

**THE MYTH OF THE ORIENT
PASSES THROUGH RAVENNA:
ENGLISH AND ITALIAN ARTISTS OF
THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*.**

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The East like the West – Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism*¹ – is not a clear, defined entity, or something which merely exists; nor is it only an idea, a product of culture, that is, an ‘orientalized’ Orient. Although fundamentally I may agree with this perspective, it is not the main concern of this paper: the usual typology adopted by so many Europeans of an Orient, real or imagined, attractive or perverse, the source of an endless and perhaps still unresolvable debate.

I will deal, instead, with the Orient as myth and fashion in Europe during the Romantic period; I will briefly analyze how it developed during the *fin de siècle*, intertwined with ‘the sense of an ending’ underlying the Decadent movement, and with the *loci* which years after years have taken on a symbolic value, as a true door to the East not only for the English and the Italian artists, but for the whole European culture: I mean Ravenna and Venice.

In other words, I will try to lead you along the road to Byzantium, following the marvellous, morbid, even terrifying atmosphere of oriental phantasmagorias, with which Thomas De Quincey captivated his readers in the *Confessions of an Opium Eater*; or cherishing the dreams and illusions, the longing for the Orient manifested by Gerard de Nerval in his *Voyage en Orient*.

This is, of course, the dream-like evocation of an imaginary Orient, conventionally designated as a place for intellectual and literary escape, which originated as *turqueries* after the French and English translations of the *Thousand and One Nights*, of which Beckford’s romance on the caliph Vathek was a prominent example during the vogue of the Gothic novel.

It is a poetry of the far-away and the exotic which was widespread in the 18th century *rococo* and picturesque in France and England, projecting western *coquetry* onto the shores of a

Bosphorous reconstructed for the entertainment of the sophisticated upper-classes. These are oriental rêveries of the same gossamer grace as the most refined lace *rocaille*. They have the same appeal for that domestic idleness which the seraglio's seclusion rendered highly seductive.

So, we can evoke secret gardens glistening with fountains and flowers; peacocks' feathers, trappings, dyed fabrics, janissaries as colourful as 'a tapestry of tulips'. I am here quoting from Lady Mary Wortely Montagu's travel diary, that noble *grand-touriste* of the routes along 18th century Bosphorous.

In this way, we are gliding, little by little, towards a vision of an Orient – be it souk, turkish bath, harem or bazar – which will be exploited and spoiled as a hunting preserve for academic realism in painting, in the 19th century. But it is also an attempt to re-establish an encounter, full of fascination, which can no longer be experienced except under the spell of art.

'All artists are lovers of the exotic', Mario Praz asserts in *Romantic Agony*,² in the wake of W.G. Wackenroder who had proclaimed: 'The Orient is a land of wonder'. While V. Hugo wrote in 1829, in his Preface to *Les Orientales*: 'Under the reign of Louis XIV we were Hellenists, now we are Orientalists'; and he continues by saying that Oriental colours have been imprinted upon all his thoughts and fantasies out of their own sheer energy.

'Orient', etymologically, means 'to rise'; the journey to the Orient is often a metaphor and a symbol of the origin of life and poetry, the *topos* which underlies that quest which, for the Romantics, became mainly a descent into the soul. The greatest poems of the Romantic age look to the Orient in search of the lost *arké*. The same sense of loss can be found in Keats', or in Leopardi's poetry, if we recall to our mind, for example, the poem 'Alla primavera o delle favole antiche'. As Leopardi emphasizes in his 'Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica': 'Che bel tempo era quello nel quale ogni cosa era viva secondo l'immaginazione umana, e viva umanamente cioè abitata o formata di esseri uguali a noi ! (...) in cui la fantasia nostra libera e senza freno impetuosa e instancabile spaziava. (...) Quanta materia di poesia, quanta ricchezza quanto vigore quant'efficacia quanta commozione quanto diletto'.

In a poet like Byron, the two attitudes I have just described coexist. On the one hand, he disdainfully dismisses the fashion of *turqueries* and oriental *tours* (today we would use the expression 'mass-tourism'), with the irony that characterizes him; he also parodies Orientalism in literary fashion. I quote from *Beppo*, 51:

'Oh, that I had the art of easy writing,...
How quickly would I print (the world delighting)
A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale;
And sell you, mixed with western sentimentalism,
Some samples of the finest Orientalism'.

On the other hand, Byron sets out on a real and metaphorical journey to the East, in search of a kind of beauty whose relics or gems only poetry can attempt to restore, though in fragments or sparks. Thus, in Byron, the oriental *masquerade*, the disguise in grand-bazar style, is coupled with his pilgrimage in search of the abode of eternal beauty in Italy and later in Greece, the cradle of all myths that the devastation of time and the even more violent devastation brought about by Turkish domination had reduced to a mere relic of a lost treasure, both splendid and terrible. In Byron there is already that sense of an ending and of decadence which was to characterize exoticism in Europe at the end of last century. As he writes in *Childe Harold* (II,10), where he shows the inconsistency of dreams, the useless and illusive constructions of the mind:

'...nor even can Fancy's eye
Restore what Time hath laboured to deface'.

It seems that the same fate is shared by Greek myth and oriental fable. In the second half of the 19th century, up to the end of the century, when *fin de siècle* assumes a truly *epoké* meaning, the fashion of the Orient and the decadent sense of an ending are inextricably bound.

Whether the Orient be seen as a place of escape *par excellence*, of surrender to lascivious pleasures; or as a land of adventure, of the discovery of *otherness* – the mania for the Orient spread throughout Europe, from England to France, from the Netherlands to Austria and Italy. Once again, it is the *Voyage en Orient* that will characterize the great itineraries of the Decadent artists at the end of the last century in Europe, to destinations such as Egypt,

Persia or Turkey, but mainly to Istanbul (Constantinople or Byzantium, however you want to call it), and to the Italian ports and gates to the East, like Ravenna or Venice, 'la Venus de l'Adriatique' in T. Gautier's words.

In all these places, the glitter of gold and gems merges with a sense of death, in the search for something undefined which vanishes just as it is about to be grasped.

'Désespoir d'une beauté qui s'en va vers la mort', Maurice Barrès writes in *La mort de Venise*. Venice, like Aigues Mortes, like Byzantium, are nostalgic places, in which beauty wastes away under the incumbent shadow of death.

As Mario Praz puts it in the chapter entitled 'Byzantium': 'The period of antiquity with which these artists of the *fin de siècle* liked the best to compare their own, was the long Byzantine twilight, that gloomy apse gleaming with dull gold and gory purple, from which peer enigmatic faces, barbaric yet refined, with dilated neurasthenic pupils'.

So, Sardanapalus or Nero, Semiramis or Cleopatra, Theodora or Salomè reigned in paintings, novels and dramas for a few decades, while buildings in Oriental style rose everywhere, on both shores of the Ocean. Oscar Wilde, who hallows the myth of Salomè in his famous play, following in Byron's footsteps, had also written a poem entitled 'Ravenna' in his youth, 'musing on Ravenna's ancient name', and glorifying 'its turquoise sky which turned to burnished gold'. Later on, in *The Decay of Lying*,³ one of his most important essays, he detects in Byzantine art the model of art as artifice:

'The whole history of the arts in Europe is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike of the actual representation of any object in nature, and our own imitative spirit. Wherever the former has been paramount, as in Byzantium, Sicily or Spain, we have had beautiful and imaginative works in which the visible things of life are transmuted into artistic conventions, and the things that has not, are invented and fashioned for her delight'.

Arthur Symons chooses Ravenna for his *Cities of Italy*, which for him epitomizes the quintessence of Italian towns, and Costantinople as the quintessence of his *Cities, tout court*.⁴

Like the Italian writer E. De Amicis, who I will deal with later, Symons loses his way in a journey which is both real and imaginary:

'At the end of my first day in Costantinople, I find myself bewildered, as if I have lost my way in my own brain. I seem to have been blown through a whirlwind, out of which I can clutch nothing tangible. (...) To walk in Costantinople is like a fierce and active struggle. One should look at once before, behind, and underneath one's feet; before, behind and underneath one's feet some danger or disgust is always threatening'.

But, he also adds:

'Somewhat hidden, under the dust of this city, under the earth itself, or crumbling, a broken wall, a burnt column, the arch of an aqueduct, there is another older Costantinople, not quite at rest, which looks out on this secret, tragic, spectacular city, the one real thing there'.

Edmond De Amicis, on the other hand, anticipating a taste for postmodern mixage in the artistic process, has no doubts about Costantinople, and writes:

'A ogni cento passi tutto muta. Qui siete in una strada d'un sobborgo di Marsiglia; svoltate: è un villaggio asiatico; tornate a svoltare: è un quartiere greco; svoltate ancora: è un sobborgo di Trebisonda. (...) È un disordine, una confusione d'aspetti disparati, un succedersi continuo di vedute imprevedibili e strane, che dà il capogiro'.⁵

For W.B. Yeats, 'Byzantium represented a civilization in which all forms of thought, art and life interpenetrated one another, and where the artist 'spoke to multitude and a few alike'.⁶

In this way, 'Sailing to the holy city of Byzantium',⁷ Yeats wrote pages which came to embody the general mood of an age. Byzantium, Venice and Ravenna, are cities of myth, beacons of civilization and beauty; and, at the same time, cities of silence and death (D'Annunzio's 'Città morte'), where the gold and blue of the mosaics is mingled with the decaying of malarial marshes, at once splendor and ruin. Hoffmansthal's or Thomas Mann's Venice, Shelley's or Pound's Ravenna are described in the same way. In his turn, Henry James, when visiting Italy, observed the deathly atmosphere lurking beneath the apparent splendour, 'the mortal sunny sadness of the stagnant Ravenna'. Quoting his *Words in Italian Hours*⁸: 'the total aspect of the place, its sepulchral stillness, its absorbing perfume of evanescence and decay and mortality, confounds the distinctions and blurs the details'.

Gabriele D'Annunzio, who more than once celebrates Ravenna in his poems and dramatic pieces, shares with James the interpretation of the city as a sinister and mysterious place, but adds to the picture echoes of past glories and power.

'Gravida di potenze è la tua sera
tragica d'ombra, accesa dal fermento
dei fieni, taciturna e balenante.

Aspra ti torce il cor la primavera;
e, sopra te che sai, passa nel vento
come polline il cenere di Dante'.⁹

But it is above all in the building of his Villa, 'il Vittoriale', that D'Annunzio raises a monument of great imagination and total whimsicality to a taste of mixage and forgery which we can even define as 'Orientalism', in the sense I have tried to describe up to now.

And it will be the Ravenna of T.S. Eliot who, in 'Lune de miel' (a poem written in French), sharply contrasts the realistic description of the honeymoon couple scratching their legs swollen by mosquito bites and defending themselves from the heat and the bed bugs, with a *surréal* portrait of the city of decaying beauty and art:

'...une nuit d'été, les voici à Ravenne,
à l'aise entre deux draps, chez deux centaines de punaises;
la sueur estivale, et une forte odeur de chienne.
Ils restent sur le dos écartant les genoux
de quatre jambes molles tout gonflées de morsures.(...)
On relève le drap pour mieux égratigner.
Moins d'une lieue d'ici est Saint Apollinaire
en Classe, basilique connue des amateurs
de chapitiaux d'acanthé que tournoie le vent'

In its inexorable decay, Ravenna's ruins and marshes emanate a 'bad smell mixed with glory, the smell of the death of a city which has lost all of its beauty'. This is the Ravenna described by Louis Mc Niece, a city which prefigures the corruption and degradation of our century, doomed to fade without beauty or memory. It is also the Ravenna of *Deserto rosso*, the movie by M. Antonioni, which has almost become a filmic archetype. And many other examples could be added to this list.

When the end (of a century, of life, of the world) is near at hand, the sense of time undergoes unforeseeable metamorphoses, and history – as Jean Baudrillard points out in his recent *L'illusion de la fin*¹⁰ – drastically reverses its course. It dilates beyond measure, and so minutes turn into hours, and hours turn into days, in the vain attempt to postpone the end. Or, time may contract as if flirting with the impending disaster accelerating the end, in order to escape a condition in which it would be useless to survive.

'It is the end, the end, a dying love's dance;
no more pretence, sweet friend; it is the end, the end.'

Arthur Symons languidly writes. And W.B. Yeats apocalyptically proclaims: 'After us, the Savage God !'.

Oscar Wilde, 'divine Oscar' in Harold Bloom's words, my favorite dandy of the *fin de siècle*, tried to play a game with time, though unsuccessfully, by idealizing youth. However, the inexorable movement forward of life, progress and the future destroyed his illusions.

'Suddenly, Time stopped for him. Yes: that blind, slow-breathing thing crawled no more, and horrible thoughts – Time being dead – raced numbly on in front, and dragged a hideous future from its grave, and showed it to him' *(Dorian Gray, chapt, XIV)*.¹¹

It is a future which appears to emerge from the past, thus completing a temporal circle which, far from being enchanted *kairos*, evokes *kronos*, the dreadful father who devours his children.

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Fin de siècle can be taken in its literal meaning, as the longing for the end of a limited, human concept of time (a century, for example) as opposed to the eternity of art; or, the term can be taken in a historical sense to indicate the end of the 19th century, a century like other centuries. But, if we are to trust Dorian Gray's words, it could mean the end of the world, both as an existential and historical concept: 'Fin de siècle, Fin du globe. I wish it were Fin du globe – said Dorian with a sigh – Life is a great disappointment'.

A final word on the idea of apocalypse, seen not merely as an end, but as a new beginning, as a renewal of poetic energy and hope, can be derived once more from D'Annunzio, and again is

Ravenna which represents a splendid fount of Ecumenism, an eternal city of beauty. Just as the vision described by J.L. Borges in his *Story of the Warrior and the Captive*, where the city is evocated like a fairytale castle:

'The wars bring him to Ravenna and there he sees something he has never seen, or has not seen in such a plenitude. He sees the day and cypresses and marble. He sees a whole that is complex and yet without disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, dwellings, stairways, urns, capitals, of regular and open spaces. None of these artifacts impresses him as beautiful; they move him as we might be moved today by a complex machine of intelligence. Perhaps it is enough for him to see a single arch, with an incomprehensible inscription in eternal Roman letters. Abruptly, that revelation, the City, blinds him and renews him'.¹²

And now from D'Annunzio:

'Ravenna, glauca notte rutilante d'oro,
sepulcro di violenti custodito
da terribili sguardi,
cupa caverna grave d'un incarco
imperiale, ferrea, costrutta
di quel ferro onde il Fato
è invincibile, spinta dal naufragio
ai confini del mondo,
sopra la riva estrema !
Ti loderò pel funebre tesoro
ove ogni orgoglio lascia un diadema.
Ti loderò pel mistico presagio
che è nella tua selva quando trema,
che è nella selvaggia febbre in che tu ardi.
O prisca, un altro eroe tenderà l'arco,
dal tuo deserto verso l'infinito.
O testimone, un altro eroe farà di tutta
la tua sapienza il suo poema'. (da *Le Laudi*)¹³

Notes

1. E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 1978.
2. M. Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica (The Romantic Agony)*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1930 (la edizione).
3. O. Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' in *Complete Works*, Collins, London 1948.
4. A. Symons, *Cities*, London, Dent, 1903.
5. E. De Amicis, *Costantinopoli*, Treves, Milano 1877.

6. D.J. Gordon and J. Fletcher, 'Byzantium' in J. Unterecker (ed. by), *Yeats. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs 1982.
7. W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, McMillan, London 1985.
8. H. James, *Italian Hours*, New York, The Ecco Press, (1909) – 1987.
9. G. D'Annunzio, *Laudi, Elettra*, Mondadori, Milano 1964.
10. J. Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la fin*, Galiléé, Paris 1992.
11. O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in op. cit. In these very pages, Wilde praises Venice's romantic atmosphere, through the lines of T. Gautier's *Emaux et Camées*.
12. J.L. Borges, *A Personal Anthology*, Grove Press, New York 1967.
13. G. D'Annunzio, *op. cit.*.