«He [the oriental] is as we are».
Gertrude Bell's Geography of Arabic Culture in *The Desert and the Sown*

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The Desert and the Sown, resoconto di viaggio dei primi del Novecento della scrittrice e archeologa inglese Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), è stato a lungo considerato una fonte di ispirazione per studiosi e viaggiatori nel Mediterraneo. Iniziato nei primi anni del '900, *The Desert and the Sown* fu pubblicato al suo rientro in Gran Bretagna nel 1907. Il desiderio più grande dell'autrice, come lei stessa dichiara, era di «scrivere non tanto un libro di viaggio, quanto un resoconto sulle genti che [ha] incontrato o che l'hanno accompagnata nel [suo] cammino, e fornire una descrizione del loro mondo, come è e come loro lo vedono». L'opera si presenta come un ampio commento narrativo, sebbene appaia come l'espressione di *momenti dell'essere* di una prosa che unisce esperienze reali ed emozioni. *The Desert and the Sown* è stato analizzato da diversi punti di vista, in questo articolo desidero porre l'attenzione sulla qualità emotiva dell'opera, in termini di scambio culturale e relazioni empatiche. In esso Gertrude Bell concettualizza la propria esperienza come una sorta di *ritualizzazione* del viaggio basata principalmente su tre azioni fondamentali: viaggiare, condividere e partecipare.

The Desert and the Sown, an early twentieth century English travel account by writer and archaeologist Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), has long been esteemed as a source of inspiration for scholars of travels and travellers in the Mediterranean. She began *The Desert and the Sown* in the early 1900s and published it after she returned to Great Britain in 1907. Her greatest wish was «to write not so much a book of travel as an account of the people whom [she] met or who accompanied [her] on [her] way, and to show what the world is like in which they live and how it appears to them». The work appears as a largely narrated commentary, although it almost gives the idea of *moments of being* of a prose that combines real experiences and emotions. *The Desert and the Sown* has been studied from a variety of standpoints. In this essay, I want to draw attention to the emotional quality of the work, in terms of cultural exchange and empathetic relationships. It seems to follow a careful method, according to which Gertrude Bell conceptualises her own experience as a form of *ritualisation* of travel, based primarily on three fundamental actions: travelling, sharing, and participating.

1 Introduction

The Desert and the Sown,[1] an early twentieth century English travel account by writer and archaeologist Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), has long been esteemed as a source of inspiration for scholars of travels and travellers in the Mediterranean. Bell was a multifaceted figure who «wrote extensively on the ancient cultures of the region, and documented the daily experience of her travels as a prolific letter writer».[2] She began *The Desert and the Sown* in the early 1900s and published it after she returned to Great Britain in 1907. Her greatest wish was «to write not so much a book of travel as an account of the

[1] Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown. Travels in Palestine and Syria*, Mineola, New York, Dover, 2008.

[2] Scot Peacock (ed.), "Introduction," in «Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism», LXVII (1997), p. 1.

people whom [she] met or who accompanied [her] on [her] way, and to show what the world is like in which they live and how it appears to them».[3]

In the *Preface*, Bell delineates both the content and the scope of the book. The work appears as a largely narrated commentary, although it almost gives the idea of *moments of being* of a prose that combines real experiences and emotions. It is noteworthy both for the author's view, and for its being the result of evidences of other social realities, while showing due respect for otherness and cultural differences. One of the most striking features of *The Desert and the Sown* is its tendency to emphasise the ideas, customs and social behaviours of different people, and it appears to accurately describe the Arabic communities the author met:

> And since it was better that they should, as far as possible, tell their own tale, I have strung their words upon the thread of the road, relating as I heard them the stories with which shepherd and man-at-arms beguiled the hours of the march, the talk that passed from lip to lip round the camp-fire, in the black tent of the Arab and the guest-chamber of the Druze, as well as the more cautious utterances of Turkish and Syrian officials.[4]

While *The Desert and the Sown* has been studied from a variety of standpoints, in terms of a feminist approach or interaction between cultures,[5] little notice has been given to the emotional quality of the work. This is a characteristic that progressively emerges from the words and situations accentuated by the author to help readers comprehend the depth of people's souls. The author's account highlights her own perception of the world she knew. However, she recognises that emotions affect judgements, including her own criticism and appreciation of others.

With her «seeing eyes»,[6] Bell's work is full of empathy and sharing.[7] «She learned to speak the languages of the people she loved with a feeling for all the nuances and subtleties, and her Arabs loved her».[8] In other words, she

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[3] G. BELL, *Preface*, in EAD., *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., pp. ix-xii, p. ix.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] In this respect, it is also worth mentioning FRED DALLMAYR, M. AKIF KAYAPINAR, and ISMAIL YAYLACI (eds.), *Civilizations and World Order Geopolitics and Cultural Difference*, Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto-Plymouth (UK), Lexington Books, 2014. It reconstructs the historical process which led to modern western civilization by focusing on a «multidimensional interactions between Islamic and other worldviews», p. 93. See also REINA LEWIS, *Rethinking Orientalism. Women, Traveler and the Ottoman Harem*, London-New York, I.B. TAURIS, 2004, specifically, the section "Intercultural Exchange. Competing Models", pp. 234-243.

[6] ELIZABETH ROBINS, *A New Art of Travel* (1911), in «Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism», LXVII (1997), pp. 2-12, p. 4.

[7] See HEIDI L. MAIBOM (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017.

[8] MICHAEL SWAN, *Emma of the Desert* (1957), in «Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism», LXVII (1997), pp. 15-17, p. 16.

«developed a new art of travel»[9] and of perceiving Arabic culture as «mixing the archaeological with the human in perfect proportion».[10]

In this essay, I want to draw attention to the emotional quality of *The Desert and the Sown*, in terms of cultural exchange and empathetic relationships. As Marta Nussbaum pointed out, Gertrude Bell shows how easy it is to have «a perfect empathetic understanding of people whose lives are very different from our own». [11] It is, perhaps, in this dialectic that one of the most significant keys to Bell's work lies. It seems to follow a careful method, according to which the author conceptualises her own experience as a form of *ritualisation* of travel, based primarily on three fundamental actions: travelling, sharing, and participating. These aspects may be considered together as a single process that contributes to a redefinition of the author's *self* and emotive participation[12] in that experience. It shows what Antonio R. Damasio would define as «the connection between emotion and consciousness».[13] By virtue of these properties, moving to the East becomes a means through which Bell aspires to invoke significant reactions as forms of response to the Arabic world as it is narrated. Therefore, by providing concrete and cogent personal experiences, and by emphasising the naturalness and authenticity of the people she met, the author suggests that the meaning that shaped her travels lies beyond her own inventiveness and that of those involved in the account.

2 Towards a «world of adventure and enterprise»

As an author who lived much of her adult life undertaking adventurous expeditions, Bell knew that it would be a real challenge for a woman to travel in the Middle East:

> Women travellers [were] [...] categorised as doubly different: they differ[ed] from other, more orthodox, socially conformist women, and from male travellers who use[d] the journey as a means of discovering more about their own masculinity. The underlying impression [...] is

[9] E. Robins, *A New Art of Travel*, cit., p. 4.

[10] M. Swan, *Emma of the Desert*, cit., p. 17.

[11] Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 341.

[12] Participation and emotion characterize Bell's writings, and evidently her own personality. As her stepmother once wrote, «In truth the real basis of Gertrude's nature was her capacity for deep emotion. Great joys came into her life, and also great sorrows. How could it be otherwise, with a temperament so avid of experience? Her ardent and magnetic personality drew the lives of others into hers as she passed along», quoted in Georgina Howell, *Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006, p. 139. As Lisa Cooper (*Britain and the Arab of Middle East,* London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. 554) notes, «Bell certainly found that travel and exploration awakened such emotions in the most powerful way».

[13] Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York-San Diego-London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999, p. 14.

> that the woman traveller was somehow in flight from something, seeking to escape from the constraints of her family or her society.[14]

Bell, instead, had an idealised vision of women travellers.[15] She believed in women's capability to face difficulties spontaneously, and recognised their determined struggle against adversities, which might have been a source of inspiration for all of women, particularly Western women.

Bell planned to travel through the Middle East after she left Oxford in 1892 and visited her uncle, Minister Frank Lascelles, who lived in Persia. Her early experiences encouraged her to embark on new ones. In 1899, she returned to the Middle East, and travelled to Palestine and Syria. She learnt Oriental languages, becoming fluent in Persian and Arabic. Her enthusiasm, determination and courage prompted her to go on exploratory expeditions, and she renounced the privileged position of the élite[16] and left Great Britain, once more, «in a stormy morning, the 5th of February» 1905:

> To those bred under an elaborate social order, few such moments of exhilaration can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance of the sanctuary is lowered, with a wary glance to right and left you step forth, and, behold! The immeasurable world. The world of adventure and enterprise, dark with hurrying storms, glittering in raw sunlight, and unanswered question and an unanswerable doubt hidden in the fold of every hill. Into it you must go alone, separated from the troops of friends that walk the rose alleys, stripped of the purple and linen that impede the fighting arm, roofless, defenceless, without possessions. The voice of the wind shall be heard instead of the persuasive voices of counsellors, the touch of the rain and the prick of the frost shall be spurs sharper than praise or blame, and necessity shall speak with an authority unknown to that borrowed wisdom which men obey or discard at will. So you leave the sheltered close, and like the man in the fairy story, you feel the bands break that were riveted about your hearts as you enter the path that stretches across the rounded shoulder of the earth.[17]

Although the soundness of her journey is motivated by a keen desire for new exciting emprises, the foreignness of the land she is about to enter em-

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[14] SUSAN BASSNETT, *Travel Writing and Gender,* in PETER HULME and TIM YOUNGS (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 225-242, p. 226.

[15] On women travellers see SARA MILLS, *Discourse of Difference. An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991.

[16] Gertrude belonged to a wealthy family, she had the opportunity to attend Oxford University at the age of sixteen and graduate at eighteen. For women education was considered secondary to a good marriage, nevertheless she could follow her own aspirations, thus giving a great impulse to her life. For a full account of her life see HEATHER LEHR WAGNER, *Gertrude Bell Explorer of the Middle East*, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004; JANET WALLACH, *The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell. Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia*, New York, Anchor Books, 2005, and LIORA LUKITZ, *A Quest in the Middle East. Gertrude Bell and the Making of the Modern Iraq*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

[17] G. BELL, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. 1 (emphasis mine).

phasises either its dichotomies («dark-storms» and «glittering-sunlight») or the dangers and the unpredictability of the East, studded with: «unanswered question[s] and [...] unanswerable doubt[s] hidden in the fold of every hill».[18] Thus, the «wild travel» becomes a challenge. The author feels an irresistible attraction for those people whose «statecraft consists of guesses [...][and] [whose] wisdom is that of men whose channels of information and standards for comparison are different from ours, and who bring a different set of preconceptions to bear upon the problem laid before them».[19] In other words, as Bell remarks, «the Oriental is like a very old child. He is unacquainted with many branches of knowledge which we have come to regard as elementary necessity [...]» and whose action «is guided by traditions of conduct and morality that go back to the beginnings of civilisation, traditions unmodified as yet by any important change in the manner of life to which they apply and out of which they arose».[20]

Her analysis rests on evidences, examples and reasoning that are based mostly on «traditions of conduct and morality» which call into question a form of immobility («go back to beginnings of civilisation») alongside people's ingenuity and simplicity of manners. Aside from these immediate images and effects, the Oriental, she puts it, «*is as we are; human nature does not undergo a complete change east of Suez*, nor is it impossible to be on terms of friendship and sympathy with the dwellers in those regions».[21] This expression is noteworthy for its giddy confidence. The terms Bell uses seem to anticipate Matte Blanco's concept of symmetrization. Indeed, she regards the Arabs as those with whom she «shar[es] something in common, becom[ing] the same in every and all respects. [...] With symmetrization the differences [...] are abolished».[22] By keeping this concept in view, we may argue, in Antonio Damasio's terms, that «it is that similarity, incidentally, that makes cross-cultural relations possible».[23]

However, Bell's objective is not only to describe places, but to produce an emotional effect in her readers. Her written project aims to raise the awareness and knowledge of traditions and customs of a country, «parts of [which] have been visited but seldom, and described only in works that are costly and often difficult to obtain».[24] Thus, Bell expands her portrayal and provides characteristics that define virtues and hospitality, underlining, moreover,

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[18] *Ibid*.

[19] Ivi, p. ix.

[20] *Ibid*. This description does not "[separate] the (inferior) observed from the (superior) observer" as Shirley Foster, *Colonialism and Gender in the East. Representations of the Harem in the Writings of Women Travellers*, in «The Yearbook of English Studies», XXXIV (2004), pp. 6-17, says by defining the "harem women as childish" (p. 11). Bell penetrates, understands, and appreciates Eastern culture; she tries to accomplish this by exploring art, archaeology, literature, and rites.

[21] Ivi, p. x (my emphasis).

[22] Ignacio Matte-Blanco, *Thinking, Feeling, and Being,* London and New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 19.

[23] A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, cit., p. 107.

[24] G. Bell, *Preface*, in Ead., *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. ix.

that they offered her «a clue to their relations with one another».[25] She delineates a human dimension together with a detailed representation of daily life, customs, law and traditions.[26] She links her activity as an archaeologist, to that of a writer who attempts to profoundly penetrate the soul of those people so distant and, yet so close to us.

The author directly constructs the physiognomy of micro-collectivities, castes, sects and tribes; she retraces peoples' attitudes, behaviours and views (in Palestine and Syria) within a defined form of social and political organisation able to ensure equality and the respect of «the law of its own».[27] Besides her account of people's qualities, Bell softens the presentation of the small group who accompanied her by choosing the unequivocal term «muleteers», a word that immediately portrays both the arduous and remote routes they were to cross, and the modest resources she could rely on. The men were all «from Lebanon»:

> A father and a son, Christian both, came from the village above Beyrout: the father an old man and toothless individual who mumbled, as he rode astride the mule trunks, blessings and pious ejaculations mingled with protestations of devotion to his most clement employer, but saw no need to make other contribution to the welfare to the party — Ibrahim was the name of this ancient; the son, Habib, a young man of twenty-three [...]. The third was a Druze, a big shambling man, incurably lazy, a rogue in his modest way, though he could always disarm my just indignation in the matter of stolen sugar or missing piastres with an appealing, lustrous eye of a dog. [...] His name was Muhammad. The last of the caravan was the cook, Mikhail, a native of Jerusalem and Christian whose religion did not sit heavy on his soul.[28]

Since the opening passages, the author acquaints the reader with other key aspects of the East as a whole:

> [The reader] will find in the East habits of intercourse less fettered by *artificial chains*, and a *wider tolerance born of greater diversity.* Society is divided by caste and sect and tribe into an infinite number of groups, each one of which is following a law of its own, and however fantastic, to our thinking, that law may be, to the Oriental it is an ample and a satisfactory explanation of all peculiarities.[29]

By keeping this unquestionable impression in view, Bell thereby seeks to demonstrate how moderation and balance seem to permeate the Oriental social thought. The author locates the source of the truest commonality in the individual's capacity to interact with others, which is regarded as crucial

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[25] Ivi, p. xi.

[26] Interesting is GILLIAN BEER, *Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past*, in CATHERINE BESLEY and JANE MOORE (eds.), *The Feminist Reader,* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 63-80.

[27] G. BELL, *Preface*, in EAD., *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. x.

[28] EAD., *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., pp. 2-3.

[29] EAD., *Preface*, in EAD., *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. x, (emphasis mine).

to the consolidation of the group's identity and culture. Thus, with the intent, that her work may have an emotional impact on different readerships, either within Great Britain or outside it, Bell wants to emphasise that despite numerous differences, the compromise between the freedom of individuals and their need to ensure orderly government make the Arabs not so distant from the Western social organisation.

3 Words as units of culture

Taking shape within the rich account of her own experiences, the individual elements of Bell's representations draw, as a single unit, a reliable map of men, places and facts, enriched by photographic impressions. She focuses on how the East has constantly been an object of curiosity – whether that of knowledge or of conquest – that seems to justify also her own desire to make such a journey. By employing different linguistic hues, that we might consider halfway between scientific and poetic language, Bell succeeded in captivating her reader by telling a story instead of overwhelming them with information. Thus, she presents an active and full picture of the places she went through, from Palestine to Syria. Each of her depictions is charged with emotional intensity, particularly when she reaches the bridge over Jordan, «[...] the most inspiring piece of architecture in the world, since it is the Gate of the Desert».[30] Likewise, she draws with passion, almost devotion, the valley of Jordan which she defines as having an «aspect of inhumanity that is almost evil. [...] A heavy stifling atmosphere weighed upon this lowest level of the earth's surface [...]».[31] Both these places mark the limits of a space crossed or even known by any European prior to her.

Bell's travel account follows the line of her route and the chronology of events, and from the beginning to the end, she narrates what she has lived. In many ways, Bell's work is like a mosaic of words and images, which has the precise function of encouraging readers to participate in her experience. She has the ability to transform her material into written images in which her own figure as a sensitive woman emerges. If Bell's writings depict and seek to understand people's experiences and qualities, they also focus on situations associated with the emotional sphere. Thus, touching elements are added in her narration, and she uses expressions that become significant for an accurate portrait of people's states of mind. One such example is when she describes Russian pilgrims who strenuously try to reach Jerusalem:

> Many die from exposure and fatigue and the unaccustomed climate; but to die in Palestine their bones rest softly in the Promised Land and their souls fly straight to Paradise. You will meet these most unsophisticated travellers on every high road, trudging patiently under the hot sun or through the winter rains, clothed always in the furs of their own country, and bearing in their hands a staff cut from the reed beds of Jordan. They add a sharp note of pathos to a landscape that touches so many of the themes of mournful poetry.[32]

[30] G. Bell, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. 11.

[31] Ivi, p. 13.

[32] Ivi, p. 8.

She evokes a sense of pity and *pathos*, and shows her sensitive apprehension of the costs of the pilgrims' journeys, as if she wanted to share («my sympathetic ears»[33]) the difficult situation they had to face. Elsewhere, with the same emotional involvement, the author describes landscape and nature, such as flowers: «anemones and white broom (*rattam* the Arabs call it) cyclamen, starch hyacinths, and wild almond trees».[34] Different terms are used to describe plants according to their usefulness: «For plants without a use, however lovely they may be, there is no name in Arabic; they are all hashish, grass; whereas the smallest vegetable that can be of service is known and distinguished in their speech».[35]

If language delineates people's identity and emotion, their complex verbal mechanisms, as we have seen, make «concepts precede words and sentences».[36] The «nonlanguage concept»,[37] becomes increasingly important in identifying different ethnic groups, such as Druzes, Bedouins, and Circassians. This provides an instructive example of how Bell places a particular emphasis on the cultural content of their language, since it bears witness to their belonging to a specific region and cultural context, which the author accurately reconstructs.[38]

Landscape and historic relics have a great appeal in Bell's gaze; the human dimension is accentuated when she talks of friendship, by pointing out how «It is easy to be on excellent terms with Orientals, and if their friendship has a price it is usually a small one»;[39] or, when she talks about optimistic expectations held by one of the Arabs she met, who tells her:

> 'Next year,' [...] 'please God I shall go to America.' I stared in amazement at the half-naked figure, the shoes dropping from the bare feet, the torn cloak slipping from the shoulders, the desert head-dress of kerchief and camel's hair rope. [...] I inquired what he would do when he reached the States. 'Buy and sell,' he replied; 'and when I have saved 200 liras I shall return'.[40]

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[33] Ivi, p. 16.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Ivi, p. 18

[36] A. DAMASIO, *The Feeling of What Happens*, cit., p. 357.

[37] Ivi, p. 358.

[38] Bell's most striking quality during the entire period is a combination of self-confident strength and passion. These feelings were considered of vital importance by D. G. HOGARTH who, in 1927, read her account of Bell's second journey to Hayil carried out in the winter 1913-14, at the Meeting of the Geographical Society. He pointed out, «There is more to be learned of Bedouin life, thought, and custom from [...] Miss Bell's diary than in any book except Doughty's 'Arabia Deserta'. It is especially informing on the subject of the women, of whom her sex enabled her to see more than her precedessors» (DAVID GEORGE HOGARTH, *Gertrude Bell's Journey to Hayil,* in «The Geographical Journal», LXX (1927), pp. 1-17, p. 16).

[39] G. BELL, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. 16.

[40] Ivi, p. 17.

Through these examples, Bell documents, also, the spirit of individuals and their capacity, despite difficulties and lack of economic resources, to cultivate their dreams, and reach places, that are distant in length and education, where they hope to realise their expectations. Bell appears to be captivated by this attitude; her observations seem to conceal a form of incredulity mixed with appreciation and awe.

The spirit of friendly relationships between people is repeatedly made apparent to the reader. Moments of friendship—intermixed with other events or stories the author recalls—are revealed by Bell's repeated use of expressions that refer to hospitality. *The Desert and the Sown* is constructed around a framework of values that is essentially one of mutual relationships and esteem. By describing these relationships, she narrates that she was, in all circumstances, received warmly by the different tribes. In various chapters, Bell focuses on their language and the fact that it contains invocations for health, happiness and peace. For example, when she arrives at Yusef Effendi Sukkar's house, the man who should have shown her the path to Salt, she immediately notes: «We settled down to coffee, the bitter black coffee of the Arabs, which is better than any nectar. The cup is handed with a 'Deign to accept,' you pass it back empty, murmuring 'May you live!' As you sip someone ejaculates, 'A double health' and you reply, 'Upon your heart!'».[41] As she observes, on many occasions, ritual practices imply a type of *gift* that serves to invoke a deity, power or spirit in return for blessings. Indeed, the linguistic features of the tribes Bell encounters are characterised by phrases the Arabs used to answer questions. For example, when she meets a horseman and asks him where he is from, he answers «May the world be wide to you! From the Arabs».[42] These accounts serve to reveal the profound sense of social unity and people's solidarity. At the same time, however, they manifest the social world to which tribes belong; the distinctive traits of certain forms of conduct help the author to gather the semiotic codes that comprise the substance of acts within a given social context.

Bell is primarily concerned with the representations of the indigenous population of Palestine and Syria, whom she redefines from the centre and periphery. She moves from periphery to centre and focuses her attention both on people's lifestyles and cities' monuments; inner and outer spaces acquire symbolic significance in her own account. She fulfils this expectation in several chapters of her book. Bell constructs the topography of the land by depicting and taking photographs of the most important relics of the Eastern Culture, such as the Theatre of Amman, the Temple in Khureibet Es Suk, and the Mausoleum.

Nature encapsulates her imagination from the very beginning, when she and her companions reach Salt, where she continues to experience the wonder of a country «famous for grapes and apricots»,[43] and whose gardens are mentioned in «the fourteenth century work of the Arab geographer Abu'l Fida».[44] This sensation does not come from diversity of territory but rather, from its remarkable similarity to those she has already journeyed through.

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[41] Ivi, p. 20.

[42] Ivi, p. 23.

[43] Ivi, p. 22.

[44] *Ibid.*

This «delicious land East Jordan»[45] should never change, she says. It should remain that delectable region about which Omar Khayyam sings, «The strip of herbage strown that just divides the desert from the sown».[46] Bell is fascinated by the place; she connects it to a lyrical atmosphere that distances it from a mere idea of conquest and colonisation.[47] In addition, she does not confine her inspection to nature and indigenous peoples; she urges readers to understand how they perceive their own countries. Everything the author transmits is based on her own observation and dialogue with people who are continuously expressing their gratitude for their own land.

Bell's imagery attempts to place the reader in the space she describes to make them experience what it feels like to stand before it. Although her descrptions are detailed, she does not employ complex compositions to make her material accessible. Her account is not a sort of passive representation of what she has known. She wants the reader to see, through her eyes, what she herself notices, to hear what she is told, and to reflect on what she reflects. There is an intense conjunction between the author and reader, who eventually find a communion of thought, while the people she meets are the principal and reliable source of inspiration. In this way, Bell not only outdoes her previous models (such as Charles Montagu Doughty or Thomas Edward Lawrence),[48] but also weakens their importance by entitling her travels with a new association with the East. Since then, Bell has been recognised as a woman who had extraordinary affinities with Oriental places and peoples. She was, in fact, an authoritative woman who transformed travels into a path for the pursuit of knowledge, by establishing a «conceptual interrelation of travel and experience».[49] This correlation gave her the profile and physiognomy of the Queen of the Desert as many published books testify, thus extending her fame throughout Europe and the Middle East.

In *The Desert and the Sown* Bell reframes her connection with the East and its populations to defuse the threat it may represent to Western culture, a menace that directly equates to the perceived otherness of that land. Consequently, Bell's relationship with the different tribes is strengthened, and

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[45] Ivi, p. 23.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] See SUTAPA DUTTA (ed.), *British women Travellers. Empire and Beyond, 1770-1870*, New York and London, Routledge, 2020.

[48] See H. L. WAGNER, *Gertrude Bell*, cit., p.53 ff.

[49] JAKUB LIPSKI (ed.), *Travel and Identity. Studies in Literature, Culture and Language*, Bydgoszcz, Springer, 2018, p. 1. In the wake of previous published works, such as Charles Montagu Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (first published in 1888, and then in 1908 with the new title *Wanderings in Arabia*), Gertrude Bell aims to make her readers perceive her experience of traveling to Middle East even as an inner experience; she, in fact, describes in *The Desert and the Sown* what that experience has given her in term of emotions and feelings appropriate to specific situations. As Norman Douglas observes about Doughty's work, «It is not enough to depict, in however glowing hues, the landscape and customs of distant regions, to smother us in folklore and statistics and history, and besprinkle the 'pages with imaginary conversations or foreign idioms by way of generating local colour'. We want to take our share in that interior voyage and watch how these alien sights and sounds affect the writer» (NORMAN DOUGLAS, *Experiments*, New York, Robert M. McBride & Co., 1925). We can easily find this attitude in Bell's work. See also CHARLES MONTAGU DOUGHTY, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

they do not «remain in separate non-interacting spheres».[50] She knows that she is not like other European travellers, who see and pass by, because nothing calls upon them to sit still to know and understand. Thus, her descriptions linger on the family ties she understands through visiting the tribes, on their discourses, and on their rituals and superstitions.

The reconstruction of their identity passes through the protagonists' narration:

> 'We spoke, too, of superstition and of fears' that clutch the heart at night. There are certain places, said he [Namrud], where the Arabs would never venture after dark—haunted wells to which thirsty men dared not approach, ruins where the weary would not seek shelter, hollows that were bad camping grounds for the solitary. What did they fear? Jinneh; who could tell what men feared?[51]

Through the representation of «human misery» and weakness that drive desperate people to hope that «the unmeasured wisdom of the West may find them a remedy»[52] for diseases, she observes, «Men and women afflicted with ulcers and terrible sores, fevers and rheumatism, children crippled from their birth, the blind and the old, there are [*sic*] no one who do not hope»[53] that travellers, like her, may free them from all sufferings, purified them of all disease and afflictions. In one specific case, Bell feels frustrated and powerless at not being able to do more to solve a problem involving a man «to whom a 'bullet had passed through the cheek and shattered the jaw'».[54] She writes: «I could do nothing but give him an antiseptic, and adjure the woman to wash the wound and keep the wrappings clean, [...] Death had him so surely by the heel».[55] We may argue that Bell's sensitivity and her emotional involvement explain how intersubjective nature takes a dimension of social relationship, a form of mutuality and sharing which includes «interpersonal symmetrization».[56]

With *The Desert and the Sown*, Gertrude Bell provides the most elaborate treatment of a theme that her work has pursued throughout: the interrelation between different cultures. Her writings translate (a word here used in its etymological meaning, from Latin *tradere*) the stories into the English context with the precise aim of encouraging the reader's empathy, which should give rise to intersubjective experiences. For this purpose, the author provides an important example of the Arabic culture when she «listened

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[50] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writings and Transculturation,* London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 80.

[51] G. Bell, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., pp. 36-37.

[52] Ivi, p. 81.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] Ivi, p. 80.

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] Eric Rayner, *Unconscious Logic. An Introduction to Matte Blanco's Bi-Logic and Its Uses*, London-New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 38.

with breathless interest as one story succeeded another»,[57] or through moral fables and proverbs, in which, as she elaborates, human behaviours and beliefs are the expression not only of autochthonous cultures, but of the mixture of those peoples who moved through the Mediterranean, and whose influence and impact determined different practices and usages.

The intensity of Bell's accounts is due to the act of listening that reinforces the reliability of the stories; she let the Arabic culture, with its multifaceted aspects, emerge not from her own interpretation as a narrator, but through the protagonists that alternate:

> "There are good customs and bad among the Arabs," said Namrud, "but the good are many. Now when they wish to bring a blood feud to an end, the two enemies come together in the tent of him who was offended. And the lord of the tent bares his sword and turns to the south and draws a circle on the floor, calling upon God. Then he takes a shred of the cloth of the tent and a handful of ashes from the hearth and throws them in the circle, and seven times he strikes the line with his naked sword. And the offender leaps into the circle, and one of the relatives of his enemy cries aloud: 'I take the murder that he did upon me!' Then there is peace. Oh lady! The women have much power in the tribe, and the maidens are well looked on. For if a maiden says: 'I would have such one for my husband,' he must marry her lest she should be put to shame. And if he has already four wives let him divorce one, and marry in her place the maiden who has chosen him. Such is the custom among the Arabs".[58]

This passage portrays a process of emotional transformation by unveiling people's nobility of spirit; forgiveness and mutual respect are shown to demonstrate that they naturally bring with them a capacity for feeling, and specifically, the capacity to live in a spirit of fraternal sharing: «'I take the murder that he did upon me!' Then there is peace».

In this way, Bell attempts to provoke an emotional response from her readers with the firm intention to inspire and open new paths for an interaction between cultures, and for the development of a culture of reciprocity. Thus, the examples the author recalls and records serve to amplify a sense of acceptance instead of rejection.

4 «SAW THE DESERT WITH HIS EYES». A WHIRLWIND OF COLOURS, SOUNDS, AND CULTURES

Numerous paradigmatic expressions of Arabic thought and morality are emphasised by Bell in an attempt to create a cultural map that unifies all elements of different narrations into a cohesive content. She highlights, for example, the concept they have of identity and belonging, in different moments of her work, either by representing what she herself sees, or quoting the verses of great poets, such as Antarah, who wrote: «And what is a man but a tent and the folk thereof? One day they depart, and the place is left de-

[57] G. BELL, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., 42.

[58] *Ibid.*

solate».[59] Through few words, the poet, here, reconstructs an entire world, the world of those who belong, not only to their tribes, but to the desert and its tents, small households whose few elements depict a whole world:

> I looked out beyond him [Gablan, her guide] into the night and saw the desert with his eyes, no longer empty but set thicker with human associations than any city. Every line of it took on significance, every stone was like the ghost of a hearth in which the warmth of Arab life was hardly cold, though the fire might have been extinguished this hundred years. It was a city of shadowy outlines visible one under the other, fleeting and changing, combining into new shapes elements that are as old as Time, the new indistinguishable from the old and the old from the new.[60]

The most explicit link between cultural foundations and the preservation of identity occurs in the Arabs' interaction with their own history, poetry and experience. Bell clarifies this aspect by narrating proverbs and stories that together synthetise a world she is learning to know. If the ethnographic lens through which she analyses habits, customs and differences provides a more complete picture of their society and lifestyle and of their moral and human dimension, it also prompts the author to discover the dual significance of her travel: physical and spiritual. In fact, she undertakes an inner journey, free from constraints of time and space, through which her own viewpoint is destined to change. The desert appears not as a peripheral land, but as a place populated by heterogeneous groups of travelers, a whirlwind of colours («To wake in the desert dawn was like waking in the heart of an opal.»[61]), sounds and cultures that contribute to emphasising Bell's inner journey; she follows similar trajectories, forging ahead through memories, feelings, thoughts and historical events; in other words, she has viewed the desert as an archetypical place of historical movements that involved moments of different importance either for herself or the people who lived or crossed it:

> There is no name for it. The Arabs do not speak of desert or wilderness as we do. Why should they? To them it is neither desert nor wilderness, but a land of which they know every feature, a mother country whose smallest product has a use sufficient for their needs. They know, or at least they knew in the days when their thoughts shaped themselves in deathless verse, how to rejoice in the great spaces and how to honour the rush of the storm. In many a couplet they extolled the beauty of the watered spots; they sang of the fly that hummed there, as a man made glad with wine croons melodies for his sole ears to hear, and of the pools of rain that shone like silver pieces, or gleamed dark as the warrior's mail when the wind ruffled them.[62]

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[59] Ivi, p. 60.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] Ivi, p. 64.

[62] Ivi, p. 60.

Here, Bell's sensibility seems to be in unison with the Arabs; she shows a form of respect for their social, moral, and ethical values as the foundation of their relationship to others and to their own land and culture. Bell spontaneously amplifies this aspect to manifest the depth of their world, unknown and mysterious to Western people. As the following passage indicates, the reflection she is about to undertake is complementary to other depictions concerning the Arabic world she has described diffusely; her primary concern of landscape description is the image of natural scenery, which harmonises with people's soul giving life:

> The temper of verse as splendid of its kind as any that has fallen from the lips of men. Every string of Arab experience is touched in turn, and the deepest chords of feeling are resonant. There are no finer lines than those in which Lebid sums up his appreciation of existence, a poem where each one of the fourteen couplets is instinct with a grave and tragic dignity beyond all praise. He looks sorrow in the face, old age and death, and ends with a solemn admission of the limitations of human wisdom: "By thy life! the casters of pebbles and the watchers of the flight of birds, how know they what God is doing?" The voice of warning is never the voice of dismay. It recurs often enough, but it does not check the wild daring of the singer. "Death is no chooser!" cries Tarafa. "The miser or the free-handed, Death has his rope round the swift flying heel of him!" But he adds: 'What dost thou fear? To-day is thy life.?" And as fearlessly Zuhair sets forth his experience: "To-day I know and yesterday and the days that were, but for to-morrow mine eyes are sightless. For I have seen Doom let out in the dark like a blind camel; those it struck died and those it missed lived to grow old." The breath of inspiration touched all alike, old and young, men and women, and among the most exquisite remnants of the desert heritage is a dirge sung by a sister for her dead brother, which is no less valuable as a historical document than it is admirable in sentiment.[63]

Poetry becomes the fundamental expression of Arabic culture in which experience and sentiment, sorrow and happiness, life and death constitute a single unity that altogether converge towards an emotional life that, as Monique Scheer observes, «is conceived and structured as part of human identity».[64] Accordingly, through poetry, Bell suggests that experience and emotion merge with the desert, interacting with it powerfully, thus making the desert the centre of the Arabs' life. The seed of their essence resides in the voices and colours of a place, which has become the epitome for the true Arabic society.

However, as she notices, the Arabs seem to have lost their cultural purity due to infiltration of other populations; probably, Damascus is the only city in which it is possible «to see the finest population that can be found anywhere».[65] Bell's agency and feeling are absorbed into descriptions provided by different places: «Above all other cities, Damascus is the capital of the

[63] Ivi, pp. 61-62.

[64] MONIQUE SCHEER, *Topographies of Emotion*, in UTE FREVERT et al. (eds.), *Emotional Lexicons*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 32-61, p. 37.

[65] G. BELL, *The Desert and the Sown*, cit., p. 134.

desert. The desert stretches up to its walls, the breath of it is blown in by every wind, the spirit of it comes through the eastern gates with every camel driver».[66] As the image of the wind suggests, perhaps the intensity of her depiction grants her affinity with the desert, and the archaeological heritage, which is the emblem of past greatness. Her opinion about historical events shows her profound scepticism; for example, when she analyses the organisation of Turkey, she encourages the reader to consider many perspectives, which then reverberated on social and political structure on a large scale:

> Nazim Pasha, though he has been eight years in Syria, talks no Arabic. We in Europe, who speak of Turkey as though it were a homogeneous empire, might as well when we speak of England intend the word to include India, the Shan States, Hong Kong and Uganda. In the sense of a land inhabited mainly by Turks, there is not such a country as Turkey. [...] He [the ruler] is not acquainted with their language, it is absurd, to expect of him much sympathy for aspirations political and religious which are generally made known to him amid a salvo musketry, [...]. Observe the internal arrangements of a Turkish village, and you shall see that the Turkish peasant knows how to lay down rules of conduct and how they obey them. I believe that the best of our native local officials in Egypt are Turks who have brought to bear under new régime the good sense and the natural instinct for government for which they had not much scope under the old.[67]

The political geography she shows underlines the decay and confusion of populations supported only by a cultural awareness coming from the distant past, for which the Arabs preserve a sort of indescribable pride.[68] On the other hand, her descriptions apply perfectly to the existing topography of a culture in which it is possible to identify Damascus as the authentic centre of the world. Bell's analysis provides the right impulse for a critical retrospective on politics and government, which she emphasises by making associations with the retrograde past and on the «Turk's failure»:

> The fact that such men [Greeks, Armenians, Syrians] as these should inevitably rise to the top, points to the reason of the Turk's failure. He cannot govern on wide lines, though he can organise a village community; above all he cannot govern on foreign lines, and unfortunately he is brought more and more into contact with foreign nations. Even his own subjects have caught the infection of progress. The Greeks and Armenians have become merchants and bankers, the Syrians merchants and landowners; they find themselves hampered at every turn by a government which will not realise that a wealthy nation is made up of wealthy subjects. And yet, for all his failure, there is no one who would obviously be fitted to take his place. For my immediate

[66] *Ibid*. (emphasis mine).

[67] Ivi, p. 139-140.

[68] Selim Beg, Bell's guide, «presented [her] with certain photographs of the priceless manuscripts of the Kubbet el Khazneh in the Great Mosque, now closed for ever to the public eye, and promised [her] the rest of the series» (ivi, p. 142).

> purpose I speak only of Syria, the province with which I am the most familiar.[69]

By changing forms of utterance and thought, she gives resonance to images, places and persons who are participants in a continuing cultural conversation. In assessing the political and cultural situation of the Orient, both the writer and the reader still seem willing to know the past by the past, as well as the past by the present. By sharply critiquing retrogressive organisations, Bell suggests a break from a hypothetical Oriental model of state: «There is no nation of Arabs»,[70] she says, every population «is separated» from another, and, in her view, it seems impossible to change the situation. Once in Syria, Bell concludes her travel – by «review[ing] the incidents of the way, and [the] adventures»[71] – by saying to her interlocutor:

> Oh Mikail, this is a pleasant world, though some have spoken ill of it, and for the most part the children of Adam are good not evil. [...] But consider, now, those whom we have met upon our journey, and think how all were glad to help us, and how well they used us. At the outset there was Najib Faris, who started us upon our way, and Namrud and Gablan—[...] "Listen, oh lady", said Mikhail, "and I will make it clear to you. Men are short of vision, and they see but that for which they look. Some look for evil and they find evil; some look for good and it is good that they find, and moreover some are fortunate and these find always what they want. Praise be to God! To that number you belong. [...] and, please God! You shall journey in peace and return in safety to your own land, [...] and again many times shall you travel in Syria with peace and safety and prosperity, please God!"[72]

Bell's travels allowed her to adapt and speak to other cultural groups, establishing a set of interactions through which she has drawn a map of human and cultural dynamics, never forgetting that a variety of social and cultural differences serve to illuminate a shared humanity.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we might argue that two important consequences derive from the cultural geography drawn by Gertrude Bell in *The Desert and the Sown.* First, she reconceives the ethnographic literature «[...] by stimulating a very set of interactions, and hence a different set of observations leading to a different set of conclusions».[73] The explorations she has conducted among the Oriental populations help the reader deeply understand Arabic traditions

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[69] Ivi, p. 140.

[70] *Ibid.*

[71] Ivi, p. 336.

[72] Ivi, pp. 336-340.

[73] MICHAEL V. ANGROSINO and KIMBERLY A. MAYS DE PEREZ, *Rethinking Observation: From Method to Context*, in NORMAN K. DENZIN and YVONNA S. LINCOLN (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage, 2000, pp. 673-702, p. 689.

and customs. Moreover, as she documents, language delineates people's identity and emotions, emphasising how words become units of culture and how the «nonlanguage concept» is their specific characteristic. In seeking to offer a clear idea of space, Bell conceptualises and attaches a significant value to the desert in which linguistic and cultural diversities express the coexistence of multiple identities; the desert, she notes, is the manifestation of an entire world, populated by heterogeneous groups of tribes and travellers, a whirlwind of colours and sounds.

Second, the author reorients the cultural geography in terms of personal involvement. She gives an account of how experience and emotional participation are capable of effecting changes. Her travels have produced the conditions for transforming her consciousness and the perception of the context alike. She has discovered their transformative potential. Bell explains that travelling in the Mediterranean has stimulated her inner research, giving her plasticity of mind, and that the emblematic method of combining the visual and verbal has operated as a form of active learning, a growing search for knowledge of herself. Thus, the Mediterranean has become a dimension through which the writer and archaeologist has finally considered her experience in the Middle East «as an emancipatory activity. [...] the East was not merely a physical place, but an ideal and imaginary one: a symbolic locus sometimes romanticised, sometimes 'expurgated' or 'cleaned' [...] but always intensely experienced».[74]

[74] Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918*, London, Macmillan, 1992, p. 307.

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Gertrude Bell; Travellers; Mediterrean; Arabic Culture; the Desert

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NOTIZIE DELL'AUTORE

Paola Partenza è professoressa associata di Letteratura inglese presso l'Università "G. D'Annunzio" di Chieti-Pescara. Fra gli autori di cui si è occupata vanno menzionati A. Marvell, W. Shakespeare, W. Godwin, Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Christina G. Rossetti, Alfred Tennyson, T. S. Eliot, Alfred E. Housman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rebecca Harding Davies, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Kazuo Ishiguro e altri. È autrice della monografia *Alfred Tennyson e la poesia del dubbio* (Adriatica 2002 e 2012) e di un volume sulla scrittura femminile, *Sguardo e narrazione. Quattro esempi di scrittura femminile. Wollstonecraft, Hays, Austen, Gaskell* (2008). Nel 2015 ha curato il volume *Alchimie austeniane. Donne, fortuna e altre storie in* Pride and Prejudice *di Jane Austen*.

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