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Writing Memory, under the Full Moon, in the Golden Volutes of Ginkgo Biloba Leaves, or the Swirling Snow of Cherry Blossoms: the Design of Literary and Artistic Travel Diaries for Survivors of Historical Traumata

Summary. What is a travel diary for the survivors of History? What kind of apology is there for them? Faced with extreme suffering, the powers of writing may seem obsolete, yet this is far from the case. The journey may be the result of an exile, lived as an exile from their world, from others, or even from themselves. In this context, the travel diary, writing and art can go together. The question arises as to how certain literary and artistic traditions, or conceptions of nature in Asia, for example, can help survivors who are inclined to write, even paint and add flowers in their travel diaries, to stop fleeing a part of the real, which totalitarianism hides or denigrates: the beauty of rebirth, the dream, the mystery, the meaning of the possible - and of course love. How can the travel diary become, for a survivor, a kind of space-time enclave, or an admirable microcosm-refuge, within a world that has become unbearable, without denying the real world? How can it be a storage medium for one’s memories, or the strata of salutary pages? The travel diary can constitute a skylight, through which a new anchoring in the real world can become possible again, favored by poetry and art, or even by reading such a travel diary to relatives, or if it were made public.

Keywords: travel writing, memory, hanami, moon worship, art, historical traumata

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Introduction

Who has never thought of writing a travel diary? Are there times more favorable than others for literary and artistic inspiration? Throughout the world, countless human beings use the practice of the travel diary to crystallize their memories of a geographical and cultural elsewhere. They sometimes produce works both artistic and literary, imbued with the literary and artistic traditions in which they travel, or have travelled. In Asia, for example, where nature tends to be sacred, sacred and profane celebrations are likely to inspire the writings of many travelers, even though they may be severely traumatized by the horrors of History. Why and how to conceive a literary and artistic travel diary, from the perspective of endured historical traumata?

The travel diaries of the first explorers, beyond the boundaries of the known world: from terra incognita to the new world

Originally, the first scientific explorers wrote of their tumultuous crossings of the ocean, towards distant lands, in notebooks. These notebooks were collections of their thoughts and scientific observations. These explorers presented their first impressions of the discovery of Aboriginal peoples in lands previously unexplored by these settlers. In these notebooks, they drew exotic plants, from their germination to their maturity, thus observing the local flora, but also the fauna.

Most of these explorers were commissioned by well-known societies, such as the Royal Geographical Society, which depended on the British Crown. In this context, many medicinal plants and food products were imported into mainland France, for instance, such as chocolate (from the cocoa tree), potatoes (introduced in the late 16th century in Europe) and coffee.

In this sense, the travel diary had a didactic purpose, in an initiatory context: the perilous crossing of the oceans, as well as the discovery of the New World.

For these scholars, venturing beyond the bounds of the “known world,” at large, was a sacrifice, or an act of faith, at a time when religious fervor was considered more prevalent than it is today. Their departure was without promise of return, for their families, their fellow citizens, and the rest of the world. In this sense, some of the travel diaries may have been posthumous works, brought back by sailors and other scientists, having survived the wind and the cold, the inexorable scarcity and putrefaction of food, dysentery, and other diseases on board ships.
Nevertheless, the fact remains that the writing of a travel diary, despite the tragic circumstances of their first appearance, proves to be a salutary and even a saving step, from which narrators are destined to escape unharmed - except when a totalitarian macrocosm prevents them from doing so, in which case, unfortunately, such a step proves to be risky.

**The dimension of the testimony inherent in the travel diary, even today**

By analogy with the more or less traumatic experiences of scientific explorers who mapped the planet, perhaps every travel diary contains more or less serious traumas. In this sense, the purpose of the travel diary is to bear witness, among other things, to dramas of the existence of which travelers may have witnessed during their journeys, or even earlier dramas that preceded their journeys, but which may have influenced their perception or their experience during their journeys.

The dimension of witness, specific to the travel diary, at least in its beginnings, is still relevant today. Writing a travel diary is evidence of a geographical and cultural elsewhere. It also means, above all, testifying to a foreign or little-known human world, even in the great megacities, where each anonymous human being acquires the status of a foreigner in relation to others; and because of cosmopolitanism, this argument is inconclusive. It is nevertheless a testimony of a human world, if only for linguistic reasons, and/or unknown customs. Some of these customs may be very interesting, but others may seem incongruous or even absurd and cruel, to those who do not know them, or even to those who know them but cannot get used to them (the ritual of walking on burning ashes, for example).

**Apology of the practice of the travel book for survivors of history (genocide and totalitarianism): the case of the travel books of exiles**

Survivors of history have endured and continue to endure various forms of alienation, to varying degrees. By its very nature, travel contravenes a form of deprivation of freedom. From this perspective, therefore, writing a travel narrative could thus foster a form of resilience, or psychological rebirth, when travel can be experienced as a form of emancipation, or an external and internal liberation.
However, the archetypal image of the jail, unless perhaps in prison architecture, like the panopticon – imagined by the philosophers (and brothers) Jeremy and Samuel Bentham, before being taken up again by the historian Michel Foucault, who made it the model of a society based on social control in 1975 – seems to be outdated, to a certain extent. By the way, it is possible to exert pressure on human beings, through intermediary persons, provoking a form of obedience, up to a certain point – a threshold that totalitarianism denies.

In other words, when a prisoner moves from point A to point B, under the orders of a superior, whether visible or not, he is not destined to get better, no more than if he had in mind to write about his misery, although writing can relieve many evils, to a certain extent. Similarly, a robot that would complete a trajectory between a starting point and a destination is not supposed to make any journey. It moved, according to the laws of robotics, or by means of a remote control that could be activated remotely.

What form(s) of alienation could, to a certain extent, be remedied by the writing of a travel diary by survivors of History? All human beings are endowed with an identity, dreams and hopes that depend in part on the cultural area from which they come. The cultures of the world are essential to give back to the survivors that part of their humanity which is not the least important, and which is being stripped away by totalitarianism and others. Arts, literature, beliefs or religions are part of the world’s cultures. Because they foster hope in a better tomorrow, or faith in the human being, totalitarianism abhors them.

In this context, the writing of a travel diary, at the crossroads of art and literature, can give back to human beings rights that yokes have been able to take away from them, in spite of violence, lies and many subterfuges or false pretenses.

In a post-dictatorial context, such as in Argentina, the notion of cultural dormancy, or “apagón cultural” (from the verb “apagar” which means “extinguish”), can illustrate the importance of giving back to survivors the right to culture, and even to cultures, and thus to cultural syncretism. It is up to each survivor to find his or her own path, inspired by literary and artistic traditions that suit him or her best, in the cultures of the world, to create his or her own travel diary.

In the case of exile, it seals a point of no return, on the narrative and existential level. Conversely, an ordinary trip involves a return trip, whether postponed or immediately following the trip.

In this sense, the narrative of an exile travel diary is open. It’s like an endless story. It is no longer the classic travel diary, which presupposes a journey from a point of departure to a point of arrival, which sooner or later lets us see a return, or at least its possibility. But it is a journey initiated in a direction, a fork in the road of existence,
or the inflection of a trajectory of life, which appears to be irreversible, and therefore linear.

Do we always have to go back to our point of departure to have a comparative point of view and learn something new, about others, the world, or ourselves? The question remains open, but it seems to me that a travel diary, or a book of exile, makes sense.

Exiles may feel the need to testify about a cultural, geographical and even temporal in-between, corresponding to a psychological evolution, sometimes major, for them, their relatives or even for other people, including any possible reader of their travel diary.

Are the ability to hope, the ability to dream, and to create, cancelled, for any survivor wishing to create an exile travel diary, or a travel book? In my eyes, they remain intact. Writing them or sharing them, in different forms, in a travel diary, seems to me to be beneficial, provided that this is possible – except in times of extreme alienation.

Writing against suffering,

to think more so as to suffer less (Hugo) in a travel diary,
to give meaning to one's existence, against despair (Frankl)

Writing can make it possible to alleviate suffering by elaborating one's thoughts, by reflecting on one's fate, or even, in some cases, by putting it back into the perspective of one's loved ones' life – the possessive “his or her loved ones” is a form that totalitarianism denies, as it pulls every human being out of the rest of the human race, which is proper to a totalitarian-style hold.

Victor Hugo had a beautiful way of chanting, in one of his poems: “Yes I write, yes I think! [...] think more, so as to suffer less.”

Nowadays, when travelers write a travel diary, the sufferings they can endure during their journey are likely to interfere with older traumata, which may be even chronic.

The writing of a travel diary, as long as it reveals a little the inner world of human beings, their psyche, is thus revealed to be traumatic. It is a literature on trauma and its aftermath.

The Austrian philosopher and neurology professor Victor Emil Frankl, the founder of psychotherapy for survivors of genocide, regarded human beings as being in search of the meaning of their life, by its very nature. Because life abounds in suffering, to find a meaning to one’s life would first of all be a question of wondering about the meaning of suffering.
Certainly, a travel diary is not, by its very nature, intended to counteract, or at least alleviate, the despair of writers or their potential readers. But in any writing, it is a matter of making sense of what happens, of the tribulations of the human being, or on the contrary of the sinister moroseness of his existence.

Indeed, there could be monotonous, depressing and anxious journeys, as well as some that revive human being, or even re-enchant their universe. In any case, writing a travel diary implies dwelling on historical evils and traumata, especially for survivors of genocide and totalitarianism, whose traumatic memory and traumatic imagination can weigh on their shoulders, like an inexorable burden.

As V. E. Frankl pointed out, despair being meaningless suffering, the idea is not to omit suffering in a travel diary, but rather to try to give it meaning, to better endure reality, or less badly. Writing a travel diary could help survivors of History to admit reality enough to make it worthwhile, without deluding oneself (as can be the case in certain life dramas such as denial, or traumatic amnesia).

Travel, art and writing presuppose or converge on a quest against the evils of existence. Art, literature and travel require a movement towards what is still worth living and even enduring - with love first and foremost, of course.

Whatever the nature of this quest, or its purpose, or even the “personal legend” of each human being, as the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho thinks, both travel and travel literature remain worthy of being lived, in my eyes.

However, it is not always a question of returning to its point of departure, to understand that the deep meaning of one’s existence, or the quest that moved each one, would remain there, in which case many travels would lose their meaning, especially for exiles.

The memorial writing of evils in travel diaries: An outlet, the search for the meaning of a spiritual journey, or even a horizon hiding the dreams and hopes of the traveler

In all cases, writing about suffering, and therefore the memory of ailments, can be beneficial, especially when memory is lacking, as in the case of traumatic amnesia.

Writing can have cathartic effects. In this sense, a travel diary can alleviate trauma, thanks to the powers of writing, on the way of the traveler.

Moreover, for travelers who would not remember what destroyed them by cumulative effect, for having sought to forget the evil or its origin, to relieve themselves of it, by habit, as they would have denied these heavy and gray clouds of steel which sometimes overload the winter skies, in a Dantesque way, writing can help them to
see more clearly, by going back to their past, even if it was recent. It is a question of elucidating the causes that may have led them to lose their composure, or of better grasping what happened, by reliving a scene that is all the more desperate because it can be experienced as absurd.

Writing makes it possible to make sense of existence, and more precisely of what happens there. However, for a traveler, the change of existence, even if it was temporary or very short, may be worthy of being transcribed in a travel diary, because it can constitute a piece of life denser, more significant, than a much larger slice of life on the temporal plane, in the absence of any journey.

In general, all travel presupposes an inner metamorphosis that juxtaposes with a transformation of the external world through which it passes. In this context, a travel diary can represent a series of stages which, by marking out the geographical journey and its psychological analogy, also known as “spiritual journey”, can help travelers to carry out their quest both outside and inside, depending on whether it is located mainly in them, or in the world around them.

In this context, writing can appear to be a way of life, to help travelers to continue what motivated their departure, their progress and their directional choices. The travel diary can be the frontier or horizon of travelers: their dreams and hopes. They can contain them, conceal them and remind them to help them to hold on, in difficult times, when things fall apart, or when the travelers’ feet are too heavily weighed down by chains carrying their past and present traumata.

Art and letters to transcend suffering:  
Watercolors, calligraphy and memory media.  
The art of the travel diary from all over the world

The travel diaries of the early explorers were written in ink. These explorers almost did calligraphy in their travel diaries.

While art and letters can make it possible to transcend suffering, to a certain extent, for any traveler today, in practical terms, the creation of a travel diary presupposes taking notes, often fragmentary, in a small notebook designed for this purpose, to avoid the dispersion of loose leaves. Some people may use a digital tablet.

Thereafter, later on, once back home, and so in favorable conditions, it is possible to take such notes again to elaborate a real travel diary. The latter can be done by calligraphy, or travelers can even insert a drop cap at the beginning of each new chapter - when their travel diary is made up of different chapters.
The art of writing is not the only thing that can help build a beautiful travel diary. Without being an explorer of the previous centuries, any autumn leaves or fairly fine flowers, well preserved in herbarium, can be inserted into the notebook and even varnished.

In general, the insertion of objects into a traveler’s notebook increases its value as a storage medium for the traveler’s memories. The travel diary thus becomes the matrix of a pool of memories, since it contains in itself not only the traveler’s writings and drawings, such as watercolors or colored pencils, but also objects collected in situ during the journey.

With regard to painting, for example, in China, numerous young people gather in rural areas to paint, with colored Chinese ink, old villages reflected in marshes or lakes, where mountains separate them from yellow lily valleys by phantasmagorical clouds. Some may include their works in travel diaries in these rural areas.

Write the world’s movement, its transitions, to crystallize its very fleeting beauty: cherry blossom snow, full moon, and golden volutes of ginkgo biloba leaves

The moments when the world changes are the most appreciated by poets. The transitions of the world, at dawn or at dusk, spring or any other season, remain anchored in the collective imagination and infuse the poetry and odes of all the countries of the world.

In addition, travelling means exposing oneself to changes in the landscape. It is good to move towards territories which differ, towards an elsewhere, whether this one is unknown, forming a new “terra incognita”, or in contrast, a site so well known that it comes to be internalized by the one who revisits it periodically, in the manner of a ritual, such as by returning to the places of their childhood, for example. In both cases, the landscape changes, or has changed, because a period of time has passed, sometimes very important (as in the case of the ritual of the lands of childhood revisited intermittently), so that the outside world is not the same at the arrival as at the starting point.

Writing down the experience of changes in the observable world can be beneficial. Words can capture the beauty of what is seen, heard and understood or not, even if it is ephemeral. If the fleeting nature of certain fragments of life, deeply regretted afterwards, is a source of disappointment, then writing can act as a partial remedy to the pain of the brevity of these short lived times that no one can suspend forever, out of time, to hold them forever, or in a sense immortalize them.
In the Hanami tradition (literally “looking at flowers”), mainly Japanese people, but also peoples from other countries, such as Chinese, Korean, Americans and French people (in the Luberon region, in the South of France), etc., admire cherry blossoms (sakura) or apricot trees from Japan (ume), near castles or parks, most often. Children are carried by adults to catch flowers in branches that bend under a snow of white or pink petals.

At night, the same tradition of observing cherry blossoms is called yozakura. Paper lanterns often illuminate parks, where cherry blossoms reflect the brightness of the moon, or clouds spread the moonlight over so many clear little flowers, that they increase the light at night, in the darkness.

Such contexts, day and night, are conducive to recollection, meditation and poetry. Writing a travel diary in the form of fragments, a linear narrative or not, or recording poetic verses, can help to live such moments more densely, alone or accompanied.

Other Asian traditions lend themselves well to the writing of travel diaries, such as kōyō (literally “red leaves”), which evoke reddish maples with often starry leaves, and momiji (referring to the golden yellow leaves of ginkgo biloba), which consist in admiring the change in color of autumn leaves.

The Chinese tradition of shāng yuè (contemplation of the Moon) and that of zǒu yuè (promenade under the Moon), during the celebration of mid-Autumn, also called “Moon Festival”, a full moon night, is also the opportunity to make very beautiful verses in the moonlight. Astrophotographers can insert fragments of photography or fragments of photographs in their travel diaries, during their Journey to the End of the Night (1932, L.F. Celine).

There is no need to wait until the 15th night of the eighth month of the Chinese lunar calendar to contemplate the full moon and write poems, for example as haikus, which are Japanese short verses where a word, the kigo, refers to the season when the poem is written.

Poems can also be very long. Many other poetic forms exist in the world.

**Conclusion**

Thus, the travel diary constitutes a kind of space-time enclave, a world in its own right, in which travelers can return to their own way, to come back to life, thanks to the emotions and feelings experienced at certain points in their life.

If transposed into a poetic language, or transfigured by art, the lived experience recorded in a travel diary confers an additional or additive thickness to the memory
of the journey, or to memory. But words, like cherry blossoms or apricot blossoms, are not strata of frost or snow, which can melt in the sun or moonlight. Words, touches of colored Indian ink and the fragmentary memory supports intrinsic to the travel diary, punctuate the worlduniverse of the notebook, like fireflies in the darkness of a memory otherwise destined to fade away with time, or almost fade away.

In this sense, the travel diary restores more than the past of a journey. It is an opportunity to rediscover the same journey in a different way, to go beyond. Writing and art can help to transcend the suffering of survivors of History, to give meaning to the existence of so many evils and sorrows, during a journey, in a travel diary, yet a travel diary is not the panacea, or a universal remedy for some inconsolable grief brought about by historical traumata.

In a travel diary, writing and art can give access to unsuspected dimensions of existence, which, thanks to them, becomes denser, certainly less, even so, than thanks to human relationships, but enough to try the experience.