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See also Journalists and Journalism

TRISTAN, FLORA (1803–1844) French
Political Activist and Travel Writer

Travel is inextricably, intimately, and crucially part of Flora Tristan’s writings and life. From the first essay she wrote and published in 1835—De la nécessité de faire bon accueil aux femmes étrangères [Of the Necessity to Properly Welcome Foreign Women], a brochure meant to serve the needs of women who traveled to France—to her last book (published posthumously)—Le Tour de France, a daily record of her journey through France when she was striving to unionize workers—Flora Tristan placed the experiences, themes, and symbols of travel at the center of her work. Tristan herself was literally and symbolically a woman on the move. As an intellectual, a political activist, an explorer, and a visionary, she defied conventional models of womanhood. She certainly did not author conventionally feminine books.

Although Tristan did pen a lengthy novel, Méphis; ou, Le Prolétaire [Méphis; or, The Proletarian], her true strength was in the retelling and the analysis of her travel experiences and observations. She was especially skilled at weaving poetry with social analysis, combining the powers of fiction writing with those of the documentary. So strong was the latter element of her narratives that, when considered in conjunction with what has often been reconstructed as her legendary and heroic life, the literary quality of her writing was not examined in its own right until quite recently. Contemporary critics have begun to recognize Tristan as a skillful author whose travel writings are situated at the crossroads of genres such as autobiography, ethnographic inquiry, and political analysis, among others, writings that give way to rich analyses, both textual and historical.

So compelling a story is the life of Tristan and so dominated by her own persona are her writings that her works have often been considered as testimonials rather than literary products. Tristan’s own experiences are certainly at the core of her best-known book, Les Pérégrinations d’une paria, 1833–1834 (1838; Peregrinations of a Pariah), a text where the generic definitions that separate autobiographical and travel writing are blurred. In this book, Tristan narrates the story of her trip to Peru, where she had hoped to secure part of her father’s inheritance. From Bordeaux to Valparaiso, from Islay to Arequipa, from Arequipa to Lima, Tristan becomes both observer and actor in a complex political situation. She also takes on the role of social commentator and pays particular attention to women’s condition, whether it be in the context of religious institutions or family relations.

In Promenades dans Londres (1840; London Journals, 1840), Tristan strengthens the socioeconomic focus and the political analysis of her travel writings and produces a narrative that has been considered one of the great ethnographic texts of the nineteenth century. She does so, however, without ever erasing her personal involvement from the makeup of a book where she sometimes appears like a character in the urban plot she deciphers for us. Her dramatized presence gives all the more power to the expression of her continued concern for the plight of the oppressed (women, prostitutes, factory workers, prisoners). Tristan describes the many faces of the metropolis—a city that comes to epitomize the age of industrial capitalism—by acting as an explorer whose goal is to reflect upon and reveal the various strata of British society. As always, she speaks abundantly of politics and political systems, going as far as disguising herself as a Turkish man in order to enter the House of Commons for a more authentic account. Tristan’s critical eye does not spare political institutions, but she denounces most vigorously the economic and sexual inequalities that she has made all the more palpable to readers by the suggestive powers of her prose.

If Promenades dans Londres was dedicated to the working classes, Le Tour de France (1973) was to become Tristan’s testament to their cause. The concerns she had begun to address in her previous travel writings take prominence in this text and become fully integrated with her journey. When Tristan embarks on what would be the last of her peregrinations, she does so to promote the political pamphlet L’Union ouvrière [The Worker’s Union], which she had authored in order to help the unionization process she felt necessary to the emancipation of the working class. Published posthumously well over a century after Tristan’s death, the narrative follows and records her journey’s daily experiences and thoughts. The unfinished nature
of the text further emphasizes its sense of raw authenticity. This apparent lack of polish also allows for Tristan’s descriptive talents to truly stand out: her great attention to details, her skills in creating a vision out of the particularity of a scene. Most revealing, finally, is the religious overtone of the narrative, both as to rhetoric and themes. As Tristan tells of her often difficult experiences, including resistance to her project and her own health problems, she embraces a Christ-like persona and uses a decidedly religious discourse to describe her endeavor. A martyr she will indeed become when she dies on the road of her ultimate political campaign.

Flora Tristan’s travels infuse and shape all of her writings, as much as politics infuses her travel accounts—which are political in essence—with vivid and urgent ways of justifying her call for sociopolitical transformations. Her extraordinary personality and life experiences were often too powerful for her readers and commentators to distance themselves from in order to recognize the force, the coherence, and the rigor of her message. The art of her travel writings has also all too often been ignored. Yet Flora Tristan can be counted as one of the most talented travel writers and autobiographers of the nineteenth century. Her artistry was best served by a genre where experience, politics, and creativity find and found literary new grounds. In this sense, the literature of travel can encompass all and be open to all visions. Tristan’s work provides us with a rare instance and an extraordinary manifestation of travel writing where literary genres, political theory, historical documents, and personal engagement coexist and contribute to the making of a complex and powerful work of art.

BÉNÉDICTE MONICAT

Biography


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TROLLOPE, ANTHONY (1815–1882)

British Novelist and Civil Servant

“As I made . . . a terribly rough voyage to Alexandria, I wrote my allotted number of pages every day. On this occasion more than once I left my paper on the cabin table, rushing away to be sick in the privacy of my stateroom.” It was statements like this in Anthony Trollope’s An Autobiography that contributed to an eclipse in the author’s reputation toward the end of his life and after his death. A writer who approached his work in such a mechanistic, not to say ruthless, manner clearly had little to say in terms of the subtlety of human relationships. But his reputation is now restored, and his prodigious output of 47 novels, volumes of short stories, travel works, other nonfiction works, and magazine articles is more highly esteemed than at any time in the past.

For much of Trollope’s life, he was an official of the Post Office. It was his transfer to Banagher in Ireland in 1841 that first afforded him the opportunity of observing a culture different from his own. Trollope’s very first novel, The Macdermots of Ballycloran, can be regarded as a travel book in that it would have been impossible for him to have attempted it without this formative experience. He continued thus throughout his career, and very many of his novels and short stories use material that he acquired on his travels.

The Post Office selected Trollope to undertake several missions to overseas countries in order to negotiate postal agreements. His first such trip was to Egypt and the Middle East in 1858 and, while he did not write a nonfiction book of his experiences, many of them ap-