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Travel and the Haunting Presence of Death in Maxime Du Camp's Writings

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Abstract

With the 19th century French writer Maxime Du Camp there is a close link between travel and a fascination with death (attraction and repulsion at the same time), which pervades the pages of his travel accounts and which from his perspective ennobles nature and life itself. The writer's feelings of death, loss, suffering give him a privileged status, since in nature, as in the work of art, death can engender life.

Keywords: travel, death, life, memory, writing, work of art.

It can be asserted that there is a close link between travel and death, and that a fascination with the latter - both attraction and repulsion - pervades every page of Du Camp's travel narratives. Indeed, in his *Souvenirs littéraires* (*Literary Recollections*), he admits that he wishes his final image in this world, at the approach of death, to be this: dressed in the travelling burnous he wore on all his journeys throughout the world, which proves his devotion to travel, in "the eternity that death brings." For Du Camp, travel is another way of dwelling in the symbolic presence of his dead, of their images and shadows, which follow him everywhere:

> "Those whom we have loved and lost are no longer where they were; but they are always and everywhere that we are." Nothing is more true. They live within us, they advise us, they change us; and the memory we retain of them is only the vibration of their presence within us.[1]

In attempting to describe the people he knew during his life in Paris and on his travels - most of them artists who were already dead - he states that he should seek his memories of them not in the cemetery, where the generations of which he was a contemporary lie at rest, but in what he calls "my private ossuary": his memory. The necropolis, toward which, as we shall show, Du Camp displays a particular attraction during his travels, becomes this time a mental, inward necropolis populated by memories. The traveller himself carries a "necropolis" on his journeys, which may suggest something of his approach to death.

The author sometimes states that death, in all its forms, ennobles nature and the landscapes he describes, and that feelings of death, loss, and suffering confer upon him a privileged, higher status; he places them in the service of his work. In nature, as in the work of art, death can engender life: the walls of the ruins he visits give birth to parasitic

[1] Maxime Du Camp, *Souvenirs litteraires* [*Literary Recollections*], Paris, Aubier, 1994, p. 86.

plants, just as the symbol of death suggested by the ruins gives birth to the work of art:

> These ruins are beautiful; these dismantled palaces look well in the dust, and these cracked walls, which let daylight pass through their fissures, make good trellises for parasitic plants. Man suffers, but the artist rejoices before this landscape for which nature and death have done everything.[2]

In trying to understand death, to integrate it into life, and to exorcise his own death, his tragic existence, and irreversible time, the traveller constructs an integrative perspective on death, seeking to penetrate the impenetrable and return to primordial existence.[3] The obsessive description of death in the passages analyzed below therefore represents a means of ending a profane existence and abolishing the past so that a new, regenerated life may begin. Death thus becomes renewal, "a sine qua non for the passage to another mode of being."[4]

Thus, what often holds the traveller's attention is the spectacle of life and death: they coexist, intersect, challenge, and reinforce one another. Their heightened drama and realism might suggest and anticipate Italian Verismo, which appeared several decades later. The traveller's gaze is held by scenes and images in which playfulness, gaiety, good humour, communion, laughter, and song accompany sadness, tears, affliction, and mourning. Life seems to acquire meaning and fullness through the union of opposites; crossing the realm of death leads to a higher knowledge intended to free the traveller from his own anxieties. One such scene describes the return to Ain-Chems of the Turkish and Syrian soldiers who accompanied the princess's caravan during the pilgrimage to Mecca. The verbs expressing delight, love, and the happiness of reunion with loved ones contrast strikingly and dramatically with those describing the despair and heartbreak caused by the death of those who left for Mecca. The happiness of some brings the tragic fate of the others into even sharper relief. The use of the narrative present, the enumerative structure, and the dynamism of the discourse also contribute to the dramatization of this description:

> They indulge in the fantasias he so cherishes, brandishing their fifteen-foot lances, each adorned at the tip with a tuft of black ostrich feathers [...] In the jostling crowd, people search for one another, meet, embrace, shake hands, and exchange compliments. Some sing and rejoice; others weep and grieve, for death has taken those whom they expected to find on their return. Some women utter their shrill zadait cry; others tear out their hair, rip their veils, and throw sand upon their heads. Impassive dromedaries walk slowly, almost in step, amid this tumult and commotion.[5]

The traveller is equally captivated by paroxysmal manifestations of suffering, destruction, horror, and death when they are produced by the "spectacle" of a fire that engulfs the imperial palace on the Bosphorus, a sight he finds possessed of "indescribable horror and beauty."

It is a convulsive disintegration, an annihilation that overwhelms everything: human beings, the plant world - almost humanized by the intensity of suffering - and the built environment, all swept into a terrifying, atrocious spectacle that borders on the atmosphere of Dante's Inferno. One could hear "the fat of bodies crackling in the fire";

[2] Maxime Du Camp, *Souvenirs et paysages d'Orient. Smyrne - Ephese - Magnesie - Constantinople - Scio* [*Memories and Landscapes of the Orient: Smyrna - Ephesus - Magnesia - Constantinople - Chios*], Paris, Didier, 1848, p. 67.

[3] In this respect, Mircea Eliade states that the germinal state of the "beginning" is itself equivalent to a death: man kills his profane, historical existence in order to reintegrate an "immaculate" existence untouched by death. *Le mythe de l'eternel retour* [*The Myth of the Eternal Return*], Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, p. 115.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 290.

[5] Maxime Du Camp, *Le Nil* [*The Nile*], Paris, Pillet fils aine, 1854, p. 55.

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the cypresses "twisted in the flames," their branches "weeping tears of fiery resin"; burning beams "fell onto the quay, rebounded, and plunged into the water"; the furnace had "swallowed everything and heaved and whirled, sending coals flying as though a wheel were turning within it"; the flames "writhed and fell furiously, rising in dazzling sprays like a boiling river"; the scourge ravaged their homes; the fire devoured roofs with its "insatiable jaws"; and, in the end, five hundred houses burned. The drama of the scene is also intensified by its network of sounds: the "shrill" moaning of the pumps, the "rustling" of the fire, the soldiers' "shouts," several "inarticulate sobs," the branches that "wept tears," the roofs that collapsed and cracked with a "horrible crash," and several caiques that "burst like walnuts."

The hell evoked here is only the tableau of purification by fire and light, the moment preceding the beginning of a new order. Violent, devastating death becomes a rite of passage toward a world in which relations of power and primordial structures are restored. This passage has warlike aspects, with echoes of the struggle between good and evil, between the old and the new. It is the place where extremes confront one another so that light may triumph.[6] Fire, and the death caused by fire, are indissolubly linked to myths of resurrection. Fire is also isomorphic with the bird and with speech, possessing a creative and sovereign power; as soon as the neophyte - in this case, Du Camp - descends into the realm of death, the entire world symbolically returns to the Cosmic Night so that it may be created anew, that is, regenerated.[7]

Du Camp deserves credit for rendering, in highly evocative language, the images of his initiatory journey into the realm of the Beyond. The sound images strengthen the description and convey the spiritual impact of the rite of passage we are witnessing. The text moves from the "magical world of sound" to "the neutral world of the visual,"[8] because the eye is primarily an organ of will, intellect, and external knowledge, whereas the principal organ of reception - the one that involves the reader substantially, as an active participant in the ritual - is the ear. The traveller, for whom this spectacle possesses incomparable beauty, seems to delight in contemplating alone, immersed in absolute silence, this funerary place that suggests the end of the world:

> And soon it was nothing more than a heap of smoking coals, amid which rose the blackened, stripped trunks of trees and several tall brick chimneys that remained standing like funerary stelae.[9]

Images of death, desolation, disintegration, and stillness are juxtaposed with images of life, youth, playful enjoyment, floral beauty, and the ephemeral. During his journey in Switzerland, in the village of Rosiere, Du Camp is drawn to the cemetery - as a "setting of reversibility"[10] - where he examines every tomb in search of inscriptions. He enjoys looking at the human bones, of which he gives a meticulous anatomical description: ribs, femurs, fibulas, jawbones, and collarbones "almost reduced to dust." They lie near flowers - "speedwells, nettles, wild sorrel" - and near children playing with "rotten boards" that once belonged to coffins and carving them into traps for catching

[6] From Gilbert Durand's perspective, light tends to become a flash or a sword, and the "diairetic schemas of daylight consolidate the schemas of verticality." *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* [*The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*], Paris, PUF, 1960, p. 154.

[7] Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

[8] Marshall McLuhan, *La Galaxie Gutenberg* [*The Gutenberg Galaxy*], Paris, Galliard, 1977, p. 164.

[9] *Souvenirs et paysages d'Orient* [*Memories and Landscapes of the Orient*], op. cit., p. 201.

[10] Valerie Wernet, "Lieux clos, coeur ouvert: l'orientation spatiale dans *La Chaumiere indienne* de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre" ["Enclosed Places, Open Heart: Spatial Orientation in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *The Indian Cottage*"], in S. Meitinger (ed.), *Espaces et paysages - Representations et inventions du paysage de l'Antiquite a nos jours* [*Spaces and Landscapes: Representations and Inventions of Landscape from Antiquity to the Present*], op. cit., p. 88.

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birds.

This image of the cemetery, where death stands beside life and where the traveller admits that he walks "to find a little coolness," appears again in a scene that moves him deeply and "invites" him to philosophical reflections on the meaning of life and death. In the cemetery of Perso, near Constantinople, for example, he encounters a small child whom his mother has brought to sleep on the grave of his dead father.[11] The writer dwells at length on this image, in which the living child, remaining beside the dead man, strangely anticipates, like a *memento mori*, his own death, which will overtake him after a certain time. In other words, life itself symbolizes a future death.

This gives Du Camp an opportunity to express his philosophical pessimism, according to which death is preferable to all the torments, sorrows, disappointments, failures, and misfortunes of life. The opposing pairs - "this carefree child - this dead man," "the one - the other" - together with the sentence's enumerative structure, the rhetorical question, and the imagery of death, in which death is personified but also associated with the monstrous sphere - it comes from "an icy bed" and has "fleshless" arms - bring out, through the drama they create, the writer's conception of death as liberation from the fetters of life:

> Everything was there, in that carefree sleeping child and in that dead man drenched in tears. One had left the harsh road of life; the other was barely taking his first steps upon it. Which was happier? The one enveloped by the earth, was it not, my God? The one who was finally resting from the weariness with which You strew the road we walk? What will become of the other, who now sleeps peacefully upon his father's grave? What comes to everyone: sorrows, broken loves, exhaustion, frantic dreams, long bitterness, unbridled desires for what cannot be attained. And perhaps, if one day his mother tells him that he slept upon his father's grave, he will regret that the dead man did not rise from his icy bed, take him in his two fleshless arms, and carry him away into the unknown regions where he dwells.[12]

Death, in this case, makes it possible to construct a symbolic consubstantiality between the sleeping child - sleep being regarded here as a little death - and his dead father, evoking the continuous passage of time as an unending cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

In Alexandria, he visits the Arab cemetery, responding to a taste for the macabre that awakens philosophical reflection in him: "no cypresses, no sycamores, no turtledoves, no marble tombs," but rather "a sterile nakedness, gray earth ugly and tiring to the eye, sepulchres all alike, made of brick and rammed earth, and, at nightfall, the mournful cries of jackals, forever hungry for corpses."[13] Scorpions, bats, and even prostitutes searching for clients complete this desolate landscape. This is followed by the image of a bucolic countryside, as if to offset the morbid effect of the preceding pages: "clusters of palm trees growing in the pink sands," peaceful houses, "sparse grasses, and herds of dromedaries and camels returning from pasture."[14]

One can discern in Du Camp a certain morbid indulgence, a fascination exerted upon him by the phenomenon of death. Sarcophagi, tombs, carrion, jackals, watchful bearded vultures, mummies, and corpses form, in Egypt - particularly in *Le Nil* (*The Nile*) - a funerary setting that contrasts with
the idealized image of the desert, where "man feels truly free and strong." There a camel dies; elsewhere, a dead

[11] *Souvenirs et paysages d'Orient* [*Memories and Landscapes of the Orient*], op. cit., p. 132 ff.
[12] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 155.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 17.

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mimosa raises its bare trunk. The road is strewn with whitened, scattered dromedary bones. Farther on, rats devour the remains of carcasses "still covered by their taut skin," and after some time the dying camel is already "half devoured." The visit to the leper colony in Damascus awakens in him, besides repugnance toward the almost mummified patients, an indescribable pity.[15] Death is indispensable if life is to be possible within the natural circulation of matter in the universe.

At the Hospice of the Great St Bernard, described in detail in *Orient et Italie* (*The Orient and Italy*), there is a description of what is called the great morgue, which holds "a dozen bodies recovered during the last century and preserved almost intact by the cold of these high regions."[16] This arouses the traveller Du Camp's curiosity. In Cairo, outside the city walls, slaughterhouses spread across a "leprous and diseased," "dirty and ugly" plain, giving off foul miasmas. Like a true naturalist, Du Camp takes pleasure in describing the place down to the smallest detail:

> Around them live and swarm snarling, tawny, mangy dogs, which fight over bloody or rotten scraps of flesh with yellow-legged bearded vultures, kites, bald vultures, screeching buzzards, falcons, and jackals that prowl only at night.[17]

A visit to the crocodile cave is a harsh ordeal for travellers thirsty for macabre curiosities. The slimy stones - like "liquid refuse of molten bitumen"[18] - make the descent into these "bowels of the earth" exhausting. Piled-up corpses, mummies, human and animal remains - every accessory of the sinister - are presented at length, and the atmosphere verges on that of a Gothic tale of terror:

> In a kind of round chamber filled with rounded rocks, a corpse leaning against the wall; one eye opened to an unnatural width, arms outstretched, mouth twisted, chin more than clenched, belly pressed to the back, unmistakable traces of dreadful convulsions. [...] The passages narrow; we crawl over bones, over human and crocodile mummies; their bones break beneath the weight of our bodies; palm sticks planted here and there to serve as markers. We reach a great heap: mummies of every kind gathered there; piles of cloth, bandages, coffin wood, feet, hands, masses of bitumen, a terrifying quantity of dead bodies. Bats fly around the lights and brush our faces with their silent wings. An acrid, penetrating smell catches in the throat and makes us cough. Du Camp was the son of a physician, which may partly explain his attraction to, and fascination with, the mechanisms of the human body, dead or alive, and his clinical precision. He admits that he knows "nothing more beautiful than the *in anima vili* study of this magnificent machine that is the human body."[19] This scientific curiosity leads the traveller to visit anatomy museums during his journey in Holland, where he spends long hours attending autopsies and viewing collections of human bodies or skulls that contain all races and their principal varieties. His attitude toward these exhibits varies greatly; the sole common denominator is his quest for the forms assumed by death.

The description of the first head, preserved "in a jar full of spirits," is an unusual oxymoronic association of death and life, between the repellent idea of a decapitated figure and its image of "admirable beauty." Interestingly, the

[15] Maxime Du Camp, *Voyage en Orient 1849-1851 Notes* [*Journey to the Orient 1849-1851 Notes*], ed. Giovanni Bonaccorso, Messina, Peloritana, 1972, p. 292.

[16] *Le Nil* [*The Nile*], op. cit., p. 169.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 46.

[18] *Voyage en Orient 1849-1851 Notes* [*Journey to the Orient 1849-1851 Notes], op. cit*., pp. 36-37.

[19] Maxime Du Camp, *En Hollande* [*In Holland*], Paris, Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1859, p. 90.

writer brings this dead man back to life as he was when alive, with all the features and characteristics he possessed: his head is "admirably beautiful"; he has an "intelligent" forehead, a "deep" eye, and a "sensual" lip. Here, in Du Camp's representation, death is beautiful and has harmonious features:

> This head is admirably beautiful, covered with long hair so black that it appears blue, adorned with an intelligent forehead upon which two broad eyebrows stand out, sheltering a deep-set eye that must have looked far and steadily when he was alive. The nose is straight and thin; it descends toward a very long moustache whose separated hairs reveal the open mouth and the teeth biting the thick, sensual lower lip. The square chin harmonizes well with the flattened cheekbones.[20]

Death also becomes an opportunity to gain knowledge of the world and of humankind in the laboratory. The dead man lives on through the knowledge his remains make available to the living. In the description of the second figure, which likewise commands all the traveller's attention, death is represented by a hideous, terrifying image. The imagery of death is dreamlike, chimerical, and dark, populated by "Gorgons," "vampires," "wyverns," "ravens," nightmarish figures, and "rogues." The organs of the body are scarcely recognizable, suggesting correspondences with the animal and plant kingdoms. Death is no longer "beautiful" and "sensual," but "sinister" and "hideous." Yet, as in the preceding passage, the same funerary quest can be discerned in Du Camp. The text's enumerative and reiterative structure adds to its drama, as the following lines clearly show:

> Never did a face glimpsed in the disordered dreams of a nightmare, never a wyvern, never a Gorgon, never a vampire, never the face of a rogue hanged ten feet above the ground with a raven croaking upon his skull, never an idol from the Sandwich Islands appear more thick-lipped, more hideous, more sinister, more terrifying to behold than this formidable head floating in its transparent, yellowish liquid. A foam of corruption drifts vaguely around its pursed lips; its ears are broad and scaly like closed oysters; sparse, graying hair runs across skin more wrinkled than a hundred-year-old pippin. Its forehead slopes away and seems to extend backward as far as the neck, which is now no more than a livid stump. Its flattened nose and lips, thick as the rims of a vase and pressed against the glass, give all its features a flattened look and a repellent softness. Formerly this face was black, naturally, since it belonged to a Black man; the alcohol has bleached it, and today it is cabbage green: enough to haunt one's dreams.[21]

As we have already stated, Du Camp is interested not only in human death, but also in the death of animals encountered along the long roads he travels, most often in the desert. The episode involving the agony of a camel encountered at a place called Bir-el-Sed in Egypt - the camel was an animal that fascinated Du Camp - is among the most interesting examples of this kind. Du Camp dwells at length on the wounded animal, giving it a dramatic representation that far exceeds a realistic framework:

> Near the well, a camel is dying. It lies on its right side; its head, thrown backward, looks on with pleading eyes that roll sadly in sockets enlarged by emaciation. It moves its off-side leg convulsively; it parts its long lips without being able to cry out, and from time to time it heaves great sighs. It has been there for three months, dying little by little each day. One night, while passing by, it fell into the well and broke its thigh. Its master dragged it close to the road, and whenever he makes the desert journey, he leaves beside it a small

[20] *Ibid*., p. 90.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 91.

> supply of dry beans and chopped straw. The Ababdeh Arabs give it water, and the poor animal will remain there, gasping and suffering, until death takes it. Wild beasts have not yet dared devour it, because this much-frequented place serves, at almost every hour of day and night, as a campsite for one caravan or another.[22]

The description of the camel struggling not to die, yet struck by an implacable blow of fate, and fed by people - strangely enough - for months despite being immobilized, symbolically illustrates the spectacle of an attended death: our inability to escape death despite the strong desire to avoid it and despite the intervention of others. Transposed to the human plane, the episode concerns the desperate struggle for life of someone who is unprepared to accept that death is a threshold, not an ending.

In Sarga Moussa's interpretation, this scene could be seen as the symbolic expression of a "pathological" condition of society, whose diagnosis Du Camp understands, like some of his contemporaries, and which appears in his book *Les Convulsions de Paris* (*The Convulsions of Paris*), published in 1878. Having come to share Saint-Simonian convictions, Du Camp considers social disorders not to be wholly negative. The "convulsions" experienced by the nineteenth century, whether social, political, or religious in nature, are "the symptom of a death that itself announces a rebirth."[23] In the preface to *Chants modernes* (*Modern Songs*), Du Camp states:

> "All the suffering that has shaken Europe for sixty years foretells both the event and the advent; nations are not delivered over to pain without purpose. [...] The earth is stirring; like Tasso's Clorinda, it removes the pieces of its cumbersome armour one by one in order to put on new attire. It is restless; it trembles upon its poles; it casts its laws, kings, and leaders into oblivion; it seems seized by vertigo and passes from convulsion to convulsion."[24]

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[22] *Le Nil* [*The Nile*], op. cit., p. 274.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[24] Maxime Du Camp, *Les Convulsions de Paris* [*The Convulsions of Paris*], Didier, 1853, p. 12.

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