



Priapus' Odyssey

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The concepts of Arcadism and Mediterraneity can be applied to the photographic representation of the nude adolescent boy in late 19th century and early 20th century southern Italy because at that time major photographic work focused on the adolescent body. From this specific area of the Mediterranean, artists such as Wilhelm von Gloeden, Guglielmo Plüschow and Vincenzo Galdi developed Arcadian and ethnographic pretexts to shed light on homoerotic and pederastic (eromenophilic) pleasures visible through a kind of corporeal Mediterraneity.

But gave them of the lotus to taste. And whosoever of them ate of the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus had no longer any wish to bring back word or to return, but there they were fain to abide among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and forgetful of their homeward way.

Homer, *Odyssey*

Any holiday might be motivated by a desire for voluntary oblivion, for a temporal retreat from the everyday. A rhythmic descent into what immerses us in the experience of the journey while amplifying the emotion of the adventure. And this experience, paradoxically simultaneous to and preceding a contemporary amble, needs an objective that announces the irrevocable transformation of the traveller.

The Mediterranean grand tour was one of these journeys undertaken by many youths of noble birth or high social position from the Renaissance until the early 19th century. Before marriage and the responsibilities of adulthood, many wealthy families sent their children to travel through Europe to complete their education and establish aristocratic relations, and Italy was generally the final destination on this tour. Although rooted in the great journeys

conceived by the early poets, the main objective of this tour seemed to have been the acquisition of knowledge of classical art, defining an aesthetic and functional Mediterraneity based on the journey to paradises in some way forgotten.

Rome, with its architectonic, statuary and pictorial richness, embodied a densification of high culture where one could get lost while establishing relations with important figures. Other places also stood out on the grand tour as ideal destinations for the early tourist, such as Naples and Sicily, given that the south of Italy was usually the final stage. In the 19th century, with the development of the railways and rail networks in Italy, journeys through the peninsula became more common. While Italy was being reconstructed and reorganised, the south was not, in this case, the destination most in demand. Neither was the new unified



Italy particularly concerned with investing in the south of the peninsula and developing its transport. However, it was visited during the grand tour and, on many occasions, was the end of the journey; moreover, once the main rail lines were laid in the late 19th century, it added other tourism destinations such as thermal waters or convalescent homes for recovering from certain illnesses.

Therefore, a Mediterranean proto-tourism emerged seemingly in parallel with and as a result of the recovery of classical forms in different moments of western culture after the 16th century. The discovery of Herculaneum in 1738 and the excavations of Pompeii in 1748,¹ the European neoclassical movement and a literary fashion particularly rooted in Great Britain through, among others, the work of Walter Pater, Lord Byron, John Addyngton Symonds and Oscar Wilde seemed to favour an inclination to the aesthetics of the adolescent body following Greek tradition.

After unearthing a route that showed the remains of an archaeology of Mediterraneity and the journey as a search for a perpetual summer, two German barons decided to travel to the south in the midst of the “machine era”.

Silver Skin

In the wrestling school they would sit with outstretched legs and without display of any indecency to the curious. Never was a child rubbed with oil below the belt; the rest of their bodies thus retained its fresh bloom and down, like a velvety peach.

Aristophanes cited by Bernard Sergent (1986, p. 120)

Wilhelm von Plüschow (Wismar, 1852), who changed his name to Guglielmo Plüschow, arrived in Naples around 1875. There he developed a career as a photographer and chose as the main subject for his work the nude body of the adolescent boy posed in classicist terms. He received commissions, such as the series of photographs of Nino Cesarini, the young lover of Baron Adelswärd Fersen, taken in his Villa Lysis in Capri; and the instructions were clear: to glorify and immortalise Nino's pubescent beauty, either as a pagan god or as a saint.

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Wilhelm von Gloeden (Mecklenburg, 1856) arrived in the coastal Sicilian town of Taormina² in 1878. Studying art history and painting, he learnt photography with Giuseppe Bruno and with his cousin Guglielmo Plüschow in Naples; like him, he explored the same subject and became an admired photographer in Taormina.

Both German photographers took many daguerreotypes of landscapes, journeys through North Africa or scenes of local customs and manners, but their work mainly comprised numerous scenes of adolescent boys from Naples and Taormina. These images, almost always nudes, also showed, not necessarily explicitly, an accumulation of “intraphotographic” desires between boys or boys and men (staged

1. Both events greatly influenced the historian J.J. Winckelmann, especially in his exalted corporeal descriptions of classical statuary in *History of Ancient Art* (1763).

2. Suffering from a lung condition, this might be one of the official motivations that led him to migrate to the Italian south.

or real) and of “extraphotographic” desires (where the boy looks at the camera and the gaze of an adult photographer or the consumer of the image is assumed).³ Perhaps inspired by the stories of adventurers and anthropologists in search of paradises to be discovered, the ephobic journey to the south seemed to seek a representational expansion of certain desires, bodies and pleasures.

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However, between the 18th and 19th centuries, homosexual and pederastic pleasures were explored, and ranged between vindicatory⁴ and coercive discourses⁵ (Moreno, 2015: 76-161). After the exaltation of the young man's beauty in Ancient Greece and the sexual permissiveness of the early Roman Empire, there was a process of medieval demonisation of the body.⁶ In the 18th and 19th centuries the most visible bodies were those that could be seen in the Fine Arts academies, in classical statuary and in all forms of the Mediterranean essence invoked in the neoclassical artistic manifestations; and which

could be imagined in the numerous Hellenist literary stories.

We find the Greek reference in Plüschow and Gloeden through the use of a series of recurrent themes, resources and procedures in their photographic compositions: the floral and/or vegetal, mythological, musical and animal iconography, the use of femininity and affectation in the boys' poses,⁷ the landscape of Arcadian references, the introduction of archaeological pieces and classical scenarios, or the reference to academicist postures. Vincenzo Galdi (Naples, 1871), one of Plüschow's favourite models, who was also his assistant and finally a photographer, also used a similar working method. Although the images were based on the guidelines developed by the previous photographers, they gradually become mere studies, more or less academic, of the adolescent nude body (as elements auxiliary to the body were gradually detached from the photographic discourse). It was Galdi who most explicitly began to show homosexual desire and intimate companionship between boys, moving from a suggested eroticism to explicit homosexual pornographic imagery. Thus, we can see how a Mediterraneanity in the place, in the object of study, in the interest (halfway between anthropological and touristic) in representing the local boy and the use of a classical iconographic imaginary, finally defined a kind of Arcadian⁸ and ethno-

3. Roger Peyrefitte, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde are among some of the collectors who bought works by Plüschow or Gloeden.

4. It is worth noting the public vindications of love between men by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs or the text *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1871) by John Addington Symonds.

5. Whose most extreme example can be found in the pathologisation of pleasures advocated and medically applied by Krafft-Ebbing in his text *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886).

6. Moral notion of the body resumed from the 18th century by the popular theory of degeneration, according to which the body could be corrupted and become sick through sexual pleasure itself, or through pedagogic control of the body through anti-onanist theories such as Tissot's in his *Onania* (1760).

7. Favouring a “voyeuristic scopophilia” in which the body of the young boy is feminised in keeping with a traditional pictorial approach in which the body of the woman is the object consumed by the male painter-viewer subject (Mulvey, 1994).

8. In reference to classical Arcadia as an Eden of vegetal and corporeal exuberance in which shepherds, fauns and nymphs lived together in nudity.

graphic pretext as guarantors of the visibility of “eromenophilic” desire.⁹

“A war machine against the medicalisation of the discourse on homosexuality” (Eribon, 2001: 231) that can also be seen through the implementation of ancestral Greek homosexual pedagogy. In the same way that British 19th century literature exalted the master-disciple relationship, Plüschow and Gloeden seem to reference the homosexual and pederastic pedagogy of Ancient Greece to shape a male identity. Their models, with a similar age range, were mainly workers, peasants and fishermen, labourers from an impoverished Italian south for whom extra income for posing nude in front of the camera of these photographers could help their family. Moreover, all photographers included their personal muse within their repertoire of models, and these were their assistants: Gloeden had Pancrazio Bucini, nicknamed *il Moro*, Plüschow had Galdi and Galdi had *il Serpente*. Galdi, schooled in the Arcadian and ethnographic pretexts, also became a photographer; in a peculiar and metaphorical way his model's name was lost in history to be remembered only as *il Serpente* in honour of the size of his penis and, therefore, was objectified given the Galdian pornographic interest.

Thus a power relationship was defined expressing the eromenophilic and visual desire between an adult male (*erasta*: high class photographer) and a male minor (*eromenos*: low class model); “the adult induces the child in his image” (Scherer, 1983: 54). A logic of classes (noble – proletarian), of age (adult – minor) and of gender (man who possesses the

gaze – minor as visual object) that resulted in the representation of the nude adolescent boy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in southern Italy¹⁰ and in the inclusion of an Arcadian Mediterraneanity in contemporary homoerotic and pederastic iconography.

The Return Inland

These men, therefore, I brought back
perforce to the ships, weeping, and dragged
them beneath the benches and bound them
fast in the hollow ships; I bade the rest of my
trusty comrades to embark with speed on the
swift ships, lest perchance anyone should eat
of the lotus and forget his homeward way.

Homer, *Odyssey*

In 1902, Plüschow was accused of having had sexual relations with a minor and sentenced to eight months in prison. In 1907 he was again involved in another scandal of similar characteristics, which meant he turned his interest to landscapes and went back to his native country in 1910 (until his death, twenty years later). Such accusations ended with the police seizing many of his pictures, and Vincenzo Galdi was considered his accomplice. After Gloeden's death in 1931, *il Moro* became the sole inheritor of the photographic work of his mentor, which it seems comprised around 3,000 plates. Later, the fascist government destroyed much of his work.

The desexualisation of the minor and the persecution of the pederast and the homosexual

9. “Love of the eromenos” or “love of the beloved” (from the Greek *eromenos*, lover, and *filia*, love, friendship); a term that establishes the pederastic relationship in an agreement similar to the Greek model. Faced with the terms “pederasty” (*paidos*, boy – *erastes*, lover) or “paedophilia” (*pais-paidos*, boy – *filia*, friendship) commonly used by the medical-legal discourse to define a despised and pursued pleasure in contemporary times, we have politically coined the term “eromenofilia” as a way of simultaneously addressing homosexual and pederastic pleasure through reminiscences of Greek antiquity and its homosexual pedagogy.

10. By doing what many desired or about which many others wrote, the erudite homosexual public defined the status of buyers of the work of Gloeden, Plüschow and Galdi. In fact, most of their works were destroyed or preserved until today in private collections, which means that many pieces are unknown and today are gradually coming to light.

through medical-legal powers seemingly ended the Mediterranean journey in search of the epebe. Many works were later labelled by art history as mere aestheticist exercises in full effervescence of the avant-garde; however, they adopted a very narrow perspective, disregarding the potentiality of subversion in the representation of bodies and pleasures that these photographers had managed to achieve in the 19th century through the use of pretexts assumed and exalted by the high culture of a western heterosexual system. Today this work would not be possible without serious legal problems and, despite its peculiar consideration as liminal sediment, ended up sliding into the midst of the 20th century and successfully shaping popular homoerotic imagery through creators such as Herbert List, Bernard Faucon, Will McBride and Larry Clark or beefcake photographers such as Mel Roberts.

The desexualisation of the minor and the persecution of the pederast and the homosexual through medical-legal powers seemingly ended the Mediterranean journey in search of the epebe

“These little Greek gods (already a contradiction because of their dark color) have

peasants’ hands, somewhat dirty, with large, misshapen nails; hardened feet, not very clean; and swollen, clearly visible prepuces which are unstylized, that is, not slenderized and tapered: our attention is drawn to the fact they are clearly uncircumcised: the Baron’s photographs are at the same time sublime and anatomical” (Barthes, 1986).

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