Worlds Within Worlds: Stella Benson's ex-centric search for home

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Abstract

Benson spent most of her adult life abroad and in this paper I propose to use the textual material of her travel books, *The Little World* (1925) and *Worlds Within Worlds* (1928), collections of the sketches she wrote during her time in America, Hong Kong and China, to focus on Benson's personal politics of location in exile. These two books very clearly demonstrate Trinh Minh-ha's concept of identity as a «product of articulation», where «[Identity] lies at the intersection of dwelling and travelling» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 14). Benson's travel sketches exemplify an enabling concept of travel and exile, where 'homelessness' is a state or space that embodies creative and utopian potentiality.

Keywords: travel, ex-centric, exile, home, homelessness.

Résumé

***Mondes dans des mondes:* La recherche excentré de Stella Benson d'une maison**

Benson est dépensée la plupart de sa vie d'adulte à l'étranger. Dans cet article je propose l'utilisation du matériel textuel de ses livres de voyage, *The Little World* (1925) et *Worlds Within Worlds (*1928), des collections d'essaies qu'elle a écrits pendant le temps vécu en Amérique, Hong Kong et Chine, pour focaliser sur la politique personnelle de Benson envers sa situation dans l'exil. Ces deux livres démontrent clairement le concept de Trinh Minh-ha de l'identité comme « un produit d'articulation », où « [l'identité] existe dans l'intersection entre habiter et voyager» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 14). Les essaies de voyage de Benson exemplifient un concept de possibilité pour le voyage et l'exil, où le «*homelessness*» devient un état ou un espace qui incarne une potentialité créative et utopique.

Mots-clés: voyage, excentré, exil, maison, *homelessness.*

Resumo

Mundos dentro de Mundos: A busca excentrada de Stella Benson de uma casa

Benson passou a maior parte da sua vida adulta no estrangeiro. Neste artigo proponho utilizar o material textual dos seus livros de escrita de viagem, *The Little World* (1925) e *Worlds Within Worlds (*1928), colecções de ensaios que ela escreveu durante o seu tempo de vivência na América, Hong Kong e China, para focalizar a sua politica pessoal face à sua situação no exílio. Estes dois livros demonstram claramente o conceito de Trinh Minh-ha da identidade como um «produto de articulação» onde «[a identidade] reside na intercepção entre habitar e viajar» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 14). Os ensaios de viagem de Benson exemplificam um conceito possibilitador de viagem e exílio, onde «*homelessness*» é um estado ou espaço que incorpora um potencial criativo e utópico.

Palavras-chave: viagem, ex-centrada, exílio, casa, *homelessness.*

Living Alone

Stella Benson's untimely death from pneumonia at the age of forty-one moved Virginia Woolf to write in her diary, «How mournful the afternoon seems… A very fine steady mind: much suffering; suppressed… A curious feeling: when a writer like SB dies, that one's response is diminished; Here and Now won't be lit up by her: it's life lessened»[1]. By her own admission, however, Benson never felt she properly belonged to any coterie in the adult world. She makes frequent reference in her diaries[2] to her sense of 'homelessness' in the real world and like her protagonist, Sarah Brown, in the novel *Living Alone* (1919), seemed «to move through a world in which she neither feels she is a citizen nor desires to be one» (Benson, 1919: 55). There is a pervasive preoccupation with what Meredith Bedell identifies as «the essential isolation of the human condition» (Bedell, 1983: 21) in all Benson's work (novels, poetry, essays and travel writing), and a particular focus on the situation of women in society, specifically their discontent with their political and social position. Benson's return, again and again, to the themes of loneliness and aloneness in her writing trace her personal attempts to construct stability in the instability of the borderlands – a perilous space, but one that also affords possibilities of empowerment and belonging.

As Caren Kaplan writes in her book on postmodern discourses of travel, «each metaphor of displacement includes referentially a concept of placement, dwelling, location, or position. Thus exile is always already a mode of dwelling at a distance from a point of origin.» (Kaplan, 1996: 143). Benson's own particular 'mode of dwelling' is powerfully voiced in the quirky beauty and humanity of the sketches comprising her two travel writing collections, *The Little World* (1925) and *Worlds Within Worlds* (1928). Read together, these two books chart a decade of travel in the author's life, first as a young unmarried adventurer, who accepts her loneliness as the condition of her independence, and then later as the wife, in unhappy exile, of an Anglo-Irish officer in the Chinese Customs Service (CCS), who finds her independent identity much diminished. Benson craved personal and political transformation, and travel, which cannot avoid a transformation of an existing order, provided escape from stagnation. But, she also craved a home, a stable space that would root and empower her. Travel puts ideas and identities on the line; it destabilizes, but can also empower and nourish what Trinh Minh-ha calls «the layers of totality that forms I» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1988). *The Little World* and *Worlds Within Worlds* very clearly demonstrate Trinh Minh-ha's concept of identity as a 'product of articulation', where «[Identity] lies at the intersection of dwelling and travelling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa)» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 14). Benson's investigation of Self traces a trajectory of flight from

[1] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. IV, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, Hogarth Press, London, 1982: p.192 (cited in Grant, 1987: xv).

[2] The diaries of Stella Benson (1902-1933) are held at Cambridge University Library.

the safety of the known but repressive 'home' of middle-class English society, travelling towards a state of exile or 'homelessness', which JanMohammed defines as

> an enabling concept …associated with …the civil and political space that hegemony cannot suture, a space in which alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project can survive. «Homelessness», then, is a situation wherein utopian potentiality can endure[3].

The perfect traveller

Benson was born in 1892 and lived for only forty-one years. She was essentially a child of Victorian tradition but her adult life, as a travelling writer, spanned the period of the interwar years, a time marked by great social and political unrest, and dramatic changes in women's positions. In her essay, *Constructions of Gender and Racial Identities in Inter-war British Women's Travel Writing*, Hsu-Ming Teo notes that «the call for women to return to the domestic sphere, and the new variants of the old ideologies of motherhood, reveal continuing pressure on women between the wars to conform to Victorian norms of femininity.» (Teo, 1999: 125). What was different about the interwar period, however, «was the proliferation of many disparate models of femininity resulting in new discourses which could be employed at various times by women travellers to construct their narratorial identities» (*Ibidem*).

Benson's sense of self-worth was rooted in her ability to make an independent living from her own writing. As a woman of the modern world, she claimed her right to put her writing first, before her duties as a wife, aunt or daughter, but her travel writing also reveals the inherent tensions of her struggle to reconcile this position with the Victorian norms of femininity still circulating in the interwar years. Benson was essentially a traveller straddling two ages: as R. Ellis Roberts said of her in his biography, *Portrait of Stella Benson*,

> She was herself acutely aware of the period, of her generation – as aware as D.H Lawrence or Aldous Huxley: and she is more representative of that generation because she was, in her bones, more a child of tradition, and so felt violently the huge break in tradition that occurred in her life-time (Roberts, 1939: 325).

Furthermore, Ellis continues,

> The value of her work as a mirror of her generation's desires and losses and torments consists in the truth that she was essentially ordinary, typically English and therefore eccentric (*Idem*, 327).

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3 JanMohamed, Abdul R, *Worldliness-Without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of Border Intellectual*. University of California, Berkeley, unpublished paper cited in Giroux, Henry, A. (1992).

In his essay, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill famously wrote that «the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained»[4]. In this tradition, to be an eccentric is therefore to be of an original mind. The positioning of women as eccentric, however, is more often fraught with pejorative implications, denoting a deviant position outside polite society, an ex-centric position that is unacceptably outlandish rather than acceptably creative. In the case of women travel writers, this sobriquet is often used to identify the comic nature of their endeavours, thus making it easy to ignore the importance of their work in history. Ellis's description of Benson as an eccentric confirms the empowering potential of an ex-centric position, and suggests perhaps unconsciously, that she has achieved the status of some kind of honorary man. In removing themselves from the centre, women travel writers, as Debbie Lisle has said in the context of both colonial and contemporary travel writing, make themselves «doubly extraordinary» by «becoming manly enough to travel and write books about it» (Lisle, 206: 97).

From an early age, Benson confided in her diary that she felt not quite a «real girl», meaning by this that she did not feel she could fulfil her family's or society's expectations for her to marry and live a quiet life of wifely dependency. She suffered from pleurisy as a child, which meant that her already isolated home life was further constricted by long periods of illness, watched over by an overprotective mother who had already lost one daughter[5]. Her illness resulted in permanent deafness in her right ear by the time she reached fifteen, which only increased her sense of isolation. Benson's early travels, to Germany, Switzerland and Jamaica, were undertaken on doctor's orders, but also gave her a glimpse of the transformative potentialities of travel. Despite her continued ill health, and against her mother's wishes, Benson left home to work in London during the First World War, briefly as a land girl and then devoting herself to charity work with poor women in the East End. Benson's health deteriorated in these harsh living conditions and shortly before the war ended, she used her contacts to secure a passport to America on the grounds that the Californian climate would benefit her lungs. She spent nearly eighteen months in America, meeting many bohemian and artistic figures that would become life-long friends. She left America for Hong Kong, where she taught at a boys' school for a term, before taking up the offer of a three months' contract in an American medical institute in Peking (Beijing). She was not sorry to leave British Hong Kong, noting in her diary that, «something about S B stays awkwardly outside, and does not want to edge in, and that is exactly what is wrong»[6]. In China, however, she was happy,

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4 Chpt.3 Paragraph 14 in John Stuart Mill (1929), *On Liberty*, London: Watts & Company, cited in Lopston, Peter (1998), *Readings on Human Nature*, Ontario: Broadview Press.

5 All biographical details for Benson are taken from Grant, Joy, *Stella Benson: a biography* (1987) and Roberts, R. Ellis, *Portrait of Stella Benson* (1939).

6 Diary entry cited in Grant, 1987: 149.

and it was here, in 1920, that she met James O'Gorman Anderson, an Anglo-Irish officer in the Chinese Customs Service (CCS). They married in 1921 and Benson was thrust into the role of Colonial wife, a role she resisted throughout her marriage. Life in the remote Treaty Ports was lonely for Benson. An agnostic without children, she had little in common with the other ex-patriots, mostly missionaries or wives of missionaries without time or interest in literature.

Benson's unhappiness was complicated by personal conflicts of desire: she was not willing to conform to the expatriate community's concept of femininity, and yet, somehow felt that she had failed as a woman and a wife by not being able to produce children, or make herself believe that her husband's profession was more important than her own ambitions as a writer. In the introduction to their book, *Women in Europe Between the Wars: Politics, Culture and Society*, Angela Kershaw and Angela Kimyongür identify the developments made in women's situation between the wars but note that the period created a «culture of contradictions» in which «progressive and regressive definitions of femininity existed simultaneously» (Kershaw & Kimyongür, 2007: 6). Women, who previously had experienced a degree of freedom, such as Benson working in London during the war years, were now told that it was their patriotic duty to return to the confines of the domestic space. Kershaw and Kimyongür note the «co-existence of constraints and freedoms» for women in this period, which was reflected in the «co-existence of disparate models of identity» which needed to be negotiated (*Ibidem*).

It is not surprising then, that travel offered a certain freedom for some women, like Benson, from the discourses that sought to restrict them to the private sphere. Travel, for Benson, offered immediate escape from an overprotective mother and the inevitable fate of being either a wife or spinster aunt in comfortable but despised dependency. Identity, for Benson, was quite clearly «a performance, which is fluid, not fixed» (Macpherson, 2004: 196), and throughout her travel writing she rehearses a variety of roles which suggest other ways of belonging in exile within the dynamic, persistently uneven tensions between self and place. As she herself, puts it in a late diary entry,

> To set down a record of my contact with people – disastrous or happy contact – is most necessary to me. Because my most continuous sensation is a feeling of terrifying slipping-away from people – a most devastating loneliness – I have to place on record the fact that I was human and that even I had my human adventures (Grant, 1987: xvii).

Although she herself was dismissive of her travel sketches, seeing them as trivial hackwork, others saw them differently. Naomi Mitchison professed herself «thrilled» by *The Little World*, telling Benson that «you couldn't possibly write a book that I wouldn't grab for every word of» (*apud* Clay, 2006: 131) and Winifred Holtby published an enthusiastic review of *Worlds Within Worlds* in the journal, *Time and Tide,* under the title 'The Perfect Traveller'. One of the parado-

xes of Benson's complicated character, as Joy Grant notes in the preface to her biography of the author, was that although she found social situations «extremely painful», she was, in equal measure, «mesmerised by human society» (Grant, 1987: xviii). Benson's observations from the margins were informed by an acute understanding of the essential loneliness of the human condition, perhaps emphasised by her own ill-health and deafness, and a personal and political restlessness, which meant that she could always see more than her own point of view. The 'perfect traveller' perhaps, because, as Said phrases it,

> The essential privilege of exile is to have, not just one set of eyes but half a dozen, each one of them corresponding to the places you have been…. There is always a kind of doubleness to that experience, and the more places you have been the more displacements you've been through, as every exile does. As every situation is a new one, you start out each day anew[7].

Trippers and Travellers

The Little World, published in 1925, traces a chronological path of the author's travels as an unmarried adventurer, first to America in 1918, then on to Japan, Hong Kong, China and India. The book continues after her marriage, in 1921, to James O'Gorman Anderson, an Anglo-Irish officer in the Chinese Customs Service (CCS), describing their honeymoon trip to America, which followed a similar itinerary to her earlier solo travels in that country, and then closing with some sketches from their first posting to the remote Chinese outpost of Mengtsz on the Indo-China border.

The Little World opens with a sinister little sketch called 'Trippers'. This is a strange anarchistic tale that clearly sets down both the contempt Stella felt for all intellectual dishonesty and the context for her future travels. Set at Tintagel Cove in Cornwall, the mythical location of King Arthur's castle, a group of four 'highbrows' wage war against the 'trippers', «the most innocent and terrible enemy of them all» (Benson, 1932: 3) who make the climb up to Arthur's seat. The pointlessness of the highbrows' hatred of tourists is voiced by one of their own party:

> I admit I am a tripper myself; I come from far to see things I have heard of. To eat lotus in a Chinese temple garden or bananas on Blackpool pier is the same thing – I know it. But I am I and only I have rights (*Idem*, 4).

Finally, the four crusaders shoot the trippers and then themselves, but when they enter Paradise with self-conscious dignity it is only to find there the awful trippers they have just slaughtered and to hear King Arthur welcome one and all

7 Said, Edward (1988), «The voice of a Palestinian in exile», Third Text, 3/4 (Spring –Summer), 48 cited in Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 16.

equally; «Come in, come in, adventurers all…» (*Idem,* 5). This is a violent tale that lays bare the dangers of intellectual snobbery. It also acts as a mission statement for the sketches to follow; Benson would have us read her sketches in a shared belief that hierarchies of race, class, and gender are artificial devices for evaluating a person's worth. In the final reckoning, it is the adventure, the will to take a chance, that matters.

Benson's early travels were fuelled by a passion for adventure and where no adventure presented itself naturally, she would find a way to construct some level of challenge in its place. In another sketch from this collection, called simply, 'The States IV', Benson is candid about her thrill seeking;

> Being alive at all is an incessant shock and, I think, all the best lives are melodramas. Nevertheless in the course of every life the shock must hang fire at times.[…] Moments between shocks are very hard to bear (*Idem*, 24).

At this early stage in her travels, Benson is working as an Editorial reader in California and is desperately bored by the reading of a book named, «with extraordinary candour, the Boring Isopod» (*Idem,* 25). An earthquake interrupts her reading, a happy event because it meant that, for her, «being alive was uncertain again» (*Idem,* 25). But, she admits, «when this feeling died away, and having waited expectantly without result for a repetition of the helpful phenomenon, I took the matter into my own hands.» (*Idem,* 25). Taking matters into her own hands meant paying an aviator to take her up his plane and loop the loop over San Francisco until she could say with satisfaction that she was «absolutely terrified» (*Idem,* 26).

Perhaps because she had spent much of her childhood cosseted from any kind of dangerous excitement, Benson was determined to throw herself emotionally and physically into all she did, proving to the world that she was indeed completely alive. Although Benson does not actually flaunt the exertions of her travels, she does make frequent mention of her willingness to suffer physical pain, once more insisting on an eccentricity of character which is given a freer rein in her physical positioning outside British society, and her imaginative positioning as a writer. Crossing the Pacific, from America to Japan, for example, she ponders the intrepidity of earlier travellers, and although she admits that their hardships were greater than hers, the listing of her own injuries suggests that she locates herself in their company:

> I imagine easily how those early great waves must have hungered for the bones of their first challengers. Even for my bones they hungered to such a degree that they broke one. By the time I reached Honolulu I had actually a broken shoulder in addition to scores of minor wounds acquired by contact with walls, floors, funnels, masts, stewards, and any fellow-passengers harder in texture than myself (*Idem*, 30).

Reading this particular sketch, there is an overriding sense of her belief in the rewards of travel – of *travail*. Indeed, in further episodes, most notably after

her marriage, Benson brings attention to her determination to take the road less travelled. Almost certainly, married life would have robbed her of opportunities for life threatening adventure, thus she made sure to grasp them greedily when they presented themselves. On a trip in Indo-China with her husband and two others, for example, she wrote,

> At Tourane harsh circumstances tore the party asunder. The Ford which we were there obliged to hire would hold only three, with luggage, and I insisted on being the one to travel by native stage-bus to Quinhon (*Idem*, 292).

On the hair- raising journey that followed, Benson rediscovered the thrill of life being uncertain; she was back in the bi-plane soaring over San Francisco and, by stubbornly deciding to go it alone, found her own contrary way to prove her willingness to fully engage with the world she inhabited.

A Woman's World

In *The Little World*, Benson describes her status as a newly married woman in terms of an ending rather than a beginning; «after three years, I tied the knot of the rather humble ravelled thread of my journeying around the world." (Benson, 1932: 125). She returns to California with her husband on their honey-moon but somehow her earlier enthusiasm for travel seems jaded by a new knowledge of what the journey will mean:

> Ignorance is the impetus that pushes all travellers from their starting- points. We travel because we do not know. We know that we do not know the best before we start. That is why we start. But we forget that we do not know the worst either. That is why we come back (*Ibidem*).

From the entries in Benson's diaries, it would seem that her marriage was not entirely unhappy; rather it was the circumstances in which she was forced to perform it, namely the various expatriate communities in China, where she was immediately marked out as different for her scholarly ways and unwillingness to submit to a traditional performance of the wifely role. Benson's struggle to maintain her sense of identity and independence could, as Johanna Alberti noted about other independent women writing during the interwar years, lead her «to place the blame for her sense of frustration on the continued submissiveness of other women» (Alberti, 1994: 177), and her travels give her ample opportunity to compare the strength of women's voices around the world:

> To come, a woman alone, from California to Japan has the effect of a heavy fall. In California women, though not – as I think- essentially independent, are socially precocious. In Japan they are trash (Benson, 1932: 33).

Similar observations, tending towards hasty generalisations, are also made in India. Here, for example, Benson comments on the complex layers of hierarchy in the Indian social system by likening the plight of cows (as mere females) to that of women in England before they got the vote. Like the women in England who were revered on pedestals but told to occupy a 'Place Apart', which was indeed so far Apart that «it was practically out of earshot» (Benson, 1932: 98),

> The cow in India finds her position equally lofty and tiresome. You practically never see a happy cow in India. Nobody east of Suez, of course, ever dares to say anything even remotely carnivorous to a cow, yet there is something in her luminously myopic eye, in her cheek grooved by a perpetual tear, that suggests that her life is empty of delight. […] She must know that she holds half of India's politics in the hollow of her hoof; like our mothers, she must have been constantly told how incalculable is her direct influence on her country's destiny – yet she is humiliated and unsatisfied (*Idem*, 98-99).

When Benson marries and begins her life in Mengtsz, in the Yunnan Province of China, she finds herself «settling down domestically for the first time in my life, going to market as though I were a housewife in Putney, S.W.» (*Idem*, 205). Despite her obvious admiration for the land and its people, Benson is beset by a terrible loneliness in her domestic life. Her geographic isolation is compounded by the emotional isolation she experiences in the company of the missionaries or missionary wives, who cannot appreciate her personal ambitions as a woman or as a writer. Deprived of intellectual conversation and encouragement, Benson, more than ever, has to face «the complex negotiations of the travelling migrant self who has to learn to accommodate a sense of not belonging with a search for belonging» (Leon, 2009: 4).

In *Worlds Within Worlds*, published in 1928, this transformation is poignantly documented. In the Preface, subtitled 'Written in a Bad Temper', Benson's bitterness and frustration at what she has lost is voiced without restraint:

> When I was young, I travelled by mistake, but now I do it on purpose. I go about the world now with three real brass-studded wardrobe trunks instead of two shabby suitcases, with real letters of introduction and letters of credit instead of precarious samples of my intellectual wares, with a real helpful husband instead of in dangerous loneliness (Benson, 1928: 1).

She continues in this tone with a damning indictment of empire-builders, with their «old heads» fitted on «young shoulders» – «shoulders that ought to have been too busy squaring up to adventures ever to allow the heads to acquire that elderly habit of wagging» (*Idem*, 3). Ironically, she finds that the «further away from the Strand you go, the more your mind shrinks» (*Idem*, 1). She is, she admits, «a melancholy illustration of my own contention, since it is a fact that Life Between the Lone Horizons has left me stiff with unreasonable prejudices» (*Idem*,

5). She finds herself living in a gross parody of the England she left behind; among the «pioneers and far-away people» who insist that Home «must remain Home still,» (*Idem*, 5). The freedom and independence she sought abroad has proved an illusion, she cannot remain, to use Adorno's phrase, uncritically «at home in [her] own home»[8], and she directs her frustration at everything around her:

> I am perhaps soured by the discovery that the voice of Nature the All-Mother can be more satisfactorily heard in South Kensington than in China. Nature has no more voice in China than has any other female (Benson, 1928: 6).

The Chinese may be guilty of smothering many of Mother Nature's forms of expression with their 'hatchets and bird snares' but the true culprits and engineers of Benson's unhappiness are her fellow expatriates:

> But even if Nature possessed a voice – even if the Creator had a message for the romantic solitary, it is my belief that such voices are always drowned in every solitude by the clamour of the Only Neighbour. For there always is an Only Neighbour (*Idem*, 6).

Benson recognises her state of exile but refuses to belong to what she sees as the dishonesty of the people she must share it with; «Why must exiles conspire to whitewash the humiliating fact of their exile?» (*Idem*, 7). These people whose society she is forced to endure are sad tourists, and

> the tourist in his purest form is never seen on land. There are no corners to sit in at sea, and man, deprived of his corner, becomes a tourist and no man. Man at sea, forced out of his corner like a hermit crab forced out of his shell, has, added to him, some intenser quality, a sort of spiritual armour of grotesquerie ten sizes too large for him, which makes him parody his land personality (Benson, 1928: 13).

Damning though this description of her fellow expatriates may be, Benson in their company, is also quite literally 'at sea', but it seems to be precisely this position of exile that hones her eye and her pen for a more mature appreciation of the humour and beauty in the world around her.

Failure of intellectual communication

«'Authenticity'», according to Clare McCotter, «is not simply determined by the visual; tourism takes place in a polysensual world.» (McCotter, 2007: 498).

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[8] «It is part of morality not to be at home in one's own home» Theodor Adorno cited in Said, Edward (1992), «Reflections on Exile,» in Ferguson, Russell, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, MIT Press, 357.

The truth of McCotter's observation is clearly borne out by Benson's particular attempts to authenticate her experiences in the unstable spaces of the contact zone, which are frequently located in interpersonal relations, where her natural empathy for the unvoiced and the unseen translated the gestures, words or acts of the Other as expressions of a human mentality, and not as objects to be manipulated at will. In her travel writing, Benson, as Meredith Bedell observes, «returns over and over again to incidents that suggest the failure of intellectual communication», while, «the very success of her imagery nurtures the sympathetic communication between individuals that she found so often lacking» (Bedell, 1983: 120).

Worlds Within Worlds starts in anger but moves through moods of pathos, loneliness, and frustration, until finally arriving at a state of mature understanding and humility which is lacking in the earlier volume of her travels. Benson's sense of exile has never been more acute – she has no children of her own, but has lost a dog she cherished as a child, and has now been sent with her husband to Northern China, where she must make her home among the other displaced peoples on the Korean and Russian border. Benson's identification with the underdog, those who have little or no power to affect change among the ruling elite, is blatant in *Worlds Within Worlds*. To the suppressed she lends her voice; not by describing the plight of nations, of peoples, but instead by bringing to life fleeting moments of contact with ordinary people, which, at some level, affect her personally, and from which she endeavours to construct a space for intellectual communication, the failure of which she felt keenly in the actual contact zone. Moments such as these reveal Benson's more highly developed sensitivity to the complex workings of race, class and gender: in the sketch entitled 'Nei-San', for example, she describes a moment in a Japanese inn, in northern Korea, which illustrates the ambiguities inherent to any positioning of the Self and the Other in spaces where opposing discourses of power meet and compete.

The sketch begins with an apparent re-affirmation of Benson's modern Western woman's disdain for the Japanese women's acceptance of their subordinate place in society:

> They walked on broad, flat, two-toed feet. The hunched obi and the modestly turned-in feet give a woman a look of confessed inferiority, as though she lived under a sun to which she could never raise her eyes (Benson, 1928, 149).

This position, though, is soon reversed; there is a subversion of the Imperial subject's notion of Self, which allows the author to see the comic value of her own foreignness in the gaze of the young servant girl, Nei-San:

> We seemed to her a couple of large jokes and she laughed at us so much that I began to be conscious of the various points of us – seen as jokes; […] We knew very well we were out of place – we must be content to amuse, content to be clumsy louts in fairyland (Benson, 1928: 150).

The Western visitors are entirely at the mercy of this Japanese woman as she prepares them for their bath; she gestures and laughs at their «senseless modesty» (*Idem*, 152), until she is interrupted in her merriment to attend to a Japanese man. The author notes the change in the dynamics of power in this social encounter and recognises her own irrelevance in the structure of the local hierarchies of gender, race, empire and nationhood:

> She was changed entirely before him; she touched the mat with her forehead; there was no dominancy left in her and no mockery; she was a slave with a cold obedient face. That little knock-kneed man with his narrow puffed eyes behind thick glasses, his prominent gold-edged teeth, his cropped round head, his slouching shuffle and his Olympian manner – he and his like commandeered the world she knew and were never funny. As for us, we had no like, we came from a world that didn't exist; our halting tongues knew no commands – and so we were slaves – we were contemptible and funny (*Idem*, 154-155).

The fact that this Japanese man is 'never funny', despite the sinister theatricality of Benson's description, is, of course, the point of this essay; in this world, he commands, and Benson and her like must accept that in this borderland it is they, and not he, who are contemptible.

If previously, Benson had described the Japanese woman as 'trash', here she fosters an understanding of the fragile complexity of local and global power structures, turning a wiser, and gentler, eye on Nei-San to illustrate her acceptance of the vagaries of human behaviour and the inherent contradictions of the Self/Other dichotomy. She accepts the failure of intellectual communication in this contact with the Other but continues to privilege the possibility of some more instinctive form of communication based on a shared emotional response to a situation beyond the restrictions of any artificial social boundaries. It is from this space that Benson draws her strength; it is here that she finds her centre. A later sketch in the same volume entitled, 'The Barber's Wife', illustrates Benson's belief in the potential for a humanist communication, which would break the cycle of the dehumanizing attitudes and interaction patterns she saw around her. At the beginning of the sketch she admits the effects of the loneliness she suffers in Manchuria; «Living entrenched as I did in a high-walled compound, with only puppies within and only Japanese without, I lived removed from senses» (Benson, 1928: 187). She has transferred all her affections to her puppies and is unhappy about being asked to give one of the bitch puppies to the Japanese barber for breeding purposes, offended that her «spoilt, fantastic, uninhibited puppies should be thought of as simple, puppy-producing machines» (*Idem*, 187). She hands over the puppy to the barber's wife but continues to fantasize a prosaic fate for her lost child/puppy , imagining her unloved in her new home, until she is told by her Korean cook that the puppy has died. Benson finds the barber's wife in tears, and the cook, acting as translator, «as if he were still needed to interpret her meaning»

(*Idem*, 188), explains unsympathetically that she is crying because, just like Benson, she has no child of her own. The women understand each other completely; the ineffable tragedy of loss is communicated briefly and silently. The moment of contact is ended and sealed by Benson handing her a bunch of sweet peas, «the only comment I could think of» (*Idem*, 190), and the barber's wife walking away with a bow. The final words of the sketch invite the reader to recognise the universal potential of that passing moment, making «visible a politics that links human suffering with a project of possibility» (Giroux, 1992):

> It was as though a ghost of lovely and sorry unreason had shimmered itself into two, and the two halves walked away from each other in the form of an English female novelist and a respectable Japanese tradesman's wife (*Idem*, 190).

'The Exile's Reward'

«Exile», as Christine Brooke – Rose has said, «is an immense force for liberation, for extra distance, for automatically developing contrasting structures in one's head, not just syntactic and lexical but social and psychological; it is, in other words, undoubtedly a leaping forth. But there is a price to pay.» (Brooke--Rose, 1998: 20). The price paid by Stella Benson was the loss of intellectual conversation and the periods of acute loneliness she suffered in remote Chinese outposts, but the rewards of exile were made manifest in the creative force of her writing wherein she found a room of her own, forging a narrative of universal knowledge, imagination and human communication in the spaces in between.

Benson's essence and her particular eccentricity mapped her path along ex-centric itineraries, each step taking her further from familiar society but closer to her true centre. Like Storm Jameson, who confessed in her autobiography, *Journey from the North*, that, «I doubt whether I shall ever know what has forced me to live as if the one unbearable fate were to be settled anywhere.» (Jameson, 1984: 228), Benson admitted that she too sometimes could not understand her own restlessness. In an entry in her diary describing her first meeting with Virginia Woolf, Benson notes a «curious serenity behind [Woolf's] anxiousness, somehow – the serenity of great understanding», but also remarks upon the differences in their physical approach to life:

> Of course she leads a physically easy life more than I do – she is more nervously fragile – she doesn't challenge physical difficulties as something drives me on to challenge them. It must be a great ease to leave go and suddenly think – well, I'm not strong enough to do that – I can't go down to Hoxton, I'm too tired – I can't go back to Shaemus in China, I'm too ill (*apud* Grant, 1987: 217).

Benson's, perhaps foolhardy, urge to push herself to her physical limits, to follow the path less travelled, undoubtedly led to her early death at the age of

forty one, but was also a manifestation of her strength of character and her determination to stand alone, exposing herself fully, without protection, to everything life had to offer.

Benson's state of exile may have been largely self-conceived, engendered by an unwillingness to bow to physical, social and emotional constraints, but her travel sketches do not escape from the manifestations of nostalgia, which, as Caren Kaplan observed, «participate in Euro-American constructions of exile: nostalgia for the past; for a home; for a 'mother-tongue'; for the particulars that signify the experience of the familiar once it has been lost.» (Kaplan, 1996: 33). Such nostalgia, Kaplan continues, «is rooted in the notion that it is 'natural' to be at 'home' and that separation from that location can never be assuaged by anything but return» (*Ibidem*).

Benson's nostalgia for 'home' is sometimes powerful; «Oh, to be part of things again, no more to be mere audience."(Benson, 1928: 257). But, once located in the longed for 'home', something compels Benson to again leave for the exile of China, although she knows the isolation and unhappiness that awaits her there, and is aware that her fragile health would have given her the perfect (feminine) excuse to stay in England. In this, she seems to join the ranks of the modernist writers, who Kaplan suggested conflated exile and expatriation in a way that, «distance has come to be privileged as the best perspective on a subject under scrutiny and in the related discourse of aesthetic gain through exile», because «when detachment is the precondition for creativity, then disaffection or alienation as states of mind becomes a rite of passage for the 'serious' modern artist or writer» (Kaplan, 1996: 36).

Stella Benson's version of exile has much in common with this 'model of aesthetic gain through exile'. In a letter to her husband explaining the terms on which their married life would resume once she returned to him in China, Benson writes, «I insist on being a writer first and a wife second: a man artist would insist and I insist…» (*apud* Bedell, 1983: 12). *The Little World* and *Worlds Within Worlds,* are further testimony to Benson's belief in her work as a writer. Forsaking the 'original' home, Benson, as Trinh Minh-ha observes about other writers in exile, finds that «the true home is to be found not in houses, but in writing» (Trinh Minh-ha, 1994: 16).

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