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BETWEEN IDYLLIC AND PESSIMISTIC LANDSCAPE: NATURE PAINTING IN ITALIAN SYMBOLIST ART

ABSTRACT: The depiction of nature in the oeuvre of Italian Symbolist artists fluctuates between idyllic and pessimistic landscapes, reflecting the artist's subjective perception of nature. In the spirit of international Symbolism, Italian Symbolist landscape painting was shaped by the fusion of local traditions, such as Macchiaioli and Scapigliati, and the influence of European contemporaries like the German painter Arnold Böcklin. While idyllic landscapes conveyed the idea of recreating paradise on Earth and emphasized a pantheistic worldview, establishing a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, the pessimistic ones were characterized by a darker atmosphere and absence of human figures, exuding a sombre and gloomy ambience. In both cases, the representation of nature is construed as a manifestation of inner landscapes, serving as an external reflection of the artist's internal nature. Whether dominated by idyllic or pessimistic tones, the landscapes of Italian Symbolists are marked by depictions of divinized nature, tracing the Romantic experience and conveying a general impression of the mystical, poignant, and elegiac. Following the Janus-faced nature of Symbolism, they often embody transitional forms between idyllic and pessimistic landscapes, confirming the affiliation of local artists with the broader circle of painters within international Symbolism.

KEYWORDS: landscape, painting, symbolism, Italy, image of paradise, Dionysus, pantheism, idyllic, pessimistic.

Introduction—Landscape in European Symbolist Painting

Landscape emerges as one of the main themes in the oeuvre of European Symbolist painters. In line with their subjective vision of the world, painting landscapes offered the possibility of "projecting internal psychological states onto external space" (Terrizzi 2013–2014: 5). Symbolically intoned nature paintings thus reflected the emotional states of their creators, serving as unique metaphors of the soul that encourage "the viewer's entry into reverie" (Борозан 2018: 29). "These are mostly Arcadian landscapes, utopian visions of a lost world, dominated by feelings of longing, loneliness, and melancholy (...)" (Мишић 2021: 47).

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The inclination towards contemplative content determined the metaphysical approach to nature that the Symbolists nurtured, focusing on meditative and transcendental states that it evoked in them (Vaughan 2000: 79). Therefore, many Symbolists recognized in nature a unique guidance towards higher spheres and divine mysteries, believing that contact with nature brought them closer to God, which encouraged them to develop a unique *biomystical* relationship with natural forces (Facos 2009: 106, 109).

The naturalistic tendencies of realistic painting dominant during the first half of the 19th century were pushed into the background by the Symbolists who preferred imagination and melancholic-meditative moods when painting landscapes. Creating imaginary landscapes inspired by real spaces, they followed the aspirations of the Romantics, who, like the German artist Caspar David Friedrich, perceived contemplation of nature as human exploration of the inner self (VAUGHAN 2000: 79). Thus, they reached for a transcendental experience that shaped their reality, which they then transferred onto canvas in the form of embellished or melancholy-tinted snippets of nature. They aimed for a quasi-religious experience of nature, emphasizing the intensity of colours and lines (ROSENBLUM, STEVENS et al. 2000: 250) to convey their inner landscapes to the external world. Inclined towards isolation and meditative states, the Symbolists often created worlds from their nature paintings that were meant to remain distant, remote, and inaccessible to the viewer, like a *forbidden paradise* (BERND 2013: 34). In this way, the mystical-spiritual quality of the painting was achieved and guaranteed.

Similarly to other Symbolist motifs, the landscape can be understood through the categories of *pessimistic* and *idealistic* (Facos 2011: 339). Pessimistic depictions of nature exude melancholy and gloomy moods. They are permeated with an atmosphere of mystique and portrayed with dark colours, evoking a sense of discomfort and unrest in the viewer. An indicative example of such painting can be found in the dark landscapes by Arnold Böcklin, the "divine painter of Nature" (Петровић 2015: 6) and "master of landscape" (Vaughan 2000: 79) who created artworks inspired by the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, composed of alienated, isolated figures (Борозан 2018: 28). In some cases, such as Böcklin's famous painting *Isle of the Dead* (1880), they also become "visual metaphors of decadence and a hidden longing for death" (Борозан 2018: 29).

Similar examples can be found in the works of Symbolist artists such as Franz von Stuck, Ludwig von Hofmann, Hans von Marées, and others. As "painters of 'stimmung' in the landscape," they also created Arcadian landscapes of eternal spring, aiming to recreate paradise on Earth (Reynolds 2000: 63) or depict dark atmospheres of gloomy landscapes as a reflection of the melancholy of contemporary society in crisis. For them, a real snippet of nature was only a pretext for further reproducing their own experiences of reality because they aspired to creatively transform the real landscape into imaginative creations full of expression and emotional charge, either idyllic or pessimistic. Whether they sought to recreate the golden age through heavenly landscapes of untouched nature inhabited by naked figures celebrating the fullness of life (Pilipović 2005: 27) or they reflected on darker moods embodied through the concept of melancholic landscapes in more

dramatic tones, Symbolists created visual commentaries on their current emotional states or escaped from the hectic urban everyday life that was not in line with their inner needs.

The Formation of Landscape in Italian Symbolist Painting

Symbolist landscape painting developed in the oeuvre of artists from the Apennine Peninsula in the late 19th century. It was created on the premises of international Symbolism, as well as local artistic tradition. Their concept of landscape largely relied on the depiction of nature represented in the works of the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio. Drawing on the idea of the *landscape of soul* introduced by Henri-Frédéric Amiel, the Italian poet advocates for an exalted understanding of landscape painting as the "glory of the 19th century." He also advocates for a pantheistic concept of nature, emphasizing that in the depiction of nature, there is a "penetration of the human soul into the soul of things" and that it is the painter's task to decipher the phenomenal world through hidden connections between humans and nature (Ruscio 2000: 42).

Influenced by D'Annunzio, artists formed their creations of nature based on and in response to the visual poetics of previous generations of Italian painters who worked in the mid-century. These are predominantly artists known as Macchiaioli, named after the Italian term *macchia*, which means *stain*. Formed in Florence around 1860, the Macchiaioli group, led by Fattori, developed a unique visual language based on the contrasts of light and dark, aimed at highlighting the colouristic value of the painting. They were particularly inclined towards painting landscapes and scenes of rural life in central Italy (Бошњак 2001: 15). The landscapes are characterized by realism in their approach and treatment of nature using specific artistic techniques based on stains.

Under the influence of the Macchiaioli, Symbolist-oriented painters, especially at the beginning of their careers, remained faithful to such a visual tradition. This is the case with artists nurtured on the principles of the Macchiaioli, such as Nomellini, a disciple of Fattori, or the early Segantini. Over time, their landscape paintings began to acquire a more mystical atmosphere. Amid the landscapes of rural Italy, with a documentary undertone, they created *landscapes of the soul* as a reflection of their emotional states and current moods. The Italian Symbolists achieved suggestiveness in their depictions—not always as readable as in the paintings of the Macchiaioli—through vibrant colours and the use of Divisionist technique, aimed at emphasizing the importance of light in constructing the modern Italian painting.

Symbolist landscape painting also developed in Italy under the influence of the Scapigliatura movement (1860–1870). Artists active in the northern regions of the Apennine Peninsula were particularly influenced by the Scapigliati formed in Milan in the 1840s. Formed as a group of revolutionary artists who expressed revolt against the Academy but remained faithful to a traditional, realistic concept of painting, the Scapigliati developed their own visual poetics (Tranquillo Cremona, Daniele Ranzoni, sculptor Giuseppe Grandi, and others). In their landscape painting, the Symbolists retained Scapigliati's tonal

colours and softened contours, which were the product of their shared interest in the effects of light in painting. This was particularly reflected in the *atmospheric* landscapes of Vittore Grubicy de Dragon.

In contrast to the Macchiaioli and the Scapigliati, the Italian Symbolists aimed for spiritualized depictions of landscapes, imbued with deep reverence for nature and its laws. These landscapes were not merely reflections of the artists' *inner migrations* but emerged in direct contact with nature. Vittore Grubicy de Dragon and Giovanni Segantini spent extended periods in the Italian and Swiss Alps, Giuseppe Pelizza da Volepedo lived in the small town of Volpedo near Alessandria, and Morbelli spent his summer days in the town of Casale Monferrato in the Piedmont region (Fraquelli 2008: 12).

Idyllic Landscape in Italian Symbolist Art: From Dionysian to Pantheistic Vision of Nature

Italy has served as inspiration for numerous artists who have interpreted it through visual and verbal imagery, marvelling at its natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. A unique *Italomania* can be traced in European culture and literature, especially since the times of Byron and Goethe. Thanks to painters better known as the German Romans (Deutschrömer), an Arcadian image of Italy has been formed in visual arts (Brajović 2017: 49; LOCHER 2005: 159–172). Italian Symbolists also nurtured an idealized image of their own country, based on *idyllic* landscapes, among whom Giovanni Nino Costa stands out.

Costa's painting, stemming from his almost ecstatic inclination towards nature, abounds in landscapes. Towards the end of the 19th century, his nature paintings, born as a product of the artist's interest in the rural landscapes of Tuscany and Lazio, gave rise to a whole series of landscapes ranging from realistic to more mystical and spiritual ones (DINI 2009: 15–45). While Costa's early landscape oeuvre is marked by local rural life, depicting everyday activities in the fields, his later work bears witness to the appearance of mythological beings, especially Pan. In both cases, the artist visualizes representatives of primordial, natural life in harmony with the biorhythm of nature, and the harmony that arises when living by natural laws. These paintings point to the mysterious vitalism of nature and its regenerative forces, akin to Böcklin's creations, which had a direct influence on Costa's landscape oeuvre.

The spirit of archaic Greek culture—sentimento greco—typical of Böcklin's canvases filled with nymphs, satyrs, and Pan (Tumasonis 1990: 55–56), attracted the Italian painter with its freely interpreted ancient themes that evoked associative reactions in the viewer. Costa applied the same pagan-pantheistic vitalism in works such as Dawn (1876–1877), The Piper (until 1886), and Leda and the Swan (1876–1901). These canvases recreate the archaic era of humanity and the undisturbed harmony between man and his natural habitat. In such representations, the focus is not on grand historical-mythological narratives but on depictions of the everyday lives of deities, which on Symbolist canvases represent the personification of the human Dionysian side—instinctive behaviour, impulses, and libido awakened in direct contact with nature.

The celebration of archaic antiquity (Борозан 2014: 36), in the service of the god Dionysus, is depicted in Plinio Nomellini's painting Dithyramb from 1905. The celebration of Dionysian ecstasy, a recurrent theme in the early poems of Gabriele D'Annunzio (Ђурић 1995: 13), is evidenced by the poetic title of the work, indicating a choral song in praise of Dionysus. Through the application of vibrant colours from an expressive Divisionist palette, the artist captured the dithyrambic atmosphere set in an idyllic landscape. The scene, in a natural environment, consists of male and female figures engaged in dancing movements celebrating the fullness of life. In addition to the central and several peripheral female figures, the canvas includes several instances of a mythological creature resembling a satyr. The Dionysian intoxication of life (Иванович 2017: 389) is depicted through graceful body movements, as well as the dazzling light in pink tones painted by the party of the sky and background mountains. The unrestrainedness of Dionysian forces embodied through figures as representatives of unbridled passions and primal instincts, fused with the fertile landscape, point to the "marvellous vitality of Hellenic paganism." Nomellini skillfully represents in a sun-drenched landscape a unique recreation akin to paradise-like bliss through the enjoyment of nature, creating an atmosphere permeated with "melodious tones, radiating light, intense joy, but also a sense of security" (Мек Данел, Ланг 1997: 168). In this way, the artist visualizes the concept of an idyllic landscape that emphasizes the importance of the sensory aspect of existence in a paradisiacal environment. It has an inspiring effect on humans, instilling in them a sense of unity with other beings and, above all, with nature itself.

The fusion of man and nature is realized in its full potential in the landscape paintings of Giovanni Segantini. His idyllic landscapes consist of alpine scenery and/or scenes from the everyday life of the local mountain population, which the artist passionately painted after leaving civilization and almost completely merging with nature. Segantini's corpus of idyllic landscapes rests on the emphasis of harmonious unity between man and the natural environment, as well as the importance of aligning with natural cycles and respecting the rhythms of the Universe. He aimed to visualize the *transcendence of nature*, perceived as a visual symbol of universal values such as life, love, and death (Avanzi 2016: 19). For him, "nature has become like an instrument playing along with what my heart sings. And it sang peaceful harmonies of sunsets and an intimate sense of things, thus nourishing my spirit with great melancholy that created infinite tenderness in my soul" (Segantini 1910: 18).

The pantheistic understanding of nature, based on the premises that "God is everything and everything is God" or that "everything that exists forms Unity that contains a sense of the divine" and that "every existing entity is part of one singular Being" (Levine 1994: 1), defined Segantini's landscape oeuvre. It can be interpreted as an embodiment of the concept of universal analogy, which implies "synesthesia as confirmation of the harmony that governs between man and nature, the world we perceive, natural creation" because "harmonies among the perceptions of our senses are analogous to harmonies among natural phenomena" (Επε3 2020: 146). As pointed out by art critic Achille Locatelli-Milesi in 1906, the artist managed to "discover eternal and universal connections between parts of nature



Fig. 1. Giovanni Segantini, *Love at the Source of life*, 1896, oil on canvas, 72×100 cm, source: *Il Simbolismo: Arte in Europa dalla Belle Époque alla Grande guerra*, a cura di Fernando Mazzocca, Claudia Zevi. Milano: 24 Ore Cultura, 2016, 258–259.

and the human soul" because Segantini's works represent "more Nature than landscapes, more Mankind than people" (Locatelli-Milesi 1906: 19). The universality of Segantini's rural and pastoral scenes, permeated with an idyllic atmosphere, attests to the artist's aspiration to reproduce his own vision of paradise on Earth through idealized images of nature.

A work by Segantini that illustrates a strong and harmonious bond between man and nature, emphasizing the artist's pantheistic view of the world is *Love at the Source of Life* (1896). It is an allegorical personification of love embodied in an embracing couple surrounded by a lush, spring landscape (Malinverni 2016: 256). With "harmony of line, brilliance of light, sublime beauty of form," the artist, as he himself emphasized, "sang of Love, Beauty, Life, and Eternity" (Locateli-Milesi 1906: 23). The wooded landscape becomes an ideal stage for experiencing love, celebrating the vitality of life, and the fullness of life's juices (Cabut 2018: 152) (Figure 1).

The presence of an angel watching over the source testifies to the spiritual tone of the composition, as well as to the *cosmic pantheism* that marked his artistic creation (Damigella

1989: 37). The spiritual note permeating the artist's Symbolist oeuvre was an important component not only of his work but also of Italian Symbolist creation in general. In Segantini's case, the spiritual was inseparably linked to his experience of nature. "In nature, there is beauty because we see it and feel it, and the manner and quantity of feelings are related to our spiritual capacity" (Segantini 1910: 29). This further emphasizes the spiritual-mystical atmosphere of Segantini's paintings and the pantheistic worldview that was at the core of his entire oeuvre.

Pessimistic Landscapes in Italian Symbolist Painting: A Darker View of the World

In addition to sun-drenched, spring landscapes, Italian Symbolist art embraces those imbued with the cold and dry atmosphere of desolate portrayals of nature in hibernation. Such landscapes, which can be categorized as *pessimistic*, feature a dark atmosphere and colour palette, a general melancholy and a certain desolation of vegetation. Gloominess is the main determinant that gives the tone to canvases born as reflections of the artist's sombre mood. Unlike *idyllic* landscapes, characterized by the lushness of nature and a harmonious relationship between men and the surrounding vegetation, *pessimistic* ones are most often devoid of human presence. They predominantly emerged in line with the tradition of Romantic landscapes, especially those derived from the works of Caspar David Friedrich. A similar sombre and mystical atmosphere of misty landscapes, accentuated with a mystic tone, permeates the creations of Italian Symbolists, who often echoed the melancholic mood and overall dark atmosphere from the tradition of German landscape painters and contemporaries, such as the renowned Arnold Böcklin, a pan-Germanic phenomenon in the world of painting.

Genoese artist Carlo Cressini painted such a scene around 1908 with the evocative title *Icy Waters of Lake Märjelen* (Figure 2). On a monumental canvas (106×198 cm), he immortalized a depiction of a Swiss lake surrounded by steep shores. Dividing the canvas into three coloured bands representing water, mountains, and sky, he captured the sombre atmosphere of the empty lake. Devoid of human presence, the landscape is characterized by coldness, desolation, and a gloomy tone achieved through shades of grey, bluish, and dark hues. Except for human presence, the landscape is also devoid of vegetation, allowing the artist to portray the bare and sombre motif of the lake and its surroundings in winter, conveying his impression onto the canvas, which "emanates an aura of internal tension rather than external relaxation" (Rosenblum 1975: 104).

The painting *Mysterious Island* by Teodoro Wolf Ferrari achieves a direct reminiscence of Arnold Böcklin's seminal work, *Isle of the Dead*, and Symbolism in general. By replicating almost identical formal and content components of the mentioned painting, Wolf Ferrari recreated its overall atmosphere. The mystique, ambivalence of potential meanings in the painting, the fusion of the Romantic cult of ruins in the spirit of Friedrich's influences, and the vibrant colours close to the Impressionist palette characterize this work



Fig. 2. Carlo Cressini, *Icy Waters of Lake Märjelen*, 1908, oil on canvas, 106 × 198 cm, source: *Il Simbolismo: Arte in Europa dalla Belle Époque alla Grande guerra*, a cura di Fernando Mazzocca, Claudia Zevi. Milano: 24 Ore Cultura, 2016, 276–277.

by the Venetian painter. An isolated island in the sea, surrounded by cypress trees, a symbol of death, imparts a dark and mystical atmosphere to the painting, which is in immediate chromatic dissonance with the rest of the landscape—the sea and clouds executed with Divisionist strokes in vibrant pastel tones. Pink, blue, and brown are contrasted with dark shades of green and brown that the artist used to depict the island motif. Human presence is excluded from the painting, which, in Böcklin's case, is hinted at by a boat directed towards the island, creating a self-contained representation of the mystical effect of nature, and death, but also a certain vitality realized by the vivid colour palette that animates the dormant theme of the painting. The Böcklin's landscape "over which one could dream" (Facos 2009: 59) in Ferrari's version was transformed into a very similar landscape of the soul, marked simultaneously by a *pessimistic* and *idyllic* atmosphere.

The symbiosis of the idyllic and pessimistic mood is also present in the overall atmosphere of the painting *Willow* by the artist Guido Marussig from 1907 (Figure 3). The painter portrayed in the foreground the motif of a willow with an elongated trunk and branches bending in the crown, surrounded by cypress and other shrubby vegetation. The Mediterranean atmosphere is brought to life by the rosy tint of the sky, which may indicate the time of sunset, adding a pronounced tone of mystique and mystery to the atmosphere. In the background, the new Moon is discernible, symbolically connected to the mournful willow known as *the Moon tree* (weeping and despair) (Спелмен 2017: 281). The painting exudes compositional harmony, a light-pink colour palette mixed with the bluish hue of the

sky and green-coloured vegetation, further emphasizing the harmony of the composition devoid of human presence. It represents a snippet of Mediterranean nature, harmonized, balanced, exuding peace, and a subtly hinted note of nostalgia, coupled with the symbolism of the cypress, a tree associated with cemeteries, sorrow, and pain, yet also the resurrection of the dead (Спелмен 2017: 84–85).



Fig. 3. Guido Marussig, Willow, 1907, oil on canvas, 85 × 85 cm, source: Il Simbolismo: Arte in Europa dalla Belle Époque alla Grande guerra, a cura di Fernando Mazzocca, Claudia Zevi.

Milano: 24 Ore Cultura, 2016, 271.

Conclusion

Italian Symbolist painters created spiritual landscapes as reflections of their inner states and moods. Approaching reality subjectively, nature paintings were composed in the spirit of *idyllic* and *pessimistic* landscapes, which emerged under the influence of Symbolism as a European phenomenon. The landscapes of Italian Symbolists were created following the tradition of Italian landscape painting of the mid-19th century. Towards the end of the century, they acquired a more mystical and sometimes obscure tone, closer to the Symbolist conception of the world and nature. Influenced by the poetic imagery of Gabriele D'Annunzio, as well as European contemporaries like the renowned painter Arnold Böcklin, Italian Symbolists created landscapes in which a pantheistic view of the world condensed, a Dionysian approach to life, and the recreation of Paradise on Earth, simultaneously offering a darker side of nature, which categorizes Italian authors within the broader context of international Symbolism that nurtured ideals of opposites that often merged as a whole in a unique artistic work.

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ИЗМЕЂУ ИДИЛИЧНОГ И ПЕСИМИСТИЧНОГ ПЕЈЗАЖА: СЛИКА ПРИРОДЕ У УМЕТНОСТИ ИТАЛИЈАНСКОГ СИМБОЛИЗМА

Резиме

У сликарству италијанског симболизма слике природе се могу подвести под категорију *идиличних* и *йесимисшичних* пејзажа, који представљају спољашњи одраз унутрашњих стања аутора. *Душевне* пејзаже италијанских симболиста одликује субјективна визија стварности настала у непосредном контакту с природом, али и кроз потоњу креативну прераду доживљеног у складу са субјективном визуром уметника.

У сликарству италијанског симболизма пејзажи су формирани у складу са традицијом Макјајола и Скапиљата, али и по узору на романтичарску концепцију природе, те уплива европских савременика, попут Арнолда Беклина. Идиличне пејзаже, заступљене у делу Ђованија Нина Косте и Плинија Номелинија одликују дионизијска начела животне радости, опијености чулима и буђење инстиката у непосредном контакту с природом, те слога између човека и његовог изворног хабитата, као и пантеистичка концепција света, коју је посебно гајио Ђовани Сегантини. Песимисшичне пејзаже чине, с друге стране, мрачнија атмосфера прожета туробним и суморним приказима опустошене природе без трагова људског присуства, а неретко и по подобију на ойскурне пејзаже Арнолда Беклина, чије је семинално дело Осшвро мршвих репетирано на готово истоименој слици Теодора Волфа Ферарија. Служећи се визуелним језиком европских аутора, италијански сликари су, сходно јанусовској природи симболизма, створили пејзаже који су се кретали између идиличних и йесимисшичних, неретко сажимајући квалитете оба поларитета у јединственом уметничком делу.

Кључне речи: пејзаж, сликарство, симболизам, Италија, слика раја, Дионис, пантеизам, идилично, песимистично.