

OCTAVIA WALTON LE VERT: A SOUTHERN BELLE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the chapters that Octavia Walton Le Vert devoted to Spain in her travel book *Souvenirs of Travel* (1857). It begins with a brief profile of the writer and then examines the contexts of production and reception of her book, followed by a summary of her journey across Spain in 1855. Using the theoretical contributions made by several critics and historians, the paper explores some rhetorical conventions, including the discourse of sentimentality, employed to accomplish the textual representation of Spain and the Spaniards. It will be argued that her representation of Spain manifests gender concerns and Protestant American views on otherness, class, and nation, setting her account somewhat apart from the dominant construction of Spain as a masculinized domain developed by other antebellum male American travelers.

KEYWORDS: Octavia Walton Le Vert, *Souvenirs of Travel*, Spanish travels, sentimentality, gender issues, otherness.

OCTAVIA WALTON LE VERT:
UNA DAMA SUREÑA EN LA ESPAÑA DEL SIGLO XIX

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza los capítulos que Octavia Walton Le Vert dedicó a España en su libro de viajes *Souvenirs of Travel* (1857). Se inicia con una breve semblanza de la autora y a continuación se examinan los contextos de producción y recepción del libro, seguidos de un resumen de su viaje por España en 1855. Basándose en las consideraciones teóricas de varios críticos e historiadores, el artículo estudia algunas convenciones retóricas, entre ellas el discurso del sentimentalismo, que se utilizan para realizar la representación textual de España y los españoles. Se argumentará que dicha representación manifiesta cuestiones de género y visiones protestantes norteamericanas sobre otredad, clase y nación que sitúan la narración un tanto al margen de la construcción dominante de España como territorio masculinizado que desarrollaron otros viajeros norteamericanos contemporáneos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Octavia Walton Le Vert, *Souvenirs of Travel*, viajes por España, sentimentalismo, cuestiones de género, otredad.



The revision and expansion of the American literary canon conducted during the late twentieth century has brought about the recovery of a host of nineteenth-century American women travel writers influential in shaping an American view of abroad. Some of these women journeyed across Spain with similar concerns to those of their male contemporaries, but upon returning home they faced institutional and gender barriers that have rendered their writings invisible for many decades. The critical scrutiny that some of them have received over recent years has gradually rescued them from oblivion, adding a significant and fundamental gender dimension to the American representation of Spain. Recent studies, for instance, have focused on Merrydelle Hoyt, Katharine Lee Bates, Louise Chandler Moulton, Kate Field, Susan Hale and Caroline Cushing, among others¹. However, further research must still be undertaken to illuminate a corpus of travel writing traditionally overshadowed by the narratives of Washington Irving, Henry W. Longfellow, John Hay and other male travelers. This paper analyzes the Spanish sections of Octavia Walton Le Vert's *Souvenirs of Travel* (1857), a book that, thanks to the hegemonic class position of its author, enjoyed a notable visibility upon its publication to later fall into oblivion. Le Vert employed some rhetorical conventions of women's travel writing to represent her journey across Spain not –in contrast to what she did with other parts of Europe– as a pretext to mingle with the rich and the famous, but as a self-empowering experience that enabled her to deploy the social and cultural values of the American woman abroad. Drawing on several episodes illustrating poverty, sympathy, and the plight of women, Le Vert appealed to the sensibility of her readers to build an idealized yet backward image of Catholic Spain and the Spaniards in which the gaze of a southern belle like herself could construct a cosmopolitan subject of high value both at home and abroad.

Octavia Celestia Valentine Walton (1810-1877) lived a privileged life, growing to be one of the most famous socialites in the antebellum United States². A typical offspring of the affluent southern aristocracy, she was born at «Belle Vue», the family estate near Augusta (Georgia). Her grandfather, George Walton Sr., had been one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, whereas her father, George Walton Jr., served as acting governor of Florida. Her mother, Sarah Minge Walker, also belonged to a prominent southern family. She received the instruction suited to southern belles, learning foreign languages (Italian, French, Latin, Greek, and Spanish), reading widely, and taking music and art lessons. She also became acquainted with the Indian culture of the southeast. During her father's appointment in Florida they lived in Pensacola, where she grew accustomed to the speech of the Spanish settlers and occasionally helped him to translate French and Spanish official documents into English. In 1834, the Waltons moved to Mobile (Alabama), where

¹ See, for example, Bigatel-Abeniacar (2005), Gifra-Adroher (1999; 2000, 2002), Egea Fernández Montesinos (2009), Laviana (2010), and Martins (2013).

² The biographical facts summarized here on Le Vert's life come from Stephens (1940), Delaney (1952; 1961), Satterfield (1987), Doss & Frear (2018), Peacock (1901), and Forrest (1861).

her father served as Mayor between 1837 and 1839. It was in this multicultural port city enriched by the cotton trade that the author met Henry Strachey Le Vert, a physician, whom she married in 1836. Their union bore five children, only two of whom survived childhood, and it signified for her the adoption of such French customs as the appellation «Madame» –connected to her from then on– and the creation of a Parisian-style literary weekly salon attended by distinguished cultural and political personalities of antebellum America. Madame Le Vert, sometimes graciously dubbed «the Countess of Mobile» by her visitors³, earned herself an extraordinary reputation not only as a cultivated hostess but also as a dedicated builder of cross-cultural networks that left a discernible imprint on a regional, national, and even international scale during the decades preceding the Civil War⁴.

Le Vert's Mobilian engagements did not prevent her from frequently traveling, either to other states or abroad. As a young woman, she visited Saint Louis and stayed in Washington DC to listen to congressional debates. Later on, in the 1850s, she went to Virginia to join in the activities of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, which raised funds to save George Washington's home, and visited summer resorts like Newport and Saratoga Springs to socialize with northern friends⁵. Moreover, like many other members of the southern elite, she made extended trips to Europe, the first in 1853, followed by another in 1855, both duly publicized by the local press. Apart from providing her with the anecdotes and cultural capital necessary for writing *Souvenirs of Travel*, these trips would increase her fame as a cosmopolitan socialite. However, the Civil War shattered her comfortable life. Even though she and her daughters dutifully served as Confederacy nurses, they did not fully believe in secession nor wholeheartedly supported the institution of slavery. Moreover, Le Vert's unionist allegiances aroused the mistrust of her fellow southerners, who accused her of being a Yankee spy. When the sectional conflict ended, she had lost her mother, father, and husband (who died in 1861, 1863 and 1864, respectively), and, what was worse, she was in a state of penury. Away from Mobile, Le Vert lived

³ «Madame» and «Countess» are not the only appellations Le Vert has received. Richard J. Hutto has referred to her as «Mobile's undisputed social doyenne» (9), while Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton has named her «the undisputed queen of Mobile's antebellum society» (157).

⁴ A detailed account of a foreigner's visit to Madame Le Vert's home in Mobile may be found in Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley's *Travels in the United States, during 1849-1850* (1851: 135-137). Le Vert received the visit of another notable woman travel writer, Frederika Bremer, in early January 1850.

⁵ One commentator on the social scene in the summer resort of Saratoga once described her social and intellectual skills in these terms: «Her colloquial talents, her tact, emanating from a kind heart, captivate all who approach her. She floats through the rooms with a radiant smile for her acquaintances; now the object of admiration to a group of Americans, now with silver-toned voice and perfect Castilian accent describing the gay scene to a Spaniard, now in conversation with a Frenchman, an Italian, and a German, speaking in his own language to each, and changing one for another with lightning rapidity. Then we find her in earnest conversation with some distinguished scholar, and note the tones of erudition, the vigorous grasp of intellect, and the rich mental culture which are among her resources» (quoted in Ellet, 412-413).



for a few years in Washington, DC and New York until she finally returned to her native Georgia⁶. In spite of financial strictures, during this late period she did not cease to engage herself in diverse cultural projects. She struggled to support herself by lecturing and wrote two more books, *Souvenirs of Distinguished People* and *Souvenirs of the War*, which went unpublished.

Throughout her life, Le Vert made the acquaintance of prestigious litterati and politicians with whom she often corresponded. In the United States, she met General Lafayette, visited President Jackson and established a close friendship with President Millard Fillmore and Senators Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun. She also visited Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving and counted Henry W. Longfellow among her literary correspondents. Likewise, in Europe, she had the opportunity to meet Queen Victoria, the poets Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Pope Pius IX, Napoleon III and the French writer Lamartine, who compelled her to record her travel impressions, even suggesting the title of the book⁷.

The two-volume travelogue *Souvenirs of Travel*, comprising Le Vert's Spanish journey, narrates the European Grand Tours made in 1853 and 1855 through a series of journal entries and letters chiefly sent home to her mother. Le Vert used European travel and writing as a sort of therapy to overcome the loss of her brother and daughters Sally (8) and Claudia (10) in 1849. In the first tour she enjoyed the company of her husband, daughter Octavia (known in the family as «Diddie»), and the servant slave Betsy. They traveled from New York to Liverpool, and after visiting different parts of Britain proceeded to France, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Highlights of this first tour were a ball given by Queen Victoria, her meeting with the Duke of Rutland, a visit to the House of Commons, where she had the opportunity to listen to a speech by Benjamin Disraeli, and her stop at Columbus's birthplace in Genoa. She undertook the second transatlantic journey in the company of her husband and her daughter. They traveled from New Orleans to Havana, and thence to Cadiz. After nearly a month in Spain, they proceeded towards Italy, Austria, Germany, and finally France, for the Governor of Alabama had appointed her as the state's commissioner to the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. Harriet E. Amos Doss and Sara Frear observe that Le Vert's appointment «attracted much notice, not only because of her legendary charms but because she was the Exposition's only female commissioner. Le Vert herself, however, noted wryly that her position appeared to be purely honorary, as she was not even provided with

⁶ Information on the hardships she endured at the end of her life may be found in «Madame Le Vert», *Alexandria Gazette* April 6 (1875): 4, and in «Madame Le Vert», *Port Tobacco Times*, March 5 (1875): 1.

⁷ While in Paris, Le Vert told Lamartine a travel anecdote with such accuracy and passion that he called her a true «improvisatrice», admonishing her to «fill with pleasure the hearts of [her] nation» with descriptions of her European journeys. He added the following: «When the excitements of your tour are over, and you are once more quietly at home, will you not remember Madame, what I have said, and employ your leisure in giving to the world a few *souvenirs* of your European life?» (quoted in Forrest, 26).



cotton seeds to display» (2018: n. p.). These difficulties notwithstanding, she confidently asserts in her travel book how her country, splendidly represented, earned the admiration of many visitors.

Issued by the German-born publisher S.H. Goetzel, *Souvenirs of Travel* came out in 1857, in Mobile and New York. A notable success led to two further editions⁸. Cathleen Baker observes that «[t]he arrival of *Souvenirs of Travel* in mid-September 1857 was a cause for celebration in Mobile as newspaper notices traced the progress of the boxes of books up Mobile Bay to the city docks» (6). The *Mobile Daily Register*, for instance, spoke of it in positive terms on 23 September 1857, stating, among other things, that «the appreciation in which the ‘Souvenirs’ are held is evidenced by the fact that the first edition of five thousand copies is already exhausted, and a new one will be published by Messrs. S.H. Goetzel & Co. in three or four weeks, when those who have not been able to obtain a copy of the present issue, can be supplied» (quoted in Baker 2010: 6). Notable Americans—including Edwin Booth, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Millard Fillmore, James Buchanan, Henry W. Longfellow and Washington Irving—soon praised Le Vert’s work, as did a number of periodicals both at home and abroad⁹. Le Vert’s descriptions of fancy-dress balls, royal audiences, and meetings with European celebrities appealed to a broad range of readers, mostly feminine, both in the northern and southern states (Williams 1979: 63).

In general, *Souvenirs of Travel* followed the conventions of other women’s travel books like Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s *Pleasant Memories of Pleasant Lands* (1842) or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), which included the usual blend of landscape description, manners and characters, sentimentality and social survey. However, its success may also be attributable to an equation that Philip Beidler describes as the debut of «a female author at the right

⁸ These editions came out in New York, issued by Derby & Jackson (1859) and Carleton (1866) respectively. The place of publication of *Souvenirs of Travel* became a matter for concern. On 24 November 1856, William Gilmore Simms had written a letter to Madame Le Vert counseling her to publish not in Mobile but with a reputable northern publisher: «I learn with great surprise that you propose to publish in Mobile. This, according to my experience, will seriously prejudice your claims and impair the success of your performance. If you are not too deeply committed to any local publisher, I beg leave most earnestly to counsel you to get it issued either in New York, Boston or Philadelphia. There, they are professed publishers, with all the mechanics for giving you large circulation. I have submitted the matter to my own publisher, W.J.V. Redfield, who authorizes me to say that he will gladly become your publisher, take all the risk upon himself, and pay you 10 per cent on the receipts» (quoted in Delaney 1952: 87). Goetzel, with his chief office in Mobile, had recently opened a commercial branch in New York, which gave greater visibility to the book.

⁹ For individual responses to Le Vert’s book, mostly recorded in letters, see Satterfield 1987: 186-192. The following reviews show the impact of Le Vert’s book: «Souvenirs of Travel», *The Irish Literary Gazette*, Oct. 24 (1857): 193-194; «Madame Levert’s New Book», *Nashville Daily Patriot*, Oct. 14 (1857): 2; «Madame Le Vert’s Book», *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, Sept. 21 (1857): 2; «Souvenirs of Travel», *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 15 (1857): 1; «Souvenirs of Travel», *North American Review* 85 (Oct. 1857): 573-574; «Souvenirs of Travel», *Southern Literary Messenger* 24, New Series vol. 3 (Jan.-July 1857): 317-318; «Souvenirs of Travel», *The Critic*, Oct. 15 (1857): 471-473; «Souvenirs of Travel», *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* 8 (Oct. 1857): 528-542.



place at the right time, a Southern woman of obviously cosmopolitan interests writing to a national audience and thereby distanced from the taint of political hostilities attached to male figures actively involved in sectional political discourse» (57). Early on, the Preface manifests the critical constraints women's travel writings were subject to. The book's (male) editors, on the one hand, diminish Le Vert's potential claim to literary fame by belittling the internal cohesion of her text, described as a loose collection letters, but on the other hand, they stress its educational value and its steadfast Americanness. They aver that Le Vert «does not aspire to the laurels of authorship» and «the materials of these volumes were not originally designed for publication», but they immediately add, as a sort of disclaimer, that the author, despite her extended sojourns in Europe, «was ever staunchly true to her republican lineage, and came back home American in heart and mind» (I: viii-ix). In other words, with its origins in the private sphere, Le Vert's text appears immediately bracketed off by its male editors as minor, gossipy literature. The conversational style and the celebrity-laden pages are some of the aspects that most reviewers noticed about her book, but on other occasions they also highlighted –and this is particularly relevant here– her focus on Spain. The pro-Catholic *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, for instance, acknowledging that the most interesting portions of Le Vert's book were those on Cuba and Spain, celebrated her courageous defense of the Spaniards against British efforts to criticize it (1857: 535, 538). Likewise, the *North American Review* recognized: «in Spain [Le Vert] occupies a ground on which she has fewer predecessors and rivals than elsewhere, so that her chapters on the Spanish cities contain a very considerable amount of entirely fresh material» (1857: 574). In view of this statement, Le Vert was credited with providing one of the first female travel narratives on Spain in antebellum America.

Le Vert's trip to Spain constituted part of the «secular» ritual of travel that many members of her wealthy class observed over the century (Stowe 1994: 19). More specifically, for the southern elites the Grand Tour became a sort of class-conscious fulcrum that enabled the erasure of sectional differences abroad. The relaxed atmosphere of the European tour favored the suspension of factional views, allowing southern genteel travelers to engage in a cultural activity that, on the one hand, increased their «sense of belonging to a republicanized aristocracy» while, on the other, contributing to their «identification with America» (Kilbride 2003: 584). This is true of the Le Verts, genuine southerners yet loyal Americans, who followed the traditional itineraries trodden earlier by other well-to-do American travelers, mostly northerners. They voyaged from Havana to Cadiz on the steamer *Fernando el Católico*, a crossing that took eighteen days. Their three-day sojourn in Cadiz not only gave Le Vert a first-hand experience of how busy its port, streets, and market were, but above all it provided a quick glimpse of how feminine identities were constructed in Spain through the socialization of women in the local Alameda or on the flower-laden balconies or flat-roofs of the houses (I: 326, 329). On March 7, they departed on board a small steamer sailing up the Guadalquivir, a river described as a «dark, muddy stream, moving lazily between flat, sterile banks» (I: 330). They were warmly welcomed in the docks of Seville by a motley crowd, a circumstance that leads Le Vert to exclaim, «in no part of the world are strangers more kindly



treated than in Spain» (I: 333). The Le Verts employed their days in Seville visiting the customary sights –the cathedral, the Alcazar, the Casa de Pilatos– and by going to nearby places. In Triana, the eyes of the gypsies, «glittering and metallic in their light», captivated her, just as did their «rich brown hue of complexion, between the olive of the Spaniard and the bronze color of our Indians» (I: 344). Likewise, in the Fabrica de Tabacos, the poor working conditions of the women labourers stirred her sympathy. «They had a pallid, unhealthy look, as though ill fed» (I: 344), she notices, adding that the large number of children they carried with them, far from cheering their life, made it the more pitiful.

The Le Verts set out in a coach for Madrid on March 10, passing en route through Mairena, Carmona, and Écija. The journey, safe and chaperoned, did not involve any transgression whatsoever from the norms of female conduct: far from being a solitary woman's trek, it is at all times represented as a family adventure, hence the constant use in the narrative of the second person (plural) pronoun. However, now and then the author resorts to a significant rhetorical convention of women's travel writing that consists, as Mary S. Schriber notes, (1995: xxix), in using the first-person (singular) pronoun to indirectly remind the audience that women are also capable of traveling solo even in challenging circumstances. The nocturnal journey to Madrid appears to be one of such moments, for while all the passengers –including her own family– sleep in the coach, she chooses to remain awake to enjoy what Wordsworth had termed «the bliss of solitude». With typical romantic diction, she silently contemplates the great, white plains, «seeming in the moonlight as though covered with a sprinkling of snow» (II: 3). In such passages, the vastness of romantic Spain becomes for the «solitary» woman traveler the ideal scenario of reveries and insightful reflections similar to those uttered in the books written by male travelers. Le Vert, in short, seems to build for herself the image of a fearless woman traveler capable –if necessary– of pushing the envelope in a largely masculinized territory.

Languages and literatures constituted other areas upon which women travel writers usually wished to show their expertise, hence the number of places in *Souvenirs of Travel* that appear to be connected to literary and romantic associations¹⁰. Lord Byron's Spanish verses often linger in Le Vert's mind as she travels across the country, but other authors and texts occasionally occur. This is true of Florian's *Gonzalve of Cordova*, one of her youthful, romantic readings, which she conjures up before entering the capital of the ancient caliphate. However, the arrival at the Andalusian city proves disappointing due to its «mouldering and crumbling» situation (I: 4). Madame Le Vert, resorting to Gothic imagery, pours forth the following reflections:

¹⁰ Le Vert, proficient in the language, also possessed a good command of Spanish literature (including Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) and foreign authors who had written on Spanish themes. In a letter to Longfellow, prior to her Spanish journey, she confesses, «I am reading now 'Ticknor's Spanish Literature', which has much interested me. I have spent so many hours, with the old Spanish Poets, in the days of my youth that I feel as tho I met again dear friends» (quoted in Satterfield 1987: 100).



There was about it the gloom and desolation of a deserted grave-yard, and little effort of imagination did it require to convert the pale and spectral creatures into ghosts of the departed. Walking along the streets, we found the grass growing, as though months had passed since a foot touched it; and from the tops of houses hung down long vines, waving mournfully in the breeze. And this was once the «Beautiful City», so famed for its ten hundred thousand private houses –for its palaces, its gardens, and baths– its literature –its chivalry– its noble mosque, with the most gorgeous mosaic of the world, and its arches of marble, carved so delicately, they resembled the richest lace woven in the looms of Brussels. Silence, gloom, and starvation, are now the peculiar attributes of Cordova, and we gladly welcomed the approach of the diligence which should take us away from the tomb-like city (II: 8).

The dismal echoes of the «ubi sunt» topic charge this passage, which may well stand as a metaphor for the imperial past of Spain, with a heightened sense of romantic loss. The atmosphere of ruin and solitude constructed here, however, remains in the next stage of the journey. She explains that they crossed the Sierra Morena and the nearly phantasmagoric landscape of La Mancha in another nocturnal journey in which she recalls again images of solitude, evoking every now and then the figure of Don Quixote and his exploits. Her romantic abstractions, briefly broken to strike up a conversation with an old monk who had met Washington Irving in Granada, eventually give way to harsh realities when daylight reveals that they were traveling across «a still more miserable country» with «wretched peasants» who were «seemingly in a state of actual starvation» (II: 13). The traveler's scripted solitude finally ends when they get off the coach and enter the railway station of Tembleque. There, waiting for the train, Le Vert sits and enjoys a moment of introspection: «I found consolation in my journal, upon whose pages I recorded the events of our three days' journey. In all times of weariness and anxiety, I have sought forgetfulness in the journal, as to a good and true friend, pouring out all my thoughts and impressions» (13). By writing about Spain in her journal, Le Vert was inscribing the ideological contradictions of her genteel position, that is, of an affluent American traveler romanticizing the peoples and landscapes of an underdeveloped foreign country.

A long intermitent journey by train finally left the Le Verts at midnight in Madrid, where they could change clothes «for the first time in four days» and enjoy «the luxury of an excellent bed» (II: 15). Madame Le Vert was pleasantly surprised with the Puerta del Sol, thronged as it was with lottery vendors and people who discussed the daily news of the Crimean War. The same is true of the Prado, «one of the most pleasant paseos» in Europe, where women were fluttering their fans and children were being cared for «by their nurses in quaint, queer costumes of the different provinces from whence they came» (II: 17-18). The daily routine of these genteel tourists entailed visits to the Prado Museum, the Royal Armory, the Museo Naval, the National Library, and the Park of El Retiro. On other occasions, they met with local politicians, whom they found «charming in conversation, intellectual, and exceedingly well informed», and received great praise as citizens of the United States, a fact that compels Le Vert to observe, «Oh! It is a glorious thing to be an American! There is a spell about the name which awakens interest, while it commands respect» (II: 24). The Le Verts also entertained themselves with some of the pastimes the



capital afforded. For instance, they attended a performance of *Lucia di Lamermoor* at the Teatro de Oriente, where all the society women were in mourning to lament the death of Don Carlos, Queen Isabella II's uncle. They also made a two-day trip to San Lorenzo del Escorial, where the pomp and circumstance of the religious services impressed Le Vert: «Deep and holy emotions possessed my soul, and never before did I so fully realize the sublime grandeur of the Catholic worship» (II: 39). Although a Protestant, her narrative invariably manifests religious tolerance, never falling into the anti-Catholic discourse of other contemporary travelers.

As Jenny Franchot has observed, attitudes for and against Catholicism «functioned as a powerful rhetorical and political force in antebellum America» (1994: xviii). No author could ignore their sway and in many cities religious coexistence sometimes proved difficult. Ryan K. Smith has shown that the animosity of Protestants toward Catholics peaked by mid-century, partly fueled by xenophobic fears about the impact of foreigners on the religious disintegration of the nation. However, during those years American Protestants paradoxically «developed a deeply mixed fascination for Roman Catholic worship, as nunneries, monasteries, chapels, and cathedrals served as popular settings for numerous tales and paintings» (2006: 8). Le Vert's narrative expresses this attraction to the aesthetics of Catholic art and pageantry on several occasions, the most remarkable instance probably being her intense devotion to Murillo, whom she nearly presents as a painter-messenger transmitting holy messages. In Seville's Art Museum she refers to the room with his canvasses as «a shrine, where I could worship his wonderful talent», later proclaiming that Murillo's depiction of the Virgin not only commands «purity, holiness, and sweetness» but also the capacity to mollify «the most stoical heart» (I: 342-343). Likewise, in Madrid's Prado Museum Le Vert stands for hours before a painting of the «Assumption of the Virgin» that makes her shed tears because Mary's face resembles that of her deceased daughter (II: 18). Blending religious discourses with the tearful and sentimental scenes typical of antebellum women's fiction, Le Vert strongly manifests the iconic power that Catholic images and ceremonies carried for the travel writer in Spain.

Madame Le Vert resumed their trip on March 19, proceeding through Alcalá de Henares towards Guadalajara, Alhama and finally Zaragoza, a cherished city because of her fond remembrances of Byron's «Maid from Zaragoza». There she once again displays her fascination for Catholicism by alluding to the great religious festivities that annually take place before the Virgin of El Pilar (II: 51). Finally, on March 23, nearly three weeks after their arrival in Spain, she and her family entered Barcelona. The activity of the Rambla, the city's main thoroughfare, soon captivated her:

Barcelona is a busy, bustling place, reminding one vastly of New York, from the strong vitality and activity of its inhabitants. Everyone seems occupied, and no longer do we see the smiling faces and *dolce far niente* attitudes of charming Andalucía. Here, too, as in the great cities of Northern Europe, «commerce is king», and hundreds of ships from distant lands fill the harbor. The people of Cataluña, from their energy and industry, from their money-making and money-keeping peculiarities, are called the «Yankees of Spain» –an appellation of which they appear exceedingly proud (II: 57).



Le Vert's narrative records not only the presence of factories in many neighborhoods but also the meticulous labor carried out by the women who weave the famous Spanish mantillas. Naturally, for a socialite like herself, the opportunity to attend theatrical performances could not be missed: she saw two at the recently opened Gran Teatro del Liceo, one a Catalan Passion play and the other Rossini's *Barbiere di Sevilla*. As strong winds prevented them from embarking on a steamer bound for Marseilles, three days later they traveled by train to Mataró, crossing a coastal scenery where «prosperity and plenty were every where visible» (II: 60). In Mataró, where the railway line ended, they took a diligence to continue their trip towards Girona, where they stayed overnight. The following day they reached Figueras, «a wild, vagrant-looking place, where crowds of soldiers were assembled» (II: 61). The closeness of the French border and the excitement of the liminal stage of the journey, with its symbolic, transitional motion, compels LeVert to confess, as she reaches the highest point on the road: «I looked my last upon Spain, with regret in my heart. There is a warm and genial kindness about its people, extremely captivating —a noble and romantic chivalry of character, unique and agreeable» (II: 62). The southern belle's journey across Spain had finally concluded, having fulfilled the romantic expectations that it had initially raised.

The representation of Spain in Madame Le Vert's text embeds many of the gender concerns that acquired prominence in nineteenth-century women's travel accounts. As mentioned earlier, she uses a number of rhetorical conventions that not only demonstrate her familiarity with the travel genre but also allow her to build a stereotyped, romantic image of things Spanish. Take, for instance, the scripted moments of solitude alluded to, during which a chaperoned southern belle like herself rewrites her own lady-like image as that of an independent traveling woman in a sometimes desolate landscape. Or her sketches of women, whether the Gaditanas on their flower-decked balconies or the Madrid women dressed up like *manolas*, which convert the Spanish female into exotic, aestheticized subjects to be enjoyed by the tourist's gaze. In the same vein, several portraits of racial or cultural difference also achieve prominence in the text, being penned by a southern woman from a state in which race was an issue. The description of the gypsies of Triana mentioned earlier perhaps is the passage that best illustrates the author's fascination with racial otherness, but there are a few more. One is her depiction of the *maragatos*, an isolated community from León, who she characterizes as «a type of people peculiar to Spain, and supposed to be Moorish Goths» who «are entirely different in appearance from all the other Spaniards». According to Le Vert, «[t]here were many characteristics about them very like our Indians. They have a language of their own, as harsh as that of the tribes along the Northern Ocean. In religion they are supposed to be Mohammedans. They never intermarry with the Spaniards, or hold with them any social intercourse» (II: 46-47). She employs a similar terminology when it comes to describing the Catalans: «The inhabitants are the descendants of the Goths, and are in strong contrast with the other Spaniards, being of fair complexion, with light hair and blue eyes. They speak a *patois* styled *Catalan*, a harsh disagreeable language. Not a sound of the noble and flowing Castilian can be traced in it» (II: 58). These examples of otherness, with their implied romantic exoticism



and linguistic difference, are based on alluring stereotypes that may disseminate erroneous notions, yet the subtext that they conceal seems troubling. Le Vert seems to imply that if the plight of the «harsh» Indians at home, in spite of their charming and honorable culture, had been their gradual assimilation or removal, the same fate could naturally be expected one day from the «romantic» discrepancies that did not fit into the linguistic and religious paradigm of mainstream Spain.

The narratorial voice in *Souvenirs of Travel* also shows that on many occasions her social construction as a «southern belle» follows the hegemonic agenda of the rising American middle-class abroad. If women like Le Vert wanted to have a public voice and ideologically influence their fellow citizens, one of their best ways of doing so depended on their display of cultural and historical information put to civic use. Nina Baym has observed that history writing—and we might also add travel writing—was one of the areas taken over by women because it blended the «public» importance of history with allusions to «private» women's issues (1995: 5-6). The private issues emerge in Le Vert's narrative as she often focuses on domestic aspects of Spain that male travelers did not attach importance to. But her love of history—no matter how superficial—is also quite present throughout *Souvenirs of Travel*, despite the disparaging observations of critics like James W. Patton, who maintains that «she does little more than copy European guide books and repeat the spiels of cicerones, and is therefore lacking in either analysis or criticism» (21). Admittedly, *Souvenirs of Travel* has its share of borrowed information and regurgitated facts, like many other contemporary travel texts written by men, but its circulation of Spanish historical themes inserts the volumes into American discourses about the fate and the decline of imperial Spain. Le Vert refers in passing to historical characters, episodes, and milieux that provide a middle-brow veneer to her book. In Seville, for instance, she mentions the triangle between Peter the Cruel, Blanche of Castile, and Maria de Padilla (I: 339-340). Later on, in Cordova, she writes about Abderahman's historical role, listing his accomplishments (II: 4-5). Likewise, in other sections she calls attention to instances of destruction wrought by the Peninsular War. She peppers her account with references to the battle of Bailén (II: 8-9), the bloody marches of Generals Dupont and Soult through La Mancha (II: 11), or the story of Augustina of Aragon (II: 49). Interestingly, a number of the historical incidents or episodes chosen bear the stamp of gender, thus collapsing both issues.

One of the most recurrent historical themes in the Spanish chapters of *Souvenirs of Travel* is the Columbian myth. Many American historians and travelers of the antebellum period regarded Christopher Columbus not only as the discoverer of the New World but nearly as a father of the American republic and, accordingly, a journey to Spain could not be altogether complete without a somewhat secular pilgrimage to some of the sights related to the early history of the Americas. Several examples of this veneration occur in Le Vert's travelogue. As the steamboat plods its way up the Guadalquivir, the author notes that they «passed the mouth of the Rio Tinto, upon which stands the convent where Columbus, an outcast and wanderer, received charity from the kind prior, who interceded with Isabella, and thus forwarded the plans of the great discoverer» (I: 331). In Seville's cathedral, Le Vert remarks that one may see «the tomb of Fernando Colon, the son of Columbus»



and, likewise, she affirms that they saw «the cross made with the first gold brought from America by Columbus» (I: 335). The highlight of this Columbian program, however, is her opportunity to examine some of the admiral's letters at the Cathedral Library, where she detects a handwriting that, blending sadness and forcefulness, above all evidences «the deep and abiding trust in the goodness of God, and perfect submission to his wisdom» (I: 336). Far from implying that the foundational Columbian myth was an affair exclusively circumscribed to the masculine sphere, her words show that the figure of the admiral could be equally appropriated into the feminine sphere to be used as a source of national pride.

Finally, the other major rhetorical convention present in Le Vert's representation of Spain that deserves to be discussed here is sentimentality. Her focus on sentimental episodes, particularly those involving beggars, children, or women, effectively exemplifies her strategy of appealing to the reader's sympathy whilst reiterating the superior value of social conditions in the United States. Shirley Samuels argues that sentimentality lies «literally at the heart of nineteenth-century American culture» and it entails «a set of cultural practices designed to evoke a certain form of emotional response» (4). In other words, for this critic what may be termed «the aesthetics of sentiment» does not belong to a single literary genre, but rather comprises «a set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification that effect connections across gender, race, and class boundaries» (6). Travel books, novels, books of conduct, popular lithographies and other art forms also figured in the reform impetus and the widespread rhetoric of sentiment that characterized American women's writing during the antebellum years. Le Vert's representation of Spain bears the influence of this important aspect of antebellum women's literature. In Seville, for instance, she appeals to her reader's sympathy by telling the story of a black beggar who had been maimed and had no hands (I: 347). Likewise, in Madrid, her gaze compassionately focuses on a poor girl who touches her heart:

Yesterday a little girl, about nine years old, caught my dress in her hands, and appealing to me with her large, tender eyes, at last said, «Ah! Señorita, a little charity –God will repay you!» Giving her some money, and asking her of her situation, she told me she was lame, and had two brothers and a sister younger than herself, and that they had never had either father or mother (II: 31-32).

Le Vert's rhetoric of benevolence and kindness makes itself manifest not only in this tearful scene but in many other episodes. Near El Escorial, also drawing on a sentimental diction, she describes a crowd of beggars who assailed them: «Miserable beings! How wasted and worn they look. It needed no words to tell the sad story of their starvation; it was written in their staring eyes and trembling limbs» (II: 38). In all of these cases, the rationale deployed revolves around the marginality of the Spanish subjects, most often women, in contrast to the implied superiority of the generous American tourists. In Igualada, near Barcelona, a group of beggars ask for charity, but as the Le Verts had already given away their last handful of coppers, they decide to feed the poor with a box of crackers. The rising crowd of poverty-stricken townspeople and their blessings towards the genteel foreigners sadden her, making



her exclaim, «Thank God! We can never behold misery like this in our own happy country» (II: 55). What these and other examples demonstrate is that, leaving aside similar concerns found in masculine travel literature, women desired a public voice and sought to influence their fellow citizens by drawing on sentimental discourses and episodes like the ones just alluded to.

In *Souvenirs of Travel* the rhetoric of sentiment, especially appropriate for Le Vert to represent some Spanish subjects as pitiful, appears to be linked to prevailing middle-class views on race, class, and nation. Reading between the lines, Le Vert's readers –mostly female– could imagine the wide gap existing between the squalor of some Spanish settings and their pristine American parlors, or compare the hardships under which certain Spaniards struggled to the prosperity of some middle- and upper-class citizens with whom the Le Verts rubbed shoulders. In any event, the intended subtext revolved around the idea that, in spite of the appeal of an heroic past, Spain and other countries represented in the book deserved pity on many counts. However, this feminine co-option of nationalist values, sometimes enacted by negatively comparing the domestic to the foreign, paradoxically takes place within a text where the issue of slavery, of major concern in Le Vert's state, is all but banned.

The journey narrated in *Souvenirs of Travel* demonstrates what Mary Schriber has observed apropos of women's travel writing, that is, that women transformed «narratives of travel, traditionally androcentric, into gynocentric narratives of their lives and narratives of gender, using the travel book as a structure within which to embed a major agenda: the politics of gender» (1995: xxx). Le Vert, though raised to shine as a well-bred southern belle, as a sophisticated socialite with the polish of European travel, used her travel experiences in a masculinized land not to go back home to rest on her laurels but to cleverly promote both women's issues and national issues. She engaged herself, for example, in some of the activities organized by one of the country's earliest protofeminist clubs («Sorosis») in New York, and likewise, as mentioned earlier, she collaborated in the preservation of national buildings. That is, she demonstrated that women could empower themselves by crossing the Atlantic, seeing the artistic treasures of the Old World, and ultimately using the cultural capital gained there to consolidate the moral values of their republic. In Spain, Le Vert invariably assumes the superiority of the American traveler abroad, yet also maintains a positive view of the country and its citizens. She praises «the loyalty and chivalry of the Spanish character» (II: 25) and refers to it as «the land of romance and of beautiful legends», that is, a safe place full of literary and historical associations where «we have never heard an uncivil word, or seen a rude action» (II: 26). Her book deserves to be recovered as a necessary text within a tradition that, through multiple narrative strategies and rhetorical conventions, proved the impetus with which American women tackled the representation of Spain. They too converted travel writing on foreign lands into disquisitions and reflections on the United States and their own gender.

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