

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Walking the River: Writers on the Banks

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Abstract: Rivers have played an important role, during the history of the humankind, as ways of transportation, sources of water, physical obstacles, places for settlements, borders. For this prominent role in everyday life, rivers also gained a consolidated symbolic value and entered the geographical imaginaries as protagonists. Literature mirrors this immaterial value of rivers, with numerous literary works focused on travels along rivers, in different geographical contexts all over the world. Each different means of transportation used to travel along a river creates a different perception of the fluvial environment. Using a literary geography approach, the essay analyses three contemporary literary accounts of authors who decided to walk following the course of a river: *Racconto del fiume Sangro* by Italian author Paolo Morelli (2013), *Maldifiume* by Italian writer Simona Baldanzi (2016), and *Walking the Nile* by British explorer and writer Levison Wood (2015). The three works share the same idea (walking alone along a river from the springs to the mouth) and the same temporal frame (all three literary accounts were written in the second decade of the current century). The research question focuses on the role that the river plays in shaping the identity of the walking experience and the perception of the territories that the river crosses.

Keywords: walking; literary geographies; travel literature; rivers; sense of place; walksapes.

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Walking the line (of a river): introduction

Walking has always been associated with the idea of freedom. When walking, we can direct our feet in any possible direction. The choice of the itinerary is part of the pleasure of walking and involves the idea of creating one's own path.

At the same time, however, the idea of following a line, a precise track, and the possibility of identifying a clear itinerary among the umpteen possible directions, are appealing thoughts. The act of choosing a precise line can take two different forms: following a previously established footpath created by other humans (or animals) or following a geographical element in the territory, such as a mountain ridge, a coastal line, or a river. Rivers have always attracted human societies, both in practical terms of settlement and in cultural and symbolic terms. This special relationship finds in literature a mirror of the emotional attachment to the geography of rivers (de Leeuw 2024).

In this paper, I take into consideration three literary accounts of authors who decided to walk following the course of a river: *Racconto del fiume Sangro* by Italian author Paolo Morelli (Morelli 2013), *Maldifiume* by Italian writer Simona Baldanzi (Baldanzi 2016), and *Walking the Nile* by British explorer and writer Levison Wood (Wood 2015). I have selected these three works for several reasons. The authors share a common premise – walking alone along a river from its source to its mouth – and frequently reflect on this specific choice of itinerary and mode of travel. The three texts also share a similar temporal framework, as all were written during the second decade of the twenty-first century.

I adopt a comparative perspective, considering two Italian authors (Morelli and Baldanzi) alongside one British author (Wood), in order to offer a broader understanding of the practice of 'river walking' across different literary traditions. This comparative approach is further reinforced by the diversity of geographical contexts: two rivers located in peninsular Italy and one in Africa. Such a comparison makes it possible to assess whether common features of river walking can be identified across markedly different environmental and cultural settings.

The research question focuses on the role that the river plays in shaping the identity of the walking experience and the perception of the territories that the river crosses. This paper aims to examine the specificities of walking along a river, considering both the geographical constraint imposed by following its course and the inspiration afforded by proximity to flowing water.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first, entitled 'Literary authors' fascination with rivers', provides a cultural contextualization of literary representations of rivers, reflecting a broader fascination with flowing water that has accompanied human history. Drawing on cultural geography as a theoretical framework, this section also introduces the three authors and their respective works.

The second section, 'Walking along a river', offers a textual analysis of the three works, presenting selected passages that illustrate how the authors conceptualize the act of walking along a river and how this practice shapes their perception of the experience. The third section, 'The "area of influence" of the river', examines a central issue in the cultural

geography of rivers: the definition of their boundaries. It explores questions such as where a river's presence is perceived and how far the limits of its perceivable presence, its 'breath', extends. The fourth section, *Cartographic Inspiration*, investigates the role of maps within the narratives and traces the emergence of a 'cartographic imagination' in the works of the three authors. The essay concludes with brief final remarks. This structure is designed to provide contextualization for the interpretation of the selected texts (Section 1), to illustrate their textual richness (Section 2), and to demonstrate the specific contribution that a geographically oriented reading can offer to their analysis (Sections 3 and 4). While literary river walks may be examined in relation to their relevance for participatory processes and political decision-making (Potter and Magner 2024), this essay concentrates on the authorial dimension, with particular emphasis on the authors' perception of the fluvial environment.

Literary authors' fascination with rivers

Throughout history, rivers have been more than mere geographical features: they are symbols of life, movement, and change. Rivers represent consolidated synonyms of flow in the collective geographical imaginaries. Their dynamic nature has fascinated humankind since the Classical Age. Heraclitus' fragment about the impossibility of bathing twice in the same river has become a frequently quoted expression to indicate the inexorable passing of time (and of waters): 'The flow of rivers has inspired poets and painters, philosophers and scientists, explorers and pilgrims' (Middleton 2012: XV). Paolo Morelli reformulates Heraclitus' concept in this way: 'The time to pass under the arches of the bypass and [the river] stretches out again, elongates like a spring, I'm constantly amazed by the way it changes with every step without ever truly changing' (Morelli 2013: 109).¹

At the same time, rivers have historically represented a privileged way to penetrate territories, to travel inland. In this way, they become 'doors' to enter a territory, keys to access the identity of a land. Throughout human history, rivers have incarnated the role of ways of transportation, of political borders, of physical obstacles, of water resources.² Human societies have always been under the 'spell' of rivers.

From this point of view, literature can provide an interesting perspective through which it is possible to investigate the relationships between human societies and rivers, at both a collective and an individual level. As the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan states:

Literature depicts human experience. Experience may be defined as the sum of means through which we know reality and construct a world ... From one viewpoint literature is a diagnostic index or evidence of culture; from another it is a creative force directing culture and enabling people to see their world in new ways. (Tuan 1976: 260)

For many writers, rivers have acted as both literal and metaphorical paths that guide their creative journeys. Rivers have inspired travels across territories, investigating the genius loci of the river basin. In the Italian literary context, a meaningful example is Gianni Celati's *Towards the river's mouth* (2018), a diary written during the author's journey (using mainly public

transportation, but sometimes even walking) to the mouth of the river Po, in Northern Italy.³ Books such as *Danube* by Claudio Magris (1989) offer a wonderful example of a mixed literary genre, suspended between the narrative impulse and the historical and cultural essay. Many journalists and writers have travelled along the courses of rivers. In the Italian context, for instance, one can mention Ermanno Rea's *Il Po si racconta* (*The Po talks about itself*), the narrative account of a voyage along the river Po (Rea 1990). Most of the authors usually travel by car or by public transportation. However, the three authors I have chosen walked along rivers, reflecting on the waters as a source of inspiration, serenity, and introspection.

Paolo Morelli's book, entitled *Racconto del fiume Sangro* (*Tale of the river Sangro*) (Morelli 2013), tells the story of a walk along the river Sangro, a 122-kilometre-long course of water running through the regions of Abruzzo and Molise, in central Italy. It is interesting to note that the book title plays with a subtle ambiguity, since the preposition 'del' in Italian could be interpreted in two ways: a tale by the river Sangro itself, and a tale about the river Sangro. Paolo Morelli (1951–) was born in Rome, where he currently lives. He is a film critic, journalist, screenwriter, author of texts for theatre and radio, and an expert in Chinese language and culture; he has published, among many other books, *Vademecum per perdersi in montagna* (*Vademecum for getting lost in the mountains*) (Morelli 2003), another work dedicated to the relationship with a geographical environment.

Simona Baldanzi's book is entitled *Maldifiume: Acqua, passi e genti d'Arno* (*River sickness: Water, steps and people of the Arno*) and tells the story of a walk along the river Arno, in Tuscany, made in 2015. The book's subtitle hierarchically lists the three main protagonists of the literary account: water, the act of walking, and the people encountered along the itinerary. Simona Baldanzi (1977–) is a writer; she was born in Florence and currently lives in the Apennine area of Mugello, in Tuscany. Among her many works, one can mention, for its value for a literary geography approach, her report of another walking experience: *Il Mugello è una trapunta di terra: A piedi da Barbiana a Monte Sole* (*Mugello is a quilt of earth: On foot from Barbiana to Monte Sole*) (Baldanzi 2014).

Levison Wood's *Walking the Nile* (Wood 2015) chronicles the astonishing nine-month walk that the author made between 2013 and 2014 from the springs to the mouth of the longest African river, for a total of more than 4,000 miles. Wood, born in Staffordshire in 1982, is an ex-Army officer who is now a full-time explorer and writer. He has accomplished, together with the walk along the Nile, other exploratory walks, such as the Himalayan range, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Caucasus mountain range. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London and of the Explorers Club in New York.

Walking along a river

The walking rhythm signals a different temporality in the relationship with the territories surrounding the river. Walking involves a close sensorial experience with the fluvial environment. These writers' walks along the course of a river offer not just a geographical experience but a profound exploration of the human condition, nature, and the art of writing itself. As Rebecca Solnit suggests: 'A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse

a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors on it as scholars and trackers and pilgrims do' (Solnit 2001: 104). If we choose to follow a path along a river, we implicitly accept the hypothesis that the river's itinerary through the land is 'the best way to traverse' its landscapes. From a geomorphological point of view, the river is the very creator of the physical skeleton of the landscapes (Brusa 1964). Thus, following its course, at least from a morphogenetic perspective, means being at the centre of a valley. The idea of being 'at the centre' can be often found in literary accounts of navigation of a river, especially when the journey is made on a canoe or a kayak, which give access to a very close and sensorial relationship with the water. This sort of 'fluvial illumination', for instance, can be found in Eddy L. Harris' literary account of the descent of the Mississippi river: 'What an abrupt change from yesterday! Today it was breezy but not violent. The water was calm. And I was feeling superb. The sun was shining and the air around me was very warm. I paddled long graceful strokes and moved swiftly out *to the center of the river*, catching the current and gliding smoothly downstream. Men working at the river's edge stopped to watch me and to wave. The whole world seemed to be waving and smiling and I was once more a very happy man' (Harris 1988: 90; italics added).

The use of rivers as 'paths' is a slightly different spatial experience from navigation. It follows the course of the river, but it is not within it. Walking along a river becomes a sort of constant search for the river itself.

Riverbanks are no longer used, in our times, as pathways for work-related activities. Once, the courses of the main rivers (such as the river Po) were accompanied by paths that were carefully maintained because they were used by humans and animals who pulled boats upstream using ropes. The so called *via alzaia* (towpath) on the river Po used to be, until the 1950s, an intensely trafficked path.

In modern times, the course of the river has become, in a sense, a 'handrail' for the walker: something to rely on as far as direction is concerned. The river's presence makes it a companion to the traveller that constantly orients one's movement.

As mentioned above, rivers have long been powerful metaphors in literature, representing the passage of time, the flow of life, and the cyclical nature of existence. The flow of waters within the riverbed can be compared to the flow of words in the narration. The river, by virtue of its perpetual flow, embodies the symbolic representation of an eternal movement, which immediately becomes, in the literary context, a *mise en abîme* of the very act of storytelling. There is a sort of mutual reinforcement between the act of walking and the act of narrating: '...and the Arno that flows and goes, and the water I touched, who knows where it already is. The stories slosh around in my head' (Baldanzi 2016: 47). Morelli openly supports the 'narrative power' of rivers: 'It was once said that a river tells a story. And when you think about it, there is nothing more similar to a river than a story; perhaps that's where the idea [for the book] came from' (Morelli 2013: 11). A similar image is provided by one of the most popular authors of literary works set near the river Po, Giovannino Guareschi (1908–1968): 'The stories of each village leap over the bank and the river carries them all: funny stories and melancholic ones, and it takes them away towards the great sea of the stories of the world.'

And, during the journey, it tells them to those who sit by the water's edge to listen to the river's chatter' (Guareschi 1991: 7).

The idea that walking along a river means to collect stories that are carried by its waters reflects the fact that following the path of a river involves meetings with the inhabitants of its territory, engaging with the 'fluvial populations', with the micro-societies that find in the territories around a river their preferred social space. Stories thus seem to be inscribed in a territory by its inhabitants, as the writer Lino Gabellone states in a short story contained in an anthology edited by Gianni Celati:

The humility of those who considered words as deposits left there by time in the places where they were born: countries, cities, villages, *riverbanks*. Those words, which did not walk, were waiting for the attentive ear, the rhythm of life, marked by the step and the breath, visible in the humid air, to awaken. (Gabellone 1992: 141; italics added)

It is important to note in this quote the direct references to the art of walking: if the words are not able to walk, it is the author-walker that can carry them towards the right rhythm, which is 'marked by step and breath' in the physicality of the action of movement.

Authors often walk along rivers not just to physically experience the landscape but also to tap into these symbolic meanings. In this sense, a writer's walk by a river also becomes a journey of self-discovery and reflection, through which both the river's territorial identity and the inner personality of the author are objects of investigation.

The fascination for the inexorability of a water flow becomes a metaphor for a challenge: to follow the course of the river from its origins to the river mouth. It is a way to accompany the existence of the river, from its spatial 'birth' to its spatial 'death' into another river or the sea.⁴ The very geomorphological structure of a watercourse, with its springs, its progressive dimensional growth, and its mouth, is a perfect analogy for the existential arc of life. The last words of the fluvial journey of *Danube* by Claudio Magris are memorable in this perspective: 'But the canal runs on, runs on, calmly and confidently into the sea, and it is no longer a canal, a limitation, a regulation, but a flowing outwards that opens and abandons itself to all the waters and oceans of the entire globe, and to the creatures living in their depths. Lord let my death – says a line of Marin's – be like the flowing of a river into the great sea' (Magris 1989: 401). Thus, the spring, for example, becomes an optimal territorial correlator of birth, and the flow also takes on the qualities of a narrative analogy:

The river, here where it begins, is a mystery just as we all are at the origin. The beginning is always a dark place, and perhaps seeking stories is like trying to move between shadows and appearances that constantly regenerate and flow like water. (Baldanzi 2016: 30)

Springs are the incarnation of a beginning. The fluidity of the movement of water is mirrored by the fluidity of the narration.

The continuity of the itinerary is provided by the connecting power of every drop of water, which will follow the same itinerary to reach the ‘conclusion’:

This was the Nile. More than four thousand miles to the north, the waters trickling through my fingers would meet the spectacular coast of the Mediterranean Sea. I was going to follow them, walking every step of the way. (Wood 2015: 8)

The movement of the river has an archaic power, almost like an enchantment. In the literary register, it easily leads to a poetic description of the fascination with the dynamism of the waters:

In fact, in the flowing water, there is never anything ugly, never an aesthetic mistake; it is always full of grace in the wave on a stone that looks like the horn of a gramophone, in the flying spray that comes back down, and even in the most common brook that spreads out after the jump in the opposite direction, almost as if it were going back up, without an apparent sense and without really knowing where to go. (Morelli 2013: 109)

The fascination with the movement of water helps the contemplation of the surrounding environment. Walking along a river is a continuous invitation to stop and rest.

The ‘area of influence’ of a river

As stated above, the idea of following a river along its course provides a clear guideline for the itinerary. The river, in this sense, can embody the attempt to find a common thread that links the land washed by its waters, bringing together a series of shared traits around its banks that, by the end of the journey, may outline possible affinities and subtle consistencies. From a historical perspective, then, the river can incarnate a role of territorial cohesion, both in a linear sense (through the development of its course) and in a spatial sense (through the recovery of administrative management at the level of the watershed). From this perspective, it is, of course, very different if the walk takes place along a ‘regional’ river (such as the river Arno, which has 98.4% of its river basin in the territory of Tuscany)⁵ or along an international river (such as the Nile, where the harsh geopolitical tensions in the area oblige Levison Wood to skip the portion of the course belonging to South Sudan). The relationship between the administrative partitions (at both a regional and national level) and the course of the river has a strong influence on the perception of unity along the walks.

The course of a river is linear but, of course, not necessarily straight. In walking along a river, one must take into consideration meanders, bends, turns, and curves. The direction of flow is clear, but the way to arrive to the river mouth is often unpredictable and unexpected. In this way, the river seems to show a proper personality. If we want to follow its course, we must adapt to its whimsical directional twists. The river can guide a path, but at the same time can disorient the walker, who is thus forced to trust the river. The concrete ‘thickness’ of the

environment makes progression a hard task, as Wood soon realizes in his walk along the river Nile:

The difficulty in following a river from a forest source is that it keeps going underground, or gets hidden by the vegetation, ferns, and thorn bushes that fill the jungle floor. Above us, the canopy was so thick that it was almost impossible to see the sky, and it seemed that we were walking in a perpetual twilight. On occasion, I could hear where the water trickled. It was this tiny trickle that would become the greatest river on Earth, the life's blood of civilisations that had risen and fallen since time immemorial. This elusive trickle gave life to six nations before it met the sea, but today it proved impossible to follow. (Wood 2015: 11)

On the other hand, the walker can follow his/her own personal choices and decide to introduce detours and deviations into the journey. How far can we go from the river we are following? If we decide not to answer with a number but with a qualitative measurement of a distance, we are allowed to follow more abstract and immaterial instincts. In doing so, we face proper geographical enigmas: how far does a river's identity stretch into the surrounding territories? How far does the river breathe into its hinterland? How orthogonal can a walk be from the river that inspires the walk's itinerary? The dilemma touches the core of the immaterial identity of a geographical element. It is the eternal opposition between the line and the doodle, between the vertical dimension of a riverbed and its horizontal expansion into the surrounding territories. Once again, it is possible to formulate a comparison between the natural environment of a river and its spiritual identity:

Its [the river's] narrow, linear form and its flow in just one direction provide an obvious spatial dimension to how we should describe and understand the physical, chemical, and biological properties of a river: horizontally from upstream to downstream. But a river is not just a channel. It is also an integral part of the countryside through which it flows, so a lateral dimension, to the surrounding landscape, is also appropriate. The links with the landscape, or riverscape as some would prefer, are innumerable. (Middleton 2012: 2)

It is interesting to note here that the 'ideal' landscape surrounding a river is conceived as exclusively rural. This could be read as one possible example of the persistent power of traditional geographical imaginaries.

How important is it to investigate the area around the river to grasp the river's identity? This dilemma accompanies the writer-walkers, and the choice of how to answer this question influences the style and the content of the literary accounts.

One of the most interesting issues in the study of the cultural geography of rivers is the investigation of the extent of the territorial area in which the river is perceived – that is, the ability of river cultures, whether material or immaterial, to extend beyond the floodplain area and diffuse into the surrounding territory. How far from the river can traces of its presence

be found in territorial imaginaries, linguistic expressions, artistic representations, and literary works? Verifying the extent of the ‘inland’ of the river’s image is a fruitful perspective for assessing the dialogue that the presence of the river establishes with the communities settled along its banks. Baldanzi makes a comparison with the situation one can find on the seashores (and Tuscany is, of course, a region facing the Tyrrhenian Sea):

Those who live near the sea, even if they don’t have a terrace with a view, always feel its presence, they carry it inside, they are people of the sea. Those who live near the river often forget about it. (Baldanzi 2016: 168)

The principle of variety, even more so in a densely populated territory such as Italy, fuels the constant tension between the red thread of the river and the irreducible diversity of the territories it crosses: ‘The river is one, but the bridges and territories are not’ (Baldanzi 2016: 61). It is the human action that create diversities in the river basin. The symbol of this action is the bridge, the connection of the two riverbanks through an artificial element. Walking along the river exposes one directly to the perception of diversities and discontinuities: ‘Along the river live many diversities, and yet everyone faces it, a living nerve to which respect and the role it deserves for the environment and politics should be acknowledged’ (Baldanzi 2016: 155). The paradox of the river thus becomes this juxtaposition of unity and diversity: ‘The river is made of pieces and at the same time of continuity. The river has specific, fixed, rooted points around itself while, by nature, it constantly changes’ (Baldanzi 2016: 168).

The identity of a river is linked to its visibility within the territory it crosses – again, both in a real sense and in its metaphorical meaning. The physical barriers of the riverbanks, which serve to protect the surrounding land from floods and to prevent inundation, make rivers a ‘separate’ reality, whose projection onto the land remains indistinct and intangible. The writer-walker feels this separation from the territory when walking within the floodplain: ‘Nothing can be seen of the outside anymore, and intimacy gains’ (Morelli 2013: 101).

It is not always easy to follow the course of a river, because its course can appear and disappear: ‘And the river is there, I add, even if we can’t see it now’ (Baldanzi 2016: 37). To perceive its presence, other sensorial landscapes can be useful, such as soundscapes (Pocock 1989). The sound of the flowing water can sometimes be heard hundreds of metres away from its bed, just as it can remain hidden until one reaches its banks. The soundscape of the river is one of the most prominent features of the fluvial environment:

It’s time to go, to start following the so-called river, which is actually a stream that struggles to gather itself together, and with a couple of small jumps, it gently descends to the junction from which I started, it sinks into a short ravine, but here there’s already a bed taking care of the water, giving it a clear, unapologetic sound that sparkles. (Morelli 2013: 19)

The musicality of the voice of the river is strictly linked to the question of rhythm of the walk: ‘I’ve definitely learned a different step; the water never flows at the same speed, it can stagnate

or be impetuous, it puffs or sighs. One must also adapt to a different kind of listening, sometimes slow, sometimes letting go.' Only an otherwise silent soundscape allows one to grasp at its best the voice of the river: 'If no cars pass, there's nothing else in the air but small sounds, especially that of the water which acts as the score' (Morelli 2013: 29). However, the voice of the river can change along its course: 'Instead, the river really shows its enthusiastic and polyphonic face for the first time' (49).

In addition to satisfying a sensory aspect, listening to the sound of the river taps into a primordial and archaic familiarity with the water element, embedded in humanity's psychological archetypes:

The sound of flowing water gives the comfort of a shared experience, who knows how ancient, it's not even worth going back to those beginnings since they are so deeply embedded in the brain, and they are always alive, even if they remain forgotten there. (Morelli 2013: 109)

The cartographic inspiration

All three literary accounts chosen as objects of analysis in this essay present a cartographic image at the beginning of the book. Maps are an important component in the creation of the fluvial imagery for a walk. The map of a river has the power to concisely and effectively represent the river in its whole course; to provide, so to speak, a synthetic 'portrait' of the river and, at the same time, to summarize what the itinerary of the walk will be. The linear nature of the river course elegantly matches the reticular design of cartography. Maps are mostly representing networks. If we look at Renaissance cartography, we see that this 'visual grammar' of the territory was made mostly by the hydrography and the orography: river courses and mountain ranges would provide the skeleton of the graphic representation of the territory.

A primary form of 'conception' of the river as a territorial entity is linked to its appearance on geographical maps.⁶ Atlases are primary elements in the formation of the imagination, capable of influencing and feeding the reading of territorial cohesion related to the river:

I have the atlas open on my lap. It's full of notes I made in pen. The geography teacher wanted it that way. I discover the idea of a watershed, I discover the first sense of territory, the idea of civilization, the complexity of not being separate pieces. The rivers and the peoples ... I went over the rivers with blue, I made the groove, on the map. (Baldanzi 2016: 12)

Even though the cartographic clearness of a river line seems a clear indicator for the prospective walker, 'the territory is not the map', as the old saying goes. Baldanzi chooses to put at the beginning of each chapter of her book (there are forty of them) a small 'cartographic summary' that reproduces the course of the river, with a pin to indicate at what point of the

descent of the course the narration contained in the chapter is set. In this way, Baldanzi creates a continuous cartographic counterpart to the narration.

The passage from the cartographic imagination to the concrete experience of the places is mediated by the act of walking. As Francesco Visentin states, the bridge between the two experiences can be found in the dimension of landscape:

Here it is, when you walk, you necessarily enter into the heart of the subject (the landscape) and the abstract experience of studying a map, book, or article materializes. It is a transition that leads to the landscape and thus towards a richer, though not complete, recognition of it. From seeing to walking, from the map to the fieldwork, they are like kinds of synaesthesia, a passage from one field of meaning to another: the modes of knowledge blending, making our experience complex and vibrant. (Visentin 2024: 151)

The itinerary: existential attributes of the river

The slow rhythm of progression that characterizes the practice of walking makes it clear that the scale of a river – and even more so if the river is one of the longest on the planet – is frightening if compared to the anatomy of a human body:

We'd been walking now for two weeks and steadily become attuned to the environment around us. That's not to say it was easy; in fact the constant shifting from swamp to field to mountain to jungle made for tough-going. In a day we'd sometimes gain a thigh pummelling thousand feet as we crested a ridge, only to drop down again into a misty valley where we'd get lost amongst the reeds and orchards, cursing the muddy slopes as we fell over every few steps. Mentally it was tough too; although we'd started off eager to make headway, the reality hadn't even sunk in yet as to the magnitude of the distance we were undertaking. Neither of us had any clue whether our feet and minds would hold up. (Wood 2015: 37)

Walking along a river makes it possible to feel it like a companion who is able to capture one's attention:

In the morning, Will and Ash disappeared the same way they had come: in a cloud of dust and a taxi, taking them all the way back to Khartoum. It was bittersweet to see them go, *but the river beckoned* – and, with the Egyptian border only three weeks to our north, it did not seem so long until I would see them again. (Wood 2015: 266; italics added)

The process of personification of the river identity is deeply rooted in human history. Precisely because of its constant dynamism, the river can become the object of an anthropomorphizing gaze, which transforms the murmur of the waters into a voice to be listened to: 'One had to

go and listen, follow the banks as much as possible, not driving away fears, but carrying them with respect and humility' (Baldanzi 2016: 14).

The very idea of walking along the river can start from a form of 'sympathy' for the geographical element:

I don't know how the idea came to me. I wanted to contemplate the water and describe it. But now water is everywhere, so why choose a small river and specifically this one? I should mention that my father was born in a town along its path, and there he still has a house where I often go. The road to get there runs alongside it for more than half of the way, and over the years, I began to realize not only that it was there beside me, but that it attracted me, I felt something like a character, a kind of affinity that's hard to explain, a passing fondness. (Morelli 2013: 9-10)

The process of personification can assign moods and attitudes to the watercourse:

Looking at it, even here it's a thoughtful river, like one that knows it will win anyway, even if it takes its time, in fact, precisely because it takes its time resolutely but comfortably, like a football team that lets things happen, knowing that sooner or later a goal will come. But here it's a sense of superiority from below, like that of a stoic, or rather, better a cynic. (Morelli 2013: 28)

The process can also proceed in the opposite direction, leading the narrator to identify herself with a river function: 'We are stories that meet along the way, we are tributaries' (Baldanzi 2016: 39).

If the river is considered a person, one can even, ultimately, have a conversation with the watercourse: 'You can say goodnight to rivers too, since no one hears us' (Morelli 2013: 105). In the search for human characteristics to assign to the river, there is also a game of understanding and interpretation. The question of gender, for example – that is, the assignment of masculine or feminine characteristics to environmental elements – influences the proposed identity image and helps to define the atmosphere. Morelli, regarding the Sangro river, chooses a sort of 'landscape hermaphroditism':

I now realize something obvious, that I am using a mix of masculine and feminine in the description, that is, the river and the water, here too, warp and weft composed to seek a barely possible, random, and momentary synthesis between the surrender and flexibility of one and the great effort to find limits, the bed in which to live, the reckless and unusual work of the other. (Morelli 2013: 100)

The process of anthropomorphization, besides being a primary element for the narrative process, also represents a key to interpreting the surrounding landscape:

The beautiful and failing thing about all of this is that the gradient, let's say, of truth of what I write will never be known; I can only cling to this, to the insecurity if it's me seeing it a bit disturbed by the banks and the wide concealment of vegetation, that I have to make comparisons and similes, perhaps only to invent, to give a character to what is only a physical progression. (Morelli 2013: 87)

If, instead of focusing on the complex personality of a river, one prefers to emphasize the irreducibility and strength expressed by the current, the watercourse can be compared, following an ancient tradition of literary figurations, to an animal, through a process of zoomorphization: 'The river is already a beast by itself, it is a real serpent that continually regenerates itself, from head to tail. In fact, the Arno from head to mouth' (Baldanzi 2016: 63-64). In an interview about *Maldifiume* conducted by Irene Cecchini, Baldanzi emphasizes this zoomorphization of the river:

Following the river, you never know how much you must adapt to its waters; it is not a path that stays there, still. It's no coincidence that pilgrims, to make long journeys, would walk at a distance; they were more exposed to obstacles and dangers. The ridgelines protect you, it's like riding an animal, while near the river, you are on the animal's face, you feel it breathe. (Baldanzi and Cecchini 2019)

Renaissance epic poems often present zoomorphization of rivers. In his *Orlando Furioso*, Ariosto compares the river Po to a bull, following literary topoi that are already present in classical antiquity. The frequency of zoomorphic personifications in ancient literature may be explained with both a greater familiarity with the animal world and a more frequent occurrence of floods (Confalonieri 2024).

The river becomes, through its metaphorical functions, an existential interlocutor, the embodiment of an elusive geographical reality, difficult to define and control. The question that animates the beginning of Simona Baldanzi's river pilgrimage originates precisely from a philosophical search:

What is the river to me? What is the Arno? What has it become? How has it changed? We Italians, who put everything in jars, who are good at preserving, what do we do with the river today? How do we live with the river that passes through villages, parks, cities, that moves near railways, highways, that hisses under bridges, that divides communities with its two banks, that attracts and scares at the same time? (Baldanzi 2016: 11)

The questions raised about the identity of the river bring us back to the ambiguous nature of the river itself, which is on one side always the same but, at the same time, constantly changing. In the above-mentioned interview, Baldanzi states:

I wanted to convey the idea of the river's dual nature: on one side, it sediments, preserves, and forms a bed, while on the other, it continues to flow relentlessly on the

surface. We document to create a common bed, we talk about sensations, body, and intimacy for the flowing water. It's a feeling of mine, but then it becomes universal. The river creates a path, but every drop of water that crosses it is always different, constantly regenerated. I feel it is very similar to a woman's body, with all the transformations we undergo, which are indeed much more visible and changeable than those in a man's body. (Baldanzi and Cecchini 2019)

The core of Baldanzi's investigation is the relationship between the river and human societies. Through the rhetorical device of the list, the author presents a series of elements of the landscape (villages, parks, cities) that are all human creations and emphasizes the attribute of mobility, which is more and more distinctive of contemporary societies.

In this perspective, the watercourse represents a 'thermometer' of territorial perception, both from a strictly ecological point of view (the quality of the water reflects the ecological quality of the territory as a whole) and from a cultural geography perspective (the visibility of the river element is reflected in the collective geographical consciousness). Literature can have precisely this value: providing 'symptoms' of territorial perception.

Towards the mouth: concluding reflections

The lesson that can be learned from a journey along a river is a refinement of the gaze, a *de facto* geography lesson: learning to observe the world with renewed attention. The context can be very different from case to case, depending on the geographical context. While for Baldanzi and Morelli the travel along the river represents an exploration of the vicinity, a voyage into territories of the everyday, for Wood the walk follows a historical tradition of exploration. His travel account frequently refers to the British explorations of the river Nile during the nineteenth century. All the walks, however, share the same quest for territorial knowledge, the same curiosity for the genius loci, the same desire to observe and understand the territories encountered along the travel.

This common trait of the three river walks creates a short-circuit arc between the local and the global, within the dialectical transcalar tension that was mentioned at the beginning. In the words of Simona Baldanzi, which serve perfectly as a farewell from these pages:

The river is the possibility of a broader gaze, a windowsill that changes window beyond every point. The river doesn't take root, and every attempt to tame it, stop it, or immortalize it in a single story disperses, escapes, evaporates. One can try to follow it, walk by it, or ride along it. Learn from it a rhythm, a mental openness, a spark of ingenuity ... The river is the globality right at our doorstep. A vision convenience that we forget we have within reach of our legs, our thoughts, and our emotions. (Baldanzi 2016: 87)

The physical corporality of the action of walking brings a unique form of perception to the journey. The fatigue of the action of putting one step after another influences the perception of the physical dimension of space. The openness to all the sensorial stimuli that walking allows establishes a close connection between the traveller and the surrounding environment. The slow rhythm of the walking pace opens the possibility for relaxed and distended forms of observation and reflection. There is therefore a close connection, as Baldanzi states in the quote above, between ‘our legs, our thoughts, and our emotions’; the order of the terms seems to suggest a hierarchical importance that confirms the importance of the walking movement.

Notes

- ¹ All the translations from Italian texts are mine, except otherwise indicated.
- ² For a historical overview of ‘river functions’, see Bethemont 2002.
- ³ For a geographical reading of *Towards the river’s mouth*, see Peterle and Visentin 2017; for the role of landscape observation in Gianni Celati’s work, see Barron 2005 and Spunta 2009.
- ⁴ Even though the opposite direction can be contemplated as well. For an experience of a walk from a river’s mouth to the river’s springs, see Kauffmann 2013. For the concept of ‘upstream’ applied to literature, see Frongia 1994.
- ⁵ <http://www.adbarno.it/>.
- ⁶ For an analysis of the inspirational power of cartography for literature, see Guglielmi and Iacoli 2013 and Fiorentino and Paolucci 2018.

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