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A VIEW OF AFRICA FROM THE SKY:
BERYL MARKHAM AND THE FEMALE GAZE

1. "I am a wanderer": a woman in search of freedom

Beryl Markham rose to fame in 1936, when she succeeded in flying solo the Atlantic¹. She took off at Abington, in England, on 4th September, to reach New York after 21 hours, through fog and rain. She was the first woman to cross the ocean nonstop alone, and the first person to do it from East to West, against the prevailing winds². It is true that, with her *Messenger*, a Percival Vega Gull, she was forced to an emergency landing on a swampy terrain in Nova Scotia, at Cape Breton. The press, however, soon transformed her into a star: the historic flight made newspaper headlines, and the record-breaking aviatrix fired the imagination of the public. She was a beautiful and elegant lady, her many love affairs were much debated, arousing the general curiosity, and she was admired for her skills but also for her unconventional way of life. Wedged between two cultures, the African and the European, she experienced different yet parallel lives and she refused to conform either to African or to European conventions and social rules³.

Born in Leicestershire in 1902, at only two she had arrived in Kenya with her parents; in that British colony, at Njoro, about 70 miles from Nairobi, her father, Charles Clutterbuck, a high-born army officer who bred and trained racehorses, had set up a farm⁴.

¹ The quotation "I am a wanderer" is taken from Markham (2001: 241).

² The first solo flight across the Atlantic was made in 1927 by the American pilot Charles Lindbergh, who took 33 hours and a half from New York to Paris.

³ The two most authoritative biographies of Beryl Markham (1902-1986) are Lovell (1987) and Trzebinski (1995).

⁴ The Clutterbuck family, like many other pioneer families who, at the beginning of the XX century, bought their plots of land in Kenya, took advantage of the favourable situation: at that time, the UK government strongly encouraged the English settlement in British East Africa. For the question of the exploitation of the Kenyan land, see Maughan-Brown (1985) and Kennedy (1987). Cf. also Brazzelli (2004: 25-29).

After her mother went back to England, Beryl, still a young girl, was left completely free to join the Nandi workers of the plantation, wandering barefoot in the Rongay Valley or entering the cedar forests of the Mau Escarpment. Swahili, spoken by many of her father's employees, was her first language; she also learned to wield local weapons, to hunt wild game and to ride horses. In 1920 her father sold his estate and moved to South America; Beryl, instead, decided to stay alone in Kenya, to breed horses and train them for the races. Her passion for horses and races marked her youth; she won the most prestigious prizes and became one of the most socially prominent young women in Nairobi.

In 1931 she obtained a pilot's license; two crucial encounters encouraged her to develop a passion for airplanes and for flying, and changed her life completely. The first one was the meeting with Tom Campbell Black, the pilot of a private Kenya airline, the second with Denys Finch Hatton, Karen Blixen's lover, a famous "white hunter", one of the first persons to own a plane in Africa. Immediately after, Markham began to work as a *bush pilot*, in charge of delivering mail, medical supplies and equipment, and was employed for reconnaissance missions over remote and inaccessible areas, to rescue missing explorers, and for other tasks. She also flew a great number of passengers, especially tourists, and with Bror Blixen, another well-known big-game hunter, started up a new kind of safari, locating elephants from the sky.

A sort of between-the-wars celebrity, pursued and hunted by the press for her marriages and divorces, in the United States she met her third husband, Raoul Schumacher, a journalist and *ghostwriter*. They married in 1941. From 1950 to her death, she always lived in Africa, most of all in Kenya, showing to be deeply attached to the land where she had grown up, and achieved literary fame producing a work that is considered a masterpiece of aeronautical and travel literature.

2. West with the Night: *between autobiography and travel writing*

"Memory in ink": in that way the writer defines her work at the end of *West with the Night*, published in 1942 and immediately granted the status of a best-seller; a mixture of *log*, *diary*, *memoir*, it displays the features of a very peculiar narrative, based on the author's

⁵ On the connection between autobiography and travel writing in women's texts, see Ascari - Monticelli - Fortunati (2001: 5-16). Women's travel writing has always been

aerial travels over the African skies⁵. *West with the Night* is a kind of “bildungsroman”, covering Markham’s childhood and her experiences first with horses and then with planes⁶. In 1983 the American restaurateur George Gutekunst and the novelist Evan Connell proposed to re-publish what they called “a lost masterpiece”; the book was released in the United States by the North Point Press and sold over a million copies⁷.

Martha Gellhorn, in her introduction to the 1984 English edition (Virago), suggests that *West with the Night* is a love letter to Africa, a complementary book to Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* (1937), which, through the category of romance, develops the trope of the love affair with Africa represented as Eden, a place of freedom and regeneration.

Only after Markham’s death, in 1986, the question of authorship was raised. In 1987 Scott O’Dell, a scriptwriter who had worked with Raoul Schumacher, sent a letter to *Vanity Fair*, claiming that the book had been written by Markham’s husband. According to Errol Trzebinski, the text was undoubtedly written by Raoul Schumacher: a series of circumstances seem to validate Trzebinski’s opinion (Trzebinski 1995: 233-246). In contrast, other scholars, and especially Mary Lovell, confirm the authenticity of Markham’s work (Lovell 1987). According to Robert O’Brien, the question of authorship has no real relevance⁸. Maybe Schumacher helped Beryl to give an order to her memoirs, thanks to his literary background.

On the whole, *West with the Night* can be truly defined as a woman’s autobiography, although its narrator does adopt some typically male attitudes; the female voice strives to represent herself as a sort of imperial hero, who conquers and domesticates the space of the colony⁹. The protagonist does not always depict herself as a woman: such *gender* bending is the main source for ambiguity in Markham’s work. The tropes of women’s travel writing unfold in a

situated within complex social, cultural and historical forces. The question of gender in the contemporary analysis of travel accounts is crucial.

⁶ On “literary” African childhoods in colonial (and postcolonial) women’s writings, cf. Simoes da Silva (2002).

⁷ In 1987 a television documentary on Markham’s life was produced by George Gutekunst, entitled “World Without Walls”.

⁸ O’Brien (1996) agrees with Hemingway, who defined *West with the Night* “a bloody wonderful book” and suggests that the problem of *authorship* regarding *West with the Night* is not important at all, because the text is very rich and full of charm, and it does not matter if Schumacher helped Beryl. O’Brien’s article is based on deconstructionist theories.

⁹ On the ambiguous position of English women in Africa see Lewis (2003: 18).

very peculiar way in *West with the Night*, which is, at the same time, inside and outside the “canon” of the female travel narrative¹⁰. If travel has always been the domain of masculinity, the mobility of women came as an effect of modernity and women travellers were singled out as examples of the new feminine freedom, made possible by the modern technologies of motion.

Actually, the search for feminine identity, that is the main pattern of women’s travel writing, is revisited by Markham from a very ambiguous perspective: as a woman of action performing masculine deeds as a pilot, she identifies herself with a man, or maybe with an androgynous creature. As a consequence, also the masculine logic of travel is renegotiated, as well as the traditional codes of men’s adventures.

West with the Night purports to be the narrative of the author’s childhood and youth, and its most remarkable features are Markham’s passion for racehorses and planes (Giordani 2002: 91-92). Thus, Africa is represented as the place of adventures and freedom; the colonial space opens wide before a colonizer’s daughter, who seems to identify herself more with the natives than with the conquerors. Markham’s presentation develops an elegiac tone, a somewhat nostalgic pattern: the “pastoral theme” discloses itself in a manner similar to the narrative construction of Blixen’s *Out of Africa*¹¹: however, while Karen Blixen represents herself as a “sorceress-queen”, Markham sees herself as a “knight-errant”, who hunts fabulous beasts in the wilderness, beats the “villains” at the races, risks her life to rescue pilots in danger; finally, she is able to achieve her greatest *quest* by crossing the Atlantic ocean, alone, by night (Knipp 1990). Beryl’s childhood belongs to a kind of fairy-tale, and in *West with the Night* she employs the narrative pattern of a romance; indeed, among the traditional characters of modern romance, a major role is played by hunters and aviators. The main character, who by magic seems shielded by her white skin, remains unhurt in spite of

¹⁰ Sara Mills (1991), in her crucial work on women’s travel writing, analyses female travel accounts within the system of imperial representation, and pinpoints women’s search for freedom through their journeys and, at the same time, also through their texts. In any case, from the Victorian period, especially considered by Mills, to the Thirties, women’s social position greatly changes and, as a consequence, the same applies to their way of travelling and representing their encounter with otherness. Cf. Teo (2002). For the relation between women’s journeys and their narrations, see also Korte (2000: 113-126) and Bassnett (2002). On women’s travel writing in more general terms, see Lawrence (1994).

¹¹ For the relation between Blixen’s and Markham’s texts, and especially on their recurrent tropes, see Whitlock (2001: 112-114).

the many dangers she has to face, completely alone (she makes no mention of her mother, nor of the woman who replaced her, her father's partner, nor of her husbands or son).

A strong selection of the events shaping her life allows Markham to recreate the ambiguous myth of the white hero/heroine conquering the black continent. In the first part of her book the narrator emphasizes her special bonds with animals, particularly with dogs and horses. Her dog Buller was courageous and able to fight boars and leopards, while her first horse was named Pegasus, from the mythical "horse with wings" of the Greek tradition; because horses were such an important part of her life, "there is no phase of my childhood I cannot recall remembering a horse I owned then" (Markham 2001: 108).

Beryl writes that in her teens she measured herself against a Nandi girl, Jebbta, only to discover to be different from her, although their bodies were very similar (Markham 2001: 77-78): the native girl could not be introduced to the male hunting rites, while the white English girl was allowed to escape the limitations of her gender (Smith 2002: 414). Being unable to identify herself with the native girl, the author effectively reveals the ambiguity of her narrative voice: Markham prefers to associate herself with a male subject.

We can find a mythical structure working as a subtext in *West with the Night*: Beryl is a modern Athena, the goddess born out of her father's head. As an unmothered daughter, she is also a new Miranda, the Shakespearean heroine, who perceives the "brave new world" around her in terms of never-ending wonder. Without a mother (being an orphan in Africa, indeed, enables boys and girls to acquire a new identity), Beryl grows up through three "patriarchal stages": the initiation into the Nandi hunting rites, the challenge as a breeder and trainer of horses, the technological exploits as a pilot. The adventure story is artfully intertwined with Greek myths and is framed in a Homeric structure. In a certain sense, in modern times the gods and heroes of the ancient mythology are embodied by the aviator/aviatrix.

The epic flight from East to West, mirrored in the title of the book, is described only in the last, dramatic chapter, whereas the whole narrative focuses on Markham's life and experiences in Kenya. Markham's text can also be read as a portrait of Kenya and of its transformations in the first decades of the XX century (Nairobi, thanks to the completion of the railway from Mombasa, developed in the Thirties as a cosmopolitan and multiracial city), as well as the portrait of a girl achieving her peculiar adulthood. However, the traditional representation of Africa as a stage where male imperial hero-

ism is performed is still present; the narrative voice seems to disclose a masculine subject.

The recollection of ancient and modern heroic deeds is reinforced by many literary references: the first quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, part II, "I speak of Africa and golden joys" (Act V, Scene III), occurs in the epigraph. The book starts in the middle of a sequence of events and its structure does not follow a strict chronological order; the main character is flying over the desolate landscape of the Serengeti Plain (in Tanzania) in search of a missing explorer: "A Slough of Despond, more tangible than, but at least as hopeless as Mr Bunyan's" (Markham 2001: 5). The hostile and dangerous environment recalls the perilous journey of John Bunyan's christian Pilgrim, although the faith of the aviatrix in modern technology overcomes a religious interpretation of the events. The text contains two opposite factors: the aviatrix, in the air, experiences a kind of "poetic intimacy" with the wilderness, while the representation of aeronautical technology creates a sharp contrast with the nature of Africa. At the same time, the risk of flying is emphasized from the very beginning of *West with the Night*.

3. *A visual map of Africa*

The myth of the airplane, a typical male construction, highlighting man's courage and connecting to his desire to expose himself to danger and master the world, is strengthened by the heroic deeds of the First World War, performed and celebrated in Italy by Gabriele D'Annunzio, who exhibited his aerial virility. Thanks to mechanical flying, however, a new way of perceiving and representing landscape is introduced¹². In the first decades of the XX century the dream of flying, that mankind had nurtured since antiquity, comes true: going up from the "mother earth" to a basically "masculine sky" – a sky ready to be colonized – implies a discourse of gender. At the same time, the idea of the conquest of the air, the domain of masculine heroism, uninhabited by women, suggests that the pilot imagines himself as an omniscient subject.

The possibilities provided by the systematic use of the airplane change the dimension of travel and the ways of watching and depicting the land, because spaces and distances expand and challenge or-

¹² See Whol (1996). More generally, on the relation between flying and literature, cf. Goldstein (1986).

der and definition. As far as Africa is concerned, at the beginning of the XX century its interior is still partly unknown and can be recreated through a visual map. Few charts were available for that huge area, and showed no details of the country. Being the product of imperial ideology, first of all the mapping process emphasizes the possession of the land, disclosing also commercial and touristic interests¹³.

While on the ground Beryl Markham is a colonizer's daughter, in the sky she belongs to a space of her own: moving upwards, she frees herself from subjection to the earth and social rules. Flying allows Beryl to escape her destiny as a "memsahib"¹⁴; nevertheless, the fact that she depicts herself as an epic hero inevitably connects her figure to the tradition of imperial pioneering. The iconography of the aviatrix is a public spectacle, because the "lady flyer" becomes the emblem of the modern woman, who affirms her place in the sky and conquers the air.

It was neither easy nor usual for anyone to own an airplane in the Thirties in Africa, particularly for a woman; yet, flying is the only way Markham can move across inaccessible areas, beyond, or rather over natural obstacles. Beryl Markham represents herself as a pioneer because she is the first to fly over a land unknown to the rest of the world, which shows the marks of an unfathomable past and of an inscrutable future. Beneath the aviatrix's gaze unfolds

A land that is unknown to the rest of the world – a strange mixture of grasslands, scrub, desert sand like long waves of the southern ocean. [...] Land without life. Land teeming with life – all of the dusty past, all of the future (Markham 2001: 15).

Africa is a cradle of mysteries never wholly solved (Markham 2001: 13). Moreover, the narrator's remembrance of sunlight and green hills, cool water and bright mornings, the colours of nature and the pulse of life, as well as the contrast between light and darkness, between sounds and silences imply the revisitation of well-known stereotypes of the exotic representation of the continent.

The aviatrix is not afraid of flying alone, by night, but a sense of isolation is conveyed through her writing, so that she feels she is the only inhabitant of the planet: "The hills, the forests, the rocks, and

¹³ On women's role in commercial aviation, see Corn (1979).

¹⁴ The term was used in colonial India as a form of respectful address for a European woman. It was also employed in Africa and in other colonies.

the plains are one with the darkness, and the darkness is infinite” (Markham 2001: 10). Only apparently the African landscapes are desolate and inhospitable; to the pilot’s gaze, they are swarming with life: for example, the grasslands of the Serengeti, at first sight, seem void and meaningless. Yet, if you carefully observe them, you understand their extraordinary energy and vitality: “They are endless and they are empty, but they are as warm with life as the waters of a tropic sea” (Markham 2001: 33).

The more you know Africa, the more you are surprised by its mercurial “moods”. As a result of such a vision, the continent is humanized, like a kind of ancestral “mother earth”:

Africa is never the same to anyone who leaves it and returns again. It is not a land of change, but it is a land of moods and its moods are numberless. It is not fickle, but because it has mothered not only men, but races, and cradled not only cities, but civilizations – and seen them die, and seen new ones born again – Africa can be dispassionate, indifferent, warm, cynical, replete with the weariness of too much wisdom (Markham 2001: 271).

In *West with the Night* Beryl Markham is convinced that there are so many Africas as there are books about Africa, and therefore she develops a very topical examination of the subjective representations of space, of the relationships between the multiple depictions of a place and, more generally, of the intertextuality of travel writing: Africa is “everything” and “nothing”, it has been filled with a large number of explorers’ and travellers’ personal insights (Markham 2001: 8).

Before meeting Tom Campbell Black, the would-be aviatrix had a sketchy notion of airplanes, and only considered them as useful and interesting inventions; she could not think of the new possibilities they provided to create a different relationship between the individual and space. Tom explains the empowering force of the new means of transport:

When you fly, you get a feeling of possession that you couldn’t have if you owned all Africa. You feel that everything you see belongs to you – all the pieces are put together, and the whole is yours; not that you want it, but because, when you’re alone in a plane, there’s no one to share it (Markham 2001: 153).

Flying creates a feeling of omnipotence, and the “dance below” produces the rhythm of an ecstasy, so that landing on rough ground seems almost an unnatural action, just like galloping a horse on concrete (Markham 2001: 228). By contrast, also the point of view of the

natives, who walk on naked feet and keep their eyes on the earth, is introduced: according to them, airplanes are only the embodiment of white stupid pretensions and are associated with legends and ancient stories, not at all with modernity:

A man was not a bird – how Arab Maina would have laughed at that – men wishing themselves into wings! It would have reminded him of a legend (Markham 2001: 153).

Also Denys Finch Hatton, the owner of a Gipsy Moth, encouraged Beryl to learn to fly¹⁵: he had developed a new technique for safaris, which implied to spot big game from the plane; after Denys' death in an air crash, Markham herself, together with Bror Blixen, Karen Blixen's husband, employed that method, with a view to tourists' and travellers' interests in Africa. However, she was strongly against hunting elephants, claiming that it was too cruel a practice (Markham 2001: 108): in her opinion, the African land had been created for animals, and for that reason it is so impenetrable to men.

The aviatrix observes the continent from the sky, employing a device we can associate with the so called *monarch-of-all-I-survey* approach¹⁶, generally used by XIX century British explorers and travellers, who admired the extra-European landscapes from the summit of mountains, hills or promontories, and dominated the earth with their gaze, before the Western settlers would conquer it. In this sense, the femininization of the land is a crucial part of the colonial vision, as the European pioneers represented the penetration into the wilderness as a metaphor for the violation of a woman's body. From Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of Guyana* (1595) to Henry Morton Stanley's African narratives of exploration, in the whole imperial textual tradition the female body of the earth becomes the object of the male gaze, suggesting the sexual rewards awaiting the colonizers¹⁷.

Markham's attitude is more complex: the aviatrix writes like an explorer who observes the land from above and appropriates it through his ambiguous gaze. She is the land, but she is over the land – a woman's body transformed by the mighty power of a male machine.

¹⁵ On the figure of Finch Hatton as a "Kenya pioneer" and a "big-game hunter", see Wheeler (2006). Beryl had an affair with Denys: Trzebinski (1995) claims that Gervase, born in 1928, when Beryl was married to Mansfield Markham, was Denys' son.

¹⁶ The expression *monarch-of-all-I-survey* was coined by Mary Louise Pratt (1992).

¹⁷ In the case of Henry Morton Stanley, the archetypal African explorer, the images of the penetration into the virgin forest achieve a strong sexual significance, emphasizing the male physical dominance of the African territory. See Brazzelli (2001).

The African space, fluid and changeable, undergoes an everlasting transformation. The aviatrix's gaze, however, does not aim at appropriating the land, she wants to become a part of Africa, to merge into it; she is interested in reading and interpreting the signs of the earth, such as animal tracks, smoke, or wrecks of airplanes: thus, the land fascinates her as when she was a little girl and went hunting in the forest with the natives. And yet, positioning herself as an adventurer who flies over the African skies, Markham feminizes Africa as a space of virginity, fertility and exoticism.

In *West with the Night*, although a male point of view is clearly established, that same point of view is also rejected or at least challenged. The narrator is aware that only the natives are able to grasp the secrets of the land:

But the soul of Africa, its integrity, the slow inexorable pulse of its life, is its own and of such singular rhythm that no outsider, unless steeped from childhood in its endless, even beat, can ever hope to experience it, except only as a bystander might experience a Masai war dance knowing nothing of its music nor the meaning of its steps (Markham 2001: 13).

Nobody, unless one has lived his/her whole life in that continent, can ever aspire to be more than a spectator of incomprehensible events. In such a way, Beryl Markham mimics the logic of Western traditional narratives, questions and deconstructs them, while remaining very close to the colonial tropes. Yet, she claims "My feet were on the earth of Africa" (Markham 2001: 134), underlining her deep attachment to the ground when, still very young, she decided that Africa would be her home.

The panoramic gaze implies an overall view over uncontaminated lands, but also a fragmentation of vision. The swampy region of the Sudd (a very large area in the Southern part of the Sudan), formed by the Nile and its entangled channels, particularly fascinates the aviatrix, because of its prehistorical features. When she flies over that large region, she feels that life, there, is still in the primeval stages of development:

If you can visualize twelve thousand square miles of swamps that seethes and crawls like a prehistoric crucible of half-formed life, you have a conception of the Sudd (Markham 2001: 250).

The landscape appears plain and green to the pilots, but the mud and the swamps prevent a possible landing; beyond the Sudd, there is only desert and nothing else, for three thousand miles. According to Beryl, seen from the sky, all desert places have the same quality of

darkness, because without vegetation they have no boundaries. Moreover, they have the power to hypnotize the spectator.

In her plane, Markham flies over vast uninhabited territories, with only a compass and maps for navigation, tools that represent man's instrumental rationality. The narrator shows an ambivalent attitude towards maps: on the one hand, she claims that pilots have confidence in topographical charts¹⁸; on the other, she knows that they are only lifeless and inanimate objects. At first sight, rivers, swamps, valleys, mountains, deserts are only lines drawn with a pen, spots on a blank paper:

It is only paper and ink, but if you think a little, if you pause a moment, you will see that these two things have seldom joined to make a document so modest and yet so full with histories of hope and sagas of conquest (Markham 2001: 246).

Nevertheless, in *West with the Night* Markham realizes that those marks try to narrate the histories and the legends of the whole humankind. When she reflects on the value of maps for a pilot like herself, she confesses she treasures up all her maps: "I have a trunk containing continents" (Markham 2001: 35). The aviation charts available at the time had a scale one to two millions: the narrator is puzzled because they report large prints of unknown names of towns and villages, and most of all because "the bulk of the terrain over which you had to fly was bluntly marked: 'unsurveyed'" (Markham 2001: 35). Still, Markham is fascinated by the large unexplored spaces, by the blank spots on the maps.

Thus, a kind of "geography of the gaze" is conveyed by the narrator, an imaginative geography of Africa, whose main features are the "stillness" and, at the same time, the movement and everlasting change produced by the "sleepless giant". The margins of the empire become the centre of the narrator's world: many rhetorical devices of the colonial tradition continue to shape the style of her representation, such as the categories of the exotic, of the picturesque and of the savage. All the same, Beryl feels at home in Africa, because "all the country I know is this country – these hills, familiar as an old wish, this veldt, this forest" (Markham 2001: 125). The identification

¹⁸ "Were all the maps in this world destroyed and vanished under the direction of some malevolent hand, each man would be blind again, each city be made a stranger to the next, each landmark become a meaningless signpost pointing to nothing" (Markham: 2001, 245).

between land and female body conveyed in conventional travel narratives resurfaces: when she flies, Beryl seems to own the land through her gaze, but she is also a part of it. The African landscape requires to be understood, and sometimes it is possible for the narrator to do it; however, it maintains its secrets and withstands every interpretation.

4. The airplane and the female body

“Flight is but momentary escape from the eternal custody of the earth” (Markham 2001: 285): flying allows Beryl to temporarily escape the subjection of the earth. In a sense, in the aviatrixes’ narratives the airplane is not only a means of transport, but also a fantastic winged machine, capable of overcoming the boundaries of the female world and of women’s roles; actually, the female pilots’ literary constructions appear devices to transcend the closures of gender and reveal new perspectives in the representation and interpretation of the world¹⁹. Thus, the airplane becomes a kind of icon, which reveals women’s courage in a male world (Federici 2005: 314-321); flying implies a very solid professional background, and requires real competence and hard work. The male logic of mobility and the female body, associated with land and home, seem in sharp opposition (Smith 2001: 1-28)²⁰. The machine provides, at the same time, “liberation” from the female body, distancing it from the daily experiences, and an awareness of the body itself, so that woman and plane seem to establish a complicity, and the plane is almost feminized. The needle of the altimeter has the power to hypnotize the pilot (Markham 2001: 286); after a moment of danger, when the motor seems to be silent, Beryl thanks God, who created the plane: “I thank Geoffrey De Havilland who designed the indomitable Gispay, and who, after all, must have been designed by God in the first place” (Markham 2001: 287).

The aviatrix, a real “new woman”, is not a passive passenger; instead, in command of the “flying machine”, she considers the technical means as a part of her body. The pilot’s identity is defined

¹⁹ On the aviatrixes of the first decades of the XX century, cf. Boase (1979) and Cadovan (1992).

²⁰ Women’s travel narrations disclose the complex negotiation between the position of the female subject and space. Women’s “movement”, indeed, has become very important since the end of the XIX century, and has turned into a remarkable feature of the modern world. Cf. Blunt - Rose (1994: 1-25).

through the control of a new technology: in fact, the airplane is a machine one gradually learns to use and control, but also an amazing vehicle, capable of pushing the pilot beyond the boundaries of everyday life. As a real “topographic machine”, capable of watching space from the sky, the airplane greatly expands the frontiers of the empire, and allows to explore and map them. Thus, projected into the air, as if by magic, the woman’s body reveals its liberated identity, struggling against all the chains of subordination.

It is important to focus on the relationship between the use of the airplane and the narrative construction of *West with the Night*. Sometimes the text shows Markham’s astonishment, but it also unfolds a deeper meditation on the present, the past and the future of the continent:

If the towns and villages of Kenya lacked roads to unite them, like threads in a net, then at least there was land enough for the wheels of planes and sky enough for their wings and time enough for their propellers to beat back the barriers of doubt they flew against. Everywhere in the world, highways had come first – and then the landing fields. Only not here, for much of Kenya’s future was already the past of other places (Markham 2001: 179).

Once again, this temporal uncertainty avoids the limitations of the European (male) perception of Africa. The contingency of the flight seems to mirror the unstable conditions of Africa, whose space is not yet organized and whose future remains enigmatic.

The aviatrix suggests a new kind of femininity, very close to androgyny, where an important role is played by the mythology of the horsewoman, that is the figure of the Amazon: on the one hand, the masculine clothes she wears reveal her Amazonic posture; on the other, they assimilate her to a man, even if we cannot speak of a real “disguise”. The male imagination associated to flight, that Markham freely unfolds, produces an original narrative form. At the margins, crossing the boundaries, and high in the air, differences lose their meaning, although Markham’s writing sometimes shows the fear of a racial “contamination” with the natives, revealing one of the many aspects of her identity²¹.

²¹ In a less ambiguous way than in *West with the Night*, the *romance* constructed around the new means of transport, the dimension of the feminine flight and its role in defining women’s identity mingle in a few tales collected in a volume entitled *The Splendid Outcast*. In 1984 Mary Lovell interviewed Markham and found the manuscripts of the stories Beryl had sold to magazines; she arranged them to be published in a collection. For example, in “Appointment in Khartoum” (Markham 1987: 69-86) Beryl’s life is described through the character of a young American aviatrix, who, during a violent storm

In *West with the Night*, Beryl Markham is at the same time “inside” and “outside” the African landscape. The female body, moving in the air and creating a kind of unity with the aeroplane, is conscious of a sense of solitude and of separation:

Being alone in an aeroplane for even so short a time as a night and a day, irrevocably alone, with nothing to observe but your instruments and your own hands in semi-darkness [...] – such an experience can be as startling as the first awareness of a stranger walking by your side at night. You are the stranger (Markham 2001: 283).

But this condition of estrangement and separation paradoxically constitutes the link between Markham and the strange land she inhabits.

A kind of negotiation between the mode of feminine representation and the masculine pattern is devised. In a certain sense, because of the interaction of space and text, the landscape represented on the page is “emptied” through the female gaze, “catalogued” and then “filled” with an estranged perception of the creatures inhabiting it. The female gaze is not enough to define that world, nor the androgynous ambiguity of Markham’s literary work is adequate. The African continent does not unveil its secrets, and the heroine is not able to decipher the manifold signs of the land. The aviatrix remains an “outsider”, grown up in Africa from English parents, identifying herself with the place in a deeper and more genuine way than the colonizers of the first generation were able to do; nevertheless, she is doomed to employ once again the tropes of the colonial tradition. The supreme freedom of the aerial flight cannot be fully translated into the language of Markham’s memoir. The imperial space, reinforced by technology, is denied and, at the same time, reconstructed. After every flight, the aviatrix regains the ground under her feet; she challenges the sky and faces the mystery of a landscape constantly carrying with it “the stamp of wilderness” (Markham 2001: 38).

over the Sudd, flies an English passenger, a man who at first does not trust her and looks down on her, but afterwards recognizes her skills as a pilot. In “Your Heart Will Tell You” (Markham 1987: 87-102), in contrast, the heroine, challenging the aeronautical code, flies through the desert, until she remains without any fuel and risks her life in order to rescue a friend, a missing aviator considered dead. Other tales concern horses and races in Kenya.

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