Fantastic Architecture and the Building of Europe in Valerio Evangelisti's Eymerich Fiction

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Abstract

Concomitant with the horizontal expansion of EU territory through physical and political enlargement is a genealogy narrative, which emphasizes the ostensible roots of Europeanness in classical antiquity and Christianity. In the face of this sanitized genealogy, which lies at the heart of the European constitutional project, a range of alternative and more inclusive narratives circulate in contemporary European popular fiction. This paper focuses on a series of fantasy novels by the Italian author Valerio Evangelisti, featuring Inquisitor Eymerich as hero-investigator. In his highly popular novels, Evangelisti seeks to uncover layers of shared historical memory untainted with post-Enlightenment rhetoric. The central architectural tropes of Evangelisti's imaginary world are those of a castle and a convent, epitomizing the temporal and sacral power in European history. Each isolated from its outside environment and built on layer upon layer of subterranean chambers and corridors, the castle and the convent conceal a past quite different from the one championed in the official European genealogy. Memories of pagan worship and Islamic or Judaic learning – banished from the official rhetoric – continue to thrive, dark and threatening, in the subterranean strata of Evangelisti's European edifice. Evangelisti thus provides an incisive critique of the official European story of origin, which threatens to suppress any alternative visions of European history or unorthodox avenues for European identity formation.

Paper

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Evangelisti's hero is based on the historical character Nicholas Eymerich, a fourteenth-century Catalonian theologian of the Dominican order, Inquisitor General of Aragon and author of an influential handbook of inquisitorial procedure (Clayton 152-53). Evangelisti's hero embodies an early pan-European drive for ideological control through a vigorous eradication of diversity. A historian by training, Evangelisti complements accurate historical detail with elements of the imaginary and the symbolic, thus hollowing out the 'real' and 'revealing its absence, its "great Other", its unspoken and its unseen' (Jackson 180).

All Eymerich novels are structured according to a neat tri-partite narrative pattern. The central story – located in a clearly identifiable historical space and time, Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century – follows Eymerich in his campaign against natural and supernatural opponents of Church orthodoxy. Historically, the late medieval period provides a model of 'Europe without Empire',[1] or, of 'Europe with Empire in the making', through the universalising politics of the Church. A second story is usually set

[1] Historians commonly define the Middle Ages by the absence of empire, marking their advent in 476, the year of the fall of the Roman Empire, and their conclusion in 1492, with the fall of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews, and Columbus' journey initiating the Age of Exploration and the attendant Age of Empire.

in the immediate past or future of the first and sheds light on its origins or direct consequences. Finally, a third story unfolds in a future further removed from the timeframe of the first two and is set either in Europe's recent historical past or present, or in its imagined near future. Although the three narrative planes do not explicitly converge, the entire text can be understood only through their synoptic reading, in which times past, present and future fuse into a timeless present of domination and submission.

Like most fantasy fiction, Evangelisti's novels are inherently political. According to Rosemary Jackson, the modern fantastic 'exists alongside the "real", on either side of the dominant cultural axis, as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other. Structurally and semantically, the fantastic aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient' (180). Gothic tales in particular, with 'their contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences, provide a dense and complex blend of assertion and doubt' and thus 'provide a space in which key elements of the dominant culture become debated, affirmed and questioned' (Smith and Hughes 3).

The counter-hegemonic potential of fantasy literature is acknowledged by Evangelisti in his editorial to the first issue of the journal *Carmilla*, edited by him and entirely devoted to the fantasy genre. According to Evangelisti, neoliberalism has colonized people's imaginary by emptying it of all non-functional content and infecting it with non-values and false certainties. In this 'world of artificial dreams', the imaginary can no longer be reclaimed through realist narrative. Fantasy fiction, on the other hand, which is itself a kind of conscious dream that can be entered and exited willingly, has the potential to de-colonize the imaginary by teaching the reader to evade the 'heterodirected' dreams imposed on her or him by this market-driven value system (1995). Evangelisti is also a keen observer of the European integration process. In the wake of France's recent rejection of the EU Constitution, in his *Carmilla* editorial entitled 'Vive la France!' (2005), he wrote:

What was the so-called European Constitution ('so-called', because Constitutions usually originate from popular mobilization, rather than from a bureaucratic act)

sanctioning in its articles, which practically cannot be reformed or renegotiated, and which are therefore theoretically destined for eternal life? First of all, it was sanctioning the absolute freedom of the market, and therefore a relentless exposure to competition, even when the competitors have the advantage of exploiting their workers as slaves.[2]

Two points of Evangelisti's criticism deserve our particular attention here: one is his comment on the lack of 'popular mobilization' in the genesis of the European constitutional project; the other is his rejection of the Constitution's market-driven rhetoric, which lacks constitutive social meaning. What is 'lacking' in the European edifice – a humanist stamp, an organic link between the 'building' and its dwellers and a symbolic correspondence between 'form' and 'content' – is found in abundance in the architectural sites which dominate Eymerich fiction, as will be explained further below.

In order to read Eymerich fiction as a story of Europeanness, I will first briefly map its geography, which follows the dendriform proliferation of the activities of the Inquisition. Eymerich's birthplace and the departure point for his missions, which see him traversing medieval Christendom in his unrelenting hunt for heretics, is the ancient walled city of Gerona (Girona), in the north-west of Catalonia, which abounds with non-Western, non-Christian influences.[3] With its Moorish past, its reputation as a major centre of medieval Kabbalistic learning and a continuous Jewish presence there for over six hundred years until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the city represents an embodiment of European diversity prior to modernity, however precarious this diversity may have been. From Gerona as his hub, Eymerich moves across a vast pan-European territory, knitted

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[2] *'Cosa sanciva la cosiddetta Costituzione europea ("cosiddetta" perché di solito le Costituzioni nascono da una mobilitazione popolare, e non da un atto burocratico) nei suoi articoli, praticamente non riformabili né rigoneziabilii, e dunque teoricamente destinati a vita eterna? Sanciva anzitutto l'assoluta libertà del mercato, e dunque l'esposizione senza freni alla concorrenza altrui – anche se il concorrente è avvantaggiato da una condizione dei lavoratori prossima allo schiavismo.'*

All translations in this article are mine.
[3] Girona's medieval Jewish ghetto, or *Judería*, is still a major tourist attraction.

together by the Catholic Church. In his endeavour to suppress heterodoxy in its hotbeds dispersed throughout the area covering today's Spain, France, Italy and Germany, Eymerich is profiled as a cosmopolitan figure of considerable mobility and with a substantial knowledge of cultures other than his own.

Eymerich's itineraries sketch a map of medieval Christendom, which has no centre,[4] periphery or borders and which can be visualized only as a configuration of 'paths' and 'nodes', that is, a network. Within this network, agents of resistance – Jews, Arabs and heterodox Christians – may temporarily occupy the 'nodes', but the exclusive control of the 'flow' between the 'nodes' always belongs to the ultimately victorious hegemonic power, represented by Eymerich and his physical movement. In history, this ownership of the 'space of flows' (Castells 1996) by hegemonic forces would eventually lead to the unification of medieval Europe around Christianity, with infidels, pagans, and heretics relegated to a space of otherness and stigmatization.

The nexus between architecture and the narrative has been crucial for gothic fiction since Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). Castles, convents and cathedrals, with their secret passages and dark, hidden spaces provide a perfect setting for mysterious occurrences that threaten the established order. According to John Hendrix,

the abysmal, the dissolution of form, vastness, intricacy, complexity, the labyrinthine maze, confusion, perplexity, infinity, variation […] lend to the realization of romance in architectural description, the romantic entailing the fantastic and imaginary, emotive and unrealistic, mysterious forms of invention. The intention of the Gothic novel was to counteract the Neoclassical emphasis on reason and order, the superimposed rationale, with psychological symbols, and to expose the suppressed experiences of sensation, mystery and the unconscious… (152)

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[4] The notion of 'decentring' is reinforced by the temporal setting of Eymerich fiction in the period of papal residency in Avignon (1305-78), called by Petrarch 'Babylonian Captivity' of the Church.

Architectural tropes are also central in the contemporary rhetoric of European integration and expansion. In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the concept of 'our common European house', within which neighbours respected each other's independence, while being prepared to help each other in times of need (Musolff 218). Most notably, in the early 1990s, the Maastricht Treaty envisaged the nascent European Union as a temple, resting on three pillars: European Community, common foreign and security policy and cooperation in justice and home affairs. Since Maastricht, building metaphors 'have been used routinely in public discourse on Europe, e.g. praise of European politicians as *architects* of the EEC/EC/EU or of EMU, or assessments of political plans for the Union as *blueprints* and of diplomatic relations as *cornerstones* of the Union' (Musolff 221). Yet, with its step-by-step projects of enlargement and political integration, the only fitting building metaphor for Europe would be that of a permanent construction site. Furthermore, in attending to the function, apparatus and the metamorphosing form of the building,[5] the architects of Europe have paid relatively little attention to questions of meaning, value and symbolism, which would turn the European 'house' into a European 'home'.

To quote Anthony Smith,

> There is no European analogue to Bastille or Armistice Day, no European ceremony for the fallen in battle, no European shrine of kings and saints. When it comes to the ritual and ceremony of collective identification, there is no European equivalent of national or religious community. Any research into the question of forging, or even discovering, a possible European identity cannot afford to overlook these central issues. (337)

In other words, the European edifice arguably lacks the symbolic dimension, which would eventually transform it into a place of belonging, by inspiring a feeling of affinity among its dwellers. This symbolic dimension cannot be introduced as a mere pragmatic

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[5] Or – to use the Vitruvian terminology dear to theorists of architecture and design – the 'commodity, firmness and delight' of the European edifice.

afterthought aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the European construct *post facto*: it needs to be integral to the building process itself.

If the geography of Eymerich fiction underscores the dispersed nature of resistance to the homogenizing drive of European integration, its architectural tropes abound in 'mobilizing' symbolism. Heterodox groups in Eymerich novels are characteristically confined within the walls of a specific edifice, usually a castle or a convent, the architecture of which is an unequivocal expression of the ideology, cosmology and the sense of self of the dissenters.

In Eymerich fiction, the reader's attention is drawn to the subterranean layers of architecture, to acknowledge the different strata of the palimpsest that is European history. For example, in the Gerona cathedral, the underground is as vast as the edifice above: 'The reason for this is that different places of worship have been laid over one another on the site for centuries: a visigothic basilica, a mosque, a Christian church built during the reign of Charlemagne'. That is why, if one entered the underground through an irregular fissure behind the apse, 'one could see a succession of rooms and colonnades without ornaments, covered with cobwebs and oozing with humidity' (2000) [6].

Just like the narrative framework of Eymerich fiction, its architectural tropes abound with marvellous elements. Architecture, says Evangelisti, is never produced fortuitously. It always has a symbolic meaning: 'think of the cathedrals, of their proportions, of their

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[6] '*I sotterranei della cattedrale di Gerona avevano un'ampiezza che rivaleggiava con quella dell'edificio sovrastante. Ciò dipendeva dal fatto che vari edifici di culto si erano sovrapposti, nei secoli, sullo stesso poggio: una basilica visigota, una moschea, una chiesa cristiana costruita ai tempi di Carlo Magno. Di conseguenza, accedendo al sottosuolo attraverso una fessura irregolare che si apriva dietro l'abside, si scopriva una successione di stanze e di colonnati senza ornamenti, carichi di ragnatele e stillanti umidità.*'

Page numbers are not provided, since I am referring to the e-book version of the novel (see Bibliography).

direction' (2000) [7]. The close relationship between architectural forms and the belief systems of their occupants in Eymerich fiction is best exemplified by the fantastic castle of Montiel in the novel *Il Castello di Eymerich* (*Eymerich's Castle*). This castle is a heterotopia (Foucault), in that it is literally a place of otherness, a sanctuary of hybridity. Its form – the geometry of which is imagined as an architectural replica of the ten Sefirot of the Kabbalistic tree of life[8] – reflects the *imago mundi* shared by the castle's creators and dwellers.

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[7] *'Le architetture non sono mai prodotto del caso. Pensate alle cattedrali, alle loro proporzioni, al loro orientamento.'*

[8] In the Kabbalistic tradition, the Tree of Life is a graphic depiction of the spatial relationship between ten divine attributes, or Sefirot, which together represent God's being and appearance in the cosmos and include male and female principles. Evil is understood as a consequence of a cosmic rupture in this system, and redemption can only be achieved through restoration of the divine order.
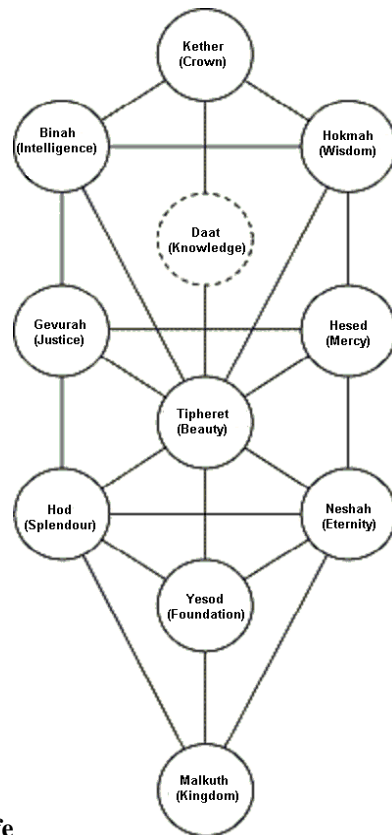
Figure: Tree of life

Evangelisti's story of the origin of the castle is related to an early fourteenth-century massacre of the local Jewish population following a plague epidemic. It was then, says Evangelisti, that many Jews of the province of Calatrava sought refuge on the hill of Montiel. There, they first created a hamlet, and then proceeded to build protective walls around it. Finally, under the patronage of Peter the Cruel,[9] they invited a group of architects from Gerona, knowledgeable in the Kabbalistic thought, to construct the ten towers, representing the ten Sefirot of the tree of life, and the twenty-two connecting underground tunnels, representing the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The spatial arrangement of the towers is thus imagined as a kind of memory theatre that

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[9] Peter I, also known as Peter the Cruel (1334–69) was the Spanish king of Castile and León from 1350 to 1369. He was known as 'King of the Jews', because he defended the Jewish population persecuted during the pogroms instigated by his half brother, Henry of Trastamara.

reproduces the tree of life. Nine of the ten cylindric towers are identical in size and shape, while the central tower, corresponding to the Sefirot Tipheret (Beauty), is slightly bigger. In Evangelisti's fiction the security of Montiel attracts both Jews and Christians, and Montiel soon becomes a prosperous township, bristling with thatched roofs and slim bell towers. The town's ethnic composition is rendered even more complex in the novel by the presence of thousands of Saracen soldiers, sent to Peter's aid by the Emir of Granada. The relationship between different groups within the castle is not described as trouble-free: while different alliances are routinely formed across ethnic and cultural borders, a potential for conflict is ever-present within the fabric of this fragile community.

The tenuous equilibrium does not last long. In Evangelisti's story, five Dominican experts in exorcism, representatives of five distinct 'nationalities' of medieval Christendom[10] are sent to Montiel by the Inquisition, to overcome the Jews and neutralize the supernatural powers of their castle. Their mission is to build twenty-two elevated trenches above the twenty-two tunnels built by the Jews and to decorate the walls of the tower of Malkuth (Kingdom) with demonic insignia and thus isolate it from the rest of the edifice. Since the tower of Malkuth represents the Shekinah, or the feminine side of the divinity, this intervention in the architecture of the castle will separate the 'feminine' from the 'masculine' side of the edifice, or 'self' from 'other', and thus give form to the sinister 'other side' of the tree of life, the tree of death.

Evangelisti attributes another perplexing characteristic to his fantasy castle of Montiel – its eastern tower, which corresponds to the Sefirot Kether (Crown), resembles the profile of a human face. On occasions, the ten towers twist, moan and scream and the whole castle wakes up and seems like a living being. More importantly, the violent movements of the castle are capable of diverting enemy attacks and thus saving the castle-dwellers from imminent harm. In Evangelisti's fantasy, the protective anthropomorphic castle is no other but the legendary Golem, a proto-Frankenstein creature brought to life out of

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[10] Castiglian, Catalan, French, Italian and German. They in fact address each other as '*padre Castigliano*', '*padre Catalano*' etc, since the secrecy of their mission does not allow them to use their 'real' names.

inanimate matter, to protect the Jewish people: the Sefirot Kether is Golem's head; Binah and Hokmah are his shoulders; the heart is Daat, the gigantic natural chasm excavated by subterranean waters; Gevurah and Hesed are the ribs; Tipheret is the navel; Hod and Neshah are the hips; Yesod is the conjunction between the knees; and Malkuth is the meeting point between the feet. Golem, says Evangelisti, 'has short life. He accomplishes his task, and dies immediately thereafter. The task of the castle was to give a signal: beware what may happen to you, if you try to annihilate a people that has a history' (2000)[11]. Having conveyed this message, the castle disappears inside the hollow belly of the hill at the end of the novel. The theme of Golem thus adds a new dimension to the treatment of architecture in the novel, by pointing at the contingent and temporary nature of built forms.

The figurative displacement of fantastic literature is not allegorical, but metonymic in nature (Todorov 65-74; Jackson 41). Accordingly, Evangelisti's novels do not substitute the European genealogy narrative along a vertical/metaphoric axis, but rather constitute a contingent narrative, which exposes the inconsistencies and the lacunae of European identity building. Clearly, Eymerich fiction explores the interrelations of self and other in the economy of European identity building, with the 'other' often designated as a supernatural, evil force. Its architectural tropes are heterotopias associated with 'time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect', or 'time in the mode of the festival' (Foucault 26). Yet, during the limited period of their transient existence, buildings such as the castle examined in this paper represent the entire history of humanity, seen through the eyes of their architects and occupants. The coincidence of opposites within the castle – male and female, self and other – is Evangelisti's homage to hybridity, the erasure of which results in the obliteration of the building itself. The temporal spread of Eymerich novels, in which the past, the present and the projected future work together to weave the story of an eternal present moment, resembles the chronotopic framework characteristic of national narratives, which binds together the consenting members of imagined national

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[11] *'Un golem ha vita breve. Porta a termine il proprio compito, e muore subito dopo. Il compito del castello era dare un segnale: attenti a ciò che può capitarvi, se cercate di annientare un popolo che ha una storia. Presumo che, raggiunto il proprio scopo, sia scomparso nel ventre cavo della collina.'*

communities. The themes that emerge from Eymerich fiction and in particular from its architectural tropes, as outlined in the paper, touch a chord with present-day discourses of Europeanness, which also abound in metaphors of architecture and building. Europe is said to be 'building' an ever-closer union, and the 'building' of European identity has been on the agenda of the architects of the European Union for at least three decades.[12] But, as the recent failure of the Constitutional project has confirmed, a European edifice that both safeguards its inhabitants and, more importantly, reflects their visions of self and society, may still be a fantasy in the making.

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[12] I am referring to the first attempt to define European identity in the document entitled 'Declaration on European Identity', issued by the then European Community in 1973.

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