

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE EAST: A STUDY OF THEMES IN TRAVEL LITERATURE WITH REFERENCE TO GIORGIO MANGANELLI'S *CINA E ALTRI ORIENTI*

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Sommario

Il saggio studia gli scritti di viaggio dedicati da Giorgio Manganelli all'oriente, in particolare il libro Cina e altri orienti (1974): più che per il loro valore documentario, le penetranti pagine manganelliane rivelano un costante gusto di affabulazione letteraria, giocato sulla falsariga di illustri modelli, dal Milione di Marco Polo alle Mille e una notte. Per Manganelli la Cina e la sua arte millenaria sono interpretabili come una grande allegoria, una bellezza nata dalla sofferenza di artefici umili e spesso ignoti. All'autore della Letteratura come menzogna quel mondo appare come un libro suggestivamente sigillato in un linguaggio remoto, d'ardua decifrazione per gli occidentali.

[...] books are written and congresses held with “the Orient” as their main focus, with the “Orientalist” [...] as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental. (Said, 1984:2)

This study deals with Manganelli's trip to China in his travelogue, *Cina e altri orienti* (1974)¹. Although this volume also includes his visit to the Philippines, “Chi ha rubato le Filippine?” [“Who stole the

¹ The trip to China was a travel report written for the Italian paper *Il Giorno* and initially published in 1972 while the section on the Philippines was written for *L'Espresso* and first published in 1973 (Pulce, 2004:101-106).

Philippines?"] and "Malaysia", my focus will be on the section on China, the first portion of the book. Choosing one section will suffice as my concern does not rest exclusively with Manganelli's role as traveller and writer, but also with treating this text as an example of travel literature in general. There are innumerable antecedents on writing concerning journeys to the Orient. Manganelli's visit is yet another instance of the meeting of the Orient, the Occident and the book.

While the term 'Orient' is generally understood to refer to the Middle Eastern regions most generally associated, in the minds of readers, with French and English travellers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the term is also used for creating a discourse around western encounters with the far East. It is in the latter sense that I have used this term, referring to Italian travellers to China, beginning with Marco Polo and using his book, *Il Milione*, as a foil for Manganelli's volume, *Cina e altri orienti*. The coupling of Italy and the East, in the sense of the far and the exotic, refers back to a steady stream of canonical writings dealing principally with church-based excursions into China and Japan, as well as to merchants' accounts, the most famous and influential of which is Marco Polo's *Il Milione*. Polo's journey, begun in 1271 and lasting 26 years, was to remain for centuries the best known and most often quoted account of travels to the Far East. His work is emblematic both in the scope of the journey as well as in the influence of its recounted narrative².

In approaching a journey to the East any travel author must perforce grapple with this body of writing, even if only subliminally. Due to this *corpus* of writings, more or less known in Europe from Polo's days to the present, perceptions of the Orient in literature are subject to broadly predetermined expectations on the part of the reader. There are a number of set forms that most travel journals to the East adhere to: the romantic imagination of the French and English travellers into an exotic, and often alien world, which also functions as a setting of mystery and, at times, sexual licentiousness; the dangerous, intrepid travel of the Nineteenth Century explorer

² The original manuscript, worked on by Polo after his release from the Genoese prison, has never been found (Manganelli, 1982:viii).

Richard Burton or T.E. Lawrence in which the East is a location of adventurous excursion closely connected to British expansionism; and, in recent years, the terrorist propaganda liberally levelled by the West against the Middle East. Obviously, these accounts of the East are highly problematic, presenting what Lowe calls “[...] an uneven matrix of Orientalist situations across different cultural and historical sites, and [...] each of these Orientalisms [...] internally complex and unstable” (Lowe, 1991:4). Each of these Orientalist instances reflects a number of historical and sociological moments that colour the perception of the tale being recounted and determine the appraisal of the works. The literary perception of the East, therefore, need not be identified with an actual country with customs, traditions, historical realities and a population of people living and acting out real lives, but rather with a land of the imagination converted into a mental construct described by the term “Orient”, in itself stylistically descriptive rather than geographically defined. The traveller to the “Orient” seeks, and invariably finds, the objective correlative of his own specific journey. Lisa Lowe, who argues against what she calls the “misapprehension of uniformity” (Lowe, 1991:7) in discussions about the ‘Orient’, says that discourse on the East is made up of multi-faceted encounters between travellers and this partly real and partly imagined destination. A full assessment of the extent to which the real and the imagined intermingle can only be achieved by considering individual books. In much the same manner every reader’s perceptions of the “Orient” will also have differing expectations and fluctuating perspectives.

One of the central assumptions at the base of European perceptions of the East, a notion also central to travel literature in general, is polarity: the “us” in opposition with the “them”. Although this notion is in itself hugely variable and historically determined, it is an inevitable position by which the writer defines the terms of the journey. While the perception of polarity underlines travel literature in general, in association with the discourse on travel to the “Orient”, a further circularity and self containedness comes into play. According to Edward Said:

Not only is the Orient accommodated to the moral exigencies of Western Christianity, it is also circumscribed by a series of attitudes and judgments that send the Western mind, not first to Oriental sources for correction and verification, but rather to other Orientalist works. (Said, 1984:67)

While all travel writers include, in their own recall of the journey, the personal as well as historically defined expectations of a specific place and a specific time, in the case of the “Orient” they also refer for validification to other sources of written “Orientalism” rather than to the experience itself. These preconceptions will, therefore, inevitably be superimposed onto an “Orient” which has its own traditions and visions, thus creating an intersection of modes and definitions that are unstable and shifting. When Manganelli, a nervous, neurotic and highly Eurocentric traveller undertakes a journey to the Orient that is pre-empted by his own baggage of childhood memories, his experiences of a geographical place will inevitably become entwined with his own admiration for Marco Polo’s accounts of a mythical and remote “Orient”. Travel writing about the East, even if devoid of the colonial overtones associated with Eighteenth Century ‘Orientalism’, must perforce take cognizance of the Orient as the appointed place of literature³. Thus, in these terms, it is essential to see Manganelli’s reading of the East as another instance of cross fertilization within his own discourse.

While the traditional travelogue is often rich in anthropological content, Manganelli’s travel writings in general, by being self referential, are essentially an extension of his own familiar linguistic games. In *Cina e altri orienti* the author’s interpretation of the “other” is largely a decipherment of a hidden pattern that formulates and structures the foreign world rather than a verbalization of the simple optical experience of travel. As F. Giannessi puts it:

³ As Lisa Lowe describes it, Said’s thesis about Orientalism is the definition of a discourse that “produces information about an invented Other, which locates and justifies the power of the knowledgeable European self” (Lowe, 1991:3).

[...] un gioco estroso e capriccioso, di momento in momento imprevedibile è sempre rigoduto da uno scrittore in una trama di delizie espressive, che frantumano le cose in visioni, e articolano le visioni in giochi arguti di stile. (Giannessi, 1974:8)

Written in the mid 1970s, Manganelli's visit to China shares an unstable set of referents typical of the post-modern world. During Italy's *anni di piombo*⁴, in the closing years of the Mao era in China and while engaged as an artist with the *Gruppo 63*, Manganelli's trip to China becomes a vehicle for drawing together personal themes and the shifting realities of a world in flux. As a writer engaged in the reevaluation of the text in the wake of the avant-garde linguistic ideologies to which he subscribed, his frequent journeys became the tangible means of expression for an artistic self definition in the face of the "other". Although as a writer Manganelli does not concern himself strictly with the political climate of the time, as an experimentalist writer, his trip to China, occupies a privileged space in his highly complex *oeuvre*⁵.

Following the Saidian notion of "Orientalism" as circular and self referential, the reader of *Cina e altri orienti* must take a close look at Manganelli's personal relationship with the East, particularly as a literary *locus* revisited through the writings of Marco Polo in *Il Milione*. As the "librarian of the possible"⁶ Manganelli's works draw liberally from other texts, in a continuous vortex of imagistic and stylistic cross-fertilization. Manganelli's own appraisal of the works from which he draws is the key to finding a lead to his own elusive and difficult texts. In his whole career as a writer, his circuitous disquisitions on other writers guide the reader through the myriads of linguistic games and tensions that make up Manganelli's own texts. It

⁴ The Italian 'years of lead' of the 70's in which kidnappings, civic disturbances and terrorist activity dominated the historical period.

⁵ Manganelli's trip to India became the volume *Esperimento con l'India* and was published in 1992.

⁶ G. Sansalvadore, *Librarian of the possible*, 1990, unpublished Ph.D. thesis on Giorgio Manganelli.

is not surprising, then, to find the nub of Manganelli's traveller's voice in the subtleties of the author's reading of Marco Polo's emblematic work.

In Polo's work Manganelli sees the earliest occurrence of the concept of *oriente* in its incarnation as an exotic land of distant and fabulous adventures, the birthplace of the idea of the exotic 'other':

Marco Polo più di chiunque altro importò l'inesauribile
immagine dell'Oriente nel mondo occidentale [...].
(Manganelli, 1986:77)

For him, therefore, Polo's work could be seen as the progenitor of all other forms of Orientalism, and as such an essential step in the development of European perceptions of the East. However, in his reappraisal of this momentous influence, Manganelli in *Cina e altri orienti* adopts a parodic voice that colours his own journey with what Grazia Menechella has called the author's "felice vanverare" (Menechella, 2002).

"Entrerò in Cina con passo elastico e nervoso, vedrò e
capirò tutto." "Sarò rispettoso e devoto." "Sarò curioso e
svagato." "Chiederò statistiche." "Indagherò il mistero
dell'anima orientale." (Manganelli, 1974:9)

As both traveller and author, Manganelli is highly conscious of all literary strata at play in the voyage and pays obeisance to an attitude that is canonical as well as distancing. The changing perceptions of both *locus* and text intermingle in the creation of a new ironic perception that honours the "Orient" but also fixes it as "other"; revered but also seen as incomprehensible to the ordered "Occidental" mind. His deeply subversive views carried over from his *Gruppo 63* years do not allow him to take these preoccupations seriously. He thus turns his discourse into a parodistic third voice that redefines as it names.

Manganelli's most important references to *Il Milione* are to be found in the Introduction to the 1982 Einaudi edition in which he sets out, more clearly than anywhere else, canonical pointers towards

personal literary concerns. Thus for him the importance of *Il Milione* is to be found in the role of the author to whom, “fu dato il compito di rendere testimonianza” (Manganelli, 1982:vii). Polo is seen, at that moment of writing his book in the prison with Rustichello, as the link between the known and the still, at that moment, unfathomed “Orient”.

As the traveller who sends his encapsulated memories into the world to which he returns, Polo is the narrator of “truths” that are remembered moments filtering through the narrated events of his recounted tale. In the words of Walter Benjamin:

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is
the source from which all storytellers have drawn.
(Benjamin, 1999:84)

The returned traveller acts as the link between the one who remains at home and the story, for he promises the possibility of escape by involving his reader in the adventure. Therefore, Polo’s words “[...] scatenavano una brama pericolosa di esilio dal quotidiano, di grandi e terribili avventure, di scoperte di cose vere e riluttanti a lasciarsi maneggiare” (Manganelli, 1986:77). While the traveller’s account of the journey on the road to Katai was the hypotext⁷, the recounted journey is the consolation for the one who remained at home. The tale of the mythical journey, only undertaken by a few privileged travellers, is then relayed to the stay at home recipient of the tale. The adventure, an excursion into the unknown, is thus like the page of the book, a giving of life that is also a “[...] vita sospetta, incantata e infidamente fiabesca” (Manganelli, 1986:77). The most important element of the *fiaba* or fairytale is, of course, that it is both a mental invention and a story. And so is the recounted journey of the traveller in Polo’s *Il Milione*, which for Manganelli is a book “che non è fatto di materiale verificabile, ma unicamente di memorie, piú esattamente di parole” (Manganelli, 1982:vii). Similarly, Manganelli’s own travel book presents itself as yet another mental invention: Like the *istoria*

⁷ The journey is seen as the primary narrative “text” while the travelogue is the secondary, textual rendition.

of medieval and Renaissance myth, the traveller's recounted tale is the byproduct of an event that no longer exists: "istoria" [...] una invenzione [...] mentale, [...] è raccontabile e materia di ricordo" (Manganelli, 1982:vii). As encapsulated tales drawn from memories of past adventure, travel literature inhabits a region that "[...] prima di essere raccontata, ha voluto essere uccisa" (Manganelli, 1982:vi).

In travel literature, therefore, what is important is not so much the reality of the facts being described for the first time, but rather the position that the raconteur occupies in relation to the exchange between the teller and the listener. The facts of the journey are outside of the recounted story as much as the raconteur is on the outside of the tale itself:

Nella prigione Genovese, l'itinerario di Marco Polo diventa ciò che è per noi, non già una descrizione, un documento, ma una "istoria" una invenzione veridica ma tutta mentale di qualcosa che esiste non perché è sperimentabile, ma perché è raccontabile e materiale di ricordo (Manganelli, 1982:vii).

The distance between the lived event and the recounting of the tale - the narrative moment itself - allows the narrator to lose his emotional entanglement and to convert the experience into art. Again in the introduction to *Il Milione* Manganelli says:

[...] la memoria gli si offre senza più di una vaga traccia di emotività; le cose ricordate sono "ferme", immagini inesauribili ma immote, depositate in un luogo che non può più aggiungere né detrarre alcunché al proprio essere concluso (Manganelli, 1982:vii).

The recounting of the tale that has been lived in the past, but is now only in the memory; a series of events that have been captured and then confined, "killed", are all essential moments shared by both narrative fiction and travel literature. As Adriana Cavarero says in her study on narrative: "[...] the story comes after the events and the actions from which it results" (Cavarero, 2000:2).

However, in Manganelli's world, the familiarity with the expectations created by travel writing demands that he adopt a different tone and tenor of appraisal as narrator of events in the journey. The irony that informs the vision takes cognizance of both the historic value of this journey, the past that is associated with the "*compito di rendere testimonianza*", as well as the intervening years of familiarity with the period that separates us from Polo's source. Manganelli says:

[...] ma siamo ormai avvolti nella grande vestaglia dell'Oriente, questo albergo risveglia alcune immagini di quell'antico cassetto, non so piú se sentirmi avventuroso, affascinato, sedotto, temerario, fastoso, mi tengo a mezza strada, e mi faccio portare una birra (Manganelli, 1974:21).

The ironic deflation of the task ahead functions as a premise for the re-entering into the text as well as into the trip, and to renewing the wonders in the eyes of the reader through the intercession of the parodic raconteur. The role of the storyteller is to see the magic of the journey and to bring it to the reader at home. For Manganelli's narrator, the flash of recognition in the less than special Roman tree serves as the precise point of entry into the world of the journey:

Mi fermo improvvisamente davanti ad un albero: è un vegetale assolutamente tradizionale, anche ovvio, un albero romano, domestico, sciatto, frequentato, che oscuramente rimandi a cani ed a un'inane lotta con l'aria inquinata; tuttavia mi sono fermato e l'ho scrutato e lo indago attentamente, perché in quella forma frettolosa e slavata è apparso per un istante qualcosa di diverso: l'occhio non si è perso stancamente nel verde, non ha indugiato sui rami goffi, ma ha eseguito fulmineamente un itinerario grafico, tutti i nodi di legno, gli stacchi e gli incroci dei rami, le nervature delle foglie si sono disegnate nell'aria, l'albero si è rivelato non dipinto da un creatore stanco e ripetitivo, ma disegnato, la mano

nervosa e esatta di un inventore di piante che ha annotato un segno difficile e sapiente, un tronco, dei rami ugualmente divisi tra sofferenza ed eleganza. Sui marciapiedi di Roma un'apparizione si logora rapidamente; ed il verde del fogliame nuovamente avvolge la calligrafia segreta, il lampo si spegne, e l'anonimo e querulo albero di sempre mi sta davanti. (Manganelli, 1974:7)

The tree is the setting for the encounter of the magical space of the story as well as an entry into the tale, an alternate world in which the narrator is in control of the terms of reference. In keeping with the *itinerario grafico*, the graphic itinerary that underpins his entire *oeuvre*, Manganelli, the modern author, in his role as narrator, is content to play his usual game of surface patterning and rewriting. Although the constraints of the travelogue force him to take note of objective "reality", the result is a game of rhetorical mastery. The painted tree, like the page of the book, is aesthetically elaborate and finite, a world of perfect shadows and artificially vanishing views. The reader is drawn along a series of visual nodes into a remembered pattern no longer alive in the present, but only in the memory of the narrator who confers life upon it by retelling his story. However, the traveller's story, like the page of the book, is an "invenzione mental[e]", a mental invention dwelling in a region of pure narrative where the tale leads to yet another tale, in the circular fashion of Scheherazade's role in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

It is the narrator who, in Cavarero's terms, is at the centre of the tale, (Cavarero, 2000:141) while the act of recounting imbues him with a sublimity experienced only by the recipient of a miracle. His role as the link between the event and the audience, between the experience and the telling, gives him a special responsibility enjoyed only by the chosen:

Conseguire un miracolo è estremamente lusinghiero e giova in genere allo scioglimento delle situazioni nevrotiche: ma è anche impegnativo e imbarazzante. Potrà il muto che ha ritrovato la favella cantare strofette

frivole e indulgere al linguaggio sconveniente? Il paralitico della mano tornerà a scrivere motti sui muri? Il miracolato è tenuto alla santità, o il miracolo include una ulterior miracolosa licenza di essere inadeguati al prodigio? (Manganelli, 1974:9)

A further binary opposition at the heart of all travel literature concerns the kind of structure elicited by the recounted story itself and upon which hinges the interrelation between the storyteller and the recipient of the tale. Adriana Cavarero defines the basic terms of the story in the following manner:

Even if a life story never has an author, it always has a protagonist – a hero as we say, not by chance – and, sometimes, a narrator. Indeed [...] only an invented story reveals an artifice that can rightly be defined as an author. (Cavarero, 2000:137)

In travel literature, the terms of the relationship between the narrator and the tale can be clearly identified: the traveller is a narrator of lived events, which he defines and encapsulates in a cultural and geographical ‘other’. Because they belong to the past, these events are necessarily “killed” and “remembered in order to retell the tale”. He becomes, through the distancing device, both narrator and character. As Hannah Arendt says in *The Human Condition*, “[...] the gaze of Teiresias, like that of every narrator, is always retrospective” (Arendt, 1958:184). In Manganelli’s image, Marco Polo is also the figure of the old narrator looking towards a remembered past:

[...] era intimidatorio quel suo modo quieto di raccontare, un modo invernale, da vecchio con molti ricordi e una punta di freddo in *conspectu mortis*. (Manganelli, 1986:78)

Like Tiresias, who predicts the future by looking at the past, the travel narrator also reveals the non-fictional tale of the encountered “other”. In recounting the actuality of the “who”, the real aim of Manganelli’s

travelogue, through parodic subversion, is to redress the stereotypes of the “other” produced and sustained by the West in travel literature. In so doing he relies on the exchange at the root of all narrative: the exchange between the lived experience and the recounting of the tale in story form.

In the travel narrative “what matters from the beginning is the narrative relation that rendered them possible and that renews itself in them” (Cavarero, 2000:85). Manganelli justifies himself accordingly:

Il libro di Marco Polo proponeva un itinerario, lungo il quale potevano procedere tutte le favole, infinitamente, senza mai incontrarle un termine, da favola nascendo favola, da esperienza esperienza. (Manganelli, 1982:xii)

Both as memory and as telling, the tale of travel to far off places is at the root of literary creation. Through memory, the travel story imbues the past lived event with durability and consequently with importance (Benjamin,1999:85), while the telling of the tale allows for it to be spread and become the lived experience of the hearer and hence attain its all important propulsion into the future. Here lies the difference between what Benjamin calls the intelligence that comes from afar which has authority and thus validity not requiring verification, and simple information, much less imbued with meaning, which is in constant need of verifiability (Benjamin,1999:88): “At the center of the ancient art of telling stories lies the figure of the narrator, not that of the author” (Cavarero, 2000:141). Travel literature combines the need for the recounted mode, the physical journey in which the collective wisdom has been garnered in one single tale, and the dispensing of this wisdom in a formalized and predetermined pattern for the entertainment and the wisdom of the audience/reader.

The pact existing in the travel story is between the narrator and the reader, and between the narrator and the encountered other, the “who” that also becomes part of the “what”:

Fragile and exposed, the existent belongs to a world-scene where interaction with other existents is unforeseeable and potentially infinite. As in *The Arabian*

Nights, the stories intersect with each other. Never isolated in the chimerical, total completion of its sense, one cannot be there without the other. (Cavarero, 2000:87)

The travel tale is therefore the continuous tale *par excellence*. The travel tale's ultimate end, be it descriptive of the unknown wonders of an alien civilization, the hegemonic discourse of colonialist powers, or the listing of beauties associated with many current travelogues, is the account of the adventure shaped by the sequences of the journey itself. Its coherence and "readability" must be determined by the identifiable ordered sequence of the tale. In its relation to the experienced reality of the destination, the travelogue covers differing aspects of the reality that it encounters. The steps of the journey are the same as the steps of the tale, both giving structure and meaning to the events that would otherwise represent merely the "everydayness of routines and deadlines" (Miller & Jack, 2007:21).

Manganelli, as a postmodernist narrator, revisits the travelogue with a view to applying a personal and often ironic viewpoint on the expected and the pre-known. What Manganelli has added to his work, in which he purposely retraces the tradition of Orientalist writing, is the linguistic fluidity and imagistic subversion of contents that the reader associates with his writing style. His starting point is the East's presence in European writing as a cause of wonder and dismay. Manganelli states this ambivalence in the opening of the book by focusing on the journey:

Ogni viaggio è un simbolo, un'iniziazione: figuriamoci un viaggio in Cina. Eccoci all'affranto aeroporto di Fiumicino, una folla di "operatori economici" e alcuni ancora fluttuanti delegati che si apprestano ad andare a Pechino, [...] il viaggio è lungo, misteriosa la meta e poi gli operatori economici hanno idee assai vaghe su quello che può attenderli. Sono vigorosamente eurocentrici e incautamente estroversi. (Manganelli, 1974:11-12)

The trip into the fabulous “Orient” is also a trip into the linguistic path that the philologist follows. The reality of the place is associated with the reality of the word that describes it and imbues it with the magic of its associations:

Vedo che in russo la Cina ha nome Jitai – dio mio,
proprio verso l’arcaico, medievale Catai stiamo
viaggiando. (Manganelli, 1974:15)

From the opening of his book, Manganelli assumes the stereotypical role of the intrepid Western traveller to the “Orient” who undertakes a journey of great danger and distant range. The trip is indeed arduous as is customary for a journey to a far off place. Manganelli’s travel narrator, therefore, becomes the hero, the adventurer subjected to the difficult journey mirroring the mock heroic tones and intrepidity of the traveller of old. His hero/narrator further debunks the heroic status of the traveller by plunging into banalities of a momentary physical discomfort:

Quando altri sedili della fila che mi precede si inclinano,
io sono chiuso in una morbida morsa: è una condizione
che farebbe venire la claustrofobia a un tuorlo d’uovo.
(Manganelli, 1974:13)

Or the feeling of exhaustion when his plane reaches destination:

Son in decomposizione quanto basta per non rendere di
rigore un ectoplasma abbastanza completo, appena in
grado di esibire il passaporto. (Manganelli, 1974:16)

Thrown amongst the cosmic signs of an arbitrary universe, Manganelli the traveller almost becomes a cipher in the equation of a journey, who, however, is aware of his own existence and, unlike the heifer and the tortoise, demands a space to tell his tale:

Un fastoso capriccio del destino mi ha spedito in questa
biblioteca di alberi, diciamo la Cina: uno di quei prodigi

che un tempo superstiziosi antichi annotavano nei loro libri oracolari: oggi è nato un vitello a due teste, una tartaruga ha ballato il valzer e un tale con gli occhiali è partito per la Cina. Anonimo, come il vitello e la tartaruga. *Ma io so che ero io.* (My italics) (Manganelli, 1974:8)

Whereas the traditional journey took the traveller into the realms of the unknown and into regions that were as yet unexplored and dangerous, the modern journey offers nothing new. What is left is the parodic voice of the narrator that can only speak of the pedestrian and the prosaic, mocking those prejudices that have long proved their lack of foundation:

[...] il sanguigno eurocentrico diffida. Qualcuno gli ha insegnato che fuori della valle padana prevale l'antropofagia, e che gli unici successi nell'opera di decannibalizzazione si debbono ai missionari che hanno imposto il venerdì magro. (Manganelli, 1974:12)

The dichotomy between the 'us' and 'them', the "here" and "there" appears as a comparison of the textual readings of some Western cities known to the traveller.

Roma è plebea e nobilesca, Parigi sa di alta borghesia e popolo folcloristico e rissoso, Londra è malinconica e impiegatizia. Ma Pechino non pare aver conosciuto condizioni intermedie tra quella imperiale, protrattasi per secoli e queste di oggi, degli uomini vestiti di blu. (Manganelli, 1974:22)

For Manganelli, like many travellers before him, the moment of description of the encountered object cannot be dissociated from a comparison with the West.

Se considero la scena che mi si svolge davanti come un esempio di "stile cinese", mi pare di rintracciare,

riassunte e ridotte ad emblema, alcune delle strutture che forse ho colto, forse ho inesattamente tradotto nel gergo di un mondo troppo diverso. (Manganelli, 1974:31)

The reader, too, because of his/her position as recipient is therefore obliged to look towards the East as “there”, and relies on the author’s story telling abilities and as go-between, to make it become part of the “here”. The traveller’s function as the link between the city and its history, the present and the past, is therefore an essential component for this transfer to take place in the reader’s mind back home:

Vi è un quartiere delle legazioni, in cui non esistono più legazioni, ma che ricorda l’insolenza europea del secolo scorso, il fastoso ghetto occidentale, il tempo della Cina coloniale della sanguinosa operetta [...]. (Manganelli, 1974:22)

The baggage of expectations, the stored images that are carried along with the personal psyche of the traveller are also part of the tale, for they ultimately give shape to the understanding of the travel experience itself:

Mi chiedo con quale bagaglio infantile, quale sottile strato di deposte memorie io guardi questi cinesi. Non penso alle immagini [...] che mi sono giunte da “grande”, cariche di perplesse prospettive, ma a quelle [de]i “corrierini”, i film, certe slabbrate e decomposte memorie di operette, di canzoni alla maniera orientale. (Manganelli, 1974:18)

The trip itself is imbued with fable and myth and through this, the expectation of the deeply felt, life-changing experience promised by the travel brochure:

Essendo un passionale e un immaturo, sa che viaggiare comporta un serie di momenti amorosi, di vagheggiamenti, di scoperte innamorative: da pochi

giorni di viaggio può accadergli di riportare una defaticante serie di amori a prima vista, una carriera di languori, un'enciclopedia, magari arruffata, di occhiate fatali. (Manganelli, 1974:11)

The dichotomy between the “us” and the “them” is defined by further narrative distance; by the gap in time existing between the moment of narration and the experience of the narrator as character. While the character will rely on stereotype to define the “them” the narrator’s immediate observation provides an interpretation of the stereotype.

Il gusto per l'allegoria si mescola alla rara e sobria pubblicità: un negozio di occhiali e binocoli offre immagini di lavoratori che “guardano lontano”; gli occhiali sembrano visti immediatamente nella loro capacità di simbolo, cartelli di una farmacia sembrano suggerire un'idea privata, non solitaria della salute (Manganelli, 1974:23).

The language of this description by Manganelli’s narrator far exceeds the imparting of information. What is described as a Chinese taste for allegory is coupled with the appreciation of an advertising style that is both ‘rare’ and ‘tasteful’ even though completely culture bound. Likewise, sign boards for pharmacies “seem” to suggest a “private” rather than “solitary” idea of health. This suggestion in the eyes of Westerners is arbitrary and unexpected as it moves the concept away from health as a state of mere physical being. The polemical questioning that Manganelli’s narrator poses to himself in order to make the connection between himself and his audience/reader functions as a form of self-identification, since both narrator and reader are bound to reconsider their own value systems. The nature of the difference between cultures can gain a creative space in a confrontational comparison that only the experience of the journey can provide:

Qual è l'atteggiamento dei cinesi di fronte a queste opere, e davanti ai documenti del loro passato. Ora l'archeologia gode di singolari fortune, e ha fatto e fa straordinarie scoperte. Non mi sembra sia nazionalismo in questa ripresa di studi dell'antico. Il proposito esplicito è quello di ricostruire la storia della società cinese.

Comunque, le fortune dell'archeologia singolarmente si contrappongono a quella che pare l'assenza della letteratura classica. Davanti ai gioielli di una civiltà di suprema sapienza, l'ammirazione si mescola alla cautela: questa bellezza è nata dalla sofferenza degli umili; insieme, si avverte un progetto di conquista e di espropriazione del passato; questi capolavori furono sempre e solo i capolavori degli umili, degli ignoti, degli anonimi morti. (Manganelli, 1974:46)

As with all incidents recounted in a travel tale, it is irrelevant whether the polemical confrontation, the historical veracity or the anecdotal parody of the event criticizes or praises the “other”. What is important is that within the framework of the relationship between the narrator and the recounted “other” the exchange has allowed, and continues to allow, for the continuation of the existence of narrative.

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