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WOMEN AT THE WHEEL

The sociopoetics of the female road trip in Ella Maillart's *The Cruel Way. Switzerland to Afghanistan in a Ford* (1947)

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Historically, women who have embarked on the adventure of travel and exploration have risked running counter to the traditional sedentary role assigned to them by society. As Mary Morris says “For centuries it was frowned upon to travel without escort, chaperone or husband. To journey was to put oneself at risk, not only physically but morally as well¹”. It seems likely that such social framing would shape how women have written about their travel experiences and this is what our study will develop. We would like to examine how the female gendered experience traverses the genre that has traditionally functioned as a domain of “constitutive masculinity²”. How do the codes and conventions of the road narrative genre apply when it is a woman who takes up the pen? How does her writing render the rather different experience and expectations of travel? A sociopoetical approach will guide us through the questions that surround social representations of travelling on the road as they are shared, questioned or reformulated by one particular writer traveler, Ella Maillart, in her narrative, *The Cruel Way*, an account of her 1939 road trip published in 1947.

Ella Maillart (1903–1997) was born in Geneva, the daughter of a Swiss father and Danish mother. A talented sailor and skier, she participated in the Olympic Games in 1924 and 1931. Her extensive travels took her to Asia and, among other jobs, she worked for the *Petit Parisien* (a French daily newspaper) in Iran and Afghanistan in 1937. She wrote about her travels in French, notably *Parmi la Jeunesse Russe* (1931)

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1. Mary Morris (éd.), *The Illustrated Virago Book of Women Travellers*, London Virago Press, 2000, p. 8.
 2. Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lines: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. x.

and *Oasis Interdites* (1935) but then increasingly in English such as *Gypsy Afloat* (1942) *Cruises and Caravanes* (1942). She is remembered particularly for *Forbidden Journey: From Peking to Kashmir* (1937), an account of her journey (by train, lorry, mule, caravan train and by foot) through the wastes of Chinese Turkestan with the English travel writer, Peter Flemming. The focus of this present study is her fascinating travel narrative *The Cruel Way*, which traces her 1939 road trip with her friend and fellow writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach (Maillart gives her the name Christina in the text). Complete with thirteen of her own photographs, Maillart's text includes insightful reflexions on the countries and cultures encountered on this epic route, intertwining them with the elusive search for self. Pre-dating Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and well before Scott Ridley's movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Ella Maillart was inventing the road trip genre to explore her relationship with the world not only for herself but for her traveling companion.

Today, her work is worthy of attention for a number of reasons. Widely read in the 30's and 40's, her narratives have fallen somewhat into the margins of literary studies³. This is despite being considered as making an important contribution to the 20th century development of the travel genre towards the "inner journey" or the journey that leads to greater self awareness⁴. On a more local note, her adventurous spirit is very much alive in Clermont-Ferrand where the hugely successful annual travel writing festival "Rendez-Vous du Carnet de Voyage"⁵ is organized by the association "IFAV" or "Il Faut Aller Voir", the name of which is inspired by a quotation attributed to Ella Maillart : "*Lire, lire lire, ça ne vaut rien. Il faut aller voir*"⁶.

In order to understand how Ella Maillart's text evokes travelling on the road, we take as our directive Alain Montandon's theoretical framework of the sociopoetical approach which starts by inviting us to review existing social representations in various media before focusing on how the author perceives, judges, expresses and stages them⁷. The car lends itself well to such an analysis. A product of now, a promise of elsewhere, it appears to us through the "prism of our fantasies, of our systems of

3. Sara Steinert Borella, *The Travel narratives of Ella Maillart: (En) Gendering the Quest*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing 2006, p. 2. Since 2000 a small number of works on Maillart have been published in France: *Ella Maillart au Népal*, by Daniel Girardin (1999), *Nomade sur la voie d'Ella Maillart* by Amandine Roche (2003), *Je suis de nulle part, sur les traces d'Ella Maillart* by Olivier Weber (2003), *Ella Maillart sur les routes de l'Orient*, by Daniel Girardin (2003).

4. Peter Hulme et Tim Youngs (éds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 237.

5. <http://www.rendezvous-carnetdevoyage.com/2016/06/lassociation-ifav/>

6. "Reading, reading, reading, that doesn't mean anything. You have to go and see". (My translation).

7. Alain Montandon has published a rich body of work devoted to this approach which he conceptualised and developed. See, for example, one of his most recent articles in the previous issue of this review. « Sociopoétiques ? » *Sociopoétiques*, n° 1, octobre 2016. [En ligne] URL : <http://revues-msh.uca.fr/sociopoetiques/index.php?id=640>

representations⁸”. If we look at early twentieth century representations of women and cars, we notice not surprisingly that women are rarely at the wheel, more frequently shown in the position of spectator or passenger. The idea of women taking a prominent, active role in the driving seat was at odds with the traditional image of women as sedentary keepers of the home⁹. The Figaro newspaper summed up this reluctance to accept women as drivers as early as 1904 in an article with the title “*Les Femmes et l’automobile, peu d’avenir*” (“Little future for women and cars”, my translation.) Commentators of the day pointed out how physically unbecoming it would for women to drive, the dirtiness of the road would turn them into ugly, unrecognizable creatures who nobody, it is implied, would care to gaze upon. “Who would paint the faces of our pretty lady drivers after such long a journey? Their heads bandaged with rubber, their eyes under goggles and the obligatory veils, mouthfuls of dust soaked by steam, dripping with sweat making pink furrows down their tarnished, earth-colored faces¹⁰” (my translation). Not only were women’s appearance represented as incompatible with the grime of the car but critics also insisted upon women’s perceived inability to drive. The myth of women’s incompetence at the wheel is a persistent one. Michael Berger points out an article in the *New Statesman* in 1927 relaying the cliché that women’s emotiveness prevented them from being competent drivers : « Women do not commonly possess the nervous imperturbability which is essential to good driving. They seem always to be a little self-conscious on the road, a little doubtful about their own powers. They are too easily worried, too uncertain of their own right of way, too apt to let their emotions affect their manipulation of the steering wheel¹¹. »

According to the sociologist Yann Demoli, the women who first obtained a driver’s licence were among privileged groups, usually exceptional women who were prepared to defy the social prejudices of their time or who were connected to men who had a specific place in the history of the automobile¹². As we have seen, Ella Maillart clearly belonged to the first category. An avid sportswoman, she thrived on

8. Frédéric Monneyron et Joël Thomas, *Automobile et Littérature*, Perpignan, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, coll. « Études », 2005, p. 11.

9. See Carl Degler, *At Odd: Women and Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980.

10. « Qui peindra la tête de nos jolies chauffeuses, après une si longue route. La tête bandée de caoutchouc, les yeux vitrés et sous les indispensables voilettes, bouchées de poussière détrempée par la buée, un visage terni, couleur de terre, où la sueur dégouline en fines rigoles roses. » Jules Grandjouan, in « La course automobile Paris-Berlin de 1901 », cited in *Les femmes et l’automobile à la Belle Époque (1898-1922) à partir de l’hebdomadaire La Vie au Grand Air*. Mémoire de master 1, mention management des événements et des loisirs sportifs, présenté par Céline Cauvin, sous la direction de M. Jean-Pierre Blay, Université Paris X Nanterre, UFR Sciences et Techniques des Activités Physiques et Sportives, p. 40

11. Michael Berger, *The Automobile in American History and Culture. A Reference Guide*, Wesport, Greenwood Press, Connecticut, London 2001, p. xxi.

12. The first world war was a turning point in the west for increasing the number of women drivers when their skills were needed to drive ambulances, tractors, buses and taxis. However, it remained a marginal activity for women. It is not until the 1980’s and the banalization of possessing a second car that the numbers of women drivers took off on a massive scale

physical challenges, and crossing boundaries, both social and geographical that we could certainly qualify as exceptional. One of the first questions we would like to examine in relation to *The Cruel Way* is Ella's motivation to take to the wheel. What does her writing tell us about why she sets off on this epic road trip?

From pioneer trails to the latest car commercial, taking to the « open road » has continually been represented as an act of escape. The road is a mythic space of possibility offering new horizons to an individual liberated from the confines of home and society. *The Cruel Way* has elements of this with Ella Maillart mixing personal desire with political context. She is writing against the backdrop of 1939 when Europe is on the brink of war and Europeans look on with feelings of despair and anxiety at the oncoming chaos. With a sense of urgency, the opening lines of the book relay a conversation between Ella and Christina in which they evoke the soul of Prague being crushed by the relentlessness of Hitler's might. Disillusioned by Europe's failure to prevent an escalation into conflict, Ella and Christina feel compelled to leave this world and head out of Europe, not so much as a flight of fantasy but in an attempt to find the necessary detachment to understand better the chaos both surrounding them and within. Ella's longing is for a more peaceful world (ironically for us today it is Afghanistan), one in which more "primitive" ways could inspire her and reconcile her with humanity. Her goal is to reach Kabul and to live among nomads. As for Christina, on top of fleeing the war brewing in Europe, she seeks to escape some long-standing family conflicts, a broken heart caused by a succession of failed love affairs and herself-destructive drug addiction. Both women declare their intention to find their way of contributing to the war effort by making a difference in the world on their return. The journey is a way for them to turn into the responsible women they need to be in order to fully engage in the world. As Maillart's travelling companion puts it, "This journey is not going to be a sky larking escapade as if we were twenty – and that is impossible, with the European crisis increasing every day. This journey must be a means towards our end. We can help each other to become conscious, responsible persons¹³." Taking to the road for them is no lightweight excursion to merely escape the routine of everyday life, or an emotional response to personal vulnerability, but is represented as serious project activated by a sense of purpose and expectation.

Maillart's sense of hope gives momentum and shapes the text. The start of the journey is expressed in language of dawn, newness, the idea of possibility: "As we stepped out of our sleeping bags our blue grey tent shone under the diamond powder of the dew. Supple like yellow satin, new leaves trembled, thrilled to be noticed by the young sun¹⁴". She goes on to compare the elation that comes with the freedom of the open road to sailing or flying. Her compulsion to roam without restraint is satisfied by the car which offers a latitude of mobility only surpassed by a boat or a plane:

13. Ella Maillart, *The Cruel Way*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 4.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Springtime and a road wide open ahead, when you are free to drive on for thousands of miles, free to camp or eat to stop or change itinerary at will, can give a great exhilaration. Only leaving harbor in one's own boat could one be more deeply stirred, for at sea the whole immensity is offered – no roads to force the keel along given lines. Or in the air, with a new element under control, a boon till now conceded only to the birds¹⁵.

Let us add that Maillart included in her travelogue a rather striking photograph, “In the Black Sea: landing at Trebizond” which depicts their Ford motorcar being transported in a ferry¹⁶. It is right at the helm of the boat, positioned at an angle in such a way that suggests it is on the verge of sprouting wings and is poised for take off. In a wonderfully imaginative way, it is as if all three modes of transport – car, boat and plane – are combined in a triplicate vision of travel that celebrates the road as an unanchored space.

The Ford car driven by Maillart and Christina is a presence throughout the text. Declared from the outset in the title, Maillart emphasizes how the mere mention of it gives form and, by some magical chemistry, sets in motion her dormant travel plan. The car is not just the instrument but the genesis of her desire to travel. “That one word was enough; flocking ideas arranged themselves in the right order, vague tendencies crystallized into a solid plan¹⁷”. Maillart later adds, however, that this was not some “kind of magic carpet¹⁸”. These road trippers have to deal with the mechanics of the machine, which they do competently, making themselves understood in local garages when the need for interventions arise. Maillart sometimes humanizes the Ford qualifying it as the “third member of the party¹⁹”. She notices the car “panting²⁰” as if it were a faithful dog, and the wheels “singing²¹” while the tarmac glides underneath. At other times, she gives it an organic status, likening the heavily loaded chassis to an “over-ripe melon²²” or adorning it with Persian blue beads against the evil eye in keeping with the local cattle²³. As Deborah Clarke has pointed out in her detailed analysis of women and automobiles²⁴, cars have frequently been humanized in cultural representations, usually feminized by the use of naming such as “Thin Lizzie” for the famous Ford T or car parts such as the “bonnet” or “skirts” (or “modesty panels”), suggesting a male/female or rider/ridden machine binary. Being a woman at the wheel,

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

24. Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women. Fiction and automobile culture in 20th century America*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2007, p. 29.

Maillart unsettles that convention and reveals a relationship with the car that is more fluid, complex. In an early episode, the two travelers accidentally lose the ignition key while out gathering provisions for their trip on which they are about to embark. In this instance, the car seems elusive, the viability of their journey hinging on their ability to overcome such a hitch. Their success in doing so forges their bond as a travelling duo. At other times, she admires the car's vigor – it is “compact and powerful²⁵” – a feature which they harness when they attempt to speed through border controls. Then it is their getaway car, thrillingly liberating.

Representing the open road as a site of freedom is a fundamental trope of travel narratives and road trip in particular is synonymous with “a time of revelling in a free-floating state beyond ordinary spatiotemporal bounds²⁶”. However, the road trip has a particular resonance when it is a pair of women travelers who are transgressing the ordinary spatiotemporal bounds that circumscribe lives along gendered lines. Her encounter, for example, with women in Begram and the conversation she engages there about veil wearing, put into sharp perspective her own experience of sense of sovereignty. “We felt grateful for our freedom – so difficult to bear, but more necessary than life²⁷.” Maillart's awareness of her status as a western woman traveler observing women in Afghanistan as the Other adds to the layers of the text which is traversed by notions of colonialism, identity, otherness and feminism²⁸.

How does Ella Maillart stage herself as a woman road-tripper? In what ways does she go beyond the representations of woman traveler as marginal or outlandish? It would be fair to suggest that she takes her writing through a process of “legitimizing”, rendering it acceptable to the editorial world and subtly expanding cultural norms. For instance, she acknowledges the heritage of previous travelers who have beaten the path in front of her and who she imagines present in the landscape: “As we drove once more on the flat road, the dead land ahead of us was like an empty screen on which we projected the silhouettes of T.E. Lawrence and Alain Gerbault²⁹.” She is in good company, she reassures us, at the same time positioning herself in the lineage of recognized travel writers³⁰. Moreover, Ella Maillart reinforces the seriousness of her work by grounding it in an ethnological stance. Frequently in “The Cruel Way”, this is the prism through which she ostensibly relates the world. She stages herself as

25. Ella Maillart, *The Cruel Way*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

26. Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, Bowling Green, Popular Press, 1996, p. 6.

27. Ella Maillart, *The Cruel Way*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

28. See in particular, the rich analysis of these questions by Sara Steinhert Borella, *The Travel narratives of Ella Maillart: (En) Gendering the Quest*, *op. cit.*

29. Ella Maillart, *The Cruel Way*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

30. It is a writing strategy that scholars have identified as characteristic of women's travel writing (particularly in the 19th century) symptomatic of an anxiety of authorship and the perceived requirement for their work to be taken seriously. See for example, Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference. An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991 and Pierre Rajotte, *Les Récits de voyageuses : écrire hors de la Maison du Père*, Québec, Triptyque, 1997.

the outside observer describing with a certain detachment people and places largely unfamiliar to the West. She is careful to demonstrate that her knowledge – cultural, linguistic, geographical – is documented and that she belongs to a community of researchers. She does so by referring to other authors on the subject in the text, in foot notes and an extensive bibliography. The reality of facts is the road map of her journey : the place name chapter headings, the many dates of the various central Asian dynasties, the table of measurements she includes as an annex where we learn the distance by car from Geneva to Istanbul is 1.750 miles or that Meshed to the Afghan border is 155 miles or that the Kandevan pass (Persia) measures 9.800 feet. There is a full index, referencing places, cultures and notable figures that firmly fix her narrative in a discourse of scientific recording. Yet, bursting through the solidness of objectivity is the subjective voice of Maillart, sharing with us the revelations that travelling on the road brings to her. She believes in the power of her mind to make her way through the world: “Beauty pain and joy are not intrinsic to a thing, they are nowhere but within me. Therefore since these latent feelings dwell within me, I can learn to bring forth from my being pure and unconditioned joy [...] I can shape my world³¹.” What a life-affirming claim. Sadly, there is little joy to be felt at the end of this road trip. Once at their destination, the bond between the two companions unravels and they part ways on disappointed terms.

In the end, the car can only take them so far. This road trip ends with a breakdown. Not the mechanical kind that they have regularly experienced and which they have overcome, but a collapse in the relationship. On arrival at Kabul, Christina confesses that, despite her promises, she has been unable to stop her drug addiction. The metaphorical journey’s end of growth and agency they had so desired, turns flat. The news depresses Maillart and she reluctantly adopts the solution of “handing over” Christina to a male friend to take her back. Maillart’s parting image of her travelling companion is of her turning the car key, an echo of the lost-and-found key that marked the preparations to their trip. Herself, she decides not to return home, but to go on a retreat in India, extending her inner journey deeper within herself.

For all the robustness of Ella Maillart’s travels, the physical exploits, and miles she has clocked upon distant journeys, the image she chooses to sum up the narrative of her vagabond life is a spider’s web. Memories of experiences form a set of connections which gently vibrate in her. “Now like a spider who has spread its web to the end of the branches, my horizon has been enlarged: as if I had left everywhere something spun out of myself, I am directly stirred by what happens along the far flung threads of my experience³².” It is a delicate picture, a web is ephemeral, barely even visible but the metaphor illustrates beautifully Maillart’s art of poeticizing the transformational effect of travel.

31. Ella Maillart, *The Cruel Way*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 45.