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ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SELF: WOMEN'S TRAVEL EXPERIENCE  
IN ELIZABETH GILBERT'S *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*  
AND CHERYL STRAYED'S *WILD*

**Abstract.** This article examines representations of women's travel experience in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2007) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild. A Journey from Lost to Found* (2012). Both authors rely on and, at the same time, subvert generic conventions of masculine and feminine traveling while creating their narrative personas. Alluding to pre-modern cultural meanings of travel and adopting the roles of spiritual pilgrims, the authors renounce their former lives, examine their past mistakes, undergo a transformation and finally regain control of their lives. Paradoxically, though going on a journey is a prerequisite for self-redemption, travel is no longer represented in these texts as an encounter and confrontation with the outer world but rather as a solipsistic practice.

**Keywords:** women's travel; spiritual pilgrimage; travel writing; generic conventions; self-help memoirs; Elizabeth Gilbert; Cheryl Strayed.

The way women authors write about their journeys at the beginning of the twenty-first century is influenced not only by generic conventions but also by prevalent social and cultural concerns. While contemporary travel books continue to be shaped by the Romantic legacy of sensibility, which celebrates “the individual as a wandering free spirit on a self-quest, whose writing is ‘authentic’, spontaneous and confessional”, their authors move away from the interest in exploration of the Other toward giving “an account of a journey as a metaphor of, and solution to, some kind of identity crisis” (Mulligan 333). Unlike their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors, contemporary women travelers seem to be less interested in exploration of foreign cultures and more

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in exploration of their own selves. Resting the appeal of a travel book almost solely on the narrative persona may prove a risky strategy as it only works well when the author, to put it bluntly, “possess[es] a brain worth exploring; some philosophy of life ... and the courage to proclaim it and put it to the test” (Douglas qtd. in Fussell 204). If the narrative persona fails to meet these conditions, the resulting book is neither a satisfying travelogue nor an engaging account of self-quest. Bearing these reservations in mind, the present paper looks at two bestselling memoirs by women, Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2007) and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild. A Journey from Lost to Found* (2012), with a view to analyzing travel experiences recorded in them. I propose to read both books as accounts of pilgrimages, which differ in purpose and form, but in both of which journeys are used as means of personal transformation. I will also be interested in ascertaining to what extent the authors rely on and, at the same time, subvert generic conventions of masculine and feminine travel while creating their narrative personas.

*Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild* represent a new, emerging mode of “redemption narratives” or “self-help memoirs” that came into prominence on the publishing market at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Leigh Gilmore defines this subgenre of life writing as “the American neoconfessional”, to differentiate it from earlier confessional narratives, written in the 1990’s, that “identified the systemic nature of disenfranchisement, unmasked middle-class pieties about privacy and sexual violence, linked suffering and violence to poverty and state indifference” (658). In contrast, the American neoconfessional narrative is deprived of such a wider social and political context as it locates “the cause, experience, and end of suffering within the framework of the individual” (659). Consequently, in such narratives it is the individual alone—and not other people or institutions—who is responsible for his or her own redemption (660).

In *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild* the rationale for travel is to find solutions to individual crises and regain control of one’s life. Both Gilbert and Strayed treat their journeys as a form of self-imposed therapy to battle depression, recover from divorce and other traumatic experiences. They feel “lost” and compelled to “search for everything”, and therefore plan the journeys that will help them move on with their lives, resorting—consciously or subconsciously—to an archetype of pilgrimage. The journeys are motivated by a commitment to redeem and transform their lives as a result of contact with something beyond the human world—be it God or nature.

Similarly to a rite of passage, a pilgrimage begins with a stage of separation, leaving one's ordinary life and daily occupations, followed by the liminal stage, when the pilgrim experiences difficulties and eventually undergoes spiritual transformation. Finally, a pilgrim returns home and is reintegrated into the community. Gilbert's stay in the ashram in India in *Eat, Pray, Love* corresponds to the liminal phase of the quest, in which pilgrims battle metaphorical demons (Goodnow and Bloom 15). In Gilbert's account, those "residual demons", as she refers to them, take the form of unpleasant memories of her past mistakes and failed relationships (Gilbert 155). The author metaphorically refers to these struggles as an internal battle between "the heart" and "the mind": when the heart eventually wins over the controlling mind, the process of healing can begin. Gilbert tries hard to convince her readers that both her anguish and the obstacles she encounters on the way to spiritual development are real and demand plenty of effort and courage to overcome. However, the difficulties she dwells on at length amount in fact to nothing more than the feelings of boredom, frustration, and occasional anger.

As Gilmore critically observes, the account of suffering in neoconfessional narratives sometimes seems exaggerated because their authors have received "their hard knocks while standing fully in the social and psychic space of white privilege" (665). Indeed, Gilbert's financial status, race and social position make her travel experience easy and pleasurable. She can afford to tour the world because her prospective book has been purchased by a publisher in advance. She has been admitted to the ashram because she has already met the Guru and studied with her. She gets on well with other seekers as they share a similar worldview and system of values. Needless to say, the book promoted as "an Everywoman's guide to whole, empowered living" (Sanders and Barnes-Brown) offers solutions that are unavailable to the majority of Western women, let alone those living in developing parts of the world.

The distinction between a traveler and a tourist is one of the staple elements of twentieth-century travel books. To ensure readers that the author belongs to the prestigious club of real travelers, he or she may resort to a wide variety of strategies (Holland and Huggan 2). It is noteworthy that Gilbert's narrative persona identifies herself neither with travelers nor with tourists, downplaying her own skills as the former and satirizing the yearnings of the latter. Posing as a spiritual pilgrim, Gilbert feels superior to an ordinary tourist because she is able to renounce the pleasures of sightseeing for a higher, spiritual purpose. This is manifested, for example, in her decision to prolong her stay at the ashram rather than go on a tour of India.

However, the unwillingness to leave one's comfort zone and encounter the Other means that, paradoxically, there is not much real travel in a book about one woman's travels. For that reason, many critics find Gilbert's account of spiritual transformation unconvincing (Beck, Crispin, Egan). In a way, all goes too smoothly and ends too well. By the end of her six-week stay at the ashram, Gilbert has managed to get rid of negative thoughts as well as a sense of guilt over her failed marriage, has mastered meditation and learned how to pray effectively. A restless, "monkey-mind" young woman, obsessed with her inability to meditate properly, has been transformed into a more relaxed and self-confident person, someone who can selflessly pray to God on behalf of other pilgrims. It is precisely at such a moment that she suddenly feels "transported through the portal of the universe and taken to the center of God's palm" (208). This blissful, mystical, out-of-body experience becomes the climax of her spiritual pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a clash between the gravity of the book's main theme—a spiritual search for God—and the chick-lit narrative persona—talkative, cheeky, and rather superficial—Gilbert has adopted to narrate her experiences. While the author's exuberant personality and the book's light-hearted tone certainly helped to make *Eat, Pray, Love* a bestseller, her voice does not sound convincing enough when she ventures into revelations about her mystic encounters with the divine. Jennifer Egan points out that the book lacks "a ballast of gravitas or grit", so, as a result, it ventures "into the realm of magical thinking: nothing Gilbert touches seems to turn out wrong; not a single wish goes unfulfilled. What's missing are the textures and confusion and unfinished business of real life, as if Gilbert were pushing these out of sight so as not to come off as dull or equivocal or downbeat" (Egan). The chick-lit conventions demand also romance and a happy ending, so on Bali, where Gilbert goes after India, she not only successfully reconciles pleasure with devotion, as she has planned, but also finds new love.

Cheryl Strayed in *Wild* does not shrink from the "confusion and unfinished business of real life" that Egan finds missing from Gilbert's book. Part One of the book paints a bleak picture of a young woman who struggles with depression, grief and anger after her mother's death. Strayed blames herself for the subsequent dissolution of family ties, for the collapse of her marriage, and for her dysfunctional relationship with a man that led to heroin addiction, an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion. Trying to find a proper image for all the psychological damage she has experienced in the aftermath of her mother's death, the author sees herself as "the woman with the hole in her heart"

(Strayed 38). Metaphorical chapter titles like “The Ten Thousand Things” and “Splitting” also express her emotional and psychological damage. A walk in the wilderness has thus been undertaken, as the author openly admits, in order “to save myself” (Strayed 5).

The wilderness—as both an abstract idea and an actual physical space—has played an important role in religious ideas and rituals across the world. “People go to the wilderness to meet themselves, their demons, and their gods; it is simultaneously framed as refuge, paradise, waste land and hell; it is where you can be led astray, into idolatry or death, or where you can discover a new subjectivity, where you may find the deepest wisdom or great ignorance” (Feldt 1). Though Strayed’s choice of the wilderness as a space for spiritual renewal makes perfect sense in the context of Western and especially American culture, it may also be seen as transgressive. In American literature, a heroic wilderness quest—which demands physical courage, stamina and survival skills—is a predominantly male venture. Few women, however, “view the quest motif—with its emphasis on individual achievement, the wilderness journey, and separation from community—as a pattern for their lives” (Groover 13). In both fiction and non-fiction, women explore instead, as Groover puts it, “the wilderness within,” and their spiritual quests involve going on an internal, spiritual voyage, which is most often grounded in a community.

Unfortunately, Strayed does not feel a part of any community where she could find encouragement and support for the re-assessment of her life. In the four years that pass between her mother’s death and her wilderness journey, she lives a solitary, erratic life, constantly moving between cities, odd jobs and fleeting relationships. Her self-chosen, post-divorce surname Strayed aptly sums up this profound sense of psychological and physical alienation and orphanhood. Another reason for relying on the masculine, rather than feminine, pattern of spiritual travel lies in her treatment of travel as *travail*, that is, ‘travel’ as suffering, a test or an ordeal (Leed 6). In the distant past, travels were rarely made for pleasure, as it was believed that such experiences “strip[ed], reduce[d] and waste[d] the passenger”, eventually transforming him into a wiser person (Leed 6).

Likewise, according to the medieval concept of expiation, pilgrims who set out on a journey demonstrated their willingness “to endure austerity, hardship, and suffering associated with their penitential undertaking” (Purkis 75). Strayed’s intuitive conviction that only a challenging trip can redeem her is thus based on the archetype of a solitary penitential pilgrimage. According to a medieval sermon, “[t]he pilgrim’s way is for the righteous: lack of vices, mortification

of the body, restitution of virtues, remission of sins, penitence of the penitent” (Purkis 75). In the initial parts of the book Strayed reconsiders her numerous mistakes, recounts the incidents when she has failed both herself and others, thus casting herself as a sinner. Though her journey lacks religious motivation and does not lead towards God, its ultimate purpose is akin to that of a religious pilgrimage, as she seeks redemption and a new life. The simplest way of making a pilgrimage is walking, an activity that separates the pilgrim from familiar places and everyday occupations and engages both the body and the mind. Moreover, Strayed believes that only a difficult, challenging trip has the power to work as shock therapy and transform her, “[n]ot into a different person, but back to the person I used to be—strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good” (Strayed 57).

When Strayed decides to walk the PCT alone, she is well aware of gender-related stereotypes pertaining to being “a solo wilderness trekker” (Strayed 5). Thus, her strategies for dealing with this problem include, first, demonstrating how poorly she fits the ideal of a “perfect” hiker and, next, presenting her success as proof that anyone determined enough can survive a lone trek on the PCT. When she sets out, she knows nothing about the wilderness and next to nothing about backpacking or trekking in the mountains, feeling like a “wilderness fraud” among the more experienced hikers. Yet, for all her shortcomings, she does possess one feature in common with male adventurers: toughness. Recognizing this quality, an experienced fellow hiker declares that being tough “is what matters the most out here” (Strayed 89). Indeed, the validity of this statement is confirmed by the very fact of Strayed’s completing the walk and the book that resulted from it; in spite of all the difficulties and dangers, the author has managed to cover the distance of 11,000 miles, hiking from Mojave, California, to the Bridge of Gods in Oregon.

The narrative persona Strayed constructs in the book is neither a heroic adventurer modelled on the indomitable Victorian lady traveler nor a “Hapless Hiker”—a trail moniker she resists as denigrating (Strayed 237). She presents herself as both tough and vulnerable, oscillating between insecurity and assertiveness, or to use her words, between feeling like “a big, fat idiot” and a “hard-ass motherfucking Amazonian queen” (Strayed 234). In *Wild*, Strayed admits openly to her many fears: she is afraid of losing the way, of meeting wild animals, of experiencing extreme weather conditions, and, last but not least, of being raped. After being accosted by an armed stranger, she comments frankly on her vulnerability: “no matter how tough or strong or brave I’d been, how comfortable I’d come to be with being alone, I’d also been

lucky, and ... if my luck ran out now, it would be as if nothing before it had ever existed, that this one evening would annihilate all those brave days” (Strayed 287). By including this traumatic incident in her narrative, Strayed breaks the silence that usually surrounds the question of women’s personal safety while traveling. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel accounts by women, fear of rape is never openly expressed as even alluding to it would affect the respectability of the author. However, there are occasionally indirect hints or remarks that suggest threats of a sexual assault, sometimes followed by a silence or a chronological gap in the journal, as Mary Morris notes in her essay on her personal experiences as a world traveler (31). Speaking from experience, Morris admits that “rape and abduction are realities for women traveling that make us wander differently than men” (Morris 31). For that reason, some women have traveled disguised as men, or have lied about being married to appear protected by an imaginary husband. In fact, Strayed uses this last strategy once, assuring a stranger that her husband is waiting for her along the road.

Life on the trail teaches material simplicity, because everything a hiker needs has to be carried in the backpack. The daily choices are likewise simple: proceed in spite of exhaustion and obstacles or give in and go back to civilization. “That my complicated life could be made so simple was astounding. It had begun to occur to me that perhaps it was okay that I hadn’t spent my days on the trail pondering the sorrows of my life, that perhaps by being forced to focus on my physical suffering some of my emotional suffering would fade away” (Strayed 92). Strayed discovers a parallel between the material burden she is able to carry—her enormous backpack—and the emotional baggage of grief and anger. Just as the backpack becomes lighter after an experienced hiker helps her leave some equipment behind, her emotional burdens are also shed. As she walks in silence, her mind, deprived of stimuli, explores its own internal resources, bringing back commercial jingles, songs and pieces of melodies. The songs playing in her head free her mind from obsessive mourning and dwelling on past mistakes. Coming to terms with her mother’s death involves giving vent to anger, directed against both her dead mother and herself, then moving beyond it, towards acceptance of death, forgiveness and self-understanding. The new self she finds on the trail is the one she has sought—a woman who is psychologically and physically strong and at peace with herself. “I felt fierce and humble and gathered up inside, like I was safe in this world, too” (Strayed 233).

Walking in *Wild* is not a pleasant wilderness ramble but a feat of endurance. Strayed's shedding her emotional burdens is inseparable from what may be described, in religious terms, as mortification of the body. Before the trip, Strayed presents herself as unable to resist the cravings of her body, which leads to risky behaviors, summed up briefly as "dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men" (5). Inability to control her life parallels inability to control her desire for pleasure and escape—however fleeting—from mental anguish. In contrast, on the trail, she remains in control, constantly testing the limits of her endurance. At times, Strayed's narrative almost borders on masochism with its obsessive catalogue of damage to her body: painful muscles, black toes, lost nails, bleeding shoulders, not to mention bruises, scratches and wounds.

By focusing on physical hardships and endured pain, Strayed emphasizes the penitential character of her journey. Bearing her burdens and afflictions patiently is parallel to an ascetic practice in which the body needs to be subdued on the way to enlightenment. The book makes it clear that hiking the PCT demands a mental toughness more than a physical one. No matter how exhausted, sweaty, dirty and bruised she may become, she remains determined to complete her journey.

At the same time, Strayed gives such a detailed account of the performance of the female body in the wilderness because it brings her a profound sense of accomplishment. "I'd made it through miles of desert, ascended and descended countless mountains, and gone days without seeing another person. I'd worn my feet raw, chafed my body until it bled, and carried not only myself over miles of rugged wilderness, but also a pack that weighed more than half of what I did. And I'd done it alone" (Strayed 81). The trail takes its toll, but Strayed accepts the hardships as part of the road therapy; the more her body suffers, the more her mind is liberated from grief and the sense of guilt over her past mistakes. According to Koven, *Wild* represents a new subgenre of life narratives in which "women explore their physical as well as their emotional power.... Their strength lies in the fact that they never stray far from the body" (175–76). The message "you are tougher than you think" points to the trope of female empowerment, which helps readers to identify with the author.

Clearly targeted at a female audience, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild* quickly climbed to top positions on the New York Times bestsellers' list, their authors elevated to the status of post-millennial female icons. Both books were selected by Oprah Winfrey for her book club, and both were adapted into Hollywood movies, starring Julia Roberts as Elizabeth Gilbert and Reese

Witherspoon as Cheryl Strayed. It seems the books resonated with readers because they offered an attractive combination of travel account with self-help memoir. Additionally, Gilbert relied on recognizable chick-lit conventions, casting her narrative persona as high-achieving, professionally successful but unhappily married upper-middle class heroine. Since a typical chick-lit protagonist is flawed, which is meant to elicit readers' compassion and identification at the same time, she presented herself as unable to follow the prescribed gender roles of a career woman and a mother simultaneously (Ferris and Young 4). Though Strayed's narrative persona in *Wild* is much less glamorous—a diffident, working-class girl who dreams about becoming a writer—it can be assumed that both books appeal to a similar audience, and some reviewers have commented on the affinities between them (Greenwood, Crispin).

However, despite marked thematic and some generic similarities, the books advocate quite dissimilar views on redeeming oneself, with their authors representing the opposite ends of a continuum. While Gilbert's approach to self-help has been criticized as materialistic, narcissistic, self-indulgent and based on a shallow New Age spirituality (Beck; Sanders and Barnes-Brown), Strayed's way to self-redemption has been praised as sensible and empowering (Greenwood, Koven). As Greenwood points out, "*Eat, Pray, Love's* undertone is that you deserve to be happy; *Wild's* is that you have to earn it." Strayed earns her redemption—as well as readers' respect—through determination and self-sacrifice. The pages of her memoir provide ample evidence that she has "guts"—in the best tradition of Hemingway characters—but, simultaneously, that she is also not afraid to admit to her vulnerability and fear.

In contrast, Elizabeth Gilbert's philosophy of life is probably best summed up by her claim that "God dwells within you, as you" (Gilbert 201). To find the divine, Gilbert explains, you do not have to make any dramatic changes of "your natural character"; you just need to renounce your sense of division from God (201). Having found God in India, Gilbert is far from becoming a devoted Hindu, and the rest of her book shows no evidence that her stay at the ashram was indeed a meaningful spiritual experience that will continue to influence her life.

Though both authors depend on travel as a means of spiritual regeneration, classifying their books as travel writing is quite problematic. According to Jessa Crispin, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild* represent the subgenre of "faux travel writing" because "the beautiful locale becomes [only] the backdrop of the real action, which is interior psychodrama" (Crispin). In her descriptions of travel experiences in Italy, India and Indonesia, Gilbert hardly ever goes beyond

stereotypes. In Italy she focuses on the sensual pleasures of eating and flirting with handsome men, who tutor her in Italian. Though she rents a flat in Rome, the city's rich past and its monuments are virtually absent from the pages of the book. In India she renounces travel altogether for a higher purpose. On Bali she lives in a lovely bungalow surrounded by a lush garden and befriends quirky locals who offer her spiritual guidance and practical life advice. In all these places, Gilbert stays in comfortable and safe environments, which offer all the pleasures of the foreign or the exotic without any inconveniences. As a result, her travels do not differ appreciably from tourist experiences.

The charge of "faux-travel" at first seem less just in the case of *Wild* since the author provides her readers with many details that authenticate the travelling experience: distances covered, places visited, weather conditions survived. However, for all these fascinating and occasionally harrowing details, Strayed is almost as solipsistic in her memoir as Gilbert. Her observations of wildlife on the trail do not go beyond an urban dweller's response, and she most frequently reacts to the unknown not with curiosity but with surprise or fear. Though geographical settings are crucial for Strayed's self-creation, being on the PCT does not lead the author into any greater awareness of nature or ecology. Nor does her walk provoke any emotional response that would bridge the gap between the self and the outside world, as happens in nature writing. The wilderness functions in *Wild* as a blurred background of mountains, deserts and forests, in short, as a series of obstacles to overcome. Strayed is far from appreciating it or recognizing the importance of the existence of the non-human world in its own right. Having read the book, the reader—just like the author—learns next to nothing about the PCT's natural history or ecology, since the memoir lacks the informed knowledge and complexity of the best American nature writing.

The journeys described in *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild* are given importance as personal projects invested with a sense of higher purpose, but their aim is neither adventure nor discovery. Alluding to pre-modern cultural meanings of travel and adopting the role of pilgrims, the authors renounce their former lives, agree to follow certain daily routines, examine their minds and hearts, and finally regain control of their lives, making peace with the past. The books' departure from the generic conventions of travel writing is manifested in the way travel is conceived primarily as self-therapy, not as a liberating experience whereby a self may be transformed through encounters and confrontations with Otherness. In a collection of essays on the modern literature of travel, published in 1992, Michael Kowalewski recognized the hazard of such a narcissistic approach,

asserting that “turning a travel account into merely a personal diary, a kind of therapist’s couch ... imperils a fully realized travel book” (9). Unfortunately, neither Gilbert nor Strayed has managed to avoid this hazard. As a result, while their memoirs give readers insight into the concerns, expectations, anxieties and spiritual yearnings of young American women at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they ultimately fail as travel books.

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SPOTKANIE ZE SOBĄ. KOBIECE DOŚWIADCZENIE PODRÓŻY W *JEDZ, MÓDL SIĘ, KOCHAJ* ELIZABETH GILBERT I *DZIKIEJ DRODZE* CHERYL STRAYED

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje przedstawienia kobiecego doświadczenia podróży we wspomnieniach Elizabeth Gilbert *Jedz, módl się, kochaj* (2007) oraz Cheryl Strayed *Dzika droga* (2012). Tworząc autorskie kreacje w tekście, Gilbert i Strayed sięgają zarówno do męskich jak i kobiecych wzorców podróżowania, a jednocześnie przełamują pewne schematy. W nawiązaniu do dawnego kulturowego znaczenia podróży jako testu czy próby, autorki przyjmują role duchowych pielgrzymów, wyrzekają się dotychczasowego życia, wyruszają w drogę by analizować popełnione błędy, przechodzą duchową transformację, by w końcu odzyskać kontrolę nad własnym życiem. Paradoksalnie, choć wyruszenie w podróż jest warunkiem koniecznym dla przemiany wewnętrznej, sama podróż, rozumiana jako spotkanie z Innym i jego kulturą, nie ma dla autorek pierwszorzędного znaczenia. Natomiast bycie w drodze stwarza okazję do psychologicznego spotkania ze sobą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** podróże kobiet; pielgrzymka duchowa; literatura podróżnicza; konwencje gatunkowe; poradnik; Elizabeth Gilbert; Cheryl Strayed.