



Emilio Salgari, A Writer For Armchair Travelers

Emilio Salgari constructed the exotic fiction for the nationa-popular public of Italy. His influence on the creation of the 'Italian' Indian has been deeply felt by both Italian cartoons and movies.

Emilio Salgari was born in Verona, northeastern Italy, in 1862 and attended the Nautical School in Venice until 1881, when he interrupted his studies and found a job on a freighter sailing along the coasts of the Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas. Though he thereafter spoke of fabulous journeys in faraway countries, this was his only real "exotic" experience, even though his fantasy let him travel all the seas and oceans in his writings.

Salgari left his job on the freighter for unknown reasons and began his career as a writer publishing the short story *The Savages of Papuasias* in 1883. After that his life became a boring sequence of days full of arguments with his publishers, debts, moving home, illnesses and accidents. He married and moved to Turin, the economic capital of king Umberto's Italy, in 1892 following a route many Venetians had covered before, to create the FIAT's wealth under the shadow of the Basilica of Superga. Later, because of a contract with a publisher, he moved to Sanpierdarena (Genoa), but his gloomy disposition, economical problems and his wife's incipient insanity, induced him to go back to Turin after only two years. Between 1883, the year of his literary beginning and his suicide in 1911, Salgari published more than seventy books: novels, short stories and "adventures", an average of two books a year, always under pressure from the publishers' noose contracts. His tragic economic troubles, together with the fact that many novels were published in instalments in magazines and papers, also explain his peculiar style, the frequent use of onomatopoeic and exclamatory words in the dialogues and the lingering on repetitive, verbose descriptions: the poor man was paid so much a line!

Salgari's works develop some fundamental cycles, dictated by the publishing market; among them are the Cycle of the Malayan Pirates, that of the Privateers and Buccaneers, and those of the Far West, of the African Adventures and of the Adventures in the East¹.

This writer of popular serial novels, cut off from the intellectual debate and Central European ferment of his time, but sharing the feelings of the petit bourgeois flag-wavers of King Umberto's² and Giolitti's³ Italy, shows his literary taste by means of a prose that owes a lot to Giuseppe Verdi and other artists of melodrama. In fact, characters and passions are foreshortened and elemental, roughly outlined with little psychological and thematic preoccupation. We find the same incapacity to read in depth minds and souls, the same type of



complicated as well as improbable and naive plot of the librettos, where the “popular” is such only for lack of analysis and complexity. But Salgari’s work is made of novels and short stories, not librettos and lacks the music which can express, with the right timbre, “the Italian soul”, robustly vital and quite virgin, though indeterminate and inconsistent.

In Salgari’s work, a typical example of the Italian popular historical novel, the reader can find current events such as the Madhi Revolt or the Wounded Knee Massacre. Fictitious characters are inserted into a historical context which allows the writer learned digressions, for example, on the conquest of the West or the buccaneers and small cameos on battles and news extrapolated from travel magazines, fictionalized in a dramatic and “extreme” way. Another characteristic is his glorification of human progress, identified with technological innovation bending nature to its will, but which contradicts Man’s elemental, noble feelings. We must not forget that, during this period, the second industrial revolution was flourishing in the Kingdom of Italy: one good example is the description of the steel steamboat in “*The Sea King*”, where American technology wins not only the Malayan pirates, but also, and above all, the old colonial powers. Technology, however, is used by the pirate prince Sandokan – and Salgari himself – as a tool of vengeance and not as a means of anti-colonial struggle; in fact, Salgari seems to consider liberation struggles as fights against civilization and progress.

His faith in technology reveals itself in the meticulous descriptions of tools and machines, such as the description of the mining techniques and the problem of firedamp in the Cycle of the Far West; but it manifests itself also in the continuous botanical and zoological digressions which give his novels a vague Darwinian taste. His almost obsessive, exaggerated representation of exotic settings allowed his reader to enjoy a thrilling entertainment, while it seemingly conferred a learned, “upper class” varnish to the tale, offering the petit bourgeois of King Umberto’s “Italietta” education and moral elevation and the writer, it should not be forgotten, the possibility of stretching out the text.

Among Salgari’s sources we can remember the book by Giulio Ferrario on the *Old and Modern Costume (Costume antico e moderno, 1817-34)*, which he ruthlessly “plundered” either for the Cycle of the Jungle or those of the Buccaneers and the West; the *History of America (Storia d’America)* by Giuseppe Compagnoni, and the Italian editions of the two principal travel magazines of the time, *Il giro del mondo* and the *Giornale illustrato dei viaggi e delle avventure*. Other important sources, as they appear in a list handwritten by the author, are the *Histoire des plantes* (1864) and *La vie et les mœurs des animaux* (1865) by Louis-Guillaume Figuier, which appeared in Italy in 1873 and 1880 respectively.

Nature, though described with meticulous pedantry, is seen by Salgari as hostile to man’s progress, represented by “the prairie raiders”, and, above all, by the



British army or the Spaniards. A Darwinist nature blindly hits both the heroes and their enemies, often the latter more than the former, thus rescuing the protagonists and the writer from dangerous cul-de-sacs in the plot.

The progress of civilization, which is the deus-ex-machina of every cycle, is lived, however, in a pessimistic way: the British conquests of India and Malaya, though bringing technological civilization, destroy or make useless male virtues such as courage, honor, and generosity. Therefore, Salgari's heroes are men at a crossroads, divided between two worlds: their culture and feelings belong to tradition – they are thus gentlefolk who have fallen upon evil days, such as the Black Corsair or Sandokan, the Malayan prince– but they are also “civilized”, that is lovers of technology and progress.

Racism, and especially miscegenation, offer an important starting point to the plots: Anglo-Indian Ada destroys the sect of the Thugs, the failure of the marriage between the Sioux Yalla and Colonel Devandel is the source of the cycle of the West, Sandokan's love for an English maiden is the leitmotif of the cycle of the Malayan pirates. The natives, either American or Eastern Indians or Africans, are characterized by popular racist stereotypes: strong, “noble” characters are such because they are half-breed, that is they possess a few drops of civilized blood. Miscegenation, however, brings bereavement and misfortune, feuds and bloody vengeance ending with the death of all, or almost all, the characters except the hero. Negative characters are often a racial abomination, such as The King of Crabs in *The Queen of the Golden Field* (*La sovrana del campo d'oro*), who is an African-Chinese mulatto, which is the farthest mixture from an European standpoint. Since the 19th century's idea of race is so important in Salgari's ideology, it is obvious that every character is introduced with his/her racial connotations:

Poteva avere quattordici anni. La sua taglia era graziosa e di forme superbamente eleganti. Aveva i lineamenti d'una purezza antica, animati dalla scintillante espressione della donna angloindiana. (I misteri della Jungla Nera, p. 41) [She might be fourteen. She was graceful and her figure superbly elegant. Her features had an ancient purity, animated by the glittering expression of the Anglo-Indian woman. (The mystery of the Black Jungle, p. 41)].

Era una bella figura di giovane, alta, slanciata, flessuosa, dalla pelle delicatissima d'un bianco leggermente roseo, di quel roseo che solo si scorge sulle fanciulle dei paesi settentrionali, e soprattutto in quelle appartenenti alle razze anglo-sassoni ed iscoto-danesi. (Il Corsaro Nero, p. 86) [She was a beautiful young woman, tall, slender and lithe; the color of her very delicate skin was a light pink white, that rosy color you can only see in the maidens of the northern countries, and above all in those belonging to the Anglo-Saxon and Scottish-Danish races. (The Black Corsair, p.86)].

(Minnehaha). Era una bella donna di venticinque o ventisei anni, alta slanciata, coi capelli e gli occhi nerissimi, i lineamenti energici, e la pelle solo leggermente bruna, con delle indefinibili sfumature rossastre. (La Scotennatrice, p. 66)



[(Minnehaha) was a beautiful woman twenty-five or twenty-six years old, tall and slender, with deep black hair and eyes, strong features and the skin was only lightly dark, with indefinable reddish tints. (The Woman Scalper, p. 66)]. *Si sarebbe detto che (Nuvola Rossa) apparteneva alla razza indiana pura piuttosto che alla meticcia, poiché la sua pelle era oscura con delle sfumature rossastre assai marcate, i suoi capelli erano lunghi, nerissimi e grossolani, il suo naso aquilino, gli zigomi assai sporgenti e gli occhi piuttosto obliqui come quelli della razza mongola ed un po' cisposi (Sulle frontiere del Far West, p.44)* [One might say (Red Cloud) belonged more to the full-blood Indian race than the half-breed one, since his skin was dark, with very marked reddish tints, his hair was long, very black and coarse, his nose aquiline, his cheekbones very protruding and his eyes rather oblique like those of the Mongolian race and a little gummy (On the frontiers of the Far West, p. 44)].

Racism is fairly distributed in Salgari's books; in fact, we can say that, apart from the stereotypes such as the continuous use of the word "redskins" (from the French, to be honest) and the insulting descriptions of non European rites and characters, also the whites are misrepresented, above all the British and, in the cycle of the privateers, the Spaniards. Lord Wilmore may be considered an emblematic character; he is one of the protagonists of the cycle of the West and embodies the stubborn arrogance of the stereotypical spleenful English lord. Captain Macpherson, moreover, in the *Mysteries of the Black Jungle* is willing to torture his Thug prisoners to gain his ends and take his revenge.

The Americans, on the other hand, even if Salgari describes them more favorably (in *The Captain Woman of the Yucatan*, *The Sea King* and the *Cycle of the West*) cannot escape his mockery, in fact "in that occasion they demonstrated all their legendary American brutality".

The reason why Salgari is acrimonious about the British is easy to understand if we remember the period when his novels are published. Between 1880 and 1911 the Kingdom of Italy's policy was more and more oriented towards achieving "a place in the sun", that is a colonial outlet allowing the solution of internal social and economic conflicts. This imperialist policy, similar to that of Germany and United States, shows the alliances born during the Risorgimento⁴ reversed: England and France are no more the allied powers which, with their cannons, permitted the creation of the Italian nation-state, but the main obstacles to its colonial expansion. These are the years of the tragic expeditions to Ethiopia⁵ and we can hear the echo of the battle of Adua in Salgari's Battle of the Little Big Horn. The Libyan war broke out in 1911, when he committed suicide, though there is apparently no connection between the two events. We can understand, this way, his hostile stance against Britain's imperial power and somewhat sympathetic, though ambiguous, attitude to young nations or invaded peoples, except for his subsequent appeal to the values of civilizing conquest.

What a difference between Salgari's and Kipling's "white man's burden"! Salgari's heroes are quite "savage" too, prey of elemental feelings and ready to strip



away their thin film of civilization; colonial officials become squalid bureaucrats or slimy, treacherous oppressors taking advantage of other people's good faith. The writer, on the other hand, does not feel any pity for the losers, especially if they fight their fate waging war: in this case, they are only "savages", urged on by their wild instinct and not by reason:

L'indiano non volle piegarsi alla dura legge del lavoro, che è la legge dell'umanità; non volle scavare il suolo e fecondarlo con i suoi sudori. [...] Giunse l'uomo bianco che portò su questo vasto continente una energia e un ardore indomabili, e quel giorno segnò la caduta della razza rossa. [...] L'antico guerriero si è trasformato in un indegno aguzzino. (La sovrana del campo d'oro, p. 49) [The Indian did not want to bow to the hard law of work, which is the law of mankind; he did not want to dig the soil and nurture it with his sweat. (...) Then the white man came, bringing untamable energy and ardor to this vast continent and that day the red race was doomed. (...) The ancient warrior became an abominable torturer. (The Queen of the Golden Field, p. 49)]

Sometimes they are fanatic barbarian nationalists who will be exterminated by the bearers of civilization:

"Disprezza gli incensi e le preci, non vuole che vittime. Quella donna (Kali) rappresenta la libertà indiana e la distruzione dei nostri oppressori dalla pelle bianca". "Ti fanno orrore i thugs? Forse perché strangolano? Gli europei ci schiacciano col ferro dei loro cannoni, noi li schiacciamo col laccio, l'arma della nostra possente dea": (I misteri della Jungla Nera, p. 301).["She despises incense and prayer, she wants only victims. That woman (goddess Kali) represents Hindu freedom and the destruction of our white skinned oppressors. (...). Do you feel horror for the Thugs? Maybe because they strangle? Europeans crush us with the steel of their cannons, we crush them with the noose, our powerful goddess's weapon". (The Mysteries of the Black Jungle, p. 301)]

In Salgari's stories the natives act like nature's forces or help underline the white heroes' human qualities: "human wild beasts, Apache devils, worse than tigers, always fierce, even against people of their race" (The Queen of the Golden Field, p. 62). The wild nature of the natives is further stressed by the "splatter effect", which somewhat characterized much of Salgari's prose:

L'ascia di Minnehaha si era staccata allargando la ferita, e dallo squarcio uscivano fiotti di sangue e brani di cervello. (Le Selve Ardenti, p. 203) [Minnehaha's axe came off widening the wound, and spurts of blood and fragments of brain came out of the gash. (The Burning Woods, p. 203)]

Sitting Bull, armato di un tomahawk, scese solo nel cañon, s'avanzò attraverso quella distesa di cadaveri, raggiunse il generale che era caduto in mezzo ai suoi ultimi ufficiali, gli spaccò il petto e levatone il cuore che era ancora caldo lo divorò coll'avidità dell'antropofago, fra le urla entusiastiche dei suoi quattromila guerrieri!⁶ (La Scotennatrice, p. 234) [Sitting Bull, armed with a tomahawk, went down to the canyon alone, advanced through the expanse of corpses,



reached the general who had fallen among his last officers, smashed his chest, and, pulled the heart out still warm, and devoured it with a cannibal's greed, amidst the enthusiastic shouts of his four thousand warriors!" (The Woman Scalper, p. 234)]⁷

Also the "patchwork" descriptions of the natives are racist, where the Indians are piled up regardless of where they actually lived; almost all Indians wear Plains style warbonnets ringed with gold (!), live in wigwams and torture their prisoners at totem poles, practice the Sun dance and are governed by sachems. Most terms are, of course, careless: Spanish and English words are mixed up with indigenous ones written with a mangled spelling in order to create exotic sounds. These foreign words, often learnt by heart and, therefore, inopportunistly and differently spelled in the same story, contribute either creating an alien, wild atmosphere, because savage peoples have uneducated languages, or giving the tale a varnish of scientific truth, a sensation which is enriched also by numerous historical background digressions, though often indulging to the Grand Guignol.

Warrior women reinforce Indian savagery once more; their fierce cruelty compares well with fragile white gentlewomen, who though intrepid are on the whole mawkish and needing the hero's help. Native women, on the contrary, often win men and animals on points.

"Anche se tra essi vi fossero delle donne?" "Esse prima di tutti". "Perché... Quale colpa hanno?" "Sono più terribili degli uomini. Rappresentano la dea Kali": (I misteri della Jungla Nera, p. 180). ["Even if among them there were some women?" "Them more than others" "Why? ...What's their sin?" "They are more terrible than men. They represent goddess Kali". (The Mysteries of the Black Jungle, p. 180)]

La squaw, vedendo i cacciatori puntare i fucili, aveva subito gridato: "Non fate fuoco visi pallidi!..." Poi un sibilo modulato uscì dalle sua labbra, ed orsi e giaguari, coguari e perfino lupi si arrestarono di colpo. (Le Selve Ardenti. P. 31). [The squaw, seeing the hunters aiming their rifles at her, had cried at once: "Don't fire, palefaces!..." Then a modulated whistle came out of her lips, and bears, jaguars, cougars and even wolves stopped abruptly. (The Burning Woods, p. 31)]

"... e per salvare la capigliatura aveva dovuto sposare Yalla, una bellissima indiana, figlia di un famoso capo. Voi sapete la repulsione istintiva che proviamo tutti noi uomini bianchi per la razza rossa". (La Scotennatrice, p. 46) ["...and, to save his scalp he had to marry Yalla, a very beautiful Indian woman, daughter of a famous chief. You know the instinctive repulsion all we white men feel for the red race" (The Woman Scalper, p. 48)]

"(Minnehaha) ha superato sua madre per valore e ferocia, per audacia e soprattutto per crudeltà. Sette volontari che erano sfuggiti al massacro della gola del Funerale, dopo quindici anni sono stati trovati da Minnehaha e scotennati



con le proprie mani, dopo aver fatto subire a quei disgraziati le torture del palo": (*La Scotennatrice*, p. 50) ["(Minnehaha) has surpassed her mother for bravery and savagery, audacity and, above all, cruelty. Seven volunteers who had escaped the massacre at the Funeral gorge, after fifteen years were found by Minnehaha who scalped them with her own hands, after she had tortured those poor wretches at the stake". (*The Woman Scalper*, p. 50)]

"Disgraziatamente ella era rossa e io bianco e l'odio istintivo non doveva tardare a scoppiare tra noi: d'altronde non avevo mai sognato di sposare una donna di colore diverso, feroce come tutti quelli della sua razza, che combatteva sempre in prima fila e che si mostrava, verso i prigionieri, di una crudeltà inaudita". (*Sulle frontiere del Far West*, p. 25) [Unfortunately she was red and I was white and the instinctive hatred did not take long to break out between us: on the other hand I had never dreamed of marrying a woman of a different color, as fierce as all of her race, who always fought in the front line and showed a cruelty unheard-of to the prisoners". (*On the Frontiers of the Far West*, p. 25)] It is possible that Salgari, influenced by the news in the illustrated magazines, had been impressed by the deeds of the suffragettes of his period (the English ones were particularly militant), and in some way depicted these modern "warrior women" in the fierce, strong heroines of his novels.

This ambiguous, contradictory writer, however, paid homage to those characters who, defeated, knew how to die with honor and wild passion: Salgari, in fact, especially admired the supermen, the Wagnerian heroes of a colonial Twilight of the Gods. In some ways, Salgari was faithful to the popular feelings of the Italian petit bourgeois, especially those low rank civil servants of whom there were many within the Italian bureaucracy, afraid of any change or novelty which might jeopardize their precarious well-being. Yet those Catholic Philistines childishly dreamed of far away lands, heroic adventures, powerful feelings and exotic encounters with (sexually) unrestrained savage women and strange people that confirmed, by means of their wildness, the civilizing western values. This is the reason why Salgari's books were absolute best-sellers for a very long time, even if they made rich not their author but the publishers. The stereotyped "Other", so excessive and alien, of his stories entered the Italians' collective unconscious together with the famous colored plates of the "Domenica del Corriere", laying out the premises for the Thirties' and Forties' adventure cartoons and the great success of Cinecittà, (Rome) and - in spite of Fascism - Hollywood movies. We can say that Salgari, and particularly his Cycle of the West, had the same importance in Italy as Carl May in Germany and Zane Grey in the USA: after all, every lover of Indians has romantically hoped to meet one of those wild, fascinating, absolutely exaggerated natives at his first encounter.



Notes

¹ The Cycle of the Malayan Pirates comprises *The Mysteries of the Black Jungle*, *Mompracem Tigers*, *The Two Tigers*, *The Sea King*, *Conquering an Empire*, *Sandokan to Arms!*, *Mompracem Reconquered*, *The Brahmin of Assam*, *The Fall of an Empire*, *The Pirates of Malaya*, *Yanez's Revenge*; the Cycle of the Far West comprises the trilogy *On the Frontiers of the Far West*, *The Woman Scalper*, *The Burning Woods* (Salgari's rendering of the Brulé) and other novels such as *The Queen of the Golden Field*, *The Prairie King*, *Adventures among the Redskins*, *The Miners of Alaska*, *Red Stories*, *The Scalper*; the Cycle of the Privateers comprises the trilogy *The Black Corsair*, *The Queen of the Caribbean*, *Jolanda, the Black Corsair's Daughter*, and *The Red Corsair's Son*, *The Last Buccaneers*, *The Corsairs of the Bermudas*, *The Cruise of the "Thundering"*, *Stone Head's Extraordinary Adventures*; the African adventures comprise, among the others, *The Favorite of the Madhi*, *The Sahara Marauders*, *The Bandits of the Riff*, *Ivory Coast*, *On the Atlantis*; among the adventures in the East we remember: *Buddha's Scimitar*, *The King of the Mountain*, *The Flower of the Pearls*, *The Philippines' Slaughters*. There are also some novels not belonging to any cycle such as *The Woman Captain of the "Yucatan"*, *The Lion of Damascus*, *Captain Storm*, *Adventures on the Prairies*, *the Jungle and the Sea* and many short stories.

² During Umberto I's reign (1878-1900) the Left obtained the power with the Prime Minister De Pretis (1876-1887), who introduced the so called Transformism, that is the dissolution of ideologically and politically defined alignments in Parliament and the formation of government majorities made of particular interests. This policy disintegrated the political groups which had fought in the Risorgimento and promoted laws such as compulsory elementary education, abolition of the tax on flour, widened franchise and saw the birth of the Triple Alliance with Prussia and the ex enemy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This alliance was to support the colonial expansion of the Reign of Italy. Among the most important politicians of the period is Francesco Crispi, ex Garibaldine, then a monarchic conservative, who was Prime Minister from 1887 to 1896. As an admirer of Bismark, he used an iron fist in the social conflicts, caused by the birth of the industry, emigration, the birth of the Trade Unions and the Socialist Party, and the beginning of expansion to Africa.

³ Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928) was Prime Minister almost without interruption from 1903 to 1914, inheriting a country shaken by social unrest, repressed by the army, and the assassination of king Umberto during Crispi's government. Giolitti, convinced that armed repression was bad for the interests of the northern, progressive, industrial middle class that had given him the power, favored the development of parties and trade unions and widened franchise with the electoral reform of 1913. The contradictions of Giolitti's government, which saved the old transformism, patronage system and corruption, led to the break with the reactionary, right wing agrarians and extreme left wing Socialists. This break laid the basis for the conquest of Libya (1911) and, later, the coming of Italy in the First World War, to which he was opposed.

⁴ During the Risorgimento, from the Vienna Congress (1815) to the conquest of Rome (1870), most of Italy became united after the First War of Independence (1848-49), the Second War of Independence (1859), the Expedition of the Thousand (1860), the Third War of Independence (1866) and the conquest of Rome, with the subsequent end of the Pope's temporal power.

⁵ The imperialist expansion of Italy occurred in a scenario, in Eastern Africa, where France (French Eritrea and Djibouti) and Britain (protectorate on Egypt and Sudan and the Kenyan colony) were also operating. The Italian adventure in Eastern Africa began with Cardinal Massaja purchasing Assab Bay on behalf of Rubattino Co.; in 1887 Prime Minister Crispi bought the Bay and sent the Italian army to conquest Asmara, capital of Eritea; although stopped by the Eritreans at Dagali, he annexed the territory after the death of the Negus. The new Negus destroyed Crispi's plans for an African empire; a very fierce war broke out and the



Italian army was defeated at Amba Alagi and especially at Adua (1896), where 6,6000 Italians died. The defeat closed a period of history.

⁶ Wishing “a place in the sun” and always excluded from the international conferences where the great powers divided the world among themselves, Italy, encouraged by its participation in the international expeditions against the Chinese Boxers, invaded Libya. The war was long and very brutal, with air bombardments and the use of gas.

⁷ The original edition has the note “historical”, but Salgari copied this detail from uncheckable sources such as Bousсенard’s novel, *Adventures of a Paris Scamp in Buffalo Country*.