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Feminist Myth in Le Guin's "Sur"

Abstract

Argues that Le Guin has created in "Sur" a "myth of women explorers, a myth of female heroes." Contrasts the fictional all-female Antarctic expedition with historical examples, the latter focusing on the individual and the former on the collective.

Additional Keywords

Feminist criticism; Heroines; Le Guin, Ursula K. "Sur" (short story)

Feminist Myth in Le Guin's "Sur"

BARBARA BROWN

The urge for adventure — the drive to explore, to conquer — has traditionally been the territory of men. Women do not go in search of "undiscovered" territory, rather, they wait at home for their men to return and tell of the adventure. Ursula Le Guin's short story, "Sur" addresses the question of what would have happened if women had been the first people at the South Pole. The story is subtitled "A Summary Report of the Yelcho Expedition to the Antarctic, 1909-1910," and narrates the adventures of nine Latin American women who mount an expedition to Antarctica. Le Guin places the Yelcho expedition between Sir Robert Falcon Scott's two expeditions — his first was 1902-1904, and the second was 1911-1912 — so that, in Le Guin's story, a group of women arrive in Antarctica on the tail of an unsuccessful expedition to the Pole and just before Amundsen's success. Still, the opening lines of the story announce that history remains unchanged by the women's expedition, because the report is hidden in someone's attic. The story begins, then, from two propositions: first, that women reached the South Pole before men, and second, that no one knows about it. These two statements form the dynamic of the story; on the one hand, there is a "cover-story" — the concealment of the expedition — on the other hand, Le Guin creates a counter-story, which is both a contrast to the way men reached the Pole and a whole counter-culture established by women in the Antarctica. The "cover-story" protects the sensibilities of the men who came later to the Pole; it also protects the women from charges of madness, or at least "unfeminine" behavior. The contrast between women and men's way of mounting expeditions comments on the differences between the genders, and critiques some of the more "macho" methods and motivations in Polar expeditions. Most interesting, though, is the counter-culture the women create in Antarctica, in the way that art, politics and ways of being are established. Ultimately, the counter-culture is particular to Antarctica, and cannot survive in the suburban surroundings of the women's "normal" lives. The counter-culture becomes subsumed into the cover-story.

The cover-story is a protective measure. It conceals the behavior of the women and protects the (tender) egos of men. It would not be possible, as the narrator knows full well, for society of the 1909-1910 to accept the fact that a group of women went to the Antarctic and returned to tell the tale. The "report" of the expedition is, therefore, concealed in an attic. The narrator says:

Although I have no intention of publishing this report, I think it would be nice if a grandchild of mine, or somebody's grandchild, happened to find it some day; so I shall keep it in the leather trunk in the attic, along with Rosita's christening dress and Juanito's silver rattle and my wedding shoes and finneskos.¹

Finneskos are boots made of reindeer skin, and were worn by Polar explorers. Although she does not wish the report to be published, she still wants to keep some sort of record of her adventure for subsequent generations. By mentioning "grandchildren" rather than children, the reader sees that the narrator wants all those involved to be, if not safely dead, then at least very old — for fear of embarrassing someone. The report becomes an heirloom: it is concealed with her keepsakes of her children and her younger days. The report is placed with the other important events of her life: her children, her marriage and her trip to the South Pole (her finneskos would only have been used in Antarctica). Should a grandchild find the report, it would remain a relic among relics, and the grandchild would have the choice between believing it, or taking it as a myth, a story. In either case, the cover-story is safe, because it would at best be a "suspect" document in the public realm.

The cover-story operates to protect the explorers themselves. The women on the expedition are all "normal" suburban women. Some have children, some have husbands, all have families who know nothing of their adventures. Nor does anyone suspect — some of the women depart under "the plausible pretext of going on retreat in a Bolivian convent," while others said they "were going to Paris for the winter season" (p. 2011). Some then, disguise their plans with devotion — a highly respectable way to spend a winter; the rest are "going shopping." If the latter is not highly respectable, it is at least "feminine." Both pretexts keep the facade in place: these women are, above all, "normal." They have on their side, as well, the fact that no one would suspect the real plan — it would, for most, be beyond imagining. In any case, the cover-story is intact in all its propriety. Under the cover-story is the counter-story, and it begins with contrasting men and women's way of going to Antarctica.

Among the many points of contrast between, say, Sir Robert Falcon Scott, whom the narrator mentions frequently, and the women of "Sur," is what could be called the "heroic." Scott's expeditions were "heroic" in conception and execution. The ostensible purposes of Scott's expeditions were those of exploration, yet I think it fair to say he really wanted to be the first man at the South Pole. He did, of course, gather a great deal of information on conditions, climate, geology, geography, physics and biology (etc.) while in the Antarctic, yet underlying these scientific quests was the desire to "conquer" nature by being first at the Pole. Annie Dillard, writing of Scott, examines his desire to reach the Pole without the help of animals (that is, dogs); she writes, quoting Scott, "when men reach a Pole unaided, their journey has 'a fine conception' and 'the conquest is more nobly and splendidly won'"² Setting aside the issue of whether or not animals

should be taken, the language of Scott's comment is telling. It is certainly grand — which may be more a comment on the language of adventure than anything else — but it speaks in terms of "conquest," of winning the Pole.

The Women's expedition uses no such language, nor is their aim one of conquest. The narrator writes of her desire to go to the Pole in a much more modest vein:

And the desire was as pure as the polar snows: to go, to see — no more, no less. I deeply respect the scientific accomplishments of Captain Scott's expeditions, and have read with passionate interest the findings of physicists, meteorologists, biologists, etc.; but having had no training in any science, nor any opportunity for such training, my ignorance obliged me to forego any thought of adding to the body of scientific knowledge concerning Antarctica; and the same is true for all members of my expedition. It seems a pity; but there was nothing we could do about it. Our goal was limited to observation and exploration. We hoped to go a little farther, perhaps, and see a little more; if not, simply to go and to see (p. 2010).

The narrator repeats that the desire is "to go, to see," and she readily admits that the scientific aspect is beyond the scope of the women. Of course, they would not have had the same access to education as their male counterparts; although they could read Scott's account, they could not be trained in similar sciences. But to move back to the scope of their expeditions, the phrase the narrator uses — "to go, to see" — reminds me of a similar phrase used by Julius Caesar: "*Veni, vidi, vici*" — "I came, I saw, I conquered." Though the first verb is different, the repetition of the phrase in the story leads one at least to suspect the connection between the words of the narrator and Caesar. The difference between the two, of course, is that the narrator does not add the last clause: "I conquered." Where Scott's desire is to conquer the Pole, the women simply wish to go and see it. There is, for the women, no question of a "conquest." Even though they wish to go "a little further," they qualify it with "perhaps." Between "a little" and "perhaps," one does not get the sense that they wish to get to the Pole simply for the sake of getting to the Pole, much less, to conquer it. The desire of the women is not heroic — it might even be called anti-heroic, or, perhaps, it is *female* heroic.

The heroic is the realm of the individual. One need only look, for example, at the fact that I have referred to "Scott," more than "Scott and the men who went with him." Many people know that Scott went to the South Pole, and will assume that he did not go alone, yet few, I think, would be able to name any of the men who went with him. There is a tendency to let the leader stand for the whole expedition — certainly it would be time-consuming to list the names of those that accompanied him — yet "the men" rather disappear under the weight of Scott's name. He was the leader of the expedition; but, as Annie Dillard puts it, "there is no such thing as a solitary expedition, fine as the conception is." (Dillard, p. 27.) In contrast, the women's expedition had only a nominal leader.

The women go to Antarctica as a collective. Before they leave Chile, they agree that they should have a leader to fall back on.

If a situation arose of such urgent danger that one voice must be obeyed without present question, the unenviable honor of speaking with that voice should fall first upon myself: if I were incapacitated, upon Clara: if she, the upon Berta. [...] As it came out, to my very great pleasure and relief, my qualities as a 'leader' were never tested; the nine of us worked things out amongst us from beginning to end without any orders being given by anybody, and only two or three times with recourse to a vote by voice or show of hands (p. 2012).

The women choose a "leader," yet they do not need one. They are able to work things out, although, she adds, they argued. Where Scott stand for his whole expedition (two expeditions, in fact). Amundsen for his, etc., the narrator — the nominal leader — remains nameless. She cannot come to stand for the whole; while the reader knows the first names of the other women in the group, she does not know the name of the "leader." The problem with leaders, moreover, is that they make mistakes. Scott made some very bad mistakes: as Doris Lessing puts it, "the kind that no even ordinarily able leader should make."³ Scott had ultimate authority over the others; they had no recourse for questioning his command. The women, who rely on collective decisions, avoid putting the responsibility on any individual's shoulders, thereby avoiding the fallibility of a "leader." The women are, as the narrator says, "by birth and upbringing, unequivocally and irrevocably, all crew" (p. 2012). All the women share chores and decisions; they are equals in the enterprise. Lessing points out that Scott's expeditions were marked by the rigid class system of England; at one point, six men were forced to winter in an ice cave — for six months they stayed there, officers on one side, men on the other. (Lessing, p. 175.) The women observe so such distinctions; they "huddled close together" (p. 2019). The most marked differences between men's expeditions and these women lies in the actual journey to the Pole.

The narrator states that their aspirations were modest, yet as soon as their ship leaves them, the women start planning the trip to the Pole. The trip signifies their desire to enter the competition with men to get to the Pole, yet it is undermined completely by their arrival there. Six women begin the journey South, but three turn back because two of them become ill — a third goes back too, because she "much preferred staying with her friends and lending them a hand in difficulties to pushing on towards the Pole" (p. 2019). There is no tone of judgement in the narrator's statement; there is no hint of "shame" at turning back, only a farewell drink and a parting of the ways. Again, this contrasts with Scott's expeditions, where, as Lessing puts it: "of course it was not in the spirit of the thing that they should turn back." (Lessing, p. 177.) The narrator makes fairly short work of her description of the journey to the Pole, though she does mention that at one point they all had but decided to turn back, then decided to go on, "at least for a while" (p. 2019). The decision to forge ahead reinforces the sense of them competing with

men. Yet the arrival at the Pole is, to say the least, anticlimactic, both for the women and the reader.

The women arrive at the Pole, only to wonder why they came. There seems, moreover, no reason to stay.

The weather was, as always, very cruel. Nothing of any kind marked the dreary whiteness. We discussed leaving some kind of mark or monument, a snow cairn, a tent pole and flag; but there seemed no particular reason to do so. Anything we could do, anything we were, was insignificant, in that awful place. We put up the tent for shelter for an hour and made a cup of tea, and then struck "90°" Camp. Dolores, standing patient as ever in her sledging harness, looked at the snow; it was so hard frozen that it showed no traces of our footprints coming [...] (p. 2020).

The women leave nothing — not even a footprint — because they have no desire to compete with the elements, the place itself, for permanence. They realize their insignificance, and choose to leave it at that. Of their trip to the Pole, the narrator says: "I wished we had not gone to the Pole. I think I wish it even now" (p. 2020). The point of the trip to Antarctica, as they discover in hindsight, is not to get to the South Pole. Theirs is not a "heroic" trip.

Scott's trip, on the other hand, was both heroic and pointed toward arrival at the South Pole. His first trip to Antarctica was unsuccessful in that he did not reach the Pole. The second voyage was successful in that he reached to Pole, but unsuccessful because he was not the first one there, and because he did not survive the return trip. It would seem, from his last letters, that the former was the bigger disappointment of the two.⁴ His disappointment at not reaching the Pole first was profound: "Great God! this is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority." (Scott, p. 374-5.) Nonetheless, they left the Union Jack and a snow cairn — they also removed a sledge runner that the Norwegians had left to mark, Scott presumed, the "exact spot of the Pole as near as the Norwegians could fix it." (Scott, p. 375.) Through all, they had to mark their arrival by leaving something there — not to mention taking away someone else's marker (although they did leave the Norwegian flag alone). It was not enough simply to have gone, nor was it enough just to leave their own mark.

Later expeditions made even more prominent "arrivals" at the Pole. Just for purposes of contrast, I am going to quote Sir Vivian Fuchs' account of his arrival at the South Pole. His expedition was mounted between 1955 and 1958. He made the journey across the continent in a snowcat — he at least had technology on his side. As he approached the Pole, he could see "quite a crowd" gathered:

On jumping of the 'cat,' I first shook hands with Ed [Sir Edmund Hillary], then George Dufek [a U. S. Navy Admiral] and the base leaders. There was such a press of photographers and recorders that it was quite difficult to move about. After the first 'milling' had subsided, Houk [U.S. Navy] and Dufek climbed into my 'cat' and I drove them on to the base, where Houk directed me to the parking site.

The next move was to wash and have a meal, followed by a press conference and a radio recording for the BBC through McMurdo Sound.

Our reception has been a most warm one and we have been invited to sleep and eat in the base instead of our tents. This makes our stay here pleasant, informal and a complete rest.⁵

One hardly needs to point out the differences between the various arrivals, but Fuchs sounds rather like he is arriving at a resort instead of the South Pole. The pictures in Fuchs' book are telling: one photograph shows the men at the Pole — a kind of "hail the conquering heroes," complete with flags and a Snowcat. Another shows "the mark" of the visitors to the Pole: a large ring of oil drums surround several flags; the snow is heavily marked with vehicle tracks.⁶ The cover photo on one edition of *Scott's Last Expedition* shows him and four of his men standing at the Pole. A picture of the women's arrival would simply have shown the snow: even the "map in the attic," which is printed with the story, does not include the Pole. The hero is not complete until his deeds are recorded for posterity. In Classical times, he became a song or a long poem; if he is a polar explorer, he publishes his journals (or in Scott's case, someone else publishes them) and has his picture taken at the Pole. And, most of all, he leaves a mark at the Pole — a kind of graffiti, "I was here." To have got "there" is to have conquered it — as long as you leave something. It is a struggle for permanence, a battle against their insignificance in a place as cruel as the South Pole. The women of "Sur," not wishing to conquer, left nothing. The narrator adds that they left nothing so as not to embarrass men who came later, yet that reason is a part of the cover-story. Since she first says that they left nothing because it would not have made a difference to the Pole, I take her second reason as just that: a second reason, incidental to the first.

I said earlier that the women's trip to the Pole is not the reason for their trip to Antarctica. To return to that point, the women found in Antarctica a place where they could establish a counter-culture — one of their own creation, instead of importing a culture created for them by men. The point of contrast I have shown are all a part of their counter-culture — sub-culture, really. "Sur" means "South" in Spanish, yet it has a history as a prefix in English as well. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "sur" become two prefixes: "sub" (under), as in surreptitious, and "super" (above) as in "surpass." The new culture is a sub-culture, then, established in contrast to the dominant culture — that of the hero.

From their arrival, the women establish their difference from the men who had been there previously. They choose, after inspecting the hut left by the men, to build their own quarters. They find the hut in a state of disorder, with a tea tin left open, empty cans on the floor and "a lot of dog tracks [...] underfoot — frozen, of course, but not a great deal improved by that" (p. 2014). Instead of marking the surface of the place with another hut, they build their base under the surface — in the ice itself. They blend in with the environment, instead of sticking out on it. Two of

the women take the quarters on as their project, and turn it into a "marvel of comfort and convenience" (p. 2016). The sailors of the ship that brought them South are, of course, shocked by what they called a "little warren or prairie-dog village" (p. 2015). But the women do not set out to challenge the environment; they choose to work with the materials at hand: snow and ice.

The same material form their art. Berta takes to sculpting more than just a living space from ice.

They were beautiful forms, some like a blending of the reclining human figure with the subtle curves and volumes of the Weddell seal, others like the fantastic shapes of ice cornices and ice caves. Perhaps they are still there, under the snow, in the bubble of the Great Barrier (p. 2016).

This art, in its form and its material, reflects the way the women choose to live. The human forms, carved in ice, still reflect the animals of the place: in fact, represent a kind of union of the people and the place. The art is particular to the place and the women who make it: it can only last in its own environment, indeed, can only be made where temperatures are low enough to preserve the medium. The narrator points out the "art" of the Discovery party: minstrel shows and melodramas—forms imported from their country, and not exactly suited to their new environment.

The women find that their new environment suits them perfectly. The narrator describes a feeling of homecoming from the moment she steps onto the land:

I cannot describe my emotions when I set foot on the earth, on that earth, the barren cold gravel at the foot of the long volcanic slope. I felt elation, impatience, gratitude, awe, familiarity. I felt that I was home at last (p. 2013).

Her sense of familiarity, of homecoming, recurs through the story. She does not feel a sense of "woman against the environment," or as if there is a battle to win over the place, but she and her companions feel at home. Their voyage South is the only freedom they know. The narrator mentions that some of the women who wanted to come South were unable to "get free," because of commitments to families, and so forth. The narrator respects these commitments, but she also desires to escape them. She describes Antarctica as "that white place on the map, that void, and there we flew and sang like sparrows" (p. 2017). That "white place" is one where no man has gone before, laying down restrictions, codes, laws that say a woman cannot travel to Antarctica. In the white place, the women rename the mountains and glaciers: "Beardmore" becomes "Florence Nightingale"—the glacier has been given a woman's name by a woman, but, of course, the name is known only to a few. The penalty for carving in water is that the carving must stay in Antarctica.

The penalty for establishing a sub-culture in the Antarctic is that it must stay there. The sub-culture is particular to the place; it is not transferable. Berta's art stays buried in the snow, as does the marvellous ice-warren. The collective effort of the women is buried in the attic; they

cannot bring their politics of equality back to Latin America. One of the women bears a child while they are in the Antarctic, but the child of the sub-culture, Rosa del Sur, burns up—literally—in the North: she dies of scarlet fever. The women lose touch with each other; their relationship changes once they are back in the suburbs. When the ship comes to fetch the women, they weep:

On the nineteenth of February, a day early, my Juana came down into [the ice-warren] in a hurry. 'The ship,' she said, 'the ship has come,' and she burst into tears—she who had never wept in all our weeks of pain and weariness: on the long haul (p. 2022).

Juana weeps tears not of relief, but of grief at leaving behind their life in Antarctica. They must return to their families and responsibilities, but they are reluctant to leave behind the freedom they could only know in Antarctica. Their adventure becomes a fairy tale for children, a myth of a time and space different from the suburbs. The adventure is hidden in the cover-story of a child's bedtime story; it is a myth explaining why the narrator has no toes (she was frostbitten on the journey to the Pole).

In "Sur," Le Guin engages in myth-making. She makes a myth of women explorers, a myth of female heroes. Hers is not a tale of the individual, but of the collective. She establishes a tale in opposition to the known myths, the ones which form the base of our culture. Her myth is particular to a time and place; it cannot survive out of Antarctica. Yet like myths particular to a space, there is much to be learned, much that can affect our way of being. In her re-writing of the heroic adventure, Le Guin suggests a myriad of possibilities for the female heroic.

Endnotes

1. Ursula Le Guin, "Sur," *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985), p. 2008. All subsequent reference to this text will appear in the body of the essay.
2. Annie Dillard, "An Expedition to the Pole," *Teaching a Stone to Talk, Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 26. I feel that I should add, in defence of Scott, that during his first expedition to the Antarctic, Scott had used dogs; for a number of reasons, the dogs could not make the trek toward the Pole. They either died on their own, or were put out of their misery by the men. Amundsen, however, did make it to the Pole with dogs—Scott and his men saw the dog tracks around the Pole. See Robert F. Scott, *Scott's Last Expedition: The Journals of Captain R.F. Scott*, ed. Leonard Huxley (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 37.
3. Doris Lessing, "Afterword," *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (London: Corgi Books, 1982), p. 166.
4. Scott's last letters tend to emphasize the glory of the expedition, and the nobility of "dying for the cause." In one of his last letters, he writes "we have been the first Englishmen as the South Pole" (*Scott's Last Expedition*, p. 4150).
5. Sir Vivian Fuchs and Sir Edmund Hillary, *The Crossing of Antarctica: The Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1955-58* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1958), p. 254.
6. Fuchs and Hillary. These pictures can be found between pages 276 and 277.

Sources Consulted but not Quoted

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