“In the Midst of Restless Terrors”
Anna Brownell Jameson’s Discovery of Canada

The genre of travelogue – in some contexts referred to as “exploration narrative” – is relatively an old one, whether it focuses on real or fictive journeys, and has achieved a particular place in the Western literary tradition, namely since the discovery and subsequent conquest of the New World. However, as a literary genre, the travelogue is usually considered to be marginal and secondary, applied either for pure information or pure entertainment, without necessarily expressing higher aesthetic aspirations. Nonetheless, under certain non-literary conditions, the travelogue can assume certain important literary functions as well: to render, not merely “social” and “objective” experience of travel or exploration, but also the “personal,” the “subjective” one of the traveler or explorer as persona, and thus to instigate an emotional and aesthetic response in the reader. In his discussion of “Exploration/Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Author”, Ian S. MacLaren argues:

[...] travelers do not necessarily in more complex ways [...], render as literary what were only literal details, or include remarks that arose not out of experience, but out of consequent reflections of it. However, many do write in greater complexity, chiefly because, conscious that other eyes than their own will read the words, they feel bound to flesh out, account for, communicate their experiences to a reader or readers who did not share them (MacLaren, 42).

In spite of Northrop Frye’s assertion formulated in his “Conclusion” to the Literary History of Canada that: “the explorers wrote with no more literary intention than a mating loon”, it is possible to provide evidence supporting the claim that even those early explorers and travellers who wrote with the most pragmatic objectives in mind not only subjected their factual material to substantive editing in view of the desired effect but even, in organizing it on the level of language, applied to it narrative techniques that, in themselves, are literary by nature. Adopting Hayden White’s notion of “emplotment”, defined in his Metahistory as a shaping of the historical record with the
application of the archetypal mythologico-literary narrative patterns identified in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, T.D. McLulich contends that early exploration narratives are structurally emplotted in one of the three basic manners, i.e. as *quests*, *odysseys*, or as *ordeals*.

As far as their mutual differences are concerned, McLulich establishes them upon the relationship between the objective or destination of the journey, and the process of its achievement. The *quest*, then, refers to a narrative of a successful journey, in which “the attaining of the goal [is] the central theme of the ensuing narrative” (McLulich, 74). What appears as typical of a quest narrative is that:

Events and people will be mentioned only insofar as they either help or hinder the attainment of the goal. The dangers and hardships encountered will be emphasized. The journey will be portrayed as a succession of crises, in each of which some obstacle is overcome, rising to a climax with the final attainment of the goal. This authorial strategy results in a swiftly-moving, straight-line narrative, focused on limited issues. The explorer himself appears as a determined and forceful hero, a conqueror (MacLulich, 74).

Conversely, a rendering of an unsuccessful journey focusing on failed attempts at achieving the desired destination, and on strategies of survival, is presented as an *ordeal*:

The action of an ordeal will focus on the attempts of the exploring party to ensure their survival, and the thematic focus will fall on the human capacity to endure privation. A further thematic emphasis will grow out of the means by which rescue or escape is achieved, whether Providential, fortuitous, or brought about by human means. The climax of the account will be the eventual rescue or escape itself – or the final scene of disaster (MacLulich, 74).

There exists, however, another variation of the motif, in which the focus shifts more or less radically from the achievement of the final destination towards the journey itself and the person journeying. In this, aesthetically the most interesting case, described as an *odyssey*:

The explorer describes the thing seen and the experiences undergone for their own sake rather than simply as adjuncts to a quest for some
specific place or object. Such an explorer often gives extensive descriptions of the lands and the peoples he encounters, and may describe his own gradually growing understanding of a non-European way of life [...] Such odyssean explorers display a greater range of personality traits than do heroic travellers or sufferers. The personal interests of an odyssean traveller determine the centres of attention of his narrative; individual characteristics are allowed a greater expression than in a quest or an ordeal (MacLulich, 75).

This kind of focus on the travelling person suggests that here, undoubtedly, is where the evolution of the author begins, as a result of a creative interaction between mind and place.

Explorations of geographic spaces as yet unknown appear, as such, to be a particularly masculine kind of enterprise. However, and interestingly enough, narrative modes of exploration account and travelogue also come out of genuinely feminine pens. One such case in the Canadian literary tradition is represented by Anna Brownell Jameson (1794–1860), an English gentlewoman, who had been an established writer, cultural historian, and a zealous supporter of women’s rights movement before he exposure to the nineteenth-century Canadian reality. It was namely her Characteristics of Women, a book-length study of Shakespeare’s heroines, that constituted her reputation and influence among the British readership.

In 1825 Anna Brownell entered an incompatible and unhappy marriage with Robert Jameson, a lawyer, and later Attorney General of Upper Canada. By the time he accepted the position in 1833, the couple had lived factually separated. But with the prospect of the position of the Vice-Chancellor of the province before him, Robert Jameson forced his wife to join him in Toronto, in order to create an impression of a stable home and a respectable status upon the community. Anna, who was then dependent on her husband by word of law, arrived to Toronto in December of 1836, and, having managed to negotiate a separation agreement with Robert after some time, left Canada for good in September 1837.

Realizing thus that Anna Jameson spent mere months in Canada, poses a question as to what constitutes her position in the history of Canadian letters? Was it simply the verifiable fact of a literary mind “being there” or, slightly more convincingly, the fact that in 1838 she published in London her Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, a highly personal, yet
keenly observant and insightful take on “things Canadian” of the time? Whichever the case may be, Anna Jameson’s name is mentioned in every history of Canadian literature, and excerpts from her Winter Studies and Summer Rambles form a part, however small, of its every comprehensive diachronic anthology. What conditions existed then that allowed Jameson to succeed in writing a “Canadian book” by simply writing about Canada? I intend to suggest that, besides Jameson’s obvious artistic talent and writerly competence, among the most important of these conditions was the historical situation of Canada at the time, for the representation of which the genre of travelogue appears to be an optimally applicable form. Winter Studies and Summer Rambles thus document a pivotal moment in the development of a national culture, an evolution of an originally straightforward exploration account into an independent, at least somewhat genuine literary element.

For Jameson and other European intellectuals coming to North America in the early nineteenth century, the geographical space they found themselves faced with appeared culturally empty; mythical and heroic characters, as well as strong and inspiring historical personalities were, with some exceptions, still largely missing from their perceptive horizons. But, in spite of this sense of a cultural void, the experience of the new country was so intense for them that it instigated aesthetic responses and imposed demands to be written down, recorded and remembered. For this reason, possibly, Jameson attempted to replace this void by making Canada itself the literary hero of her work, and thereby contributed to initiating the country’s literary tradition. The genre of travelogue provided the appropriate form for the first stage of the process of establishing this tradition, and also expressed the historical awareness of it. It prepared ground for the first upcoming examples of the novel form, by discovering verbally not only a new physical space for their action, but also the aesthetic potential of that space. This quality, according to Christopher Mulvey, seems to be inherent in the genre of travelogue:

Travel books may aspire to the condition of the novel, some do in fact become a species of novel, and the novel often contains a higher truth, but the lesser truth of the travel book has its own light to shed – one which is likely to be lost in the greater illumination of fiction (Mulvey, XIII).

What makes Anna Jameson’s observations of the pre-Confederation Canadian society so keen and illuminating is critical distance, given not only by her
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education and outsider position but, more importantly, by the fact that
Canada was not the destination of her free choice. Her initial response to the
new country is one of reluctance and disdain, which is a result of painfully
comparing life and things abandoned back in Europe with life and things
she sees around herself and evaluates as vulgar, pretentious, and trivial in
the cultural sense. The first observation she makes about Toronto, for
example, goes as follows:

Toronto – such is now the sonorous name of this our sublime capital –
was, thirty years ago, a wilderness, the haunt of the bear and deer, with
a little, ugly, inefficient port, which, however, could not be more ugly
or inefficient than the present one [...]. What Toronto may be in summer,
I cannot tell; they say it is a pretty place. At present its appearance to
me, a stranger, is most strangely mean and melancholy. A little ill-
built town on low land, at the bottom of a frozen bay, with one very
ugly church, without tower or steeple; some government offices, built
of staring red brick, in the most tasteless, vulgar style imaginable; three
feet of snow all around; and the grey, sullen, wintry lake, and the dark
gloom of the pine forest bounding the prospect; such seems Toronto to
me now. I did not expect much; but for this I was not prepared. Perhaps
no preparation could have prepared me, or softened my present feelings.
I will not be unjust if I can help it, nor querulous. If I look into my own
heart, I find that it is regret for what I have left and lost – the absent,
not the present – which throws over all around me a chill, colder than
that of the wintry day – a gloom, deeper than that of the wintry night
(Jameson, 15-16).

Anna’s words document clearly that her first response to Canada is primarily
literary; her language is that of romantic sensibility, and later, also, of
sublime aesthetics. She betrays one of her immediate literary influences,
common to many women writers of the time – Madame de Staël, and,
namely, her novel Corinne, which is: “a travel guide, in fictional guise, to
the beauties of Italy as seen through the eyes of a beautiful, brilliant, and
mysteriously broken-hearted heroine” (Thomas, 546).

Jameson’s imposition upon Canada of the European linguistic arsenal of
romantic imagination is valuable, but would have remained much less so
had it not undergone a creative adaptation at the author’s hand. Jameson
does not only observe and record, but speculates about the observed, and
about the potential conceptual expression of it. She soon demonstrates
interest and insight into political issues, like, for example, when speculating about the country’s future:

Canada is a colony, not a country; it is not yet identified with the dearest affections and associations, remembrances, and hopes of its inhabitants: it is to them an adopted, not a real mother. Their love, their pride, are not for poor Canada, but for high and happy England; but a few more generations must change all this (Jameson, 66).

Even the image of Toronto, after merely fifty pages of text, manages to break through the cultural sarcasm of Jameson, and finds some mercy in her eyes:

Toronto is, as a residence, worse and better than other small communities – worse in so much that it is remote from all the best advantages of a high state of civilization, while it is infected by all its evils, all its follies; and better, because, besides being a small place, it is a young place; and in spite of its affectation of looking back, instead of looking up, it must advance – it may become the thinking head and beating heart of a nation, great, and wise, and happy; – who knows? (Jameson, 69).

In June 1837, Jameson set out for an exploration journey from Toronto to Niagara, Hamilton, Brantford, Woodstock, London, St. Thomas, Port Talbot, Chatham, and Detroit, from which she continued on a steamer to Mackinaw, “still well within reach of any eager traveller” (Thomas, 547). From there, though, she continued by boat to Sault Ste. Marie, and further to Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron, and then by canoe to Petetang and Lake Simcoe, and back to Toronto. Such a “wild expedition,” as Anna called it, which she partly undertook all by herself, was, indeed, a rare and unusual enterprise for a woman at the time.

During the gradual change of her surroundings, moving away from civilization and order towards wilderness and open space, Anna, the subject of the journey, also undergoes an observable change of her self. In her afterword to the 1990 edition of Jameson’s Winter Studies and Summer Rambles, Clara Thomas notes:

Once on the road she was a different person from the Anna, frost-bound in body and spirit, who was the centre-stage heroine of “Winter
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Studies”, gallantly upholding her ideas on culture even with the temperature at twelve degrees below zero and the ink freezing in the ink-well. Anna, the practised traveller of “Summer Rambles”, enjoyed all manner of people and related well to them, from the reclusive Colonel Talbot, the “Lake Erie Baron,” to the picturesque voyageurs who rowed her bateau. Most particularly, she found all the Indians fascinating cultural studies […] some of them […] became lasting friends (Thomas, 547).

The inherent dramatic change of the narrative subject indicates that Anna Jameson’s travel book belongs into the odyssey category, where the focus rests not on the result of the action but on the process of achieving it, not exclusively on the external, but on the internal level as well. The change of, or, in the self is marked by the change of language – on the surface it remains still the language of the sublime, but underneath betrays the writer’s genuine abandonment of the pose in favour of impression and emotion. The rapids above the Niagara Falls, for example, inspire in her the following verbal outburst:

The good people, travellers, describers, poets, and others, who seem to have hunted through the dictionary for words in which to depict these cataracts under every aspect, have never said enough of the rapids above – even for which reason, perhaps, they have struck me the more […] The idea, too, of the immediate danger, the consciousness that anything caught within their verge is inevitably hurried to a swift destination, swallowed up, annihilated, thrills the blood; the immensity of the picture… adds to the feeling of grandeur: while the giddy, infinite motions of the headlong waters, dancing and leaping, and revelling and roaring, in their mad glee, gave me a sensation of rapturous terror, and at last caused a tension of the nerves in my head, which obliged me to turn away […] beauty and terror, and power and joy, were blended, and so thoroughly, that even while I trembled and admired, I could have burst into a wild laugh, and joined the dancing billows in their glorious, fearful mirth […] (Jameson, 203-205).

The most dramatic experience, in both outward and inward sense, comes for Jameson at Sault Ste. Marie, during the descent of the rapids in an Indian canoe. She was, reportedly, “declared duly initiated”, adopted into an Indian family, and baptized by an Indian name meaning “the woman of the bright foam” (Jameson, 456). At this geographical and narrative moment Jameson
finds herself at the remotest point of her journey from civilization, but at the closest possible point of her journey towards her new, authorial self. She discovered, or, helped to discover an uninhabited space for the New World woman’s discourse, and contributed to the cultural process which resulted in the emergence of one brand of New Literatures in English, that today reflects and challenges global aesthetic standards, and inspires their further developments. Thomas Tausky, therefore, concludes his discussion of the importance of Jameson, whom he calls: “a celebrated English writer temporarily in exile in Canada”, for Canadian literature, in the following words:

The woman of the bright foam was as alone as she claimed, in spirit as well as in physical location. Her account is pioneering in more than the obvious sense, and deserves to be re-read, not only by Canadians, who have in fact kept its memory alive, but by anyone interested in the record of women’s feelings (Tausky, 140).

Works Cited


MacLulich, T.D. “Canadian Exploration as Literature”. *Canadian Literature* v. 81, (Summer 1979), 72-85.

