The Journey as an Initiatic Experience in Maxime Du Camp’s Travel Accounts

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Abstract: Maxime Du Camp, a 19th century French writer and famous photographer, who is still being rediscovered nowadays, was a close friend and travelling companion of Gustave Flaubert, together with whom he made in 1849 a classic journey to the Middle East, which he illustrated in his own travel accounts. This paper will explore Du Camp’s writings in terms of the significance of journey (mainly the journey to the Orient), which in the author’s vision becomes an initiatic experience, a passage rite, an act of sacralization of a profane itinerary, by means of which he can return to the origins of our European culture and civilisation, to what Mircea Eliade called our ‘cosmogonical and intellectual cradle’. Travelling means for the writer appropriating a different world, it confers on him a new identity, a new status: he has the privilege of seeing and contemplating an exotic space which is for Du Camp a source of spiritual enjoyment, a space which he desires to know from inside, as an ethnologist. For this purpose he renounces the European costume, rhythm and lifestyle, choosing to live like a genuine Oriental. This article aims to illustrate that for Maxime Du Camp the journey also signifies a quest to find his own Self, an attempt to find an answer to his identitary dimension and, more importantly, to the ultimate question: what is the meaning of life?

Keywords: journey to the Orient, initiatic experience, passage rite, new identity

1. Introduction

An expression of the penchant for an interdisciplinary analysis and for a postmodern revalorization of the difference, of the otherness, the interest we take nowadays in the travel literature, which is a different type of discourse, but not stranger to the literary canon, is continuously increasing.

Our paper is focused on the significance of journey in the travel accounts of Maxime Du Camp, a French writer and a pioneer in collotype photography (he is Gustave le Gray’s disciple), who travelled widely with his close friend, the French novelist Gustave Flaubert, his books being the first to be illustrated with his own photographs.

In Du Camp’s vision, journey can associated to a spectacle, to an initiation into another world, very different from his own one. The mystical connotations are recurrent in his travel accounts: he considers himself a ‘pilgrim of art and nature’, a ‘pilgrim of sunsets and landscapes’, his travels throughout the ancient world are often compared to ‘pilgrimages’. Interestingly, for the writer, the meaning of these terms refers rather to the initiatic value of the trip, the appropriation of another world, which becomes for him a locus sacrum.

Rashid Amirou, the author of ‘Tourism Imaginary and Travel Sociabilities’ an excellent book on the imaginary of travelling, stated that the journey to the Orient is a real passage rite, a process of sacralization of a

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secular itinerary, having a initiatory, social value, which allows the return to the origins of our culture, to what the ‘cosmogonic and intellectual cradle’ to "Center", which Mircea Eliade associates with the experience of the sacred. The author adds that the route of the journey to the Orient made by Maxime Du Camp and Gustave Flaubert in 1849 gives us the model of what was to become later on an ideal itinerary: Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Asia Minor, Constantinople, Athens, Greece.

In his book, The Journey to the Orient3, Berchet also wrote that if the journey to the East in the nineteenth century took the ritual character of collective celebration, it was because this had a value initiatory, social value: affirming an order of Western culture.

In Du Camp’ vision, travel, culture and sacredness are intertwined, as shown in the excerpt from the introduction to his travel account, The Nile:

‘Dear Theophilus, you’ve often criticized me for not telling others about my travels, for not writing about what I saw in the luminous countries I passed through, and for not mentioning the strange customs I noticed. You made me see that the genius of modern literature is essentially traveller and, each one, according to his own ability, among our demi-gods, had tried to tell his contemporaries about the wanderings he had done’.4

The author refers to famous personalities such as Chateaubriand, Byron, Hugo, the latter earning from him the title of ‘preacher of the Orient’. Camp presents himself as equal to the great writers and travelers that are highly remarkable, since they are ‘pilgrims of the future’ Thus, his journey to the Orient could take the form of a religious experience, of a duty to accomplish on behalf of literature and culture.

It would be interesting to note that with Du Camp the term ‘pilgrimage’ is symbolically associated with the search of an unusual spiritual communion with his ancestors of Arab origin, to revive, by his own travels, their valour, bravery, their spiritual strength, their nomadism. He confessed that he travelled to the Oriental space as a hajj in search of a perfect Mecca. It is a symbolic journey from the profane to the sacred, from the inner world, to the outer, real one, from the periphery to the Center. The East becomes in his perception not only a cultural cradle, that of the European civilization, to which he belonged body and soul, but also an individual, personal, through his Arabic parentage he is particularly proud of. He appears to enjoy considering that he carries with him the "vestiges" of the great Spanish travellers. In Daniel Oster’s opinion, he travels across the Oriental space in order ‘to inventory his genetic hieroglyphs’:

My family established in France, from Spain long ago and there is a tradition among my family saying that that we have Arab blood in our veins. I would not be surprised: the delightful sensation that I was penetrated by all the time I lived in a tent, I slept on the sand and under the sky that I went to the unknown as a hajj in search of an ideal Mecca is perhaps nothing else than the unconscious happiness of coming back to the lives of my ancestors5.

We can identify with the writer an authentic travelling vocation, a keen desire for freedom, for the elsewhere, for distant areas, different from the ordinary native space and where he dreams of spending his entire life. A man who lives at home, in his country, said Rachid Amirou, ‘lives in the profane, he lives in the sacred when he goes on a journey.’ It is this sacred space that Du Camp wants to achieve, and the fact that he cannot stay there all his life is perceived as a non-fulfillment of his destiny of absolute traveler. In his view, even the death of a true traveller is regarded as a desirable virtue that gives it a special status:

‘I was born traveller, if the incidents of my life I had not obliged me to remain in Paris up to my thirtieth year, it is likely that my freedom and loneliness would have thrown me into the African continent. After the threshold of old age, coming back to look backwards at the days that passed, I regret not having been to the Zambezi, Niger, Congo, and I feel jealous of Stanley and I envy Livingstone’s death’.6

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4 Maxime Du Camp, Le Nil, Paris, Pillet fils aîné, 1854, p. 7
6 Ibidem, p. 102
He is a ‘homo viator’ a pilgrim walking towards a physical and spiritual Otherness which gives him a mental availability, openness to the diversity, heterogeneity of the highly cosmopolitan space he visited. This journey is a transforming experience that makes him regard his fellows and his native spaces with the eyes of a homesick, who wishes to escape continuously. The sadness and boredom aroused by the ‘cold clouds’ and ‘misty sky’ of France are opposed to the nostalgia for the sun, the vastness and grandeur of the Otherness: *I'll go without regret and sorrow throughout the whole world! From all these pilgrimages throughout the ancient world, I have always returned with an unbearable sadness, with a continuous desire to return to the sun, and an incurable deep, nostalgic boredom, that I carry as I can in the cold clouds of our misty sky. At night in the streets of Damascus, when the sentinels shouted at me: Who goes there?, I was always ready to answer: Cosmopolitan!*

The Journey to the Orient is also a journey in search of his own Self, a journey to the Center, to a world he has learned to idealize, which is opposite to the one that he belongs to de facto, and that disappointed his ideals. This is an awareness that offers Du Camp a confinement into a representational space, populated by myths, symbols, where he makes use of the Otherness like a mirror of his own being, for his reflexive approach; he hopes to reconcile opposites and give sense to a concrete existence which does not accomplish him, wishing to find an answer to the identitary dimension, and most importantly, to the ultimate question: what is the meaning of life?

The deep dissatisfaction which the author is feeling and trying to exorcise during and through his long journey towards peace, has multiple sources. The genetic Arabic inheritance the author promotes, albeit without any certain proof, is perhaps one of the ways of reconciliation with himself, of diminishing his own discontent. It is interesting to note that the writer is, however, very sensitive to the feelings of regret, nostalgia felt by most travellers, pilgrims, adventurers, soldiers, servants to their homelands, even if he does not share these feelings, detaching himself from them; it remains a mystery to the author, whose lyrical interrogations concerning these feelings remain without any answer.

It is only journey that gives him the enjoyment of independence, the freedom to escape his own self, with its pains and sorrows, to escape his social environment, with its conventions, and clichés. Travelling can fill the emptiness created by his life’s failures, disappointments, betrayals, and offer incessant spiritual enjoyment. It is only by travelling that one can contemplate distant civilizations, with their exotic manners and customs, with historical monuments, grandiose landscapes. Consequently, the mediocrity of home space contrasts with the exaltation offered by the Otherness, the Elsewhere:

> Friendship has its own betrayals, love has always hidden somewhere the cancer that is devouring it, work is full of endless discouragements and boundless weariness, ambition is a foolish pride that feeds on disguised needs of domesticity, it is only travels that never lie and give us everything they promised: each day they bring nourishment to our insatiable mind, they give landscapes, teeming cities, magnificent rivers, ruins of robust civilizations.

The journey also offers him the privilege of knowing and contemplating an exotic world that he is seeking to appropriate, to understand from within, as an ethnologist, by the immersion into the slums of the cities and villages visited, by knowledge of the local manners and customs, especially those of the Islamic culture, the traveller turning out to be a sensible and knowledgeable observer. Sometimes he starts to learn the local language; before leaving for the East, he devotes himself to reading many books on Muslim traditions, the most notable one being the *Oriental Library* by Herbolot, often referred to in his travel accounts.

Moreover, he and Gustave Flaubert, his traveling companion in the Orient, attend in Cairo following specific courses on this topic with Arab scholar recommended by Lambert. They take notes on a variety of topics, such as: birth, circumcision, marriage, pilgrimage, religious rites and ceremonies, funerals, the last judgment, clothing, food courses, as well as language of the Other. This is a very important experience for travellers who seek to learn and plan at the time to make use of this information as an authentic source of new literary works.

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7 *Ibidem*, p. 156
8 *Le Nil, op. cit.*, p. 73
If the practice of travelling attaches great importance to visual processes, this is due to the fact that the essential activity of any traveller is that of looking, of watching: the traveler makes use of his status to accurately look, to look at everything, even when he normally should look away from people praying in a mosque, from the sick or from those dying in a hospital, from unveiled women. But what might usually appear to be sacrilegious or prying eyes is easily tolerated to travellers, especially in the case of a writer traveller who should always be watchful. (Dolores Toma in *Le voyage, entre la féerie et le néant* dedicates a whole chapter to the ‘Look of the Good Traveller’, as the main instrument of the art of travelling, making reference to several implicit visual techniques of the art of travelling.) It is a privilege and a duty for him to watchfully look at everything that is easily accessible, but also at what is prohibited and hidden.

Alain Buisine refers to a ‘visual voracity’ and a ‘scopic relentlessness of the traveller, whose analytical and scrutinizing gaze takes hold of everything. During a religious procession, for example, where people were solemnly bringing into the city the sacred carpet, Du Camp put on Arab clothes to mingle more easily with devotees, he held a place in a shop located on the route of the procession, waiting patiently to see all the development of the event. Thus he penetrates into private spaces, which are closed or hidden to foreigners and does not even hesitate to corrupt the other in order to buy his benevolence, so as to learn new information on very interesting topics such as the divine service of a mosque.

Rachid Amirou affirms that journey is a passage rite, an initiation rite that can give a ‘real transmutation, a new identity’. The traveler enjoys the privileges of a new status: the old self dies and another one comes into being, replacing it, the rite being seen as a symbolic death. Sometimes it is Du Camp who takes this new identity when he renounces the European costume, style and pace of life from home and lives in an Oriental lifestyle. He adopts the Oriental costume, with the turban and the fez, which give him access to places otherwise forbidden, often indulging himself to the pleasures, to the delights of life of the Other: he loves Turkish courses, drinks savorous coffee, he smokes pipe, narghilé and chibouk and takes joy in having Turkish bath.

His keen desire to know the local color of the countries he visits him to dwell at length on the music, the dancing, the costumes, the traditional meals. For those latter, he does not hesitate to adopt them, even though they are very different compared to European meals. Sometimes Du Camp travels aimlessly as a flaneur as an idler, interested in the unexpected, the new, the spectacular, the hidden. Evoking Constantinople, for which he shows an obvious predilection, he refers to its ‘enchanting aspects, always beautiful and always new’. He wanders through the city streets, admiring the houses, mosques, entering cafés, visiting bazaars, and unknown cosmopolitan neighborhoods. There he meets Greeks, Turks, Armenians, each with their customs, manners, language, that captivate the traveler by their exoticism and diversity:

He likes to mingle with the natives with a view to knowing them closely, to identifying them according to distinguishing marks. Besides, he likes to draw specific portraits to each nationality he meets, proving to be a very keen and knowledgeable observer of different features related to their habits, physical traits, temperament, attitudes. He recognizes the Turks according to their ‘seriousness’ of the Greeks after their ‘petulance’, the Jews according to their ‘instincts’, Armenians after their ‘nonchalance’, Bulgarians according to their ‘strength of Hercules’ and "childish gentleness’.

Particularly attached to the uniqueness and charm of the Muslim culture, the traveller makes a plea in favour of its traditions, which are increasingly endangered by the influences of European civilization. He regrets the loss of ‘splendid Turkish costume of the past’, whose beauty and brightness is compared by the author with the sun itself; the turbans, jackets ‘gold-embroidered’ scarves, the ‘silk’ belts, the kaftans were all replaced by ‘narrow’ trousers and the ‘ugly’ coat of the European fashion:

‘Oh! Why did they leave off their splendid costume that was once so suited to their beautiful sun? Why did they abandon their muslin turbans, their cashmere scarves? Where are the weapons that shone brightly on their

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10 Rachid Amirou, *op. cit.*, p. 87
belt? What did they do to their battle helmets whose swan wings beat the air above their heads? Alas! They forgot all this ancient magnificence, and now they are walking entangled, sad and dishonored in our ugly coats and our tight trousers.11

The author thus suggests images of a fading, crepuscular world, which he considers himself responsible to disclose to others. Rachid Amirou makes reference to the ‘rescuing value’ of the good traveller’s accounts, a traveller who contemplates and evokes an unknown, forgotten, fading world. As an authentic ethnologist, he leaves the gregarious spaces, the populated routes in order to see exotic areas, in search of the uniqueness and intimacy of the indigenes and places. He often goes to the mountains, for which he feels a particular attachment, for meeting with community natives who have preserved across the centuries, their ethnic purity, their antique beauty, which has not been touched by the time, by the vicissitudes of history, by many conquerors of all times. In Greece, at Delphi, for example, he contemplates the women, children, men, a race he considers ‘privileged’ ‘predestined’ being made of the descendants of the people of Pericles. He valorizes them, not hesitating to contrast their features with those of the farmers in his country:

Men and women, everything is beautiful, especially in the mountains where the conquerors of all ages had less chances of mixing with the population. What was it like in the time of Pericles, as his time was the climax of Greece, as after twenty-three centuries of degeneration, of defeat, of oppression, they have remained so beautiful and so stylish! What difference from the French peasant; this has truly been a predestined race.12

It should be emphasized that travel, this passage rite, transforms the emotional experience of the traveler, making him much more sensitive to interpersonal relationships, whether, we refer to peasants, fellahs, beautiful women, slaves, beggars, children, who all impress him and touch him in different ways. To support this idea, we will quote the episode where, upon departure, the traveler feels very powerful emotions, regret, thinking that he would never see these people he met during his wanderings, even if they are strangers, who perhaps would normally leave him indifferent. This is the case of a very young beggar from Ibsamboul, who, which causes a deep sadness to him, because he understands that this is the last time he met her:

She galloped barefoot, showing everyone that piastre I had given her. She followed me to the boat and I came back sad, thinking about the huge emotion that we spend on the road for all stranger whom we will never ever see again.13

Moreover, he often refers to feelings of loss, desertion, grief he feels when having in mind the uniqueness of the things encountered in his journey, to a ‘heart-stifling oppression’ at the time of a separation, be it as indifferent as it can be, whether from a beautiful landscape, from a cosmopolitan city, or from a welcoming host, where he spent the night.

We can also notice the fact that in Du Camp’s vision, as time passes, the journey gradually transforms the traveller’s representation and perception of time: the present is lived a much more intensely, because the future is perceived as an uncertainty, and this may make travellers vulnerable. This is the reason why the mutual feelings of travelers are stronger, so they befriend easily: they give ‘a portion of the heart in a handshake’. Even their meetings, their conversations become real events that remain in the memory of travellers. As we have already stated, the temporal coordinates change, too: ‘We give in a few moments something which, under ordinary circumstances, would require weeks and months; after an hour we leave loving one another, not knowing if we will ever find meet again. There is no transition, we are already close friends, although we do not even know by what name to call ourselves.14

Thus, the perception of time changes, the author frequently passes through a timeless experience with each new journey he makes. As a matter of fact, these voyages are experienced by Du Camp like time breakouts, like

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12 Maxime Du Camp, Voyage en Orient (1848-1851), Notes, p. 511.
13 Ibidem, p. 115
14 Ibidem, p. 87
evasions from historical time, like moments when he is seeking and building his own self, during which he is taking joy in the spectacle of the Other, emotionally involving himself in the search for the essence of the Other.

3. References
Toma, Dolores, *Le voyage, entre la féerie et le néant*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2008,