PRE-RAPHAELITE INTERTEXTUALITIES, ROMANTIC AESTHETICS AND LOVE AS MELANCHOLY IN CONSTANTIN CHRISTOMANOS' *TAGEBUCHBLÄTTER* (1898)

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Abstract. In this paper, I investigate the cultural fashion of Pre-Raphaelitism which, in the late 19th century, inspired Constantin Christomanos to write a work based on his virtual interaction with Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary. This literary piece, first published in German in 1898, was titled *Tagebuchblätter*. I review the Greek version, published in 1908 under the title *Το Βιβλίο της αυτοκράτειρας Ελισάβετ. Φύλλα Ημερολογίου* (transliterated as: *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet. Fylla Imerologiou*).

The *fin-de-siècle* spirit that sprang during that time disseminated common aesthetic principles throughout Europe. The contribution of art to the formation of national culture was suggested as an ideological principle in Victorian England. The phenomenon expanded and led to the ideologisation of Art. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was inspired by the early Italians and the *Stil Novisti*. Translation became a new creation. This resonates with what Oscar Wilde will later quote in his work *The Critic as Artist* (1891). Rossetti, in the translation of Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, *mirrors* himself, while Dante does the same thing in his own writing. It is a process of literary genealogy that moves between the two works. In the second case to be examined, that is, in Rossetti's artistic work, there is the embedment of a literary subject within an artwork. Christomanos assimilates reversely the technique by Rossetti into his own literary work.

The last part of my paper aims to explore *love as melancholy* in this writing of Christomanos through an original multidisciplinary perspective, that is to say: theoretical, literary, aesthetic, historical, psychoanalytic, as well as gender perspective that ranges from antiquity to modernity. The painting *Love Among the Ruins* (1894) by Edward Burne-Jones perhaps best and vividly portrays Christomanos' creative memories and self-reflection on the mood and feelings he

experienced over his dwelling in the Austrian Empire, where he was assigned to serve as the Empress' private instructor of Greek, bringing into light the tender erotic feelings he maintained for her (a fact that was previously addressed in earlier research: Christomanos 1990, 10-20). At this point, I suggest construing Christomanos' love aesthetics through the scheme of the bodily humor of *melancholy,* by applying the rather romantic motif of *unfulfilled love*, which is thus completed only through decay and death 'among the ruins'.

Keywords: Pre-Raphaelites, Christomanos, Empress Elisabeth, Austria, Hungary, Sissi, intertextuality, Dante, Rossetti, Wilde, mirroring, autobiography, fin-de-siècle, love-melancholy, Edward Burne-Jones, love among ruins

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu presented the work of art as a palimpsest revealing its modern aspect. He recognised the multitude of interpretations, the act of reading as a process of recreating, the boundless essence, the potential for both materialistic and symbolic significance in engaging with it, categorizing it, unravelling its mysteries, offering commentary, challenging its ideas, understanding it, and embracing it as a possession (Giebelhausen and Barringer 2009, 1).

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, established in the late 1840s, embraced the principles proposed by Pierre Bourdieu and their influence on the artistic and literary landscape endured for over 150 years. In an article published in *The Critic* on February 15th, 1850, Edward William Cox sought to introduce them as the epitome of the artistic tradition. According to *The Guardian* on August 28th, 1850, the era witnessed the emergence of Pre-Raphaelites as a group of intellectuals and artists, forming a *School*. (Corbett 2009, 81, 82, 96).

Although Pre-Raphaelites were often seen as complex and controversial figures, they were guided by a set of principles that defined their artistic identity. In *Victorian Art Criticism*, they were associated with debated concepts such as manliness and effeminacy,

Britishness and cosmopolitanism, tradition and modernity. The dualistic approach yielded a multitude of interpretations, where artistic influences, genealogies, and stylistic morphologies demonstrated a critical role in shaping the movement (Codell 2009, 54).

As it is argued: "By around 1908, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had […] (come) to serve the needs of British cultural politics for a national imagined community" (Codell 2009, 54). In this context, from *daring rebels* Pre-Raphaelites transformed into *idols of Britishness*, intellectual and artistic conveyors of the *Victorian national identity*. The endeavour was conducted in the popular spirit of the period to assert the configuration of the *national culture* (Codell 2009, 54).

Furthermore, *Victorian national identity* in Britain was built upon the dogma of "deliberate *cultural construction*" (Codell 2009, 54). Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was the case to perform it. At this point, it is worth noting that Pre-Raphaelitism had a strong impact on the expansion of both British and other European and Continental national identities while, at the same time, the movement fostered every single nation's cultural fashion all over Europe (Codell 2009, 53).

The process of nationalising in Victorian England had, as research pointed out, three dominant aesthetic principles: literary style, race, and interdisciplinary (see Codell 2009, 65). At this point, I do not discuss race as an aesthetic principle but showcase, in the lines below, the gender component instead. It is evident that during that time, in England intellectuals and artists insisted on emphasising the details, while European artists focused on the submission of an atmosphere. As Codell puts it: "While Europeans painted atmosphere, the English maintained bright colours" (Codell 2009, 65). Pre-Raphaelites were asseverating the spiritual in art and their "rebellion became a cultural Protestantism claiming to be both traditional and modern" (Codell 2009, 66).

The Female Figure by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Her Mirroring in The Literary Representation of Empress Elisabeth by Christomanos

A leading figure in Pre-Raphaelitism was Dante-Gabriel Rossetti (1828 – 1882). In his essay on Rossetti, later collected in the book *Appreciations*, yet first published in 1883, a year after Rossetti's death (McGann 2012, 89), Walter Pater puts the writer and painter at the centre of intellectual life in the *fin-de-siècle* (McGann 2012, 89). The years 1845-1846 are considered critical for Rossetti's artistic development. During that period, he was keen on translating Dante and other Italian poets of the early *Stil Novisti* (Codell 2009, 89, 90). Rossetti's reading of the early Italian poetry (Dante, Cavalcanti, Cecco Angiolieri) transforms his poetics into what Shelley (1792-1822) called "intellectual beauty" (McGann 2012, 90).

In the bibliography, Rossetti is characterised as a poet of love and physical passion, an intellectual writer like Dante, who follows programmatically a definite set of ideas (McGann 2012, 90). The virtual conversations between Christomanos and Empress Elisabeth on Dante were likely to have been triggered to some extent by the popular interest in Pre-Raphaelitism amidst the *fin-de-siècle*, as well as Rossetti who *read* the Renaissance anew.

Rossetti considered his translations as a way, a method that could function as a precursor for his own poetry. His translations of Dante and the early Italian poets "-probably begun as early as 1845- plunged him into a study of Europe's most significant body of love poetry*"* (McGann 2012, 90). He adapted his prosody into English and ventured to develop it into Italian prosodic forms (McGann 2012, 90). The main writing was *La Vita Nuova* of Dante, the writing in which Dante transformed his life into a poetic myth. According to research: Rossetti in his translation "was consciously trying to map Dante's life onto his own" (McGann 2012, 90). In other words, Rossetti was in the making of Dante's life a mirror of himself.

In a parallel reading, the backdrop of Dante's and Rossetti's works is brought to the forefront. Taking inspiration from Dante, Rossetti's love poetry embodies an intellectual depth, demonstrating both poets' view of love through a philosophical lens. Poets sought a style that could transform intangible concepts such as emotions, ideas, and spiritual forces into an objective form, often through language, semiotics or symbolism. The allegorical elements present in their works underscore the philosophical dimensions of their artistic expression. (McGann's lecture, "Dante and Rossetti: Translation, Pastiche, Ritual, Fate", delivered in 1998 and published by the University of London Press in 2005 in PDF format, with a subsequent release in 2020, 5).

The self-referentiality of Rossetti's work and the assumption of poetic genealogy - of Dante as well - can be traced within the narrative of *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*, at text passages where Christomanos alludes to the artistic representation of *Beatrice*, by Rossetti who, according to him: *painted her figure as if she was mirroring herself within his soul* / in Greek: *που τη ζωγράφησε βλέποντάς τη στον καθρέφτη της ψυχής του* (Christomanos 1990*,* 69). Rossetti develops an intimate relationship with the poetic and artistic figure he crafts while he re-creates it through his own 'glasses', as a mirroring of his own life.

As it is argued: "Rossetti's inspiration was Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), exploring the Italian poet's idealized love for Beatrice and her premature death" - Gallery label. November 2016*,* and "Rossetti draws a parallel in this picture (1864–70) between the Italian poet Dante's despair at the death of his beloved Beatrice and his own grief at the death of his wife Elizabeth Siddal, who died on 11 February 1862". Frances Fowle. 7 December 2000, Both found at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279 (last access 25/10/2021).

One could say that Rossetti's translations were less translations but a sort of poetic essays in progress for his later work as a poet. *The Critic*, according to the famous quote that reaches Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900), becomes the new *Artist*. The poetic and painting

features of Rossetti's oeuvre share jointly the dogma of the undivided form that found its equivalent in many literary and artistic representatives of the epoch.

In the memoir of his brother, William Michael Rossetti vividly recounts the significance of the 1849 drawing, titled: *Dante Drawing an Angel on the First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*. The drawing is a "key example of how outline could be modified to enable a more personal expression of ideas". (Cruise 2011, 54). The artwork, he asserts, stands as the quintessential embodiment of the *Pre-Raphaelite School* during that era. Remarkably, it appears to be the inaugural instance where Rossetti draws inspiration from Dante's personal narrative, transmuting the poet's verses into a visual representation. The image itself portrays the early Italian poet, Dante, surrounded by a circle of his companions, while an additional inscription records the location and date of this poignant scene: *Florence, 9th June 1291* (PretteJohn 2012, 103).

Within a broad frame, the same artistic representation technique inspired Christomanos in his own writing, *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*. The main difference lies in the fact that the latter makes the reverse: it is evident that the literary subject of Dante transforms into an artwork by Rossetti, while the artwork of Rossetti is embedded, as a literary subject, into the narrative of Christomanos, thereby forming an interdisciplinary genealogy process. Another difference lies in the aestheticisation of the latter. A hybrid form illuminates the two aspects, both expressed in the context designated in the narrative.

Going back to Dante, he launches a multiplicity of meanings. Rossetti used this technique as a methodological tool in poetry and painting. PretteJohn argues that, due to his personal obsessions and a destructive allure of women, he found himself distanced from the artistic milieu. Over time, his artistic expression transformed into a mere conduit for his personal desires. The tragic demise of his beloved Siddall served as the final blow towards a tremendous collapse that was followed by his descent into drug addiction (PretteJohn 2012, 103, 108, 109). His life and work explain one

another, while intertextuality of what he called *double work* is a technique which found its representatives to aesthets and Anglosaxon modernists.

Through the pages of *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*, the Empress is presented similarly to Siddall and, a few lines below, the analogy becomes more accurate: Christomanos likens Elisabeth's image during her hair rituals to the drawing by Rossetti *La Bella Mano*: in *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*, translated in Greek: "η ζωγραφιά του Ροσσέττη *Τ' όμορφο χέρι*" (Christomanos 1990*,* 92). The writer, according to the well-known technique of Rossetti, combines the drawing with its literary counterpart. Therefore, he seems to adopt with scrutiny the literary style that features the aesthetic subject and theme he discusses.

In the writing *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*, terms such as *The Beloved* - drawn from the title of Rossetti's painting (1865 – 6) - relate to Rossetti's biography. The term *The Beloved*, at Christomanos, derives from the same characterisation of Siddall by Rossetti. Other characterisations such as *The female figure of a lily* / in Greek: *Κρινένια Υπαρξη* come directly from Rossetti's work. (For similar quotations, see Christomanos 1990*,* 103, 209). In Rossetti's work *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, where, according to the secondary bibliography: "the representational level of meaning works together with the technique, the Virgin is learning to translate the visual appearance of a lily (her symbol) into a work of visual art, an embroidery" (PretteJohn 2012, 103, 106).

The Intertextuality of Edward Burne-Jones' Painting and The Romantic Motif of "Love Among the Ruins"

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) entered the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the late 1850s and was associated with Rossetti (Arscott 2012, 103, 223). In *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet*, the focus on interior spaces - characteristic of the art of Burne-Jones - becomes apparent in text passages where the writer describes the

interior of Achillion Palace in Kerkyra (Corfu) (Christomanos 1990*,* 123 - 138).

Another work cited in *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet* is the painting *Love Among the Ruins* (1894), translated in Greek by Christomanos as *Ο Έρως μες τα ερείπια* (Christomanos 1990*,* 195). The writer confesses implicitly - almost subtly - the erotic sense he adds to that exclusive moment of his virtual promenade with the empress in *Villa Kapodistria,* located on the Ionian Greek Island.

For the research of common ground between the painting *Love among the Ruins* and the writing *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet,* I examine literary and artistic features in the way they were depicted in Burne-Jones' artwork and how they were presumably perceived by Christomanos.

The rejection of the omnipotence of *masculinity* was considered as a *succès de scandale*. (Bullen 1998, 185). Edward Burne-Jones' statement sheds light on this aesthetics: "The more materialistic science becomes, the more angels shall I paint" (Bullen 1998, 185). Effeminacy was ubiquitous (Bullen 1998, 185). It is argued that "the lack of action" in the paintings by Burne-Jones "was not manly" and the unwillingness to introduce clearly "gender definitions was similarly unmasculine" (Bullen 1998, 185). But the strongest counterweight for masculinity was not only femininity but the androgynous. Between the 1860s and 1870s, aesthetic androgyny was firmly associated with Algernon Charles Swinburne's (1837 – 1909) and Edward Burne-Jones (Bullen 1998, 186).

Painted figures of Edward Burne-Jones and Botticelli (1445 - 1510) are *sexless*: The fusion of male and female characteristics to discerning the gender of the depicted individuals becomes a daunting task, if not an insurmountable one within the oeuvre of both. In the realm of this artistic movement, heroes and heroines bear striking resemblances, blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity. Male figures possess an uncanny resemblance to women, while the archetypal female form exhibits high cheekbones and a thin, almost starved countenance (Bullen 1998, 191).

These aesthetic features frame the painting *Love Among the Ruins* (1894). The work depicts an embraced couple with their arms tangled holding one another, their faces and bodies in side-to-side contact. In a distant shot, the two figures seem to be united. There is no space between them, the bodies and heads are presented in complete unity. However, the body contact has no clear sexual intimation. The two lovers neither are kissing nor is there a hint of a moment that precedes or follows sexual intercourse.

Their clothing is social as they wear early-Renaissance style long robes that cover the whole of their bodies. As noted, the characteristic female figure in Burne-Jones "has high cheekbones and rather a hungry face" (Bullen 1998, 191). The prolonged chin of the woman and her thin and pale face confirm the first part of the assumption. However, in this painting, there is not a sense of sexual deprivation on her face. The literary data (that is, certain passages from *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet* that I will examine below), associated with the painting's interpretation by Christomanos, promotes the depiction of an *unfulfilled love* relationship, where *together is not feasible*.

According to historical testimonies, Burne-Jones during that time had a passionate love affair with the Greek artist and sculptor Maria Zambaco (1843 – 1914). The original composition was painted shortly after the end of Burne-Jones' affair with his muse. The above information is given in *Sir Edward Coley Burne–Jones* (Birmingham 1833 – London 1898) - *Love Among the Ruins*, www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1288953 (last access 14/10/2021).

Christomanos reflects on the Empress' reference to *Ruins* (in Greek: *Ερείπια*) and makes his personal associative remark. The associative reference to the painting of Burne-Jones gives insight into the way Christomanos was thinking of the close professional relationship he had with Elisabeth. In other words, the painting features can be taken as plot elements in *To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet* and, to some extent, as historical evidence.

In this context, it seems that the writer was maintaining tender love feelings for Empress Elisabeth. By the painting's associative remark, which was triggered by her words, she is transferred to his personal aesthetic world, where the hope for intimacy, namely, the love interaction with the Empress (which, most likely, is not to be carnal) prevails. Looking closely through the modern bibliography on the phenomenon, and within my own assumptions, the bodily humor of *erotic melancholy* (in ancient Greek terms) is inherent in Christomanos' literary imagination.

The first reference to *melancholy* is found in *Air, Waters, and Places*, it is attributed to Hippocrates and dates back to the end of the 5th century BC (Rassidaki 2012, 24). The interface between imagination (that is to say, Christomanos' associative remark) and *melancholy* is given in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problem 30*, where "melancholy is associated with heightened eroticism" (Wells 2007, 27).

The expression of *erotic frenzy* (in Plato's terms) is the platonic (*divine*) *fantasy* intertwined with *melancholy*, and their conflation leads to divine *inspiration* that transcends the pragmatic sense of the world. The expression of *the frenzy of intellect* (a sort of *divine frenzy*) leads to sublime creativity.

In the bibliography, there is also a take on the concept of *melancholy*. It is contended by the old writers that there is a divine essence within this humor (Wells 2007, 29). The notion is further explored in the analysis of *Problem 30* in modern research, which sheds light on Christomanos' interpretation of *melancholy* as a sexualized and imaginative experience. The relationship between the imagination and *melancholy*, as depicted in *Problem 30*, holds great significance as it implies both the eroticisation of the melancholic imagination and a transcendent, divine inspiration that surpasses mere physical comprehension. These implications have also found their way into early modern writings on *melancholy* and *love-melancholy*. For instance, Jacques Ferrand's comprehensive work on *love-melancholy*, in 1610, inherits the perspective of a sexualised melancholic imagination. Similarly, André du Laurens emphasises the specific delusions experienced by melancholic lovers, suggesting

a connection between the eroticised imagination of the melancholic and the poetic inspiration of the artist (Wells 2007, 28).

Melancholy, in the long history of the English Renaissance, became emblematic (Sullivan 2016). From the 16th through 17th century, its epicentre was in England over the Elizabethan era, considering the status of *melancholy* as the "Elizabethan malady". In the *fin-de-siècle* literature, the melancholic hero finds their archetypes in Romanticism. German Romanticism's aesthetics can also be traced within this writing of Christomanos. The narrative imbued with the painting's connotations is framed by a predominantly Romantic theme: the *unfulfilled love*, where the mental communication between the two lovers prevails. The phenomenon is aligned with a popular notion of the period, asserting that the individual communicates mentally and spiritually with his physical and human environment. The *fulfilment of love* occurs not in life but through their union *in death* (or *among the ruins*).

In Romanticism's theory, the role of nature is redefined, since it no longer functions solely as a graphic setting but, due to its effect on the human psyche, it transforms into a critical component for the composition of the work. At this point, I should note the *Romantic* motif deriving from ancient Greek *melancholy* that promotes the idea of *romantic love* being profoundly infinite and completed only through tragedy.

According to these sources, even beyond romanticism ruins occupy a unique position at the intersection of various aesthetic concepts, such as *the beautiful*, *the picturesque*, *the sublime* and *melancholy*. Before a structure falls into ruin, it may possess qualities of smoothness and completeness, which are associated with *beauty*. However, when decay sets in beauty diminishes, as explained by Uvedale Price in his *Essays on the Picturesque*. The transition occurs when the embellishments of buildings are replaced by the embellishments of ruins, such as incrustations, weather stains, and the growth of plants on walls. At this point, the picturesque qualities take precedence over *the beautiful* and, eventually, all signs of smoothness, symmetry, and design disappear. Ruins hold an

abundance of associative triggers, evoking a sense of the past and the passage of time. They are repositories of history and carry a multitude of allusions. Additionally, ruins possess a sense of *sublime*, surpassing the pictorial effects of light and shade, as well as other elements of scale and proportion. They become images that inspire awe and even fear. For instance, Diderot's critique of Hubert Robert's paintings in the *Salon of 1767* deemed them excessively picturesque. Diderot's ideal of ruins was shaped by the aesthetic of *the sublime* (Bowring 2017, 20).

On the other side, romanticism – as reflected by the decadence of the *fin-de-siècle*, intertwines melancholy and the landscape. It is evident that along with the motif of *love-melancholy*, the literary depiction of an imposing landscape played an equally decisive role in Christomanos' writing, where the painting of Burne-Jones sets the backdrop for his virtual promenade with the Empress in *Villa Kapodistria*. The narrator describes the "desperate orchard, the trees, the sea like a second sky but deeper, more mysterious and more vast", presenting the Empress' beauty as melancholic and ecstatic "among the ruins, surrendering to the sweet sorrow of all these plant-sorrows" (Christomanos 1990, 195), among humors of nature that surrounded her.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the Pre-Raphaelite movement as a conceptual and artistic scheme through Constantin Christomanos' writing, published in Greek in 1908, under the title *Το Βιβλίο της αυτοκράτειρας Ελισάβετ. Φύλλα Ημερολογίου / To Vivlio tis aftokrateiras Elisavet. Fylla Imerologiou*. My main aim was to show that, nearing the *fin-de-siècle*, a prevalent ideological dogma that claimed the contribution of art to the configuration of *national identity* gradually emerged. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 – 1882) was inspired by the early Italians' and the *Stil Novisti.*

Translation became new literature. Rossetti, by translating Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, re-creates himself as Dante did himself

through this writing. It is about a literary genealogy, a process which moves between the two writings. Christomanos uses Rossetti's intertextuality with scrutiny. Then, the visual arts' intertextuality of Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), and the scheme of love as *melancholy* reveal the intimate (although platonic) relationship with Empress Elisabeth, Christomanos was dreaming of while living in the Austrian Empire as her tutor, and being seduced by her mythical existence.

Publication Notes of the author: Constantin Christomanos was appointed to serve the Empress of Austria-Hungary for the first time in 1891, later on periodically until 1893 (Mavrikou Anagnostou, 16-17). "Konstantin Christomanos, Elisabeth's Greek instructor […] tutored the Empress during her hair-styling sessions" (Gruber Florek, 9). Christomanos' literary work on his interaction with Elisabeth was first published in 1898, in German, with the title *Tagebuchblätter*. Here, in the transliteration of the Greek title, I decided to maintain the subtitle in order to designate that the German title of the first publication turned into a subtitle in the Greek version that followed, then in the French (1900), and the Italian (1901) versions respectively (Christomanos 1990, 9).

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