Social Economic Debates
Volume 11, Issue 2, 2022
ISSN 2360-1973; ISSN-L 2248-3837

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE GREAT CITIES IN MAXIME DU CAMP'S NARRATIVES

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Abstract
For the French writer Maxime Du Camp, who remained in the literary history as Gustave Flaubert's close friend, the travel writings often represent a valorization of his vast culture, illustrating a mediated vision on life, since the space that he visits passes through the filter of the author's culture, which connects him to the outside world. Thus, Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Damascus, Rhodes, Beirut, Spart, etc, make up not only a spatial, but also an inner, spiritual journey.

Key-words: journey, travel writings, ancient cities, space, Orient.

In the work of Maxime Du Camp, the travel narrative signifies a valorization of the traveler's readings; it is the sign of a filtered perception of the world, given that the space he visits passes through the screen of the author's formation, through the "hardware"[1], the underlying culture interposed between him and the world. This produces *a reading of space*, which he reinvests, so that the journey along the horizontal axis also becomes a journey along the vertical axis, into the past of the civilizations that he revives through his writings. Adrien Pasquali speaks of a "reclaiming of the journey and of the referential real present, by recourse to an earlier narrative"[2]. To do this, he draws on his vast encyclopedic knowledge: his historical, architectural, scientific, mythological, and religious learning[3].

Alexandria is a large city that fascinates Du Camp through its ugliness and its lack of uniformity and comfort; he perceives it from the moment of his arrival, in the urban agglomeration that characterizes it, and finds it eclectic: "has no defined character"[4]. A *Frankish* city, which he defines by what it is not: "is neither French, nor German, nor

[1] Edward Hall, *La danse de la vie*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1984, p. 56
[2] Adrien Pasquali, *Le Tour des Horizons. Critique et récits de voyage*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1984, p. 65.
[3] See also Diana Ligia Tudor, *Une typologie du descriptif dans le „Nil" de Maxime Du Camp*, published in the volume *Studia Doctoralia*, Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 2008, p. 85-94
[4] Maxime Du Camp, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie, Dessins photographiques recueillis pendant les années 1849, 1850 et*

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Russian, nor Italian, nor Spanish, nor Arab, nor Turkish, nor English" (*loc. cit.*), a city without its famous baths, palaces, and squares numbering in the thousands, because of the unfortunate governance of Méhémet-Ali. A city fallen silent at nightfall, with only "the softened murmur of the sea" and some symphony of Arab musicians with their darabukas at a circumcision feast as its sole backdrop. Du Camp notes in passing the obligatory but wholly uninteresting visit to the *Needles* of Cleopatra and Pompey's Pillar. The villages surrounding it are dismal in their poverty, "heaps of hives built of earth, pierced to let air in and smoke out"[5].

In Egypt, the Arab town of Rosetta likewise enjoys extensive descriptions, ranging from the exterior, from the road leading to it, to the interiors of the houses, the arrangement of the bazaars, the styles of the modern buildings and traditional khans, the fountains found at street corners, the mosques and minarets, "topped by a sort of small bulbous cupola that resembles a large bud about to bloom"[6]. In Nubia, *Derr* is a town founded by Mamluks, situated "three gunshots from the Nile"[7]. It is an appealing town for its cleanliness and the unusual whiteness of its inhabitants, who follow him about full of curiosity. Their welcome brings to mind Montesquieu's Persians landing in Paris at the beginning of the eighteenth century[8].

By contrast, there are small port towns on the Red Sea such as **Kôçéir** [Qôsséir], with barely two or three streets, a town – "fallen from its past splendors," "like a sick man about to die"[9] – which provokes in the traveler Du Camp genuine disgust, even repugnance, on account of its insalubrity. All his senses are mobilized to describe the foul atmosphere of this town, whose water is a "nauseating liquid that smells at once of soap, rotten egg, and old leather" (*loc. cit.*). Moreover,

> […] the air of Kôcéir is steeped in this stench; the men, the animals, the food at meals, the coffee, even the most secret corners of the houses exhale this thick, hot, and tenacious odor that one breathes in chemical factories[10].

When a town seems to him simply unremarkable, he contents himself with a brief note, as in the case of Cassaba, a small town lost on the great plain of Smyrna, "a town like any other"[11].

Du Camp arrives in **Cairo** on 26 November 1849; the city appears to travelers seeing it for the first time as a citadel, "a great Constantinopolitan mosque"[12]. In Cairo (Kaire in the text), Du Camp grows ecstatic over the bazaars and the mosques, which he finds very beautiful and illustrative of the Arab style. The former serve as a refuge for the population during the scorching hours of the day and are, moreover, cooled by water. He lists them tirelessly and concludes that they are, with a single exception (the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem), "the most marvelous Muslim

1851, accompagnés d'un texte explicatif et précédés d'une introduction par Maxime Du Camp, chargé d'une mission archéologique en Orient par le ministère de l'Instruction publique, Paris, Gide et Baudry, 1852 p. 8.

[5] Maxime Du Camp, *Voyage en Orient (1849-1851), Notes,* ed. Giovanni Bonaccorso, Messina, Peloritana, 1972, p. 17.

[6] *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, p. 22.

[7] *Voyage en Orient*, p. 102.

[8] *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie,* p. 130 and 131.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 281.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 282.

[11] *Voyage en Orient*, p. 409.

[12] *Ibid.,* p. 18.

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ISSN 2360-1973; ISSN-L 2248-3837

temples I have seen in my travels"[13]. During the two months he stays there, he sees everything: the houses, the viceroy's gardens, the slave khans, even the Sultan Hassan Mosque. In Egypt, Du Camp passes through and describes on the spot villages and small towns (such as Dendil) without lingering long. In the town of Syout, however, Du Camp visits the prison and the cemetery, two privileged places in his imagination, the latter even being a "charming spot for a stroll"[14]. Other small Egyptian towns, such as Beni Souef, situated on the bank of the Nile, have "nothing of interest."

During his journey in Italy, Du Camp arrives on the Island of Capri, which is the subject of an entire chapter in his book; at the same time, the town of **Anacapri** enjoys beautiful and lengthy descriptive pages down to the smallest detail, along both the horizontal and vertical axes at once. The description, conceived as a parallel between Anacapri and the central town of Capri in order to better underscore the former's superiority in every respect, begins with a traveling shot of the streets (wide, clean despite the presence of pigs, which lend them local specificity and picturesqueness), and with mention of the church and the Christian deities present there. Du Camp dons the mask of the "prying" traveler setting off in search of the town's secret things, and there discovers beautiful flowers and beautiful singing women, a whole space to be adorned. The subject is nonetheless treated overall in stereotyped superlatives, the traveler's attention remaining focused on the description of the biblical scenes present in the town's church, of the real or mythological bestiary, of the church's paintings which constitute, in the end, Anacapri's sole curiosity, a small hamlet of twelve hundred inhabitants.

But since his penchant for rummaging through ruins is always present wherever he visits, Du Camp reviews destroyed buildings, old towers dating from the era of maritime incursions: the Torre di Damecuta, the Torre di Materita, the Torre di Guardia[15]. He is particularly interested there in the degree of antiquity with which the space is charged, in what it has become after being abandoned to the *villani*. His interest is directed toward these two towns that hate each other to the death, to the point of dereliction, to the point of blasphemy, the discord between Capri and Anacapri being supported by literary reflections, numerous comparisons and maxims, and references to historians; everything is introduced as justificatory digression (even the "inquiries" he conducts out of "curious experience") to prove the soundness of his judgments, the refusal of History to which the Capriotes bear witness[16]. The traveler Du Camp problematizes questions of history (the veracity of historical facts, chronology, etc.) whenever a space is represented as a place of legend or myth.

Du Camp offers a summary of the significance of the Island of Capri, underscoring its picturesqueness and his saddened feelings at the all-powerful nature that crushes man and darkens his history:

> I have nothing more to say about the Island of Capri, which is the finest belvedere one can climb to see the Gulf of Naples unfold in all its splendor. These undulating coasts, this Vesuvius that bears the clouds, this sea so gentle and so blue, form one of the most beautiful landscapes it is given to the human eye to contemplate. And yet, in spite of oneself, one feels saddened there: nature is so powerful there that man disappears; unfortunately, he disappears entirely. This charming island sleeps a sleep full of intoxicating dreams, I grant;

[13] *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie,* p. 28.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[15] Maxime Du Camp, *Orient et Italie. Souvenirs de voyage et de lectures,* Paris, Didier, 1868, p. 53. During his stay on the Island of Capri, Du Camp's favorite walks were those along the seashore to admire the sunsets.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

> but it sleeps, and sometimes so deeply that one might believe it is forever; it is the Sleeping Beauty of the waves. The memories of antiquity have left such an imprint upon this land that modern life can scarcely take root there; it seems to hold back with mistrust and to wait, before beginning its work, for the newly won freedom to have accomplished its own[17].

Du Camp sometimes possesses the cinematic gaze of an objective camera that merely records and inventories, in a dry tone, objects, movements, buildings, and human beings. This is the case with the town of Saïda in Lebanon, situated on the seashore, which he passes through hastily in nine hours:

> Coffeehouse before the town. Wooden door studded with large iron nails. Narrow streets, without pointed vaults, houses of fine square stone, well built, bazaars; *salams* from a few Christians. Arrived at the French khan (national property). Large square courtyard, surrounded by pointed arcades, in the middle a basin with vines, white canes, a weeping willow, a banana tree, a lush and superb aspect, the top lit by the setting sun. […] Young girls at a doorway, pale, fair-haired, consumptive, and charming, seeming to delight greatly in our attire. […] Small, with narrow streets, a true town of the Crusades, with the makings of a magnificent harbor and a dozen boats at anchor. Women and children generally pretty[18].

Another island with a beautiful town built in amphitheater fashion is Malta. Despite the island's sad, rugged, and desolate look (owing to its vegetative scarcity), the town is interesting in more ways than one; English influence is evident in the cleanliness of streets structured like laborious staircases. Moreover, the island of Malta represents the hearth where two races cross paths, where Italy and the Orient meet. Even the smallest towns, the saddest, the most dreary or "accursed," such as the town of Tyre in Lebanon or the "meager and small fortified town" of Haifa, are named and receive a summary, telegraphic description in all the narratives. The town of Jaffa, for example, "presents itself well," a brief notation developed over a paragraph of some twenty lines.

The panorama of **Jerusalem** presents a gray town sharply outlined against the blue sky, sad and bare, with its terraced houses, with little vegetation, behind clean, cold walls, its surroundings primitively harsh and fierce, "enclosed in its crown of crenellated walls"[19]. Du Camp visits a grandiose Armenian convent, another Greek one, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre[20], a Protestant temple, and strolls through the town, looking closely at the mosques and bazaars. The overall impression is that this town is an enormous "sepulchre surrounded by small tombs" (*loc. cit.*) Nazareth, another holy town, terraced amphitheater-fashion, compels the traveler to stop for a brief sketch, from which the exquisite beauty of its women stands out.

Damascus, "a very oriental town, quite full of perfumes and beautiful costumes,"[21] fascinates through the contrast between the exterior of the inhabited space — the poor appearance of the houses (made of mud and straw)

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[18] *Voyage en Orient*, p. 183.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 215.
[20] Du Camp devotes to the visit of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre four pages of detailed descriptions of the Stone of Unction, the tapestries adorning its walls, Calvary, etc.; the same attention is also given to the tombs of Mary and Joseph.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 289.

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and of the streets — and the richly adorned interior (in "marble and every imaginable ornament"[22]). Du Camp visits the synagogue, the tomb of Father Thomas, the bazaars, very lively and crowded[23] compared to the deserted streets (he says, moreover, that it is "a town of bazaars and cafés"[24]). In his view, it is a "fanatical" town for having religiously preserved its traditions.

Having arrived in **Beirut**, a town close to the sea, Du Camp is charmed by everything: the rocky mountains surrounding it are magnificent, the roads leading to it are charming, "all bordered with prickly pears, all shaded with azeroles and carob trees, entangled with vines, all green with fig and mulberry trees"[25]. The town's positive perception is favored from the outset by an enhancing landscape, which makes him dream of staying there to smoke, to work, to breathe in nature with his whole chest.

In 1850, Du Camp visits the **Island of Rhodes** ; the road leading to the center of the Island, the Street of the Knights, "does not produce the effect for which one is prepared by travelers' accounts," he notes, disappointed, in the second volume of *Voyage en Orient*[26]. The buildings that populate it date from the pointed-arch era; they are crowned with marble escutcheons and parasitic plants, which reinforces the idea of desolation, bareness, and coldness, and saddens the traveler's innate curiosity. The Church of Saint John, turned into a mosque, the other climbing and tangled streets and alleys, the great number of bazaars and cafés, do not win the admiration of the traveler, who has no desire to wander through it or discover it as he would other tourist attractions.

In his *Voyage en Orient* of 1850, he once again evokes the great city of **Constantinople** (to which he devoted extensive pages in *Souvenirs et paysages d'Orient*, a work from 1848). Two images are superimposed six years apart: whereas the first time it was entirely illuminated by the rising sun, this time it is gray and damp. In the *Souvenirs*, Constantinople was seen close up, gradually: in the foreground, trees, the seraglio, palaces, walls, gardens, and pavilions; in the background, minarets, mosques, domes, but above all cypresses, toward which Du Camp is highly admiring. Everything is caressed by the waters of the four seas (the Marmara, the Bosphorus, the Golden Horn, the Gulf of Nicomedia). The corollary is "Man succumbs before such spectacles," and further on, having barely arrived at Péra, he declares himself "amazed, charmed, and feeling [his] reason shaken by the contemplation of so many splendors gathered together"[27]. The city he had dreamed of, while hoping not to be disappointed (as had been the case with the Gulf of Naples), surpasses itself and offers him a view in which "all the marvels of creation" come together in enchantment[28]. The bazaars of perfumes, slippers, pipes, and jewelry receive generous and meticulous descriptions.

This second visit becomes a work of recognition of the minarets of the mosques of Hagia Sophia, Ahmed, Orosman, Bayezid, and Suleiman, of the Cannon Gate, and of the popular quarters, which have remained the same. Some places retain the same air, others have changed noticeably; Péra is reviewed along with all the architectural

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 281.
[23] Once again, Du Camp has occasion to demonstrate his encyclopedic knowledge and his commitment to noting everything down. Over two pages he draws up a list of the types of bazaars, with their specific merchandise and countries of origin, with the names given in Turkish and Syrian. Moreover, he explains and comments on the structure and social organization of a bazaar, the khans that house the merchandise, the hours, and the stereotypes of trade.
[24] *Voyage en Orient*, p. 301.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 321.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 342.
[27] Maxime Du Camp, *Souvenirs et paysages d'Orient. Smyrne - Ephèse — Magnésie - Constantinople - Scio, Paris*, Didier, 1848, p. 99-100.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

features that compose it. When his perception of the field of the dead diminishes, he asks himself rhetorically: "Must memory, then, always be greater than reality?"[29]. There follow a few scattered reflections on the influence, harmful in his eyes, of European culture on the Western world in matters of dress and habits: "Stamboul itself is no longer as Turkish as it once was"[30]. In seeing the mosques and the Seraglio again, he corrects his earlier observations of six years before and sincerely admits his errors of perception.

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[29] *Voyage en Orient,* p. 418.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 420.