

The Uprooting in the Narrative Language of *Foreign Land* by Jonathan Raban

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Abstract

The language and narrative style of Jonathan Raban, a contemporary English writer author of the novel *Foreign Land* (1985), seem to find in the themes of uprooting and self-searching a metaphorical and existential interpretation that in the search for identity alternates the desire to return to the origins, recovering lost affections and beloved places, with the attraction to the unknown. In this oscillation, masterfully rendered by the metaphorical and figurative language of the novel, Raban tells the awareness that the return to the origins is not always a point of arrival but a further turning point in life. The article focuses on some particularly effective linguistic and semantic aspects through which the author renews and personalizes the travel novel, making it an existential, intimate tale in which the sense of estrangement and the desire to take root are intertwined with a compelling story rich in landscape descriptions and philosophical reflections.

Keywords

English literature; Travel Literature; Cultural Landscape; Travelogue; Place and Placeness.

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Francesca Machì

The novel *Foreign Land* by the writer, essayist, and journalist Jonathan Raban belongs to an early stage of the writer's production. The novel represents the fundamental aspects of the Rabanian writing, not only issues such as travel, the relationship with Nature and the passion for navigation but also more social, psychological and intimate issues such as journey intended as a search for one's own identity and the sense of uprooting from a place understood as discomfort towards something that is no longer recognized and with detachment. All these themes are expressed with great poetic sensitivity and a powerful language in *Foreign Land*. In particular, this analysis attempts to identify the individual search for identity through the rooting in a place and the contrasting desire to belong to each place through the escape from the place of origin. This opposition can compromise one's freedom and highlight the language choices through which Raban gives voice to the feelings and desires of his characters.

That is how Raban alternates the drive between escape and return. George is a retiring mariner who has spent the last several decades in West Africa, far from his original birthplace and family. His wife left him a long time ago and took their only daughter with her in England. Upon his retirement George has nowhere he wants to go. He has money and "friends" and tries to return to England to catch up with them and especially with his daughter. Although welcomed by his neighbours and daughter he cannot forget his love and life in West Africa. He feels that he doesn't belong anymore to his place of origin. What sets George apart from his old friends, who all want to use him for their own purposes, is that he risks human contact and, in his daughter's case, even tries to make amends. Memories contrasting his marriage to his friends in Bom Porto, the town where he lived in Africa, are what ultimately lead him to a liberating decision to return to Africa on the tiny old sailboat, a journey the reader regards with both hope and fear as George sets out for "home". And since the first page of the novel, we know that George, "is coming back" (Raban 2) to the native land, in search of a place that is home and not foreign.

According to this consideration, we can read the entire novel as an existential journey whose stages are represented by the life experiences of the

protagonist. In this sense, Raban's travel novel should be interpreted. It is a metaphor, punctuated by places, feelings and people who accompany George Gray's search for identity and freedom. Throughout his life George travels, starting from England, passes by the Middle East, then arrives in Africa, half-arrival and place where he "from the native who was at the departure bringing to the end the mutation begins during the transit, he turns into a foreigner" (Raban 74). The arrival entails at the same time a restructuring of the self and the beginning of a new phase of one's life that cannot be separated from the new environment. It seems that, in an ideal circle that is resolved at the end of the novel, in the last page, after having completed continuous physical and mental paths that from Africa will have brought him to England and from England again to Africa, we will know that solitary, finally away from anywhere, "George was home and dry" (Raban 352).

Therefore, for Raban the journey is a conscious choice of freedom and knowledge. Moreover, George Gray is not only the protagonist of this poetic instance but also the filter through which all the characters in the novel will express their relationship both with Nature and the surrounding social environment. We can see this in the words used by Sheila, George's daughter, while they are talking about their native land and Raban lets her say "But there must be things about England... things we are blind to because we've lived here too long. You're bringing a fresh eye to the place" (Raban 102).

In Sheila's words there is a hint of envy towards the opportunity of her father. In fact, he can renew the emotional bond with the places thanks to the fact that he does not belong to any of them. Therefore, as Fabio Lando says (1993), as every society identifies with the territory, we can analyze the social universe of George in the perspective of the contrast between rooting and uprooting applied from time to time to all the characters that revolve around him (Relph 1985).

In the novel therefore we will find that some characters are rooted and others are not; in their midst, George will represent the continuous alternating desire of having roots and that one of not having them at all. The novel thus outlines the secondary theme of contrast alongside the main theme "between distance and intimacy for the foreigner for whom the cultural model of group approached is not a refuge, but a field of adventure, subject of investigation this, controversial and fascinating at the same time" (Schuts 27). Moreover, it must be considered the fact that in Foreign Land each character manifests on the basis of his/her own experience the link with the territory and Raban manages through them to outline a variety of visions of reality that contrast, or integrate the main one assumed by the protagonist.

Describing the characters

Sheila, as already said, is George's thirty-seven-year-old daughter. Raban builds this character with the intent to create a kind of suspense in the story. She is the reason why George is returning home, and she is also the unconscious spring that causes George to have a crisis of conscience that will lead him to turn his life around.

Sheila represents George's inner consciousness, that drives what every man has to deal with. And that she is a sort of judge of her father's actions. Raban makes her say it to herself, using a word with emblematic meaning "All daughters should make a reckoning with their fathers [...]" (Raban 11). Here, the reckoning Sheila speaks of should be understood as the showdown of his life to which George is called to answer by his daughter. Their bond is conditioned by the contrast between Sheila's rooting to which she would also like to induce her father, and the uprooting of George who unconsciously refuses to bind himself to a place. Resolving tensions with his daughter would mean, first of all, the need to stop, to "take root," which George, actually, can't do.

Raban always presents Sheila, at home, describing her universe enclosed in the house on the outskirts of London. Obvious signs of her belonging to the metropolitan environment are, in addition to her austere character and her profession, the structure of the house "all height and space", which in its dual role of domestic and work space gives us the idea of household dimension, familiar and stable, intimate and multipurpose in which an individual can leave his "essential imprint" (Fremont 101). In this total immersion in the territory, Sheila can have a disruptive effect on her father as the following description show: "Troubled, he gazed at his daughter's room; its coloured rugs spread on bare wooden boards, its books, its almost empty walls. Sheila's house had the air of a place where there was nothing that wasn't wanted and intended" (Raban 22).

The home dimension, the feeling of home is another of the basic themes of the novel *Foreign land* on which we want to dwell in this work. Demangeon (1920) says that the house must be adapted to the needs of the man who creates his own living environment. A concept taken up by Lefebvre who calls the house "a moment and a space of happiness" (Lefebvre in Fremont 92). In the novel, Sheila should be the medium through which George, who became an outsider because of his long stay abroad, becomes an insider. But this does not happen indeed, the branch environment causes him a sense of discomfort. And it is precisely the semantic field of discomfort that seems to characterize the father-daughter relationship. Just think at the expressions that Raban uses to describe George's feeling during his visit at Sheila's: "He felt marooned"; "he always seemed to end up doing the wrong thing"; "troubled; obliged"; "Feared; "nasty stab; "he felt indulged and scolded"; "appalled" and then the sentence "The more he watched,

the stranger his daughter grew to him." (Raban 100-111). Also, Sheila realizes her father's state of restlessness not without feeling herself a certain distress "Why was it that in England that George was always on someone's way to somewhere else? It made his journey seem unoriginal; it made the country itself seem no bigger than a village street." (Raban 107). It is the feeling of the banality of a fixed place, of its lack of attractiveness that causes George to be always on the road, that is perceived by Sheila when she realizes the impossibility of convincing her father to plant roots somewhere.

The same attempt is made by another female character in the novel, Diana Pym, George's old friend who driven by an attraction to the man, by *outsider* who was originally, she turns into an *insider* to help the outsider George to integrate and overcome the sense of isolation. And in fact, even though we know from the narrative that she moved to St Cadix only five years before, she is actually the rooted character *par excellence*, as evidenced by her connection to the mainland repeated in the text through descriptions or metaphors, as opposed to George's bond to the sea.

Emblematic character, Dyana Pym is an old lady that George meets in St. Cadix at a party at the Walpole'. The sentence with which they are introduced to each other establishes the type of relationship between the two "Oh,...Diana Pym, George Gray. George is just back from Africa. Diana is a great gardener." (Raban 57). The first one is identified as a foreigner, the second one is connoted through her great passion for gardening and therefore for her love for the mainland, for its fruits, and for her will to plant roots. The same name, Diana, that evokes the goddess of hunting, gives us the measure of the writer's intent to deeply root this character in the territory.

In fact, despite having moved to St. Cadix a few years ago the woman has managed to carve out a socially recognized space within the community, she's the one who accompanies George in his attempt to settle in. Harmony Cottage, the name of her house is emblematic of the balance that the woman has achieved with the surrounding environment. Although the meeting with George will have some repercussions on this apparent balance, especially when George brings her into the sea in contact, therefore, with an environment not at all familiar to her "From the moment they'd left the quay, things had started to seem more than a bit odd. First the boat (which had seemed so solid, so Coy, when it washed up) had shrunk to a walnut as it nosed out into the Estuary" (Raban 170). Inside the marine universe of George, Diana becomes a foreigner and begins to perceive reality in a different, stranger, less stable way. Her safety begins to falter as George's, perfectly at ease on the boat, grows gradually away from the coast. This contrast is made evident by the figurative metaphor from which emerges a

physical contrast between the two characters. And with Diana's eyes, Raban tells us: "Then George had grown...he seemed to have put on a good eighteen inches overnight. Now he was disconcertingly tall"(Raban 170).

Diana slowly senses not only the physical difference that separates her from George, but also the mental difference. And the discomfort that the woman feels becomes almost irritating in the similitudes with which Raban describes the man's attitude: "He seemed possessed by some private good humour. as he danced around his boat from end to end" (Raban 170). And then" It looks so bald when the sea's out - I'm afraid, Diana Pym said. - No its's charming - George answered" (Raban 152). Also if for the woman the sea is *disorienting* for George it is *charming* (emphasis added).

When the woman asks him if he with his boat is going to arrive to Africa George answers "Oh, one could. I shan't. England's quite foreign enough for me at present" (Raban 171). With this statement George not only sets a distance from his friend but reiterates once again his distance from the place of origin, his non belonging, his condition as an uprooted outsider. And when Diana says to him, "If my cottage'd been tied up to Cornwall with a rope, I guess I'd done the knot long ago." Not hiding behind the irony, a lukewarm desire to travel, George answers " Well that's the trouble with houses. They don't float."(Raban 147), expressing once again with a metaphor all marina his priorities as a traveller. In fact, he is not opposed to the idea of home as a place of intimacy, memory and security, but rather to the fact that it is fixed in a place. In contrast, his friend Diana on the boat feels lost and afraid " In need of *ballast*, she looked across to the rim of dark land, and the land gone...the boat was in the dead centre of a gigantic disc of squally water. She searched the far for hills, for Cornwall. There was nothing there at all and Diana felt the first, niggling *spasm of alarm*"(Raban 170, emphasis added). Once again, the writer entrusts words and images with the power to evoke the contrasting feelings and emotions of the characters with respect to the territory. Raban's attitude is therefore ecological in the sense that, he conceives an ecosystem in which man and territory coexist to support each other.

The metaphoric language of the novel: a way to *interact* with the reader

As already said this novel is particularly interesting for the attempt to speculate on philosophic or psychological themes using the language of the narrative. To do it Raban uses his tools as a writer: his tools of the trade such as words, imagination and some specific literary strategies such as the metaphor that is a particular way to represent ideas.

A theory that has been very successful and at the same time a renewed interest in the studies related to this figure, is called "interaction view" (Black in Cortese 2004) and sees the metaphor as the interaction between two sets of clichés associated with the two terms present in it. This theory postulated by Max Black hangs up on the Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) started with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), developing its more philosophical implications. Black calls focus and frame the two constituent elements of the metaphor: focus is the center of it; while the frame is precisely the set of clichés, in their literal sense that the center of the metaphor recalls. Black's conclusions lead to a definition of the concept of metaphor that involves a close link with the idea that each word has a more or less structured network of other concepts, systems of clichés associated with it attached to it.

The interaction view provides the key to this step as follows: there are two ideas active at the same time, each of which is merged with structured sets of beliefs that the interpreter possesses in advance, but which are in this case associated in a new and unexpected way. In this context we are very close to the Kantian formulation of the concept of aesthetic ideas. For Kant, aesthetic ideas are "those representations of the imagination that give an opportunity to think a lot" (Kant in Cortese 56). The remarkable similarity between the effects that aesthetic ideas arouse in the soul can be united to what we have seen belong to the metaphor.

We can assume that Jonathan Raban's novel is a metaphorically dense novel, in the sense that the use of metaphorical language perhaps represents the innovative element by which the writer manages to rework the travelogue, enriching it with philosophical and psychological implications.

So far we have seen how Raban deals with the issue of the uprooting from an environment, there is, however, in the novel the will to describe uprooting as an existential condition that underlies an unease and aims, as it will happen at the end of the novel to a resolution that restores balance. So a form of "uprooting at home" is what George lives in Africa. For George "*Africa was home*" contrasting with England "*that was so far away*" (Raban 73, emphasis added). Even the water in George imagination is different. The English water is "*thin, light starved*" the African water is "*milky green thick as a soup*" (Raban 78, emphasis added).

While the detachment between the image of England that he left and the one that he found when he returned after so many years creates in him a sense of disorientation filled only by memories, the same thing cannot be said of Africa, the place where he has spent the last forty years of his life. Certainly enough to feel connected to that place that, at different times in the novel, he defines home.

And yet even there, in Africa, George is an immigrant, aware that he is. And it is still that sense of incompleteness that distinguishes the character who assumes the traits defined by Porteous of the home-insider and the away-outsider that express the feeling of estrangement of an individual with respect to the place where he lives and the "a sense of alienation, of no connection with the typical environment of uprooted people and immigrants." (Porteous as cited in Lando 250). And actually all the characters seem not to feel at their own ease everywhere they go. As for Sheila George's house is "perfectly hideous" (Raban 272).

The semantic of Home

Beyond any research that can involve man in time and space Raban addresses a classic and constant theme of the human condition: being at home. As Pellizzetti suggests (2015) the semantics of "home" refers to a heterogeneous set of phenomena that do not have - in Italian - a specific conceptual and linguistic reference analogous to the English-speaking distinction between house and home. The first term, in fact, refers to the building, part of a larger settlement, which constitutes a "tangible testimony of a lifestyle or a status" (Rampazi 18). By home, we mean as much a "physical space, characterized by affective values (as well as functional elements), as a symbolic space, condition of familiarity, recognition and belonging. So, the rooting space *par excellence*" (Rampazi 17).

Although the two levels cannot be distinguished, the concept of home to which we refer here - and which we want to investigate - is to be understood as an emotional framework representing the home feeling. As such, it is not necessarily confined to the walls of one's home. According to Agnes Heller "familiarity is the most important element of feeling at home" (Heller 32). This, in fact, relates to two semantic and conceptual universes that are complementary to each other, which give back their complexity and tonality; which is both eminently emotional, but also cognitive and volitive. The first reference undoubtedly goes to the sphere of custom, of usual practices: what is familiar to me is something I know (in the epistemic sense) and re-know (in the identity sense); familiar is something that is repeated over time and that I internalized: it is something which is part of me. "Home" can, therefore, be read as a metaphor of a text written by its inhabitants, thanks to materials from different sources. Home implies here the idea of fullness made of experiences and hopes lived, of security with respect to the upheavals of the external world. That "full" in which space and time, from abstract and absolute dimensions (and therefore elusive), become their own, tangible. It follows that the rooting therefore (which is affective connotation of the spaces) constitutes strictly personal operation. Rootedness, an individual right that is as vital as ever in a time of great transformation, constitutes - even in the various variations and nuances it assumes - the common destiny of all humanity, to share a place. (Heller 32-33; Pellizzetti 37-38).

Language and Themes: Home, Uprooting, Rebirth

Raban in his novel tells us that George decides that for him his house is the sea. It is not by chance that the sea is the common denominator of all the phases of George's life. In the novel we learn that in youth he had enlisted in The Navy, in Aden; in Africa his work was linked to navigation, Bom Porto, the imaginary city where he had lived, is a city of the sea and even the house where he decides to set once retired, has a significant and evocative name that recalls the theme of the novel: *Thalassa* is the emblem of his strong desire for freedom embodied by the sea, that is also the natural element in which George can feel "at home". And it is from *Thalassa*, the paternal home, the place of roots and family identity, of the desire for reconciliation with one's own past and history that George, driven once again by that intimate and uncontrollable need to search for himself, will depart from what has become a foreign land for him. And like those who are preparing to make a cathartic journey, Raban describes George as he prepares, like in a sacred ritual that precedes the initiation, his new home the boat *Calliope*.

With calm and careful slowness, he strips the boat of all the things belonged to the old owners, almost as if to empty it of its past history to make it reborn with him in the journey that together they are preparing to do. It is no coincidence that "working in the rain", he brings "his life aboard" (Raban, 1985, p. 138). In fact the few objects that George brings into the boat are all linked to people he loves, objects to remember that on the boat they acquire a new life, because at sea George will be able to find harmony with the surrounding world. Raban says: "As for sailing, it's mostly quiet, slow meditative; an ideal way to study and watch the land" (Raban 2006). Raban sees navigation as a way to resolve the sea/land contrast of his character but at the same time it is the autobiographical element that seems to guide the mood of the character.

Again the fluid, maritime, nautical language, evokes to the reader the attitude of man. After all *Calliope*, represents his attempt to find home by the sea. So once more Raban uses rethorical figures in order to give the narrative the emphasis of reconstruction and rebirth it needs. As well as to the similitudes that refer to the condition of George as eternal uprooted. Just think how Raban entrusts to a sentence whose words pertain to the semantic field of uprooting the effective description of George's condition. In the central part of the novel, before accompanying us to what will be George's final decision, he writes "he *had never had a proper place of his own* before. He'd always been a *lodger* in *other people's* houses and had *picked up* the lodger's habit of *passing through* without *leaving tracks*." (Raban 139, emphasis added).

Raban relies on writing - made particularly effective by the specialized language used, by the use of metaphors, verbs and adjectives with which places

and characters are connoted - the aim of making the dialectic opposition between the mainland and the sea effective through images and physical sensations contrasting the immobilism of some characters to the dynamism of George. And at the same time, he reveals, as the narrative develops, his propensity towards the existential dimension that involves the isolation assumed by his main character. In fact what constantly emerges from Raban's books is that all his subjects are always really being foreigners - whether the alien are them or someone else.

Even in other books like *Bad Land* (1996) or *Coasting* (1986) Raban seems to cultivate a position as an outsider and 'sympathetic traveller'. He usually writes about feeling like *a lonely visitor* in his own home and country. Many of his books are concerned with notions of travel and movement, perhaps with escape but also with feeling rooted. In a recent interview given on the magazine *Granta*, Raban says "Living in America, I feel precious little need to up sticks and go somewhere else; I feel that I'm 'somewhere else' most of the time. Eighteen years, and I'm still a *traveller* picking his way through a foreign land that starts at the front door" (n. 102, 2008, emphasis added).

Conclusion

The feeling of estrangement and uprooting can also be read in the light of the conception of Nature in Rabanian poetics. For Raban, Nature is not only a background but something that can profoundly change the state of mind of man. And so that from his marine perspective. George realizes the greatness of Nature and his impossibility to dominate it. There is something of dramatically inexorable in the images by which Raban describes the moments leading up to George's final departure "When he looked across at the land, he was as fixed as a navigation buoy. Tethered to the seafloor on a chain and bucking fretfully on the tide. Sometimes the sea won, sometimes the land, and every time George looked, he knew that what his eyes told him was untrue" (Raban 282). Once again Raban, through a figurative metaphor, entrusts the description of the state of mind of his protagonist whose emotional oscillation and his sense of precariousness in the presence of Nature are more evident thanks to the photographic images, and lexical contrasts made by chiasmus that contribute to highlight the opposite feelings, landscapes and desires. As navigation continues along the English coast, the process of moving away from the mainland as opposed to the process of identifying with the sea becomes increasingly evident. And so the mainland becomes more and more unreal, a construction of the mind and even the villages he sees from his boat seem to him "pretty invention" of his imagination. On the contrary the process of identifying with the sea becomes total to such an extent that as a marine creature George has trouble communicating with others when he comes ashore to refuel he no longer needs words to communicate as he is now projected into the marine dimension ((Raban 1985).

Concluding this analysis, we can affirm that Jonathan Raban is largely responsible for changing the nature of travel writing, in fact even it is clear that *Foreign Land* maintains some characteristic traits of the genre such as fusing factual reportage with fictional technique, using vivid descriptions, illustrations, historical background, he also gives to this kind of writing a more emotional, intimate dimension because in it the journey depicted through Raban's descriptive expertise and his photographic eye is the background to a story of redemption and it is a process of soul searching and identity construction, that Raban entrusts precisely to his language, to his powerful and evocative writing that gradually becomes less and less discursive, ever more intimate and that assuming the form of a logbook while the same protagonist renounces to communicate with his fellow men when finally at sea closes the circle of his search.

Moreover, we can see three kinds of relationships in this book as in others rabanian books: the relationship between the physical process of 'travelling the land', the creative process of writing, and the psychological process of finding the self. So far we have seen how in Raban's novel the dialogues between the characters embody the metaphor of *rootedness* and *uprooting* (emphasis added), the one interpreted by the more sedentary characters and tied to the mainland in contrast with the protagonist ideally linked to the sea intended as a place not stable. In this wavering, George the protagonist of the novel seems to oscillate between the desire to find emotional ties, to reconcile with his past through the memories that each place brings, the discomfort of not being able to find their own identity and the instinct to look for it elsewhere, towards less defined and circumscribed places. This oscillation outlines the fundamental poetic instance of the novel, the search for identity understood as a cyclical journey. After all, to travel is to seek a change in identity.

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