

Between Painting and Writing: The Orient in Women's Travel Writing and Sackville West's *Passenger to Teheran*

Federica Frediani

During the 19th and the early 20th centuries, literary travel writers show an almost obsessive desire to overcome the discrepancy between the landscape they observed and their writing so as to fully depict an authentic reality. The effort dedicated to capturing images as well as examining aesthetic considerations on the relationship between literature, art and reality are both features of most travel accounts. Those who traveled to the East seem to be caught up in the urgency to translate their vision into words written down on paper; as writers, they are bewildered by the novelty and elusiveness of the very subject they wish to portray: the Orient¹.

The Orient, as Eugène Fromentin writes in his work *Une année dans le Sahel* (1859), reveals a kind of beauty unprecedented in Western

¹ The Orient of journeys and travelers analyzed in this paper refers to the Middle East although, as is known, when speaking of 'the Orient' the actual topography overlaps with an imaginary one whose shifting uncertain borders don't always coincide with places geographically in the East. Extensive studies from literary criticism regarding geographical political and ideological conceptions of the Orient have amply covered this topic; therefore, we shall limit ourselves to citing Edward Said, Billie Melman, and Jean-Claude Berchet. In Italy two important volumes have been published: Innocenti - Amalfitano 2007 and, more specifically on travels to the Orient, Brilli: 2009.

models of art and literature, to the point that Western aesthetic canons are disrupted.

Même quand [l'Orient] est très-beau, il conserve je ne sais quoi d'entier, d'exagéré, de violent, qui le rend excessif, et c'est un ordre de beauté qui, ne rencontrant pas de précédents ni dans la littérature ancienne ni dans l'art, a pour premier effet de paraître bizarre. [...] Il échappe aux conventions, il est hors de tout conventions, il est hors de toute discipline, il transpose, il intervertit tout; il renverse les harmonies dont le paysage a vécu depuis de siècles. [...] C'est le pays par excellence du grand dans les lignes fuyantes, du clair et de l'immobile, - des terrains enflammés sous un ciel bleu, c'est-à-dire plus clairs que le ciel, ce qui amène, notez-le bien, a tout moment des tableaux renversés; - pas de centre, car la lumière afflue par tout; pas d'ombres mobiles. (Fromentin 1859: 262, 266-267).

This strangeness is both a natural and a cultural phenomena; even the usual time-space coordinates are inadequate to describe a landscape with no center or moving shadows, nor any of the traditional landmarks of European landscape artists. The framework of Western art and the rigid formal patterns of landscape painting (e.g. Rosa, Poussin, Hackert), established in the 18th century, are unable to capture or contain the anomalies of the Orient and its surrounding landscape. The interpretive models of what is 'picturesque' or 'sublime', deeply ingrained in the perception of the traveler-observer, are shattered when confronted with this new 'order of beauty': Eugène Fromentin even doubts that the Orient can be interpreted since the interpretive processes itself, with its inadequate categories, may result in the destruction of the Orient itself (cfr. *ibid.*: 261).

In capturing the images and transposing them into painting or writing, one strays into slippery and deceptive territory as Roger Benjamin points out when he speaks of an «Oriental mirage» (Benjamin 1997: 7). Photographers and painters, strongly conditioned by their Eurocentric and ethnographically oriented vision, suddenly find themselves faced with depicting something that is elusive and evanescent. The Orient is unquestionably a concentration of mirages

and therefore represents what is the driving force behind every journey; what Melville calls «the image of the ungraspable phantom of life» (Melville 1994: 39).

To approach and portray Oriental scenes, the traveler-painters are obliged, exactly like ethnographers, to strip themselves of their culture of origin and not be confused or overwhelmed by the shimmer of the Orient, fleeting by definition. Nurtured by European culture, hazy images move against the background of these illusory visions-images of a place of seduction, fascination and perdition.

As is common to all the arts, the desire to replicate what is 'real' must face the difficulty of finding elements that are comprehensible and recognizable to potential European readers. Once again Fromentin, in the pages of his diary *Un année dans le Sahel*, wonders how it is possible to arouse the interest of the European public for these unknown places and, above all, how it is possible to achieve a plausible, sensitive and intelligible 'tableau' of such a unique country, and render acceptable the most unconventional images through the usual means of expression (cfr. Fromentin 1859: 266).

Faced with the limits of language and a lack of words, the writer-travelers draw upon the tools of painting, often making use of meta-literary references. Painting gives the best reflection of reality and of the images focused on the retina. For this very reason, it becomes common practice to refer to, and sometimes even rely on, the works of Orientalist landscape painters when words fail to express the writer's impressions. This device is strategically adopted in order to make unusual people and places seem realistic and familiar to the public. This in turn leads to an exchange of references and citations that, in some cases, also contribute to the spread of stereotyped images.

Women travelers - who, for the sake of conventional norms, describe their writing as private, occasional and amateur - resort to this device even more frequently. One case in point is who, in *Asie Mineure et Syrie: Souvenirs de Voyages*, regrets not being Decamps so that she could portray the 'wild' and 'proud' figure of a horseman (Trivulzio di Belgiojoso 1858)². Later, in describing one of the riders of his escort, she recalls the Arab portraits of Horace Vernet. Another

² Gabriel-Alexandre Decamps (1803-1860) visited Syria and Asia Minor in 1828.

example can be found with the Countess of Gasparin who, when traveling near Alexandria, describes the landscape as a «tableau à la Claude Lorrain» (Comtesse de Gasparin 1850: 26).

These citations indicate a significant shift in that both writers free themselves from the position of being the *subject* of aesthetic observation, thereby becoming critical observers themselves³. In so-called Orientalist art, but not only that genre, women are depicted in moments of intimacy such as the bath or in the harem, as illustrated in the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, Etienne Liotard that are tinged with the colors of *A Thousand and One Nights*⁴.

Vita Sackville-West opens her account of a trip to the East, *Passenger to Teheran* (1926), with a reflection on the failure of aesthetic language when faced with reality, on the sense of the journey, and on the literature and its forms that give an account of travel. She introduces her book with a meta-textual reflection on the fundamental issues regarding the relationship between art and reality, but she also poses innovative and unconventional questions about the characteristics and the value of travel literature.

In 1926, Sackville-West left on her first trip to Persia, which lasted about four months. It was apparently a “traditional” journey in the sense that the writer was joining her husband Harold Nicholson, the British consul in Teheran. However, *her* purpose for traveling differed greatly from the accepted norms; Vita Sackville-West refused to establish her residence in Teheran simply as “the consul’s wife”, thus refusing the role of ‘the wife who follows her husband’, for centuries one of the only types of travel permitted to women – a fate shared by many aristocratic women who had travelled and written of the Orient. Among them Lady Mary Montagu stands out as a model for women travel writers who visited that part of the world now known as the Middle East. Her *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1717) significantly influenced orientalist painting to the point that Ingres, the most well known of the *orientalistes en chambre*, drew inspiration from it for his famous paintings *Le Bain turc* and *La grande Odalisque*. Ingres, who never

³ Women approached art and aesthetics only marginally, as non-professionals. Cfr. Bolhs 1995.

⁴ Cfr. Thornton 1993.

travelled in the Orient, was moved by Lady Mary Montagu's letters to depict the *harem* and the *hammam* – quintessentially private inner rooms – absolutely forbidden to men.

The beginning of *Passenger to Teheran* is particularly significant: «Travel is the most private of pleasures» (Sackville-West 2007: 25). With this statement, the author seems to have reached full awareness of the position expressed by Sterne in *Sentimental Journey* where, for the first time, the utterly personal nature of the experience of travel is posited as well as the existence of various types of travelers. In this way, Sackville-West distances herself from eighteenth century canons, which prescribed 'objective' descriptions of reality. Soon after in the text, she explicitly describes her idea of travel:

One must concede then, and sadly, that travel is a private pleasure, since it consists entirely of things felt and things seen, - of sensations received and impressions visually enjoyed [...]. Travel is simply a taste, not be logically defended; nor standing in any need of defence, since it cannot be argued away, but remains there like a good concrete fact. (*Ibid.*: 29)

She writes of travel as a familiar experience, a personal pleasure that comes down to impressions that are seen or heard. Even in its tangibility, the travel experience is made up of fleeting images and sensations that are intensely private and essentially cannot be disclosed to others. It is this creative tension that allows the writer to restore the distinct atmosphere and spirit of a place, that *genius loci*, that pervades a site; the perceptible, yet intangible presence that has inspired writers and travelers and to which Vernon Lee dedicates an entire work⁵.

Vita Sackville-West accumulates adjectives that refer to the impossible, the impalpable, the elusive – «so subtle», «so tenuous», «so swiftly dispelled» (*ibid.*: 26).

The scenario of the journey, imagined with the help of readings and paintings, does not coincide with the real landscape:

It is a fine and delicate form of mental exercise to reconstruct a landscape, to capture so subtle a thing as the atmospheric

⁵ Vernon Lee 1899.

significance of a place, from the indications given; rather, reconstruction and capture are words too gross for the lovelier unreality that emerges, a country wholly of the invention, like those roseate landscapes of romantic Italian painters, but it is an art in itself, a luxury for the idle and speculative, repaid – with a freakish twist – when later on we tread with our mortal feet that place which for so long served as the imaginary country of our wanderings. (*Ibid.*)

Sackville-West continues to illustrate the difficulty of accurately recalling and describing places that one has known and seen in the past; what one remembers does not correspond to what one actually sees. Furthermore, she intertwines her views on the difference between art and reality with those regarding the limitations of letter-writing, one of the main forms of travel literature. She judges letters to be “intrinsically wrong” because they lack immediacy and require the active participation of the recipient, who must have a close relationship with the sender, to be able to visualize the descriptions of places; nevertheless, she holds that letters are worthy to be considered good literature. Vita Sackville-West quotes the letters of Lady Mary Montagu and Beckford, and limits her correspondence with Virginia Woolf to a private domain. Indeed, from Vita Sackville-West’s travel to the Orient, in addition to *Passenger to Teheran*, there remains a collection of Persian letters addressed to Virginia Woolf⁶. Several passages and anecdotes are recognizable as having ‘migrated’ from the private correspondence to the published book. It is precisely this transfer from one form to the other that is a traditional feature of travel writing.

Vita Fortunati, in her essay “The Metamorphosis of the ‘Travel Book’ in Vita Sackville-West’s *A Passenger to Teheran*”, identifies the innovative elements introduced by Vita Sackville-West in her travel book⁷. The changes mostly concern the lessening of both the autobiographical and ethnographic aspects. While places, people and landscapes are described, practical information and ethnographic curiosities, traditional features of travel accounts and especially, of women’s travel writing, give way to sensations and a flow of

⁶ Sackville-West 1984.

⁷ Fortunati 2001: 65-73.

associations that recall the 'stream of consciousness': an expression that evokes a world – or even many worlds – together.

One January morning, then, I set out; not on a very adventurous journey, perhaps, but on one that should take me to an unexploited country whose very name, printed on my luggage labels, seem to distil a faint, a far aroma in the chill air of Victoria station: Persia. It was quite unnecessary for me to have had those labels printed. They did not help the railway authorities or the porters in the least. But I enjoyed seeing my fellow-passengers whose destination was Mürren or Cannes, and if I put my bag in the rack myself I always managed to let the label dangle, a little flag of ostentation. (Sackville-West 1925: 31-32)

In the opening pages of *Passenger to Teheran* a vivid and eloquent image connects the beginning of the text to the end in a sort of iconic circle – that of a small orange baggage label whose bright color evokes the colors of Persia against the grey backdrop of Victoria Station. The name Persia calls to mind, as the adjectives *unexploited*, *faint*, and *far* suggest, a world that is faraway and shadowy, yet hints at *A Thousand and One Nights*. The journey – and the book – end with the same image. «Was I standing on the platform at Victoria, I who had stood on so many platforms. The orange labels dangled in the glare of the electric lamps. Persia, they said; Persia» (*ibid.*: 155).

The immediacy of the image and its strongly evocative power seem to derive from the art of photography even more than from literary narrative. Besides, as Susan Sontag writes, quotes and photographs, even as fragments of reality, often seem to be more authentic than literature⁸.

The circular movement that links the beginning to the end, flowing directly from the *stream of consciousness*, also reveals a fine touch with the structure of the text. Sackville-West emphasizes the difference in speed between the word and the image, as is illustrated in the passage below:

⁸ Cfr. Sontag 2008.

It may be that language, that distorted labyrinthine universe, was never designed to replace or even to complete the much simpler functions of the eye. We look; and there is the image in its entirety, three-dimensional, instantaneous. Language follows, a tortoise competing with the velocity of light; and after five pages of print succeeds in reproducing but a fraction of the registered vision. It reminds one of the Oriental who with engaging naivety thought that by photographing the muezzin he would record the notes of his call to prayer. The most – but what a most! – that language can hope to achieve is suggestion; for the art of word is not an exact science. (*Ibid.*: 27)

In Sackville-West's *travel book*, one notes a significant reduction in reference to painters, although the author compares, for example, Karnak to Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons* (*ibid.*: 45) and questions herself endlessly about the meaning of the work of art. At Karnak she writes: «What was a work of art if not the deliberate attempt to produce, artificially, such a harmony, which in nature emerges only by accident, and with the help of such adventitious advantages as Karnak itself now enjoyed, as, the moon casting shadows, and familiar constellations wryly tilted overhead» (*ibid.*).

In the text, one notes the paradigm shift that contributed to the spread of photography, due also to the fact that Sackville-West herself took photographs. In the travel diaries of the 20th century, the influence of photography was already evident and this shift, which had already begun in the second half of the 19th century, gains momentum. In fact, from 1839, photography contributed to the spread of the constructed artificial image of the Orient. Painters, including Horace Vernet, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Maxime Du Camp used photographs as preparatory materials for their paintings, replacing the collections of curiosities. Photo studios also gained popularity, especially in Cairo, operated by Europeans who provided travelers with catalogues and sets of photos that could also be made to order. This material – reconstructions of biblical scenes and daily life, portraits, panoramas of the city, of archeological sites, of ruins – was 'touched up' and adapted to the aesthetic taste of European travelers (cfr. Brill 2009: 178-179).

The effects of photography on art bring to mind Walter Benjamin and his famous *L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*

and Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* and even before them, Baudelaire's *Salon* of 1859.

Although photographs led to a change in vision and 'visions', making greater claims to authenticity and realism, the issue of subjectivity/objectivity of the representation remains the same.

Photographers are subject to the same cultural limitations as painters despite the availability of photography's technical innovations. For this reason, the Orient is still a mirage (cfr. Benjamin 1997: 7).

Bibliography

- Belgiojoso, Cristina Trivulzio di, *Asie Mineure et Syrie: Souvenirs de Voyages*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1858.
- Benjamin, Roger (ed.), *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*, Sidney, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997.
- Berchet, J. Claude, *Le Voyage en Orient: anthologie des voyageurs français vers le Levant*, Paris, Laffont, 1980.
- Bolhs, Elizabeth A., *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics 1716-1818*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Brilli, Attilio, *Il viaggio in Oriente*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.
- Fortunati, Vita - Monticelli, Rita - Ascari, Maurizio (eds.), *Travel writing and female imaginary*, Bologna, Pàtron Editore, 2001.
- Fromentin, Eugène, *Une année dans le Sahel*, Paris, Michel Levy Editeur, 1859.
- Gasparin, Valery Boissier, Comtesse de, *Journal d'un voyage au Levant*, Ducloux, Paris, 1850.
- Innocenti, Loretta - Amalfitano, Paolo (eds.), *L'Oriente. Storia di una figura nelle arti occidentali*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2007.
- Lee, Vernon, *Genius Loci. Notes on places*, Grant Richards, London, 1899.
- Melman, Billie, *Women's Orient: English Women and Middle East, 1717-1918. Sexuality, Religion and Work*, London, MacMillan, 1992.
- Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick* (1851), London, Penguin Books, 1994.
- Montagu, Lady Mary, *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1717), London, Virago Press, 1994.
- Sackville-West, Vita, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, London, Hutchinson, 1984.
- Id., *Passenger to Teheran* (1926), London-New York, Tauris Parke Paperback, 2007.
- Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (1977), London, Penguin, 2008.
- Thornton, Lynne, *La femme dans la peinture orientaliste*, Paris, ACR, 1993.

The author

Federica Frediani

Dottore di ricerca in Letteratura Comparata e traduzione del testo letterario (Università degli studi di Siena), è assistente di ricerca post-doc e docente all'Istituto Studi Mediterranei dell'Università della Svizzera italiana. Studia la letteratura di viaggio, con particolare riguardo per la produzione letteraria delle viaggiatrici dell'Ottocento e del primo Novecento. Si occupa di rappresentazioni e immagini letterarie del Mediterraneo, di cultural heritage e turismo. È autrice di articoli, saggi e volumi fra cui: *Uscire. La scrittura di viaggio al femminile: dai paradigmi mitici alle immagini orientaliste* (Diabasis, 2007). Con Anna Omodei Zorini ha curato *Ulisse: Variazioni di un mito mediterraneo* (Franco Angeli Editore, 2006); con Maria Teresa Giaveri, Anna Omodei Zorini, Vincenzo Salerno, Massimo Scotti ha curato *Lo sguardo azzurro. Costanti e varianti dell'immaginario mediterraneo* (Mesogea, 2008). Ha infine curato con Fernanda Gallo *Ethos repubblicano e pensiero meridiano* (Diabasis, 2011).

Email: frediani@unibg.it

The paper

Data invio: 30/06/2011

Data accettazione: 30/09/2011

Data pubblicazione: 30/11/2011

How to quote this paper

Frediani, Federica, "Between Painting and Writing: The Orient in Women's Travel Writing and Sackville West's *Passenger to Teheran*", *Between*, I.2 (2011), <http://www.Between-journal.it/>