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A Modernist Desire: Oriental Signification in *Salomé* and *Death in Venice*

Sara Wengström

This article considers two emblematic texts in the modernist canon, *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde and *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, and the implications of their modernist aesthetics when writing queerness in the context of Edward Said's Orientalism. As play and novella, the texts contrast the self-sufficiency of the realist narrative that Said argues is crucial for the establishment of the Orient in Western imagination. The signification of queer desire, through a language of Oriental tropes, introduces competing discourses in the texts that work to undermine the meaning and values of the imperial and Oriental framework in which they are written

This article will consider how the Oriental framework of two emblematic texts of the modernist canon, Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, relate to the signification of desire. It will insist on reading these texts as distinctly modernist and, as such, opposed to the parameters of realist narrative, and will trace the implications of their modernist aesthetics when writing queerness in the context of Orientalism. The article will take its starting point in Edward Said's brief but informative section on modernism in *Culture and Imperialism*,[1] and will argue that modernist texts achieve a de-familiarisation that allows for a questioning of Oriental premise and perspective. This becomes an instrumental strategy in their critique of the imperial society in which they originate.

In *Orientalism*, Said establishes the Orient as 'an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West,'[2] defining the Orient as a Western idea maintained by a relationship of power and domination. He situates this relationship in the Marxist tradition of hegemony, thus accounting for Orientalism's pervasiveness. It follows that in this hegemonic circulation

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[1] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).
[2] E. Said *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

and reproduction of cultural values, 'both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions and intentions.'[3] As Western ideas of the Orient distilled into an 'unchallenged coherence'[4] over the course of the nineteenth century, it enabled a vast body of cultural associations for writers to draw on. This process and these associations are what Said calls the idea of latent Orientalism, and they are at work in both *Salomé* and *Death in Venice*.

Oscar Wilde's fin-de-siècle play is premised on the trope of the Jewish princess Salomé, who typifies the veiled woman, a trope that, according to Elaine Showalter, was 'associated with the mysteries of the Orient.'[5] Showalter argues that 'the Oriental woman behind the veil of purdah stood as a figure of sexual secrecy and inaccessibility for Victorian men in the 1880s and 1890s,'[6] thus pointing to one of the immediate associations of the Oriental in the Western mind: the sensual and erotic.[7]

Said assigns a special place to Germany in *Orientalism*, arguing that, due to Germany's relatively small colonial presence, it had less of an Oriental cultural inheritance than Britain and France. However, Deborah Prager, in recent research into German Orientalism, argues that the cultural development of latent Orientalism had also taken place in Germany by the early twentieth century: 'the Orient evolves into a signifier so highly charged with multiple associations of fear, passion, mystery, violence, and pleasure that it can function metonymously.'[8] She emphasises the mobility of the Oriental signifier, a notion also stressed by Todd Kontje, who writes that Mann's Orientalism 'is linked less to a particular place than to a wide range of locations defined by their opposition to Northern Germany.'[9] The polarity of North and South is readily traced in Mann's novella as the German aristocrat Gustav von Aschenbach travels from

[3] Ibid, 202
[4] Ibid.
[5] E. Showalter, *The Veiled Woman' in Gender and Culture at the "Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 145.
[6] E. Showalter, 146.
[7] E. Said, *Orientalism*, 203.
[8] D.N. Prager, *Orienting the Self: the German Literary Encounter With the Eastern Other*, (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014), 4.
[9] T. Kontje, 'Germany's Local Orientalisms' in J. Hodkinson and J. Walker (eds.), *Deploying Orientalism in Culture and History: from Germany to Central and Eastern Europe* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2013), 65.

Munich to the 'southern vivacity'[10] of Venice. The North is signified by a 'sober trustworthiness' that is noted as 'so alien to and unusual in the roguish South.'[11]

However, although both texts rely on Oriental signification, it is imperative to realise how they differ from the texts Said considers in much of his work. Said argues that 'the colonial territories are realms of possibility, and they have always been associated with the realistic novel.'[12] Wilde and Mann's texts are not only modernist, but as play and novella they structurally diverge from the novel's 'incorporative, quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form.'[13] In *Culture and Imperialism* Said dedicates a short but insightful chapter to modernism, which he tellingly begins with the notion that a resistance 'however ineffective'[14] did exist. As such, he opens for considering modernist texts as inherently displacing the Orientalist mechanisms of the realist narrative. Whilst the realist novel is 'self-validating in the course of the narrative'[15], suggesting a transcendent truth authorised within its own parameters, the aesthetics of these two texts display the modernists' response to the imperial experience: 'self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony.'[16] In *Orientalism* Said emphasises representation over 'truth', making clear that, since there is no original to which the Western idea of the Orient relates, 'the things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices.'[17] *Salomé* and *Death in Venice* make this explicit by exaggerating the staging and aestheticization of the Oriental, thus pushing 'figures of speech' and codes beyond their familiar and conventional semantic function.

Salomé as a play is, by definition, far from the realist novel's sense of self-sufficient reality. Wilde's aestheticism works to de-familiarize rather than reiterate conventional Oriental narratives. Nicholas Mirzoeff introduces the idea of 'disorientalism', a conscious strategy of misidentification with the 'Orient' that allowed the queer minority in London to refuse emancipation on the terms of the dominant majority. He explains it as a gesture of incoherence, or 'a strategy of excess, in which symbol, paradox, and pun pushed the indexical language of taxonomy to the visualised point of failure, which was

[10] T. Mann, *Death in Venice* (1912; trans. Michael Heim, New York: Ecco, 2004), 110.
[11] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 119.
[12] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 75.
[13] Ibid.
[14] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 75.
[15] Ibid, 91.
[16] Ibid, 227.
[17] E. Said, *Orientalism.*

precisely the place of connection.'[18] This 'indexical language' is undoubtedly the realist language of pathology. This language is forcefully disrupted in Wilde's play, in which the points of failure become the exact points that reveal the performativity and construed nature of the Oriental image.

The dislocation of Oriental signifier can be traced in *Salomé* through Wilde's use of metaphor, which displays a symbolist tendency of self-referentiality where by the two components of the metaphor create an unfamiliar relationship. The metaphors deployed to describe the beauty of the veiled and sensual woman are strange: 'She is like a dove that has strayed … She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind … She is like a silver flower.'[19] Not immediately recognised in the conventional framework of beauty, these metaphors unsettle the premise of familiar desire for the oriental Salomé. Salomé's metaphors for expressing her desire for the prophet Iokanaan are equally strange: 'Thy hair is like the cedars of Lebanon,'[20] and exaggerate the Oriental to the point of absurdity. The metaphors are, furthermore, repeated in a way that equally wears them out and marks them as 'worn' in the sense of aesthetic performativity. As such the references become obsessive and textually disruptive: 'The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia (…) Neither the roses of the garden of the Queen of Arabia, the garden of spices of the Queen of Arabia.'[21]

In the imperial mind, the Oriental served its purpose for Western domination as a stereotype that could be reduced to a fixed characteristic. In Wilde's play, however, the Oriental character of the Jew is a volatile signifier, constantly deferred. The court is Jewish, but Salomé consistently refers to the Jew as Other: 'Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies.'[22] The Second Soldier scorns the Jews: 'They are always like that.'[23] But 'that' is difficult to pinpoint in the text, and 'they' even more so. Herodias asks Herod why he has not given Iokanaan over to 'the Jews who for these six months past have been clamouring for him.'[24] As such, Salomé's position becomes unstable, moving at the will and pleasure of

[18] N. Mirzoeff 'Disorientalism Minority and Visuality in Imperial London' (2006) 50:2 *TDR: The Drama Review*, 54.
[19] O. Wilde, *Salomé* (1893; Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 60.
[20] Ibid, 82.
[21] O. Wilde, *Salomé*, 82.
[22] Ibid, 60.
[23] Ibid, 46.
[24] Ibid.,104.

the writer, resisting the fixed parameters of 'Oriental' identity. This is underlined by an accumulation of various 'Oriental types'; at the court there are 'barbarians who drink and drink', 'Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes', 'Egyptians silent and subtle' and 'Romans brutal and coarse.'[25] Described as such by Salomé herself, this signification notes a lack of Western superior presence against which the Oriental signifier can work. The absence of such a binary structure contrasts with realist narrative and undermines the relational structure in which Orient and Occident function.

Death in Venice proves an interesting comparison as it maintains the relationship of audience and stage found in the play. The man that causes Aschenbach to leave Munich in search for the exoticism of 'faraway places,'[26] and who represents the first indication of the Oriental in the text, appears literally framed, as on a stage or as a painting, by a Byzantine structure of 'brightly painted hieratic motifs,' 'symmetrically arranged texts in gilt lettering' and 'mysticism.'[27] In this staged encounter, where the point of perception is emphasised, Aschenbach is established as audience: 'the raised point of vantage on which he stood'[28] contributes to the overall appearance of the man and makes Aschenbach uncertain about his features. Nor is Aschenbach allowed undisturbed observation, but instead his own position is revealed: 'he suddenly became aware that his gazed was returned: the man was in fact staring at him.'[29] The premise of the undetected but defining gaze of the Occident is interrupted, exposing the existence of the Orient as wholly depending on Western perception and perspective.

The staging of the Oriental is especially evident in the object of Aschenbach's desire, the young Polish boy Tadzio. Their dynamic maintains the relationship of actor and audience set up by the first Oriental encounter. Aschenbach is unable to understand the foreign language of the boy and instead 'the boy's speech transformed it into music, the exuberant sun poured its copious rays over him, and the sea and its sublime depths provided a constant *foil* and *backdrop* for his presence.'[30] The vocabulary suggests the dramatized nature of Tadzio's character. He often appears through language evoking stage directions: 'the horizontal shoreline was suddenly intersected by a human form

[25] O. Wilde, *Salomé*, 62.
[26] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 5.
[27] Ibid, 3
[28] Ibid.
[29] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 3.
[30] Ibid, 80 (My italics).

(…) the beautiful boy coming from the left.'[31] Towards the end of the narrative, the character of Aschenbach himself becomes a mere symbol, his name replaced by 'the lone traveller' or 'adventurer'[32], with a stylistic repetition similar to that in *Salomé*. Considering Said's insistence that the realist narrative permits the heroes 'adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of (…) what they can become,'[33] Aschenbach's regression appears decidedly ironic, de-familiarising the story's main protagonist.

Both texts make subversive use of the trope of the sensual and eroticized Orient, consequently challenging its very premise. Yeeyon Im argues that, due to the lack of Western self in *Salomé* noted above, 'far from remaining objective, *Salomé's* playwright seems to identify with the Orient.'[34] Considering Wilde as a queer writer thus acquires relevance for Oriental signification in the text. The strategy of 'disorientalism,' as theorised by Mirzoeff, works through Wilde's queerness to refute imperial values. Mirzoeff sees how, in Wilde's aesthetics, 'theatricality, deviance and same-sex desire,'[35] become linked. In other words, the Oriental image is complicated, as Wilde does not attribute deviance and decadence to the Orient in order to maintain imperial ideology. Since he himself could not identify within that ideological framework, his use of its tropes undermines it. Im further argues that 'Wilde's case demonstrates how one's identity is symbolically determined rather than biologically inherited.'[36] This can be traced in the way Wilde's use of language does not only establish the Oriental as theatre, but also desire. Desire in the play is always presented as an aesthetic concern rather than an emotional one, and is as such controlled by language. The mobility of the Oriental signifier is transferred to the signification of desire.

This is perhaps most notable in the use of the moon, which acts as the marker for desire in the text. It is from the very beginning linked to the beauty of Salomé and the Young Syrian's desire for her. The gaze of the Syrian and the Page of Herodias alternate between Salomé and the moon, with the moon taking on the features of the princess, 'She is like a little princess', and Salomé the white light of the moon, 'How pale the

[31] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 55.
[32] Ibid, 104.
[33] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 80.
[34] Y. Im, 'Oscar Wilde's Salomé: Disorienting Orientalism' (2011) 45:4 *Comparative Drama*, 368.
[35] N. Mirzoeff, 'Disorientalism Minority and Visuality in Imperial London', 53.
[36] Y. Im, 'Oscar Wilde's Salomé', 368.

princess is!"[37] However, the white light of the moon equally signifies Iokanaan and Salomé's desire for him: 'He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste, as the moon is. He is like a moon-beam.'[38] Furthermore, Salomé looks at the moon herself, saying 'She is (…) a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste.'[39] As she herself notes its beauty it further unsettles the solidity of its symbolism, inducing a sense of narcissism, echoed in the Syrian's 'joy to gaze at himself in the river.'[40]

The confusion of the symbol indicates the ambiguity of the relationships in the play. The uncertainty is further reinforced by the initial description of the moon: 'She is like a woman rising from the tomb. She is like a dead woman.'[41] This description is subverted as it is Iokanaan rising from the cistern that most closely resembles a rising from the tomb, and the dead woman is replaced by the dead Young Syrian: 'I knew the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom he sought. Ah! Why did I not hide him from the moon?'[42]

The word 'hide' notes an anxiety of visibility and position within the text, directly linked to desire by the moonlight. The play is self-conscious about the space of its own stage and the gazes it allows. There is a central tension created between inside and outside; one space that allows the moonlight and one to which it does not reach. The moonlight marks objects of desire and establishes relationships between characters. But as the moonlight moves and shifts, the uncertainty of signification extends to the inability to control patterns of desire. The Young Syrian's desire for Salomé expressed at the very beginning, framed by moonlight and fear, is revealed to be equally about the desire of the Page for the Syrian, concluded by the Syrian's death as the Page has not managed to 'hide' him from the moon-beams.

In *Orientalism*, Said notably argues that 'latent Orientalism also encouraged a peculiarly (…) male conception of the world.'[43] According to Said this male perspective denotes the description of the Orient in terms of 'a male power-fantasy' in which Oriental

[37] O. Wilde, *Salomé*, 50.
[38] Ibid, 76.
[39] Ibid, 62.
[40] Ibid, 90.
[41] Ibid, 44.
[42] Ibid, 86.
[43] E. Said, *Orientalism*, 207.

women 'express unlimited sensuality.'[44] The prominence of such discourse is hardly surprising, but becomes especially pertinent in the readings of Wilde and Mann. In Wilde's case, 'disorientalism' defers the idea of the imperial man exploiting the 'feminine penetrability of the Orient.'[45] Wilde's status as the minor anti-hero, outlined by Mirzoeff, negates the masculine ideals of the imperial projects, casting the supposedly dominant figure of the 'white man' as an effeminate dandy.

The destabilising of dominant masculinity resonates also with Aschenbach. James Wilper draws a direct parallel between Wilde's decadent aesthetics and Mann's work. He argues that Wilde's public trials for indecency helped to create an 'effeminate homosexual image'[46] to which Mann responded. Wilper further argues that 'the defining struggle of Aschenbach's life'[47] is between his maternal, foreign and Bohemian heritage and his paternal bourgeois intellectual and artistic tradition. Wilper notes that part of this struggle is the 'effort to transform the production of art into a manly, proactive, and civic minded undertaking by conquering its effeminate, egocentric, and asocial aspects.'[48] Indeed, Aschenbach anxiously frames his writing in terms of imperial conquest: 'their creator had held out for years under the strain of a single work with a fortitude and tenacity analogous to those Frederick had used to conquer his native province.'[49] However, the narrative itself undercuts Aschenbach efforts and comes to allow for Bohemian passion, thus critiquing the 'civic' and 'manly' ideals of the imperial West.

The imperial expectation of male power-fantasy is most forcefully subverted as Aschenbach's desire is centred on Tadzio. In other words, the desire for the exotic is a hallmark of Orientalist narrative, but the displacement of that desire onto a boy complicates its signification; there is a disparity between the Orientalist discourse and its homoeroticism. Esther K. Bauer writes that, in early twentieth century German literature, 'erotic subjects had become increasingly important as a means of questioning

[44] Ibid.
[45] E. Said, *Orientalism*, 206.
[46] J. Wilper (2013) 'Wilde and the Model of Homosexuality in Mann's Tod in Venedig' (2013) 15:4 *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2305 [Accessed 24.10.2015], 2.
[47] Ibid, 6.
[48] Ibid.
[49] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*.

bourgeois structures, particularly gender roles and sexual politics.'[50] In Mann's novella, Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio becomes indivisibly linked with a sense of liberation from the bourgeois expectations of his ancestry. As such, it denotes self-expression rather than moral demise. The 'sudden temptation' and erotic promise of his wanderlust is noted as a 'yearning for freedom, release, oblivion.'[51] Furthermore, the impulse to travel is 'restrained and redressed.'[52] The vocabulary contrasts the impending journey to the life of self-discipline he has led thus far. In the midst of infatuation, Aschenbach reminds himself of his ancestors and his artistic tradition, contemplating that 'the joy of a belated and profound exhilaration prompted him, persuaded him to indulge without shame or remorse in the most distasteful behaviour.'[53] The desire is justified, and the word 'belated' suggests its relation to the conventions of his previous life. His 'exotic extravagances of emotion' is directly opposed to his ancestors' 'upstanding manliness of character.'[54]

Kontje points out that 'Aschenbach (…) has been ennobled for his contributions to the national culture'[55] and that he is 'torn between (…) national dignity and oriental decadence.'[56] In other words, his aesthetic tradition becomes directly aligned with the colonial project and national identity. The nation and his own desire are at odds, a conflict framed by his artistic endeavours: 'as much as the *nation* might honour it, it gave *him* no pleasure.'[57] His psyche stands in for the imperial psyche, paralleled to a self-inflicted discipline repressing forbidden desires. His desire, not only homoerotic but also with Oriental pretexts, thus decidedly extends the critique of bourgeois conventions to an imperial critique.

In conclusion, both *Salomé* and *Death in Venice* contain competing discourses that work to unsettle the meaning of the Oriental framework in which they are written. The texts' modernist challenge of realist aesthetic conventions extends to a critique of imperial assumptions, decentring and destabilizing the originating point of Western imperial

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[50] E.K. Bauer 'Penetrating Desire: Gender in the Field of Vision in Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg and Christian Schad's Graf St. Genois Anneaucourt' (2009 101 *Monatshefte*, 484.
[51] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 8.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, 104.
[54] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 105.
[55] T. Kontje, 'Germany's Local Orientalisms', 65.
[56] Ibid, 66.
[57] T. Mann, *Death in Venice*, 9.

perspective. As the form and language of the texts exaggerate the theatrical relationship of Orient and Occident, they displace the values upholding the Oriental image in Western imagination. They accomplish this not only through aestheticizing the Orient to the breaking point of credibility, but also through the signification of desire. In *Salomé,* desire is signified by moonlight, and its mobility establishes ambiguous relationships and reveals hidden desires. In *Death in Venice* the artistic figure of Aschenbach's exotic desire opposes both bourgeois artistic tradition and imperial values. That the semantic functioning of Oriental discourse is disrupted by the texts is not to say that their use of the Orient is unproblematic, but rather highlights the force of collective cultural assumptions of their contemporary society, pointing to the Orient as a trope at the Western writer's disposal.

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