetic expression was closely linked to his experience with drugs and alcohol. The narrator's youth and the frequent mention of her drug induced hallucinations and reveries make Cerf's *L'Antivoyage* appear almost like a "pastiche" of

Rimbaud's life and work. Further on, she refers to her "excursion sentimentale" as "La Carte du Tendre". The allusion takes the narrative further back to the 17th century allegorical map of lover's sentiments designed by Mlle Scudéry and her entourage. The reference to the mythical "voyage au Cythère", "idyllic island of love and pleasure" parallels her own voyage through the sentiments that attach her to *Le duc*, Tendi and Coulino. The intertextual references also contribute in the splitting of the narrative into a real voyage and an illusionary one.

Conclusion

Is there an ideal language to write about travel?

For lack of another appropriate metaphor, I would say that a travel narrative (male or female authored) in an era that calls into question real travel is more aptly one that recounts how writing travels. Referring once again to Porter's observation that was a point of departure of this study, it is in the field of travel writing that the fundamental ambiguity of "representation" is most apparent. More importantly, it represents (however imperfectly) one who is representing. The combined and shifting presence of the Orientalist, the woman and the traveller in the act of representing the Other in the *L'Antivoyage* has been adequately analysed. It is this complexity that is characteristic of Cerf's language and expresses her anxiety and her failure to peg a fixed perceived reality encountered while travelling. Vocabulary and imagery that allude to dreams, drugs, delirious ramblings of sick mind, and inter-textuality mark the episodes as the narration swings frenetically between perceived reality and hallucinated reality, between real truth and illusory perceptions. The end clarifies once in for all that reality is that which defies the present time and geographical space – a surrealistic mix of Eros and Death, an explosion of illusory (maya) images that brings together figures of a burning lion on a pyre and a smiling female figure of death clad in bright pink. Using the allegory of the shadow theatre, that subverts the difference between the real (the puppets behind the screen) and the imagined (the shadows that fall on the screen and are for spectator viewing) Cerf's writing calls for a voyage behind the screen, beyond the symbolic order of the language.

"Livres, poèmes, films, collages, musique odeur, on devrait essayer de tout réunir pour faire une vraie oeuvre qui pourrait se lire, se voir, se toucher, se respirer et se manger, en utilisant un langage nouveau...."(AV 166).

Cerf's version of an alternative language is one that does not include "mots restrictifs, artificiels, incomplets". These words frustrate and irritate. Her solution is to 'brutalise' them, to throw them around to jumble them in the hope that some of them would resonate deeper than the others.

“...en les traitant comme les va-comme –je-te-pousse, en les brutalisant et en les jetant pêle-mêle, les moches, les ordinaires les jolis ensemble, avec l’espoir que dans ce trop-plein il y en aura quelques-uns qui éveilleront des résonances un peu plus profondes que les autres.” (AV 166)

In this desire, it is her “imagined” relationship with Couline or her feminine Other that becomes an alternative space for representing new expressions.

“On a nettoyé le vieux ciel usé par les regards des amoureux qui se chatouillent en regardant la lune, et on en mis à la place un tout neuf, prêt pour de nouveaux poèmes”. (AV 88)

In a celebratory finish writing subverts the idea of representation as a mirror effect of the symbolic order, when the narrator challenges her (Other) self to go behind the screen of representation.

“Appuie sur l’accélérateur, qu’on aille voir une bonne fois pour toutes ce qui se passe derrière le décor et qu’on s’envoie en l’air dans la douce nuit tropicale sur notre moto étincelante comme un char de feu.” (AV 306)

For Cerf travel is a transgression of the discourse on travel, it is a transgression of the patriarchal discourse on sexuality, it is a transgression of language as a totalizing system of meaning, it is an experiment with women’s writing. The tropes of travel and femininity and the discourse on the Other have served Cerf the pretext and pre-text to narrate how a woman’s writing travels.

Notes

1. The récit de voyage is not just a first person journal or diary. It could be in the third person. It is not just in prose. Poetic travel accounts have been written. It is not necessarily a story with a simple uncontrived plot. It is not just a series of notes jotted each day. In almost all cases, the account has been reworked, changed in translation, polished edited. It is not just an objective report but a subjective interpretation of scenes and of situations. As with any type of creation, it is not a complete record but a careful selection. Adams argues in his book that the novel originated from travel discourse. (See Adams, *Travel literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1983.)

2. Some of the salient features of the Othering process (See Said, Pratt (1992), Ali Behdad (1994) etc) include constituting the Other as a list of features, relegating it another time zone etc. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, to travel for the imperialist vanguard was to transcend (to go beyond the range or grasp of human experience and belief) It was a positive, exhilarating experience and this feeling tied in with the “monarch of all I survey scenes” that Pratt delineates in the description of late nineteenth century Orientalist writers.

3. Gallimard published a second edition in 1979. The book was republished in 1995 by Editions J’ai lu. Cerf is also the author of *Le Diable Vert* (Mercure de France 1975), *Une Passion* (J.C. Lattès 1981) and *Une vie sans secret* (Éditions du Rocher 1996).

4. In his remarkably well-written book, Porter (*Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European travel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991) does not include women’s writings.

5. See Ghose (*Women Travellers in colonial India* 1998).
6. While in the first kind of narrative, the récit is “agentless” and no human interaction is described, in the second kind the narrator is foregrounded with the narrator and the indigenous inhabitants involved in dramatic action. The informational text gives way to the experiential one. Pratt makes another distinction between survival accounts (first person stories of castaways, shipwrecks, abandonments) and sentimental accounts that stem from the former to invoke intercultural conjugal contact. (Pratt 1992: 87).
7. In Burton’s travel essays, Pratt recognises 3 distinctive features in the describing process: esthetification, density of meaning and domination. (Pratt 1992: 204).
8. But where male orientalist literature focuses on the eroticization of the Orient, women’s narratives were at times compassionate and sensitive. Ali Behdad (*Belated Travelers*: 109-112) shows how in Anne Blunt’s writing, the author does not use descriptions of women’s clothing and ornaments as a vehicle to stimulate erotic desires.
9. See Pratt (*Imperial eyes*:218).
10. Dorothy Figuiera (1994) in her study of the representation of the exotic shows how the tension between the search for inspirational models and the escape into despair circumscribed much of the Western emplotment of India. She maintains that it was the irrational West that impelled many thinkers Eastward to seek a grounding for their irrationality.
11. See “Old Journeys Revisited” in Kowaleski Michael (ed.), *Temperamental Journeys-Essays on the modern literature of Travel*, Athens, London, University of Georgia Press, 1992, p218.
12. See Elisabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions, Three French feminists*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1988, pp39-69.
13. See Jacobus (1986: 30) “Woman and artist, the feminine and the avant garde are elided in the privileged zone of contemporary intellectual and aesthetic concern: writing.”
14. In Paul Fussell’s *Abroad*, he divides the continuum of travel writing into 3 categories, each corresponding to their Ages: exploration, travel and tourism. He goes on to add that tourism causes the death of real travel and the end of good writing. (Fussell 1980)
- 15 See “Travel and Writing” (Butor in Kowaleski Michael (ed), *Temperamental Journeys-Essays on the modern literature of Travel*, Athens, London, University of Georgia Press, 1992, p69).

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