BECOMING THE NOMADIC SUBJECT: 
MARÍA BENEYTO’S “LA PEREGRINA”

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In the conclusion of my book Mirror; Mirror on the Page I suggest a need to examine women’s poetry of the Franco era for occurrences of the phenomenon of the page as mirror. A reading of the poetry of María Beneyto affords an excellent opportunity to explore this phenomenon given that the titles of several of her poems allude to female figures, including Biblical women such as Eve (“Eva en el tiempo” 43-45), the wife of Lot (“Mujer de sal” 73-75), and Mary Magdalene (“La penitente” 60-61), all of whom appear in women’s poetry of the post-Franco era. The poet even mentions the mirror in “Transeúnte.” Nonetheless, when we read these poems, it is readily apparent that the page as mirror does not obtain. Something else is happening that we might explain by taking into account the historical context. In post-Franco, democratic Spain, society undergoes radical changes. Although vestiges of the Franco regime’s patriarchal social structure still linger, a socio-political restructuring occurs in which more possibilities and spaces for participation arise for women to contribute to cultural production. As a result, women are free to explore, experiment, take risks, and challenge the outdated standards of women’s identity. That freedom did not exist during the Franco era, as Carmen Martín Gaite’s seminal text Usos amorosos de la posguerra española makes abundantly clear.

When María Beneyto began her writing career, the roles allotted to women were narrowly prescribed.1 Anyone who dared to step outside of the category of wife and mother bore the stigma of being “marimacho,” “solterona,” “roja,” or other even more denigrating terms. Confronted with the limited choices imposed by a conservative dictatorial regime in the 1940s and ’50s, María Beneyto did not experience the freedom and sense of playful experimentation or joyful discovery of her potential that women of the democratic era were to experience. The strict definition of gender roles foreclosed a wide range of possibilities, compelling Beneyto to act in opposition to a prescribed model of “Woman.” Rather than the opportunity to delve into the similarities and differences in a self-determined definition of self, Beneyto stands in opposition to an image imposed from without. These
two stances are comparable to a distinction between a Platonic concept of repetition—that imposed by the Franco regime—in which each copy is an exact duplicate of the ideal, and a Nietzschean concept, in which each copy varies from the other.2

Rather than conceiving of the page as mirror, then, we should view the poetic voice that emerges from Beneyto’s poetry as the nomadic subject posited by Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti’s description of the nomadic subject quite aptly defines the poetic speaker(s) of Beneyto’s poetry. In general terms, the nomadic subject participates in a constant process of becoming, a concept that Braidotti adopts from Gilles Deleuze.

The concept of “becoming” is central to Deleuze’s philosophical concerns. [...] Becoming is neither the dynamic opposition of opposites nor the unfolding of an essence in a teleologically ordained process leading to a synthesizing identity. The Deleuzian becoming is the affirmation of the positivity of difference, meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation. Both teleological order and fixed identities are relinquished in favor of a flux of multiple becoming. (111)

Beneyto’s lyric persona repeatedly adopts different “guises,” as revealed in the various female figures identified in the titles of her poems. This nomadic movement exemplifies what Donna Haraway calls “the quest for feminist figurations, in the sense of representations of female experience as that which cannot easily be fitted within the parameters of phallogocentric language” (see Braidotti 75-76; emphasis added).3 Braidotti also notes the “passing through” that Diane Fisher (5) mentions, but she describes it using the psychoanalytic term “working through”:

[...] the feminist subject is nomadic because it is intensive, multiple, embodied, and therefore perfectly cultural. [...] [T]he task of redefining female subjectivity requires as a preliminary method the working through of the stock of cumulated images, concepts, and representations of women, of female identity, such as they have been codified by the culture in which we live. (196; emphasis added)

Defining what she calls “the philosophy of ‘as if’,” Braidotti emphasizes that this transient movement, this “flow of connections” (5) from one figuration to another avoids appropriation and instead “marks transitions between communicating states or experiences” (5).4 Relying on Deleuze’s concept of “lines of escape” and becoming, Braidotti explains that “nomadic becoming is neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness” (5; emphasis added). In sum, “Nomadic shifts designate [...] a creative sort of becoming; a performative
metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unexpected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge” (6).

As a nomadic subject *avant la lettre*, Beneyto’s nomadic shifts from one “identity” to another represent a direct response to the Franco regime. Her poetry thus becomes the stage for resisting “the culturally dominant model for female identity” (164). The female figuration achieved in each poem allows for “emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness” without complete appropriation of the other’s identity. Rather than the constant vacillation, the interaction of comparison and contrast, that takes place in the relationship of self and other in the page as mirror, the poetic voice in Beneyto’s poetry pauses to explore the other’s identity before moving on. Beneyto’s poems are the site of “the working through [and] a form of resisting assimilation of homologation into dominant ways of representing the self” (24). In short, nomadism emphasizes sexual difference to provide shifting locations for multiple feminist figurations or “embodied voices” (172). But just as important is the recognition that “Nomadic consciousness is also an epistemological position” (23). Beneyto uses her poetry to subvert the conventional definition of “Woman” imposed by the Franco regime. “One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition” (4).

Beneyto’s “La peregrina,” the final poem of her second collection *Eva en el tiempo*, defines a critical moment in her budding career as a poet. In this poem the poetic voice recognizes her emergent nomadic subjectivity, her becoming nomadic. In fact, her choice of the word “peregrina” adds a telling nuance to Braidotti’s nomadism by raising semantic inflections when juxtaposed with Braidotti’s preference for the nomad. In fact, Beneyto’s choice would seem to be much more fitting. According to a standard dictionary, a nomad is “a member of a people that has no permanent abode but moves from place to place along a traditional circuit in search of pasturage or food.” Although Braidotti is using the term to describe any wanderer or itinerant (synonyms also mentioned in the dictionary), this definition does not quite fit the activity of the poetic voice because of the restrictions suggested by “a traditional circuit” or the purpose of the movement. Nor does “itinerant,” “a person who alternates between working and wandering, who travels from place to place, especially for duty or business.” Similarly, a migrant “moves from one country, region, or place to another.” If we think of itinerant workers or migrant farmhands, we again cannot directly assimilate the purpose of the movement with the figure Braidotti conjures up. A pilgrim, in comparison, is one “who journeys, especially a long distance, to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.” This journey has a specific goal in mind, but even when the pilgrim reaches a physical destination, the spiritual journey continues. The figure of the pilgrim captures more precisely the goal of the
feminist subject and of Beneyto’s poetic persona, who moves “religiously”—relentlessly—toward a specific goal but following an irregular path: a place for women in society that is not determined by a masculinist hegemonic authority. Even when certain goals are attained, the striving for additional recognition and autonomy continues.

Studies of Beneyto’s poetry seldom fail to mention “La peregrina,” and Diane Fisher, Monica Jato, and Candelas Gala have contributed valuable insights into this poem. Gala’s study comes closest to addressing the nomadic nature of the poetic voice in Beneyto’s poetry and the distinction she makes between vertical and horizontal movement in “La peregrina” aptly captures Beneyto’s adoption of nomadic subjectivity (“Dismantling” 281). Moreover, her characterization of Beneyto’s poetry addresses many of the characteristics of the nomadic subject without specifically mentioning Braidotti’s work. The present study seeks to emend certain aspects of prior readings, demonstrating the importance of close reading in light of Braidotti’s theory of the nomadic project. In essence, it is necessary that the reader become nomadic in her/his relation with the poetic voice in Beneyto’s poetry. A closer look at “La peregrina” will illuminate the pivotal nature of this poem in Beneyto’s oeuvre and bring to the fore her role not just as “social poet” but as a champion of feminist principles at a time when Franco’s regime was imposing stringent limitations on feminine roles and behaviors.6

Given the length of the poem (105 verses), it is helpful to limn a tripartite structure. Even so, the three major sections that I define here do not preclude rhizomatic thinking, “digressions,” or unexpected shifts. Indeed, Braidotti privileges “an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essentialist unity” (22). She asserts that feminist nomadic statements “are consequently not immune from discontinuities and shifts” (201). In accord with these principles, “La peregrina” consists of a long introductory statement in the first three stanzas (vv. 1-37), where the poetic persona defines her rejection of culturally imposed expectations for women. In the second section (stanzas 4-7, vv. 38-89) she describes her journey, the pathway she has chosen—her poetic endeavor—and the rejection of her work by hegemonic powers. The poem then concludes with the final stanza, replete with verbs in the future tense and the present subjunctive and with gerunds, a short coda that affirms her commitment to her purpose and to a nomadic project in spite of the difficulties it poses. “La peregrina” thus posits a moment of decision and self-affirmation, as well as a commitment to the nomadic process in spite of its apparently wandering and disjointed, i.e., rhizomatic, nonlinearity. It is a poem about becoming nomadic.

The poetic voice makes a powerful declaration in the opening statement of “La peregrina”: “Yo era la mujer que se alzó de la tierra / para mirar las
luces siderales” (vv. 1-2). The first-person pronoun is especially emphatic, but it also calls attention to the interaction between self and other. The speaker recognizes herself in other women who have extracted themselves from a “hueco tibio,” the “hogar” that confines women to certain traditional roles. We might even say that, because “se alzó de la tierra,” this type of woman rejects the concept of her “biological destiny.” The imperfect tense of the verb “era” entails the repetition or multiplicity of the action. The poetic voice can relate to many other women—some famous like Virginia Woolf, but many others who are anonymous—who strived to attain transcendent goals, as the image of “luces siderales” indicates. Later in this section the images of music, mountains, and “amaneceres altos”—the adjective is highly appropriate—also refer to the vision that attracts these women. Nonetheless, although the poetic voice rejects a subject position that ties her to the earth, setting her sights instead on transcendent goals, she generally moves laterally, rhizomatically, on a horizontal plane toward her goal, the destination that the pilgrim intends to reach.

We should note that this sympathetic response to other women is not comparable to the play of sameness and difference characteristic of the page as mirror. The poetic voice observes models in the past and in the world around her and recognizes the same impulse in herself. She shares their feelings in approving accord with their strivings, experiencing “emphatic proximity [and] intensive interconnectedness.” Described as “la inquieta, / la andariega mujer” (vv. 10-11), this type of woman fits Braidotti’s definition of the nomadic subject. It is this image of woman—certainly not essentialist but multiple (see Braidotti 4)—that the poetic voice discovers: “ésa me fue de súbito encontrada / en los más hondos pliegues de mi túnica” (vv. 14-15). The image of “woman” that the poetic voice finds ensconced in the deepest folds of her tunic is one of many possibilities for women to select: it does not require a complete rejection of other feminine qualities, but already forms part of a woman’s possibilities.

Nonetheless, on choosing to foreground the nomadic identity, one obviously has to pay a price. On the one hand, she abandons the desire to have children, apparently because she does not understand their crying, which she hears in her blood: she does not comprehend this calling, this vocation, as other women might. Another allusion to what she rejects resides in the image of the “rueca”: “Se quedaron gritando en el hogar / la rueca y las menudas cosas femeninas del alma” (vv. 18-19). Metonymically evoking images of spinning and weaving, the distaff symbolizes a patriarchal system advocating traditional roles for women, and it is connected to time and death, evoking the mythological figures of the Parcae. Throughout this first section of the poem the poetic voice contrasts the putative stability and safety of a
traditional woman’s life with the uncertainty and difficulty of the nomadic subject. Even when she decries

ciudades de cemento,
de hierro, asfalto, hambre y abundancia,
injusticia, esperanza, fiebre, grito,
humo, cristal, calor…” (vv. 28-31)

the nomadic subject anticipates finding more opportunities to resonate with other women. If we consider Beneyto’s poetic trajectory, in *Criatura múltiple* she moves from one female figuration to another, becoming those women in order to learn from them in an epistemological process. Thereafter she writes *Poemas de la ciudad* as a flâneuse with a similar purpose. As Braidotti says:

> The urban space is thus one huge map that requires special decoding and interpreting skills; in the hands of these artists the city also becomes text, a signifying artifact. [...] Public spaces as sites of creativity therefore highlight a paradox: they are both loaded with signification and profoundly anonymous; they are spaces of detached transition, but also venues of inspiration, of visionary insight, of great release of creativity. (20)

We might even consider the city as a desert, an asphalt wasteland, as Candelas Gala suggests (“Voces silenciadas” 22). “La peregrina” thus prefigures the course that Beneyto envisions her poetry taking. But as the moment when the poetic persona recognizes herself becoming nomadic, this poem continues to describe a gateway experience.

In the second section of the poem the poetic voice embarks on her nomadic journey, identifying completely with the women she encounters.

> Y atravesé la risa,
hendí la densa lágrima,
deseando quedarme en cada gota
de sudor, en cada mano encallecida,
en los niños que mueren
o en la mujer que teje por las noches
debajo de la angustia. (vv. 38-44)

She experiences moments of joy and sadness in other women’s lives, and she participates fully in their hard work, striving to become so engrained in their experiences that she invests herself “en cada gota / de sudor, en cada mano encallecida.” The image of the woman who weaves at night evokes the idea that women write or perform other creative tasks in moments stolen
from the ordinary routines of daily life. The poetic voice characterizes this urge as emerging “debajo de la angustia.” This prepositional phrase might refer to the “clandestine” nature of their creative work or to the imperative impulse that they cannot suppress. Nonetheless, in the midst of her quest the poetic voice gets sidetracked:

Y, de pronto, cerraron mi camino
los ojos del deseo.
(Los ojos del deseo
eran rotundos, mágicos,
inextinguibles en su quemadura.) (vv. 50-54)

What distracts the nomadic subject is the desire to know and to produce, and her most ardent desire is to achieve acclaim for her poetry. Her goal is to scale Mount Parnassus, where she sees that “En lo alto del monte / los hombres se apiñaban reunidos. / Era la meta, al fin, de mis pisadas” (vv. 62-64). However, when she approaches this summit, full of optimism and illusion, “con el triunfo cenital en los ojos, / con el contento de alas en mis hombros” (vv. 65-66), she encounters harsh opposition and rejection because she is a woman. One phrase is especially telling: “no me dejaron entregar mis palabras / porque en ellos la ira de Dios resplandecía” (vv. 67-68; emphasis added). Whether the poet attempts to have her poems published or intends to submit them for a prize, it seems that the God-like figure of Dámaso Alonso, author of the seminal Hijos de la ira and one of the most influential intellectual and poetic figures of his time, took great exception to and criticized her aspirations mercilessly:

Bíblicas maldiciones
inflamaron mi oído
y me dijeron Eva una y mil veces,
manantial del dolor, impúdica pureza,
hembra evadida del rincón oscuro,
del lugar de vigía en la ventana,
desertora
de la orilla del fuego
y el hogar apagado […] (vv. 69-77)

This experience has a deeply dispiriting effect on the poetic persona, as the pithy sixth stanza shows. Yet the neutral punctuation of these sentences not only understates but also undercuts the speaker’s outrage.
Vergüenza de mi sexo acongojó mis hombros que se creyeron alas para el vuelo. Vergüenza de bajar de las alturas sin traer la palabra que buscaba. (vv. 78-81)

Isolated in a separate stanza and punctuated neutrally, these sentences represent a moment of disillusionment and despair but also of illumination for the poetic persona. On the one hand, read as exclamations, these phrases express how deeply appalled, outraged, and discouraged she is by the male poets’ reaction to her poetry. But on the other hand, if read as enclosed in question marks, they show the poetic persona stepping back to ponder this situation, thus experiencing a moment of illumination. We could even imagine these verses as framed within parentheses as an aside. In this moment she recognizes the falseness of the desire she was seeking, and she prepares to dedicate herself to the nomadic project. This short stanza epitomizes nomadic writing. Functioning almost as an aside, it is nonetheless integrally, completely the thematic center of the poem. As a rhizome, it pulls away from a more linear development, yet this rhizomatic movement in and of itself embodies nomadic subjectivity and aesthetics.

As if to prove to herself a theory she is formulating, the poetic voice enters another arena similar to “lo alto del monte.” In this case I believe that she refers to submitting her work to the Premio Adonais. Rather than a symbol of Marxist ideology as Candelas Gala has suggested, the “hoz interrogante” evokes a line from Claudio Rodríguez’s “Canto del caminar” from Don de la ebriedad, that year’s winner of the Adonais published in 1953: “Hasta la hoz interroga más que siega” (v. 13). In the context of Rodríguez’s encounter with the poetic act, the sickle presents a visible question mark, an indication of the silence inherent in language and the futility of the poet’s search for meaning (see Mudrovic, Breaking New Ground 62). Beneyto’s poetic voice seems to question why the judges silence her voice and whether her lyric quest is futile, but she has already provided the answer in the previous stanzas. The central portion of “La peregrina” thus deals with the poetic persona’s incursion on her nomadic quest, where she encounters the tension of sexual difference as captured in the opposition between vertical and horizontal movement. In her attempt to move vertically, she negated sexual difference, a characteristic essential to the nomadic project. Now she realizes that her course will be different from that of her male counterparts.

In her discussion of “La peregrina” Diane Fisher contends that the poetic persona “ultimately returns to her initial, immobile position, forced into it by her unwilling occupation of the role of Eve as defined by God and men” (11). But quite the contrary is true. Using the future tense and the subjunctive mood, the poetic voice asserts that she may at some point in the distant future return to the hearth, but only after having exhausted all possibilities:
Mujer que soy, mujer profundamente
maldecida por Dios desde el vivir primero,
dejaré la obsesión de los caminos
cuando Eva en mí pida perdón al alba
y vuelva a serme la mujer discreta,
callada y sedentaria, junto al fuego
y la ventana eterna.
Volveré y estaré por siempre quieta
tal vez porque ya entonces no haya hijos dormidos
que sueñen en mi sangre caminante
sus ansias andariegas. (vv. 90-100)

Only after she has exhausted her wanderlust and when she is too old
to continue struggling will she go back to the hearth, leaving her return
pending indefinitely. She admits that her quest may be futile and fruitless,
yet she will continue, “buscando . . . y a ciegas caminando, interrogando…”
The suspension points are the poetic voice’s and indicate the inclusive and
inconclusive nature of her quest. They also then lead directly into Criatura múltiple and its array of feminist figurations, followed by Poemas en la ciudad through which the flâneuse will walk.

That “La peregrina” continues to stir critical commentary attests to the
centrality of this poem in María Beneyto’s lyric evolvement. It defines a
moment of illumination in the continuous process of becoming that defines
the nomadic subject. In fact, it is the moment when the poet realizes (in both
senses of the word) her nomadic identity. She does not become fixed in a
defined position, but rather comprehends her capacity and her dedication to
explore feminist figurations as a subversive activity.

Though the image of “nomadic subjects” is inspired by the experience
of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in
question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists
settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. [...] It is the
subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state [...]. (5)

In conclusion, in light of Rosi Braidotti’s theory of the nomadic subject,
Beneyto’s lyric trajectory and project come into clearer focus. Beneyto’s
nomadic consciousness resists the Franco regime’s stultifying, subordinating,
and oppressive definition of “Woman” and becomes a site of resistance.
Through her exploration of various feminist figurations, Beneyto aims to
destabilize rigid gender roles and resist “assimilation or homologation into
dominant ways of representing the self” (Braidotti 25) as well as dominant
styles of writing. During this time she also publishes collections of poetry
in Catalan, continuing to affirm her nomadic identity through her polyglot wandering (see Braidotti 8-15) but also acclaiming her autonomy. Whereas her approach tended to marginalize her poetry, we are now in a position to reassess her importance and to afford her the acclaim she merits.
WORKS CITED


NOTES

1 Mónica Jato discusses various aspects of the suppressive environment of the Franco regime in Beneyto’s novels as well as her poetry in “Memoria, historia y olvido.”

2 See J. Hillis Miller’s discussion of Platonic vs. Nietzschean repetition in the introduction of Fiction and Repetition (6-9). Here it might also be helpful to keep in mind Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of the word “identity” as both sameness and difference, idem and ipse (16).

3 As Diane Fisher notes, “A proliferation of formulas based on nominalization promotes a view of subjectivity in terms of conditions, roles, or situations rather than individual essences. These formulas are especially significant as titles of poems […], for as we have seen […] they provide plural identities that the poetic voice assumes, often interrogates, and then passes through” (5).

4 Candelas Gala makes a similar point that addresses the shifting locations for feminist figurations in opposition to the limited model imposed by the Franco regime: “Difference is something ‘liquid’ and ‘wandering’ because it resists fixedness and the attempt to abide by a set of pre-established and static rules” (292). Jato also recognizes this aspect of Beneyto’s poetry when discussing Hojas para algún día de noviembre, where she says, “Se regresa a la técnica de las nominalizaciones empleada allí [en Eva en el tiempo y Criatura múltiple] para designar la identidad plural del sujeto femenino […]” (123).

5 I have modified this and the following definitions found in the Random House Webster’s College Dictionary.

6 With regard to the categorization of Beneyto as a “social poet,” I agree wholeheartedly with Diane Fisher, who states, “ultimately, such a categorization as social, though perhaps helpful in orienting a reader to an unfamiliar name, does little justice to the complexity of Beneyto’s poetic persona and to the variety of ways in which she expresses that intricate and changeable subjectivity and its relationship to the world” (1). Note that Fisher’s language also approaches the concept of nomadic subjectivity in Beneyto’s poetry without mentioning Braidotti explicitly.
7 Wendy Bird discusses the sexual overtones of bobbins and distaffs as well as the ambivalent connotations of spinners in her commentary on Velázquez’s “Las hilanderas” in “The Bobbin and the Distaff.” With regard to the figures in the painting, she states, “[T]he spinners in the foreground are practicing a craft traditionally associated with earthy sexuality. In a state of semi-undress they take on unrestrained, immodest postures, denoting more relaxed sexual mores.” In their *Diccionario de los símbolos* Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant expressly state that the “ruca” is a symbol of domestic arts. They also note that it represents “el desarrollo de los días, el hilo cuya existencia cesará de tejerse cuando la rueca quede vacía. Es el tiempo contado, que pasa inexorablemente.” In addition, they remark that “la rueca, que es una caña, tiene una significación fálica y sexual. Representa no sólo el órgano viril, sino también el hilo de las generaciones.” Also see dictionaries of symbols by Nadia Julien, J. A. Pérez-Rioja, and J. E. Cirlot.

8 Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton would undergo similar experiences in the 1950s and ’60s.

9 If Dámaso Alonso made a comment either publicly or privately to the poet, I am not aware of it. However, in her discussion of Beneyto’s poem “¿Desarraigo…?” Diane Fisher discusses “Alonso’s coinage of the categories of poesía arraigada and poesía desarraigada in the historiography of Spanish poetry” (13). The connections here are suggestive.

10 María Elvira Lacaci was the first woman to garner the Premio Adonais in 1956 for *Humana voz*. No other woman would receive the prize until 1970 when Pureza Canelo won for *Lugar común*. Beneyto was a runner-up in 1956 for *Tierra viva*.

11 The time frame here is intriguing but also raises many questions. Beneyto published *Eva en el tiempo* in 1952, a year prior to the publication of *Don de la ebriedad*. Did she have access to Rodríguez’s work prior to its publication? Because of the placement of this stanza in “La peregrina,” can we assume perhaps that Beneyto inserted it at the last minute? We cannot definitively answer these questions, but coincidences are thought-provoking.