

## **Narrating the Self and Others in the Travel Letters of Susan Hale, Margaret Van Horn Dwight and Emily Dickinson**

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*“Travelers are very pleasant people. They tell you what picture was produced in their brain by the things they saw. How it looks to none pair of eyes would be a good reminder penciled on the margin of many a volume.”*

N.P. Willis, *Letters from Under a Bridge* (1840)\*

Travel literature is a form of fiction that has a narrator, a setting, a conflict, characters, and even a plot. The voice of the travel writer is the realist non-fictional medium of communication with the society (addressee). It sees, perceives and shows things as they are. The objective of this paper is to trace the characters of women as shown by the traveling voices of Susan Hale, Margaret Dwight and Emily Dickinson. The analysis of characters aims at discovering women as objects (other women in the travel letters) and as subjects (characters of writers themselves). The paper discusses the characters revealed through the eyes of writers in 20 travel letters: 10 for Susan Hale, 5 Margaret Dwight and 5 for Emily Dickinson.

Letter writing was a dominant practice through which men and women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to know themselves as individuals and developed personal attitudes towards others. The letter became an everyday activity, which was more than a medium of exchanging news; it was a necessary means for self-awareness, social awareness and self-

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\* Quoted from: Mulvey, Christopher. *Transatlantic Manners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1990- 3

expression. Through letter writing, individuals unfolded their subjectivity and portrayed themselves and others. I will not employ the notion of self/other in this paper as two binary opposites as usually assumed by feminism or post-colonialism in a way they cause us to create stereotypes of travel writers and the people they encounter. The objective of this paper is to trace the representation of women as shown by the self-referential traveling voices. The subjectivity that women developed through the practice of letter writing sheds light on the image of others as part of their understanding of that subjectivity. This paper aims at discovering women as objects (other women in the travel letters) and as subjects (the image of the 'I').

I choose the epistolary genre for this paper because letters in general address a specific audience. In this way they are a direct call to the reader to pay attention to the particular selfhood of the author. In this way, the epistolary genre becomes a unique forum for life writing. Casy Blanton, in her book *Travel Writing*, states that "The reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental or temperamental voyage, which takes place side by side with that outer one" (5). Travel writers construct new identities while discovering the identities of others. This is the 'I' that is evolving in travel, the self they present to us on a path to know the self while knowing others.

From this understanding, writers subject to this paper are not assumed to be egocentric who reflect upon others as binary opposites of themselves. A postcolonial reading of travel writings usually frame writers as colonial travelers and representatives of their empires. "They are always associated with their 'home' empire, regardless of whether or not they express the colonial values in their writings" (McColley 22). A great deal of feminist writings, on the other hand, sees travel writers as eccentric or imposters. In her essay "Travel Writing and Gender," Susan Bassnett discusses the earlier writing about women travelers by feminist scholars, she describes the style of representation common to their scholarly publication:

The titles of some of these studies reflect a particular way of looking at women travelers. Though praising their efforts and achievements, the authors hint nevertheless that they are slightly eccentric, and introduce a comic note that can easily be interpreted as mocking. So we find *Ladies on the Loose*, *The Blessings of a Good, Thick Skirt*, and *Spinsters Abroad*, all of which focus on the unusual life stories of women travelers, on their originality, and on their refusal to conform to social norms of the day. (226)

The use of this caricature is ironic when used to describe women writers in a process of forming new identities through knowing others. This paper finds it unfair to the writers and to their process of transformation to analyze such works as paradigms of feminist and postcolonial texts.

The woman travelers who are subjects of this study are women who made conscious effort to make their self-awareness, as well as their process of self transformation through travel, known through writing about themselves and others. These women, I argue, are not merely egocentric, but rather very conscious about the self within the complex context of the travel places. The paper will include examples from the autobiographical epistolary texts of the three authors of my study. The approach is to begin describing the textual details that allow the exploration of self as a subject and the other as an object.

### **Suzan Hale and the ‘Other’**

In her travel letters during several journeys to different countries, Susan Hale described many women of different cultural backgrounds: French, German, Middle Eastern, English, Jamaican and Scotch. These characters were usually compared to American women who worked as the standard comparison image, the only image well known to the addressee. This was a common phenomenon of the letter writings of that time; “As

women write home from abroad, they presume to remark the world in the image of the United States, which is to say in the image of white, Protestant, middle class values” (Schriber 9). It is a process of knowing others in the light of self awareness. For this reason, it seemed difficult to separate the image of foreign women from the image of American women in these letters. It also seemed very difficult to separate the image of women from the image of men as well. Both sexes were compared to each other, and described in relation to each other. As a result, description of men revealed in this paper was necessary to show the image of women themselves.

The prominent women’s figure described in details in the letters of Suzan Hale was the image of French women. They were well-cultured working women. “I went to buy my tickets, in the afternoon; but the odd thing is that a woman keeps the box-office” (Hale 89). It seemed odd to Susan to find women working in a box office, which indicates that such jobs were not common to women in the United States. Despite working, French women were “polite ladies in caps who tend the boxes and tickets” (Ibid). They enjoyed much freedom and independence than American women at that time. This was the reason behind being astonished when Hale said, “the streets are full of women (of respectability) at all hours” (Hale 90). Unlike the women of the United States, French women went out alone, not accompanied by a male figure. “Perhaps it is just as well, however, not to yawp much about our going alone, as it may be considered loose in America” (Ibid). Later, Susan expressed frankly that it was not socially accepted in the United States to go out alone. She said, “All our French friends here think it perfectly *comme il faut*<sup>\*</sup>, and seem not to know what we mean when we doubt about going without a man” (ibid).

French women were also portrayed as socially powerful figures. They control their husbands, which was unfamiliar to Americans, “the fact is the women have got the upper hand entirely in this town, and men are of no importance at all; Jules

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\* A French expression which means being in accord with conventions or accepted standards

makes the beds and Madame scolds him” (ibid). Similarly, Scotch ladies are described like the French women. They were beautiful and delightful: “She is small and very gentle with large blue eyes, her manner as gentle as Mrs. Matlack, though she is the most determined little creature, she rules him with a rod of iron” (Hale 416). This seemed strange to Hale as an American woman. She considered reporting such information as something important to be told. If the same conditions were common to American men, she would have not mentioned it in her letters. This indicates that men in America, at that time, did not accept to do what Jules did, and women could not scold men in any way. American men of that time, as implied in the letter, were Patriarchal in nature who had the upper hand.

The outside appearance of French women was also described in details. They were fashionable and good-looking, who used to wear short skirts made of excellent fabrics, “All Parisian women go about with neat petticoats of black Moreen just to the tops of their boots. Then they hold or hitch their dresses quite out of sight. They are either with a flounce or not, trimmed with rows of black velvet ribbon or not” (Hale 93). American women, on the contrary, wore long skirts that drag in mud or dust. For this reason, it was easy to distinguish between French and American women by their dress. “No French woman dreams of letting her skirts drag in the mud or dust, and you can tell them from the Americans in a minute by this difference” (ibid).

The second image of women shown in Hale’s letters was the image of Dutch women. Hale described a hospitable landlady of the hotel she was staying in, who used to enter the room many times without knocking the door. “My dear, they never any of them knock! And I can’t teach them to. I can only suppose that the reason is that they are determined to come in whether I want them to or not” (Hale121). Dutch women did not take care of their outside appearance like the French women; “the German bed, which no effort can remedy, and I have spoiled my best nail trying for it in vain. By the way, they take not the slightest interest in finger nails” (Hale119). American women, or at least women of Suzan’s social class, took good

care of their nails. Hale, here, seems to look down on Dutch women because they take not the slightest interest in finger nail. Another quality of Dutch women, as revealed by Hale's letters, was that they did not usually bathe or use soap. "I don't mean to say but what they are clean and neat enough, as a general thing I think they always wash their faces once a day and their hands, say, twice a week, when they are going to party, but not so often with soap" (Hale 121). I guess this information about nails and soap was just an ironic personal view and should be read the same, and therefore; the information included should not be authentic, or otherwise the whole meaning would change.

Middle Eastern women were mentioned briefly as housewives looking after the household affairs; "a woman from the neighborhood was got over to sew up my gown" (Hale 60). Men were described as strong servants or servicemen, "the Arabs are very strong. They pull you up like a weed" (Hale 46). They were also gentle and shy, "The gentle Hagi mounted the box" (Hale 45). Jamaican women had similar qualities of Middle Eastern women; "they sell eggs and milk cows," but they were not mentioned in details like the French or German women. Description of Middle Eastern and Jamaican women is more related to the nature of their professions rather than belittling them.

Reading Hale's letters gives us a window into herself to see how this self was constructed. The self image of Susan Hale, as indirectly revealed through her letters, was characterized by independence. She traveled alone to different countries without a companion. This slightly shows the status of American women as a whole at that time. Schriber claims that "the travels of many women were in no way accidental. On the contrary, women claimed to conceive and execute travel plans independently....they traveled in what they saw as their own interests quite apart from those of a man" (15). Such a case is applicable to Susan Hale because almost all her letters, discussed in this paper, were sent to her family back home to share them her own experience of traveling. She was an adventurous woman as well: she rode a wild camel in Egypt, ascended to the top of the pyramid alone, ventured to ride the

bus in France, and went out late at night there; “the big door swung open, and we rushed up to narrate our adventures. The other girls were afraid to go” (Hale 90). She was also a very well cultured woman, whose interest was gaining knowledge. She used many expressions of different languages in her letters, drew pictures, went to musical concerts and discussed the symphonies of Schumann and the architecture of Spain like an expert, and went to music lessons in France.

She was also a funny woman who had a high sense of humor. This was shown through the description of her experience of riding a camel in Egypt and the details of the hotel life in Germany. She was a smart woman as well who was not easily deceived by the flattery of men. She talked about her French teacher who once told her that “he has never parted from any one with so much regret,” but she understood that “ $\frac{3}{4}$  flattery, if not  $\frac{7}{8}$ , but he is very good to me” (Hale 91). She was physically fit which enabled her to ascend the grand pyramid while “Lueretia got half way; Mr. Lesley only a few rods” (Hale 45). She had long hair that she always tried to make it well arranged. When she fell down the camel she said, “My back hair came down,” and when she criticized one of the French women she said, “I think she is very high in the social scale, though her hair is ill arranged.” This indicates that it was necessary for a woman to have well-arranged hair.

### **Subjects and Objects in the Letters of Margaret Van Horn Dwight**

The prominent image of women shown in Dwight’s travel letters was the image of the tough landladies of guest houses. She described them as mannish, strong women; “The landlady (I hate the word but I must use it)” (letter 1). They were also displayed as masters taking the place of their husbands, “the landlady is a fat, dirty, ugly looking creature, yet I must confess very obliging—she has a very suspicious countenance & I am very afraid of her. She seems to be the master, as well as mistress & storekeeper.” I think such a description of women was unnatural. In fact, I believe that the landladies had been made such creatures because of the nature of their work which put them in a direct contact with many different people of

different manners. It was necessary for women like her to be harsh because of the many unmannered residents of their inns. Later in the same letter, Dwight described the landlady as a very noisy woman. She said, "From the great noise she has been making directly under me for this half hour, I suspect she has been stoning the raisins & watering the rum" (1). I wonder if such a duty of stoning the raisins and watering the rum was a common task to American women who lived at that time.

Another working lady in the guest house was described like the wife of Bath, "the woman had no husband at present, I suspect she has one in expectation." (letter 2) One of Dwight's women companions was a soft and easy to cry woman, "poor Susan groans & sighs & and now sheds a few tears. I think I exceed her in patience & equanimity." On the contrary, another companion of hers was in a good control of her feelings and demonstrated signs of patience to the hardships of traveling. "Mrs. Wolcott is a woman of the most perfect equanimity I ever saw. She is a woman of great feeling & tenderness, but has the most perfect command over her feelings" (letter 3). Elizabeth, the third companion, was a decent soft girl who cried and escaped from the bedroom when one of the residents of the house broke into their room. Dwight, herself, taught her "to eat raw pork and drink whisky" (3).

Men in Dwight's letters were exhibited in a depressing manner; they were a group of misfits and drunkards. The first man was a deacon, with whom she traveled. He was a miser who obliged them to sleep in a cheap hotel to save some money, "to be obliged to pass the night in such a place as we are now in, just because it is a little cheaper, is more that I am willing to do" (1). Contrary to Dwight, both he and his wife didn't mind the dirt and disgusting food offered in that place, "I didn't think I could eat in the house, but dare to refuse. The good deacon nor his wife didn't mind it" (1). A second character was the husband of the landlady of the guest house. He had a weak character if compared to the character of his wife, who was "cross as a witch". He was also unfriendly person, who "could not be persuaded to bring in but a small part of the baggage." Other men were a group of "drunken prophane wretches," who were

“swearing and laughing” all the time in a room whose “air is so intolerable.” Even the ferrymen “were swearing at every breath.” Some other men broke into the ladies bedrooms and made their life miserable. The one broke into Dwight’s room was described as “A good for nothing brute” (letter 4). Among such horrible creatures, it is justified to find harsh landladies to run the house.

Dwight demonstrated herself as a patient person, who was willing to bear the hardships of traveling, but reflected normal responses and feelings of sensitive women as well. “I went to bed last night with fears & trembling & feel truly glad to wake up & find myself alive & well” (letter 5). In the few lines that followed, she displayed the normal womanly concerns of clean bed sheets and nice curtains, “there we were all obliged to sleep in the same room without curtains or any other screen, and our sheets there were so dirty, I felt afraid to sleep on them.” (ibid) I do not think such concerns were very important for a man who intended to spend a night in a motel during a long journey. Moreover, what was the use of curtains or screens if all of them were obliged to sleep in one room? Margaret Dwight seemed a rich woman, who neither paid much concern for money nor made the household activities by herself. While she was staying in Cook’s Inn, she complained: “It is very grating to my pride to go into a tavern & furnish & cook my own provisions or to ride in a wagon.” This complaint implies that she did not get used to furnish and cook her own provisions or even to ride in a wagon.

### **Emily Dickinson Narrates the Self and Other**

As a form of fiction, travel letters have “a narrator, who travels for the sake of travel; a narrative organization that owes much to fiction; a commitment to both a literary language and personal voice; and thematic concerns of great moral and philosophic import” (Blanton 30). The travel letters of Emily Dickinson included many of these qualities; Emily had a commitment to both a literary language and personal voice. Through the practice of correspondence, Emily developed her own form of subjectivity in her way of expression, usage of language, and

private relations with other women. In her letter to Abiah\*, Emily expressed her temporary illness in her own unique way. She said that her physical status affected her spirits, “my health affected my spirits & was quite down spirited for some time, but have with renewed health regained my usual flow of spirits.” This personal distinguished voice of Emily shows that she was not a normal traveler recording a journey, but a very well cultured learned person who had her own way of expression. She also expressed her privacy in a philosophic way when she said, “I feel that I have not yet had peace with God.” However, she desired to reach that peace to get rid of her restless self: “pray for me dear A. that I may yet enter the kingdom, that there may be a room left for me in the shining courts above.” Somewhere else in the same letter, she found it too much for her to be happy like other normal people, “I am visiting my aunt’s family & am happy. Happy! Did I say? No not happy, but contented.” She expressed herself in a different way from both Hale and Dwight, who usually reflected a happy self and a sense of humor in their travel letters. Like Susan Hale, Emily demonstrated a great interest in educational and cultural activities. She told Abiah, “I went to the Chinese museum, to Bunker hill. I have attended two concerts and one Horticultural exhibition” (Letter 13).

Other women shown in her travel letters were the loved ones, either friends or family members. They were educated, caring and appreciate close relations. Both Emily and her friends were serious correspondents, in love with books, and curious about everything. They were also devoted friends whose letters were filled with expressions of their devotion and their critical reflections on what they were reading, seeing and doing. They also appreciated social activities and had some interests in some aspects of aristocratic life: “Have you any flowers in Norwich? My garden looked finely when I left home.”, “Many sweet ladies and noble gentlemen have taken us hand by hand and smiled upon us pleasantly.” (Letter 179)

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\* Abiah Root, a girlhood friend and correspondent of Emily Dickinson.

Men, as described in the few travel letters of Emily, were two Chinese professors. They were rich and opium eaters. Both were strong-willed who managed to “overcome the practice.” Another good quality of both was their “self denial.” I think self-denial, here, referred to the two men’s ability to control their desire and deny their joy for health purposes and families’ sake. One of the two men invested his journey and made business by “writing the names of the visitors who request it upon cards in the Chinese language- for which he charges 12.5 cts. a piece.” (Letter 16)

Letters form an autobiographical project. Faced with the desire to write to another, writers are also faced with a confrontation with the self. When letters are sent, they reveal a person whose identity is informed by immediate relationship between self, time and place. This self couldn’t be articulated clearly unless directly or indirectly compared to others in the time and the place. These other people mirror the travelers themselves and may cause them to experience a sense of sameness or difference. Hale reflects a character of her own through her letters as An American model to which other international women are compared. She shows herself as independent, funny and sharp-witted woman. Similarly, Dwight, through her letters, reflects upon the life and duties of European women as compared to herself, the American moral and social standard. The ‘I’ image of Dwight as revealed through the letters studied is egoistic and judgmental. Dickinson, on the other hand, mirrors herself much more than portraying others in her travel letters; unhappy nor having a sense of humor, but a great deal of interest in educational and cultural matters. Travel letters open a window to the life and ideas of their writers and a medium of self awareness.

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