

ORIENTALISM IN BARTOL'S NOVEL *ALAMUT* – “NOTHING IS TRUE,
EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED”

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a study of Vladimir Bartol's novel Alamut that uses the epistemological framework of Edward Said's Orientalism. Said's conception of Orientalism is further developed through the concept of self-Orientalism in both its versions, here labeled as "Oriental" and "Occidental" self-Orientalism respectively. The main hypothesis of the paper states that Bartol's novel can be interpreted as an example of Orientalism – as well as Occidental self-Orientalism – in literature. Thus, the paper's primary purpose is to deliver an analysis of Alamut's Orientalist and self-Orientalist elements.

Key words: Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut*, Orientalism, self-Orientalism

L'ORIENTALISMO NEL ROMANZO DI BARTOL *ALAMUT* – “NULLA È REALE,
TUTTO È LECITO”

SINTESI

Il contributo presenta uno studio del romanzo di Vladimir Bartol Alamut, che utilizza la struttura epistemologica dell'Orientalismo di Edward Said. L'idea dell'orientalismo di Said viene sviluppata ulteriormente attraverso il concetto di autoorientalismo in ambedue le sue versioni, qui denominate rispettivamente autoorientalismo 'orientale' e 'occidentale'. L'ipotesi principale del contributo sostiene che il romanzo di Bartol possa essere interpretato come un esempio di orientalismo – nonché di autoorientalismo occidentale – in letteratura. Lo scopo primario del saggio è quindi di fornire un'analisi degli elementi orientalistici e autoorientalistici di Alamut.

Parole chiave: Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut*, orientalismo, autoorientalismo

INTRODUCTION

At first glance Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut* presents itself as a typical instance of Orientalism in literature, chiefly because it exploits the Arabo-Islamic Orient for aesthetic purposes. However, on a closer inspection, the novel distinguishes itself from similar examples of Orientalism by its distinctive self-Orientalist character. Starting from the epistemological framework of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, we will further develop the concept through the introduction of self-Orientalism, which comprises a specific conceptual permutation of the former. Furthermore, two versions of self-Orientalism will be analysed, for which we propose the labels "Oriental" and "Occidental" self-Orientalism respectively. Before proceeding to the application of this epistemological framework to our case study, a general historical background on Bartol and his times will be provided, with particular attention paid to the shifting receptions and interpretations of his novel *Alamut* in the various historical and geopolitical contexts (its negative reception at home and the success it enjoyed abroad as well as the different interpretations of its content). The central part of the article consists of two separate analyses of Bartol's *Alamut*, one dealing with its Orientalist elements (the "Secret Order of the Assassins", the "Artificial Paradise", the "Tale of the Three Scholars", the "Old Man of the Mountain"), while the other focusing on the self-Orientalist ones (nihilism and Machiavellianism). We will try to show how all the main four Orientalist motives are in the first place an imaginative fruit of the Islamic world itself, exported during the period of the Crusades and given greater currency only later on in the West – and conversely, how and why were the two main self-Orientalist elements (nihilism, Machiavellianism), as distinctively Western inventions, projected upon that Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other par excellence, namely, the "Assassins". Finally, in the conclusion part, we will consider the link between the historical "Assassins" and modern "terrorists" within the specific cultural and political context of the novel's translation into English and its publication in the US – namely the post 9/11 era, marked by a prevailing imperialism/terrorism ideology.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: ORIENTALISM AND SELF-ORIENTALISM

Orientalism was long understood simply as a Western artistic and scholarly tradition of depicting and writing about the Orient but this understanding, as well as the meaning of the concept itself, has slowly started to change, at least since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Instead of an allegedly neutral scientific or aesthetic interest a careful examination of various Orientalist works in the arts and sciences revealed a plurality of ideological implications. It turned out that Orientalism was far from being a neutral description due to its

becoming evident that it denoted a specific perception of the East by the West that was at the same time essentialist and ahistorical. It also became clear that Orientalism has as its purpose the establishment of the Orient not only as an object of knowledge and/or aesthetic pleasure but also of colonialist domination. Said's work is understood as one of the most important forerunners of contemporary post-colonial studies precisely due to this specific link it established between imagination and domination.

The scientific Orientalist discourse was traditionally understood mainly as a Western scholarly discipline that specialized in the research of certain very narrowly defined aspects of a very broadly conceived Orient (linguistic, cultural, religious, and political). In contrast, Said gave Orientalism the more general meaning of "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said, 2003, 1-3). The concept can thus encompass the classical Orientalist writings of the European – mainly French and British – scholarly tradition (which constitute the main object of critique in *Orientalism*), as well as the works of poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators – their common denominator being an acceptance of the basic ontological and epistemological distinctions between East and West.

This conception of Orientalism as a specific "style of thought" was itself grounded in Michel Foucault's conception of a "discourse" as a unifying instance of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1972, 37). Orientalism as a discursive style of thought did not confine itself to the traditional Orientalist genres of discourse (scientific or literary writings) for it could be – and indeed was – extended into other, primarily non-discursive fields, such as photography or painting. It was only a matter of time before critical cultural studies research on Orientalism began to focus on television and – especially – films: already in Said's book we are able to find the following assertion:

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demology of 'the mysterious Orient.' (Said, 2003, 26)

If we consider entertainment – bolstered by the culture industry – as the perfect locus for ideology to dress itself up in non-ideological clothing (Adorno, 2001), then cinema can very well be regarded as the medium *par excellence* through which any hegemonic ideology can be reproduced (Comolli, Narboni, 2000, 197). In the context of Orientalism, cinema is consequently also the me-

dium through which the ideological stereotyping of the Orient is replicated – this is especially the case when it comes to the question of representations of the Arabo-Islamic world (Shaheen, 2000, 2001). Orientalism is the movement that constructs the Orient as a twofold object of knowledge and pleasure; an entity painted in negative tonalities as a dangerous and underdeveloped world; yet at the same time exalted for its more fascinating coloration and thus fetishized in all its exoticism and mystery. It comes as no surprise that in the cinematic Orientalist discourse, as is the case in almost all representations of the Oriental Other by the entertainment industry, the phobic elements go hand-in-hand with the fetishistic ones – in cinema and television as well as in literature.

If Orientalism therefore denotes a specific discursive style of thought and the related power-praxis of domination exerted by the West upon the East, resulting in a stereotyped depiction of the Orient as an exotic, yet dangerous entity, then self-Orientalism can be regarded as a peculiar extension of Orientalism, for in this case it is the Oriental Other that inflicts Orientalism upon itself. Self-Orientalism can be generally understood in terms of post-colonial self-exploitation or as an anti-colonialist attempt at cultural self-definition; either way, it is a modus of Orientalism practiced by the Oriental Other itself (Azm, 2000). Often labelled also as "self-othering," or as "reversed" or "complicit" Orientalism (Macfie, 2000), self-Orientalism denotes a reversal of Orientalism, a certain complicit – willing or unwilling – adoption of the Western "style of thought" through a process of self-othering. The most evident cases of self-orientalisation would include a variety of present-day commercial activities modelled for the Western eye, the most flagrant and popular example of which would be, of course, belly dancing (Shay, Sellers-Young, 2003).

Besides this conception of self-Orientalism, there is another version that we must take into account, namely, the kind in which the subject of self-othering is not the Oriental Other, but rather the Occidental subject itself. Already during the colonial era, at a time when the Orientalist discourses were already flourishing, one can find examples of various degrees of such a self-Orientalisation, mostly by famous figures from arts and literature: Byron, in his eccentric voyages to the Balkans; Goethe, with his failed attempt to travel to an imaginary Orient; and most notably Burton, who, disguised as a Muslim, accomplished the ritual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Nicholas A. Germana, for example, argues that German Orientalism, from the Baroque period to Romanticism, demonstrates very different traits than its French and British counterparts, which were the main concern of Said's work (Germana, 2010). The most notable difference is a certain self-othering, which functions in terms of identification with the Oriental Other. A more contemporary example would include, again, belly dancing; this time performed not by the feminine self-Orientalized Arabic Other, but

by self-othered Western women. This is a phenomenon that is spreading mainly in Europe and the United States and that is, according to Sunaina, connected to New Age feminism (Sunaina, 2008).

If the main role of Orientalism as such is to reproduce the basic ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, then self-Orientalism fulfils the same function in two very different ways: the first form of self-Orientalism achieves this through the identification of the Oriental subject with Western Orientalist ideology while the second achieves it through the identification of the Occidental subject with the Oriental Other as part of a characteristic process of self-othering. To distinguish the two forms of self-Orientalism proposed above, I will refer to the first as "Oriental self-Orientalism" and to the second as "Occidental self-Orientalism." The two proposed forms of self-Orientalism are not to be seen as separate phenomena but rather as complementary versions of the same "style of thought". The distinction between Orientalism and self-Orientalism lies elsewhere, namely in their relation to power: if Orientalism is conceived as a post-colonial praxis of domination, then self-Orientalism (both Occidental and Oriental) could be understood as post-colonial self-exploitation. However, it could also be understood – at least, so I argue – as a genuine attempt at potentially emancipatory and subversive cultural self-determination and self-Orientalisation.

Before proceeding to the analyses of the Orientalist and self-Orientalist elements respectively present in Bartol's novel *Alamut*, a historical contextualization of the emergence of the novel and its subsequent reception is needed. This will help us to understand why it was rejected in its author's time and popularized in our own: for this, factors inherently linked with the question of Orientalism in general and "Occidental self-Orientalism" in particular are pertinent.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION: RECEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF BARTOL'S *ALAMUT*

Vladimir Bartol was a Slovene writer from Trieste (1903-1967), best known for his novel *Alamut*, a novelistic account of an Islamic sect that flourished in 11th century Persia and was popularly known as the "Order of the Assassins" and their uncanny master Hasan as-Sabbah, nicknamed the "Old Man of the Mountain".

Bartol's education began in Trieste and continued in Ljubljana with the study of philosophy, which considerably marks his literary works. Klemen Jug, a somewhat controversial figure of the period, introduced him to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche; meanwhile Bartol discovered the work of Sigmund Freud independently and was greatly interested in psychoanalysis. Graduating in 1925, he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1926-27 where he met Josip Vidmar, a Slovenian critic, essayist and politician, who invited Bartol to join the Yugoslav Front. Vidmar told

Bartol about the *Tales of Marco Polo* and suggested the legend of the "Old Man of the Mountain" as material for a short story. This was the spark that ignited the idea for the novel *Alamut*. In 1928 Bartol moved to Petrovaradin where he served in the army, while from 1933-1934 he lived in Belgrade and worked as the editor of the *Slovenian Belgrade Weekly*. Soon after he returned to Ljubljana and worked there as a freelance writer until 1941. It would take ten years for Bartol to study the historical material, write down schemes, drafts and four versions of *Alamut*, before he finally published it in 1938.

During his lifetime Bartol was not recognized as much as he would have liked, neither by the general public nor by his contemporaries in literature; the reasons for this vary widely. For the most part, his fellow writers disliked his work and felt free to disregard him. Nevertheless an element within the younger generation looked at him as an avant-garde cosmopolitan writer; a label that was also to be applied later from abroad, where he was seen as one of the few genuinely cosmopolitan Slovenian authors.¹ From the perspective of his Slovenian literary peers his works were seen as cynic and nihilistic, stylistically poor and at best essayistic philosophy disguised in the form of literature.² In between the two wars the then valid esthetical cannon, enforced mercilessly by the Slovenian literary triumvirate of Josip Vidmar and brothers Juša and Ferdo Kozak, regarded Bartol's prosaic work as too distant from the real problems of the Slovenian nation and in dereliction of the duty of Slovenian literature. This type of critique, which was rooted in the orthodox Slovenian perception of literature as a means to achieve national cohesion, was due to a very strong and rigid canon, nowadays still present and influential in Slovenian literature. Allegedly, during the first period, under the regime of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Bartol stated in bitterness that the Slovenian guild of writers is ruled by nationalists; while during the second, under the regime of Socialist Yugoslavia, he said it was ruled by ideologists, himself alone, together with a couple of exceptions, being part of an alternative camp of cosmopolitan Slovenian writers. Bartol's work was to be rehabilitated and recognized by his countrymen only long after his death on the eve of Slovenian independence, supported on the part of the now grown-up younger generation of writers and not contested anymore by the dying or already deceased older generation. One of the

main reasons for this recognition was undoubtedly the success his novel *Alamut* enjoyed abroad – especially in the west – a success that started in Paris in 1988.

While considering the reception of the novel during Bartol's own lifetime, we should also take into account what the author said about it himself and what were the criticisms he attempted to refute. Before the war he had two suggestions as to how his novel should be interpreted (as found in an article from 1938 entitled *Instead of an introduction to Alamut*): on the one hand he said that the novel was "a faithful historical reconstruction of 11th century Islamic Persia" while on the other hand he suggested that it was "a living metaphor for the age of dictatorship we live in", comparing the "Secret Order of the Assassins" to the totalitarian regimes of the period and the "Old Man of the Mountain" to Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. Both interpretations were either accepted or rejected largely depending upon whether it was being applied by the older "conservative" generation or the younger "open-minded" one. But if the historicity of the novel is plainly erroneous – at least nowadays when extensive and more precise research on the sect in question is available – the question of the central character and his sect's functioning as a metaphor for the head of a totalitarian regime is still a possible interpretation.³ On of the most insistent criticisms of *Alamut* was that its author preaches solipsism and cynical nihilism, as well as amoral decadence and Machiavellianism. It is important to note that in the Slovenia of the 50s any reference to Nietzsche or similar authors was regarded as *bourgeois decadence* at best or fascism at worst. Bartol defended himself by refuting any connection to Nietzsche whatsoever (even if everybody – critics and supporters alike – knew that was his philosophical affiliation), remodelling the previous two interpretations into a more acceptable form by amplifying his statement that *Alamut* was a metaphor for totalitarian regimes. Regardless of Bartol's own assertions and interpretations, his novel continued to be critically rejected, with the most frequent reasons besides nihilism and Machiavellianism being the exoticism of the novel, which was "too far from the real problems of the nation". But the distinctively nihilistic and Machiavellian character of the novel did not deter its French editor from publishing it in Paris in 1988, where its success was followed by a series of translations into other languages: Spanish and

1 Boris Paternu, for instance, rejects the interpretation of Bartol being an avant-garde post-modern author and finds the reasons for his revival in the 80s more in his Eco-style "encyclopedicness", which "pleased the taste of the younger generations, not caring so much for its philosophical value as much as the writer's "erudition, irony and his technique of story-telling"; for Paternu, *Alamut* is "not a post-modern novel" at all, but "a pre-modern novel, made in such a way that it pleased the post-modern sensibility" (Paternu, 1991, 89).

2 Drago Bajt gives us an insight into some of the period's opinions about Bartol's work being "mere training in essayistic": B. Borko spoke of the collection of short-prose works *Al' Araf* as "intellectualism" and "scientificism", and as "philosophical and psychological treatises", while L. Legiša and T. Potokar declared *Alamut* to be "half report, half psychological study", "nearer to artistic essays than creative prose" (Bajt, 1991, 77-78).

3 It is an important to mention the article was written after the publishing of the novel, and that in the same text he tells us that at the time of writing *Alamut* he did not want to consciously give any actual meaning to the novel. But it is also important to know that he first wanted to dedicate the book to Benito Mussolini, but was advised not to do so, and that then he tried to change the dedication into the more generic "To a certain dictator", an attempt for which he was again dissuaded by the editor Janez Žagar (Bajt, 1991).

Italian in 1989, German in 1992, even Turkish and Persian in 1995; later on also in English, Arabic, Greek and even Korean.

As the reasons of the failure at home, so do the reasons for the success abroad vary; however, the most distinctive and influential one is probably the appeal *Alamut* had on account of its chief Orientalist theme, which referred to what is known nowadays as "Islamic fundamentalism". The Paris editor, besides mentioning that it was a "cursed book in its own country", did not see any reason to mention the scandal about the "nihilistic amorality" of the author or his novel; furthermore, he was concerned to downplay the philosophical aspects of the novel, worrying they could be boring for the average reader. On the other hand, he was much more interested in amplifying its Orientalist aspect, promoting *Alamut* as a faithful description and interpretation of "Islamic fundamentalism." The editor probably had the right idea, at least in terms of marketing: the novel had a great success in a climate influenced by the then omnipresent "threat from the East", who went by the name of Khomeini.⁴ He was being referred to as a "charismatic leader of immense popularity," considered a "champion of Islamic revival" and described as the "virtual face in Western popular culture of Islam" (Nasr, 2006, 138). It will not come as a surprise to recall that the Hasan as-Sabbah of the novel was compared to Khomeini and *vice versa*; that many saw in *Alamut* a key to understanding the otherwise – at least for Westerners – incomprehensible phenomenon of "Islamic fundamentalism." Of course it was not only its political resonance that put the novel under the spotlight for it was also regarded as a masterpiece in "literary hedonism" (as the same Paris editor from promulgated); readable and enjoyable for a very broad audience. Still, it was again its political resonance that favoured the first translation of the novel into English. Al-Qaida's 9/11 terrorist attacks using hijacked planes gave an excellent pretext for the novel's publication in the United States, where *Alamut* was once again read as a rational explanation for what Westerners tend to believe to be the irrational behaviour of Islamic extremists, who disregard their own personal safety and have no moral compunction in killing civilians. As with the French translation, stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in general – as well as about the Assassins/Terrorists in particular – worked in the novel's favour, transforming

it into the most fabulous success Slovenian literature had ever known abroad. In short, as a "best-seller phenomenon" *Alamut* was smuggled into the consciousness of the allegedly "non-ideological" entertainment industry, while all the while reproducing Orientalist stereotypes disguised as answers to complex political and cultural problems.

What the English translation brought of most value was "an exhaustive summary of everything that Slovene 'Bartology' had created so far," as Miran Hladnik tells us about the afterword of his friend and translator of the novel Michael Biggins, adding that "Biggins's analysis of the four classifications of the novel is clearly his great contribution to 'Alamutology'" (Hladnik, 2004, 107). Both statements are bold exaggerations since the summary mentioned consists of no more than four pages in a seven-page afterword, that simplifies the arguments of the not-even-mentioned past or still-existing Bartologists or Alamutists. Let's examine Biggins's classification of the various different approaches used to interpret the novel (Biggins, 2004, 383-390) in detail. First, *Alamut* is a novelistic account of the 11th century struggle between the Ismaili sect and Seljuk power, based on historical references.⁵ Second, *Alamut* is an allegorical representation of the rise of totalitarian regimes in the early 20th century, where Hasan as-Sabbah can be seen as the mirror image of Hitler, Mussolini and/or Stalin. The third kind of interpretation, defined as "nationalistic" (of which Biggins complains that it rings "facile and flat" – and for which Hladnik in his commentary on Biggins immodestly explains that in this case we are speaking about his own original interpretation) – is a mirroring version of the second reading, for it compares the Ismailis to the underground organization TIGR ("Trst-Istra-Gorica-Rijeka"), since both were fighting against a foreign invader – and both used *medicine forti* (as Machiavelli would put it) to achieve their ultimate goal, namely national liberation. While the first three types of interpretation are bound to the past, the fourth ties *Alamut* to the present, characterizing the novel as "actualistic," by stating that it is some kind of a "prophetic vision or at least an uncanny foreshadowing" of the early 21st century's fundamental conflict between the West and the Islamic world; according to this kind of interpretation the US is seen as the imperialistic Seljuk power, and conversely, the Ismailis are Al'Qaeda and Hasan as-Sabbah is Osama bin

4 Syed Ruhollah Moosavi Khomeini was an Iranian political and religious leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which following a national referendum became "Supreme Leader" of the country (a function defined in the constitution as the highest ranking political and religious authority of the nation). In his writings and speeches he propagated the Shi'ah Usuli theory of *velayat-e faqih* ("guardianship of the juriconsult") or "clerical authority", to include theocratic political rule by Islamic jurists.

5 Biggins' diction is highly exalted, as the novel for him is "a broadly historical if highly fictionalized account of 11th century Iran under Seljuk rule", where a reader can "appreciate its scrupulously researched historical background, the general absence of historical anachronisms, its account of the origins of the Shiite-Sunni conflict within Islam, and its exposition of the deep-seated resentments that the indigenous peoples of this area have had against foreign occupiers, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, for over a millennium." The work has some historical background, but considering Bartol used mainly 19th century historians, that his research was not as "scrupulous" as his worshippers tend to think, and that it is full of philosophical anachronisms, we can remain skeptical on this and any other account that tries to attribute to *Alamut* a firmer historical fundament that it has in reality.

Laden.⁶ The fifth, Biggins' own personal interpretation, self-declared as "non-ideological" (as already the title of his pretentious afterword suggests: *Against Ideologies*), unsurprisingly sees *Alamut* as a "deconstruction of ideologies", itself being an anti-ideological work supposedly based on "personalistic philosophy".⁷ Moreover, Biggins reassures us that Bartol was not at all the kind of a person to promote solipsism, nihilism or Medievalism, for he was "in love with life", and to convince us he quotes one of Bartol's own remarks from 1957 about *Alamut* being a novel about "friendship, love and truth", forgetting or not even knowing that this was the period when the author was forced to defend himself from the critiques that condemned his work as nihilistic Machiavellianism.

Besides the interpretations from the fourth group, Biggins tells us that he personally most dislikes those from the third while favouring the first two: for him the nationalistic interpretations, on the one hand, miss the obvious fact that nationalist ideologies are an anachronism in 11th century Persia and that Hasan's articulated nihilism is driven from a pure lust for power without any greater goals, while on the other hand, the "actualistic" ones tends to stereotype the Middle East as a trans-historical "home of fanatics and unquestioning fundamentalists"; moreover, the combination of both interpretations can produce a "really perverted reading" by finding in the novel "an apology for terrorism," something Biggins is horrified even to consider. Biggins' categorical rejection can be discarded if we interpret it as a distinctively American ideology, which – if we push it to the extreme – tends to label "every desperate aggressive deed by those that have exhausted all other means to defend their rights as terrorism out of paranoia," as Hladnik replayed to his friend and colleague. What both Hladnik and Biggins miss in this regard is an anachronism typical of our present time, namely the equation between "terrorists" and "assassins": the assassinations of the Ismailis targeted high-ranking military officials, political figures, influential bureaucrats and even heads of states, while civilian casualties were almost

zero; meanwhile modern terrorism is purposely intended to harm civilians in order to spread terror in the population (as its very name tells us) and by doing so to influence mainstream politicians, who are in final analysis again the true targets of such extreme practices.

As we have seen, the receptions and interpretations of Bartol's *Alamut* varied through time; its place in the history of literature being characterized by its rejection in Slovenia during the author's lifetime and by its popularization in the West afterwards. The common denominator of both its successes and failures was precisely its specific Orientalist character and set-up (the "Secret Order of the Assassins" operating in 11th century Persia under the command of the "Old Man of the Mountain"), expressed in a distinctively Occidental self-Orientalist manner through the numerous references to nihilism and Machiavellianism, emblematically represented in the alleged "supreme motto of the Ismailis": "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." We will deal with the Occidental self-Orientalist aspect of the novel later and for now focus solely on the Orientalist elements.

ALAMUT'S ORIENTALISM: THE "SECRET ORDER OF THE ASSASSINS", THE "ARTIFICIAL PARADISE", THE "TALE OF THE THREE SCHOOLFELLOWS" AND THE "OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN"

There are four main motives in the novel that can help us to identify the various Orientalist elements scattered in Bartol's *Alamut*: first of all the "Secret Order of the Assassins" then the motive of the "Artificial Paradise" after it the "Tale of the Three SchoolFellows" and finally the "Old Man of the Mountain". All of these motives are, as I will try to show, first of all an imaginative fruit of the Islamic world itself, which were exported during the period of the Crusades and given greater currency only later on in the West.

"Assassin" the name by which the Shi'a sect of the Nizari Ismailis were known,⁸ has been traced to some

6 Such was also the *mis-en-scène* of *Alamut* as a piece of theatre from 2005, directed by Sebastian Horvat and dramatised by Dušan Jovanovič (coproduction of Ljubljana's theater *Drama* with the *Salzburg Festspiele*).

7 To qualify his statement Biggins mentions the connections between Bartol and personalism, which was seen as an alternative to the mainstream currents of the period, such as, for example, Freudian psychoanalyses. Although it is true that Bartol studied in Paris with a number of his fellow-countryman who would later become "personalist" (like the psychologist Anton Trstenjak or the poet Edvard Kocbek), it is also obvious that his true sympathies were with Nietzsche (he even translated some parts of *Zarathustra* into Slovene) and that the living figures that influenced his life and work were not Trstenjak or Kocbek, but first and foremost Klement Jug, one of the most influential thinkers of the younger generations of Slovenian intellectuals in the interwar period. Jug was an alpinist, writer and philosopher, whose controversial "solipsistic ethics" influenced Bartol (Virk, 1991).

8 Ismailism is a branch of the Shia while the Shia is in turn a branch of Islam, which originated as a faction of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, who claimed power after the murder of Mohammed's third successor. All the different factions of Shia Islam have in common the belief that Ali and his successors in Mohammed's family are the only legitimate rulers and religious authorities from the time that the Prophet died. Shia Islam had become very strong by the middle of the 18th century, and one branch, represented by the Abbasid dynasty, even took over the Caliphate in Baghdad, but then turned their backs on the other Shia and become the stronghold of Sunnism and the Sunni, who formed and still form the majority of Muslims. The Shia group we are interested in sprang from those Shia that limited the imamate ("leadership") to only one line of Ali's descendants; that is, the line by Mohammed's daughter Fatima. In the context of the dissolution of the Fatimids and their capital in Cairo at the hands of the Seljuk Turks, the scattered Ismailis began with a totally new kind of policy as well as religious and philosophical doctrines and soon split from the Fatimids altogether. Calling themselves

conflicting potential origins. The most common interpretation, present also in Bartol's novel, can be found in de Sacy's famous article *Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins et sur l'étymologie de leur nom*, who two centuries ago showed how the term was used not only by Christian and Jewish but also by primary Muslim writers (Sacy, 1818, 322-403). The Arabic form of the name "Assassin" was *hashishiyya* or *hashishiyyun*, meaning quite literally the users of the drug *hashish*, a preparation from cannabis. The use of the drug was attributed to the "Assassins" as an explanation for their apparently "irrational behaviour", with the insinuation that they used hashish to induce some kind of battle-frenzy, disregarding their own personal safety and thus making them suitable for suicidal assassination missions. Apart from the obvious fact that the drug in question is not suited for combat, the most plausible explanation for the connection of the sect with the drug seems – at least according to Hodgson – "that, already despised as a minority, they had special opportunities to become associated with the prevailing vices" in the popular view; moreover, Hodgson mentions another interpretation that goes along same lines; namely that "the term was scornful rather than descriptive" and that a popular name for them would be "less likely to describe a secret practice of theirs than to express the loathing and the fear for them." (Hodgson, 2005, 136) In short, *hashishiyyun* was most probably a popular term from the time used to derogate the Nizari Ismailis and was later picked up as fact by Christian writers during the Crusades. From here it is only one step to the generalization that made the practice of assassination a "specialty" of the sect, which, in fact, merely lent it their name:

The word "assassin", which the West uses for terrorist murderers in general, was originally a nickname of the sect, and had nothing to do with killing. It received this connotation in our language only by analogy to the famous murders of the "Assassins" – whose "chief object", however, was not murder, and especially not "to assassinate Crusaders." (Hodgson, 2005, 1)

It is also questionable whether the *fidai* or "devotee" formed a special rank within the Isma'ili organization: "There seems little reason to suppose that the *fidayeen* in any case formed a bottom rank in the Nizari hierarchy [...] or that they received special training in languages, or wore special garb, as has been suggested" (Hodgson, 2005, 82-83). Similar adaptations were made also about

the suicidal assassination missions in order to amplify the sinister and "fundamentalist" nature of the sect in question, present in numerous mythological accounts about the "Secret Order of the Assassins" (Daftary, 1994). In Bartol's novel the *fidayeen* are depicted as a special rank of soldiers, trained and prepared before combat, enacting suicidal attacks following the will of their master – a trait that leads us directly to our next element, the "artificial paradise".

To introduce this second motive, let's return to de Sacy and his own interpretation of the name "Assassins", an interpretation that was meant to be a "scientific" back-up for one of Marco Polo's famous *Tales*, itself one of the main sources for the many legends circulating in the Western minds about the sect in question – Bartol *via* Vidmar not excluded. De Sacy disposes of one possibility, which was nevertheless repeated after him; namely, that the hashish was used to drive the *fidayeen* into a state of frenzy. This seemed unlikely to him, because the patience, carefulness and rationality of the murders attributed to the "Assassins" eliminates the probability of any use of such a drug, whether as a momentary stimulant or as a regular habit. That's why de Sacy turned to the legend surrounding the sect as a historical explanation, namely that the *fidayeen* were artificially prepared beforehand for their deeds. Relying on Marco Polo's tale, de Sacy deduced that hashish was a secret property of the chiefs of the "Assassins" used to stimulate dreams of paradise as a reward for their obedience. This tale of Marco Polo contains another, more elaborate story about an "artificial paradise", which occupied the popular mind and best suited Bartol's own novelistic intent; a story that is also contained in the *Sira Hakim*, an Arabic novel completed in 1430.⁹ This version of the story recounts the exploits of an Ismail from the time of the Fatimid ruler Zahir, who lands at Tripoli with his *fidayeen* and then installs himself at the fortress of Masyaf, where he builds a vast garden with a four-story pleasure-building in the midst, filled with luxuries and slaves of both sexes. In the evenings he invited men attracted by his personal charm to his nearby residence, drugged them in such a way that they were unaware of it and then conveyed them through a secret tunnel connecting his residence to the garden, where they were told they are experiencing paradise. After the experience, Ismail tells them that if they will keep the secret and serve his cause they will be sent to paradise, thus binding their will to his own. As we can clearly see when reading *Alamut*, Bartol added or changed little of

"Nizaris" (because they started as supporters of Nizar, one of the two sons of the imam Mustansir who disputed the Ismaili imamate in Egypt) they fought against the Seljuks and from a certain point in history onwards even against the whole of Islam, by seizing fortresses, conquering villages, attempting cities by *coups de main* and by means of assassination, a practice for which they became renowned.

9 In 1813 the Austrian Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall announced that at the Imperial Library (now National Library) in Vienna he found the unique manuscript of this novel, entitled *Sirat amir al-mu'minin al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah*. Deliberately, the authorship of this work had been falsely attributed to the famous Muslim biographer Ibn Khallikan, probably to enhance its prestige. In fact, the novel is supposed to have been written in Syria in the late Mamluk era either by a local Sunni Muslim or an Arab Christian, who was familiar with the version handed down by Marco Polo (Daftary, 1994, 118-119).

the original story: he changed the tunnel into an elevator, transferred the location from Masyaf in Syria to Alamut in Persia and substituted the main protagonist for Hasan as-Sabbah while retaining the original nickname of "Old Man of the Mountain".

We'll come to this intriguing figure in a moment but before doing so let's take a look at our third Orientalist element, another legend that circulated at the period, but this time about the first famous deed of the Nizari Ismailis from Alamut, namely the assassination of the mighty vizier Nizam al-Mulk in 1092. According to Hodgson, the "tale of the three schoolfellows" was a creation of the Nizaris themselves – a tale that became enshrined in legend after the renown historian Rashid ad-Din published it as part of the biography of Nizam al-Mulk and came to be popularized in the West by Fitzgerald's preface to his own translation of Omar Khayyam's poetry (Hodgson, 2005, 137). This tale goes like this: Omar Khayyam, Nizam al-Mulk and Hasan as-Sabbah were talented students of the same master, who agreed that whoever would rise to high fortune first would help the others. Omar, a *bon-vivant* poet, chose a life of leisure, while Hasan as-Sabbah competed at court with Nizam al-Mulk, who became vizier of the mighty Seljuk Empire. When Hasan was near to overtaking Nizam in influence, the canny vizier tricked his old friend into exile. In exile in Egypt he joined the Ismailis and afterwards, returning in secret to Iran for a mission, he started to organize the supporters of Nizar, stating that with just two men as determined as himself he could overthrow the mighty Seljuk empire. His followers at first considered that he had gone mad and offered him medicine but after this he took over Alamut and began his long-planned project by the act of sending an assassin to take Nizam al-Mulk's life for revenge. After the Sultan's death, which caused the empire to splinter among the quarrelling *amirs* ("princes"), Hasan's followers were told: "Which of the two of us was mad when you gave me medicines?" Later Sunni historians attempted to clean Nizam al-Mulk and to picture Hasan as-Sabbah as a mere madman with the lust for power; these are the versions that mostly also came to occupy the Western mind. Again, Bartol's writing delivers a faithful reproduction of the original story as promulgated by the Ismailis

themselves, portraying Hasan as-Sabbah a man who soberly claimed revenge for an injustice.

And now comes the fourth element, the leader of the Nizari Ismailis at Alamut, a personage concerning whom we have less than satisfactory historical material: an imaginative short biography in Rashid ad-Din, a large excerpt of his writings preserved by Shahrastani as well as, of course, a vast number of references and quotations scattered here and there, where fact cannot be safely separated from fiction. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence to show that a Hasan as-Sabbah existed¹⁰ and that this man stood at the very centre of the new Ismaili movement that started at the fortress of Alamut – in former times called *Aluh Amut*, a place that is surrounded by almost the same legendary aura as its master himself. There a lot of variants of the story about the taking of the fortress, not to mention the mystic coincidences related to it, all served to amplify the importance of the founding-figure.¹¹ In the version we find also in Bartol's novel, we are shown a Hasan as-Sabbah persuading the former owner of Alamut to sell – for a pre-definite large amount – as much land as could be included within a cowhide; when the naive man accepts, thinking that the man standing before him was crazy, Hasan proceeded to cut the cowhide into strips which laid end to end are used to enclose the whole fortress. As is the case with the "tale of the three schoolfellows," we can see a repetition of the pattern used to characterise Hasan as-Sabbah: first treated as a madman by his surroundings and then the supposed madness being disclosed as geniality, a trait that Bartol was eager to exploit when describing the relations between the master and his subjects in Alamut. In fact, Bartol seized every opportunity to stress the discipline and rigor of his main character, traits that were ascribed also to the real, historical Hasan as-Sabbah. He is portrayed as remaining constantly in his residence, studying, writing and directing operations from there, and – as is invariably stated – during all the time of his stay in Alamut he never went out of his home, except twice – onto the rooftop. His relationship with his fellow men is portrayed as sober, rational and generally cold – the same being true of his relationship with his family members. During a time of want he send his daughters away with their mothers and does not bring

10 The young Hasan was born to a Twelver Shia family, apparently in Qumm, northwestern Iran, and studied in nearby Rayy to enter the clerical profession. Everything else about his youth is questionable; we have only variants of the legendary "tale of the three schoolfellows". There are translations from Rashid ad-Din of what is supposed to be his own memoirs, telling how he was convinced of the truth of the Ismaili's doctrines; but there are many reliable accounts informing how in fact he joined the Ismailis in Isfahan under Abd al-Malik's command and, following that, how he arrived in Cairo in 1078, which was at the time the headquarters of their imam. The only credible fact remaining from the period of his stay in Egypt is that he was there during troubled times, when the question of succession between Nizar and his brother had not yet arisen. Upon his return to Isfahan, he began a series of travels that brought him through the major Ismaili centers in western Iran (Yazd, Kirman, Khuzistan, Iraq Ajami) as well as the major centers of Seljuk power, spending all the 1080s recruiting men and looking for a site to set up his headquarters, which he finally found in the fortress of Alamut (Hodgson, 2005, 41-51).

11 One of the meaningful coincidences the Ismaili believed in was, for example, that the letters of *Aluh Amut* in the numeric reckoning (each Arabic letter has a numeric value; the value of the sum of the letters in a word is the value of that word) give the date of Hasan as-Sabbah's arrival at the fortress.

them back later on. Moreover, he has his own sons executed – one on a charge of murder, the other for being accused of drinking wine. The latter incident was not missed by Bartol who used the killing of the son to amplify his character's "diabolicity" (on a few occasions in the novel he is called "dreamer from Hell"). He thus – knowingly or unknowingly – uses the same explanation given also by the Orientalist von Hammer, known for being excessively disdainful toward the Nizari Ismailis: "Human nature is not naturally so diabolical that the historian must, among several doubtful motives to an action, always decide for the worst; but, in the founder of this society of vice, the establisher of the murderous order of the Assassins, the most horrible is the most likely." (Hammer-Purgstall, 1968, 72) Hence von Hammer deducted, as did Bartol after him (although for completely opposite reasons), that Hasan as-Sabbah's son was killed not for the sake of strict application of the law but rather as a deliberate act intended to affect the community in such a way as to give a picture of himself as someone who disregards all natural bonds of affection. What Bartol therefore did, following Western Orientalists such as von Hammer, was to amplify all these uncanny traits for his own purpose, namely to give a face to what he believed to be the "supreme motto of the Ismailis": "Nothing is true, everything is permitted."

Before proceeding to the analysis of this most explicit trait of self-Orientalism in *Alamut*, a few remarks. It is intriguing to consider that popular Western myths about the Assassins were first born in the Islamic world itself, due to the fact that the majority Sunni population regarded the Shia in general and the Nizari Ismailis in particular as a dangerous threat to their more moderate interpretation of Islam. Thus, Orientalism, allegedly a complete Western invention, can be found – at least in our case – already present in the Islamic world itself, from where it spread into and developed in the ideological context of the West, where it gained the institutionalized form we are familiar with. What we are dealing here with is a clear case of "self-Orientalism in reverse" or what we have labelled as "Oriental self-Orientalism": the Orientalist myths circulating about "the Secret Order of the Assassins" turning out to be an imaginative fruit that was first born by the same Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other as its own, internal "Oriental Other".

BARTOL'S SELF-ORIENTALISM: "NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED"

The two most emblematic elements, through which we can palpably grasp Bartol's "self-othering" onto the Assassins – and especially onto the figure of Hasan as-Sabbah – are related to the distinctively European philosophies of nihilism and Machiavellianism. In the book there numerous references to the teaching of Greek philosophers, which attestably were circulating in the Arabo-Islamic world of the period – while nihilism and Machiavellianism clearly were not.

The primary motif of the novel, which is asserted at the very beginning of the book, is referred to as the "supreme motto of the Ismailis", stating: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted". We have seen how Bartol always insisted on the historicity of the novel, on many occasions stating that he studied numerous historical materials pertinent to the related period and society; he also insisted particularly strenuously that the meaning of the phrase "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" was not a mere echo of Nietzsche. For Bartol *Alamut* represented not only an original work of literature, but also a historically accurate study; thus no doubt is to be cast on the genuineness of the motto's source. Nobody went so far as to research the true origin of the sentence since from the very first literary studies of Bartol's work, his own reassurances on the historicity of the novel were taken seriously and all that followed up until the 90s reproduced the same error.¹² In truth, at least if we read his still living contemporaries, everybody knew the phrase was from Nietzsche, but nobody could find proofs that it was not an Ismaili motto in the first place. Only after Janko Kos went into a tiresome research finding Bartol's original sources (mainly historians and Orientalists from the 19. century), the origin of the misunderstanding showed itself.

As a matter of fact, it was Nietzsche who, in typical Occidental self-Orientalist fashion, popularized the phrase along with the conviction that it is "the supreme motto of the Ismailis". Thus spoke Nietzsche in his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (published in 1887):

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient came across that invincible order of Assassins – that order of free spirits *par excellence* whose lowest order received, through some channel or other, a hint about that symbol and spell reserved for the uppermost

12 In 1969 Marta Silvester makes reference to the sources, mentioning the names of the Orientalists and historians used by Bartol at the time, but does not use them by first hand, so that she follows Bartol's autobiographical statement that the famous sentence of the Ismailis comes from Hakim I (Silvester, 1960). On the other hand, Nada Ulaga personally consulted his historical references in 1961 but she could do so only for Weil and Malcom, not for Flügel and Michaud. She concluded that the phrase can of course be found in Nietzsche and also in Dostoevsky, but that the true source is the Ismailis themselves, who in turn took it from Hakim I (Ulaga, 1961). The same assumption was followed by latter researchers, who depended entirely on the previous works on the novel: such was the case with Miran Košuta and his research from the years 1983-83 at the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana; such was also the case with Drago Bajt, who wrote an extensive afterword for the 1984 edition of the novel (Bajt, 1984); and such was again the case with Košuta, who wrote another afterword for the novel, this time for the 1988 edition (Košuta, 1988).

echelons alone, as their secret: "nothing is true, everything is permitted." (Nietzsche, 1976, 150)

As Janko Kos, a contemporary Slovene literary scholar, reconstructs the misunderstanding, it was precisely from Nietzsche that Bartol took the idea in the first place, later bolstering it with erroneous historical sources, which they themselves were probably used by Nietzsche in the first place. In Sacy's *Exposé de la Religion des Druzes* (first published in 1838), it is mentioned that, according to the Isma'ili teachings, a proselyte must undergo some stages of initiation, from which emerging "at the end he would forfeit the joke of any religion and become a true materialist, not recognizing any god or any moral constraint". However, it is only in Gustav Flügel's *Geschichte der Araber* (published in 1867) that we encounter the phrase for the first time, as a mere comment on Sacy's own articulation, in the passage where it is said that for a student it is necessary to undergo eight levels of knowledge to reach the ninth level and thus gain the supreme wisdom of *Nichts zu glauben und Alles tun zu dürfen* (Kos, 1991, 37-38). The famous sentence attributed to the Isma'ilis is, therefore, another clear case of Occidental Orientalism in reverse, for it was a common slogan in the 19th century and was used in journals, essays and other sites of popular philosophy to designate and disqualify atheism/materialism as amoral. Therefore, in reading Sacy's work, it was Flügel himself who paved the road for the erroneous belief concerning the "supreme motto of the Assassins" while Bartol reproduced and popularized it *via* Nietzsche. Just as in Nietzsche, so also in Bartol's *Alamut* where it functions in terms of a projection upon the Oriental Other of a culturally-specific, nihilistic dilemma between moral restraint and absolute freedom. The phrase itself is, of course, due to its philosophical character, open to numerous interpretations that we cannot explore further here in all their variety. Instead, we shall limit ourselves to a single interpretation, namely by connecting the phrase with the other cornerstone of Bartol's self-Orientalism, namely its Machiavellianism.

Four years before *Alamut* was published, King Alexander of Yugoslavia was shot by Bulgarian and Croatian national radicals. (This assassination can be compared to an earlier, even more famous political assassination 1914 when Franz Ferdinand was shot by Gavrilo Princip, a member of the radical Bosnian nationalist group Mlada Bosna). We already mentioned that Bartol had been invited join the Yugoslav Front by Josip Vidmar and that he sympathized with the underground organization TIGR. Despite the fact that he never became a member of either, we have at least one statement that demonstrates his allegiance: when one of the group's most prominent leaders Zorko Jelinčič was captured and executed by the Italian fascists, his friend and admirer Bartol stated in his diary: "I will avenge you, Zorko!" I mention the two famous assassinations in this context, because TIGR was

also a radical nationalist underground group that made an attempt to assassinate Mussolini. It is precisely in this context that Hladnik discerns the basis for his "nationalism thesis", concluding that "*Alamut* belongs to the genre of the historical novel of which the basic demand is a nationally relevant message." (Hladnik, 2004, 110) One of the reasons why Bartol's work was disregarded in his own time was that it did not conform to the mainstream ideology of Slovenian literature at the time (namely the nation-building mission). However, Hladnik's interpretation seems to direct us in the opposite direction: through a distinctively self-Orientalist gesture Bartol apparently wanted to "join the club" and write a nationalistic novel after all. Therefore, a parallel can be made between the Nizari Ismailis fighting for liberation from the Seljuks and the Partisans in Yugoslavia in general and TIGR in Slovenia in particular fighting for national liberation against the fascist occupier. As tempting as this interpretation sounds, according to my advice, this was not the case since we have many statements from Bartol's his diaries that show how he despised his nationalistic literary contemporaries for being "too narrow." Moreover, if we consider his strong affiliation with philosophy and generally apolitical attitude (apart from the two abovementioned very tangential connections with politics), we must search for an alternative interpretation.

As already mentioned, there are many philosophical references scattered throughout Bartol's novel. However, apart from quotations of ancient Greek philosophers (Democritus, Archimedes, Heraclites, Epicurus), which were very-well known to the Muslim intellectuals of the period, most of the quotations or semi-quotations refer to later philosophies, such as, for instance, a Cartesian interpretation of Protagoras (Juvan, 1990, 96-99). But none of the numerous quotations or paraphrases can compete with the weight attributed to the main idea of the novel – "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" – which is, as we showed earlier, a distinctively European product related to the question of nihilism, as popularized by Nietzsche. Flügel, as a traditional Orientalist, used the quote disqualify the Oriental Other. In Bartol, however, we have a clear case of self-Orientalism, for he imbues it with a distinctively positive value, as is clearly seen in the extent and quality of the novel's text that is dedicated to Hasan as-Sabbah's philosophy. Now, first of all, Bartol used Nietzsche's aphorism "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" in connection to another great European writer, namely Dostoevsky, who in *The Brothers Karamazov* states "if there is no God, then everything is permitted." When, in a parallel movement, Bartol's Hasan as-Sabbah deduces "Nothing is true and therefore everything is permitted" from the cognition that "there is no God", this is a typically Cartesian move that links truth with God (God being the guarantee of truth). From the detailed analyses Janko Kos made on the question of nihilism in *Alamut* (1990, 39-51), one is tempted to put forward the thesis that

Bartol wanted not only to enter into the general European discourse on nihilism, but also to challenge the primacy of Slovenian literary colossus, Ivan Cankar. In his work *King of Betajnova*, Cankar develops the classical antagonism between the morally corrupted Kantor and his ethical antagonist Maks, predictably preferring the latter over the former. Bartol, on the other hand, shows an explicit sympathy towards the amoral Hasan as-Sabbah, who uses a nihilistic philosophy to underpin his Machiavellian designs.

Already Hladnik had detected that this was one of the chief reasons for the "disguised, dubious or suspicious Slovene attitude towards this literary work" because modern Slovenian readers (and Biggins together with them) considered ibn Tahir a healthy counter to Hasan's reprehensible manipulations: "In our culture, literature is a *priori* highly respected, and even works with morally questionable messages are attributed with positive characteristics." (Hladnik, 2004, 110) The hypocritical Slovene attitude that Hladnik criticizes should be read in the context of his provocative interpretation, namely that in *Alamut*, we are dealing with a "nationalistic" and "terroristic" novel. A general Slovenian attitude towards the problem of nationalism and what is labelled as "terrorism" is that Slovenians want to have two incompatible things: to carry a successful historical deed of nation-building and at the same time to be an example of moral justness. But, as Hladnik remarks, "Bartol dedicated much of his writing to persuading readers how these two extremes are incompatible and that deciding on one of the two possibilities is inevitable." (Hladnik, 2004, 111) The question that arises is a Machiavellian question *par excellence*, for Machiavelli argued that extreme political measures, such as assassinations, are legitimate means only when it comes to the supreme political act of founding a state (and only then, contrary to some "Machiavellian" interpretations that would like to see the phrase "the end justifies the means" generalized for all kinds of human action).

What Bartol showed through *Alamut* is that nihilism without Machiavellianism – that is, without a political goal such as nation-building – leads to paralysis of action or at best to "vulgar nihilism" (the mentality that one is "permitted to do everything", i.e. one acts as one pleases), while nihilism in connection with Machiavellianism can produce a political action that is in final instance legitimised by its goal. This goal of not only liberation from an occupier (traditionally considered a morally approvable goal) but also the constitution of a nation-state, was a potentially reprobable, but nevertheless actual process unfolding before his eyes at the beginning of the 20th century. In sum, it is only by interpreting *Alamut* as philosophical novel connecting nihilism with Machiavellianism that we can see the reasons for Bartol's curious self-Orientalist gesture in projecting these two distinctively European or Western ideas upon the Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other *par excellence*, namely, the "Assassins."

CONCLUSION

In the previous sections of this article we tried to demonstrate how the historical and cultural background related to the Orientalist mythology of the Assassins shaped Bartol's novel *Alamut* in terms of its four main Orientalisms (the name of the "Assassins," the legends about the "Artificial Paradise", the "Tale of the Three Schoolfellows" and the "Old Man of the Mountain") and two of its self-Orientalist elements (nihilism, Machiavellianism). Now, in the conclusion, we would like to address the question of how the novel fits into the more general context of the post-9/11 era in the West, an era significantly marked by a problematically dichotomist imperialism/terrorism ideology.

At the beginning of the final part of his book, Said stated that Orientalism, especially that which concerns the Othering of the Arabo-Islamic Oriental, entered a new phase after the generally accepted geopolitical shift in power relations between Europe and the US that occurred in the middle of the 20th century: "Since World War II, and more noticeably after each of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture, in the academic world, in the policy of the planner's world, and in the world of business." (Said, 2003, 285–286) Orientalism, at least as conceptualized by Said, always went hand-in-hand with an imperialistic agenda. From this perspective, it is understandable that after the US took over the management of the old British and French colonies in the Middle East, it also took over the European Orientalist tradition and shaped it in to its own culturally-specific purpose; for example, in academia, it would henceforth be euphemistically known as "Area Studies." Melani McAlister's book *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US interests in the Middle East* delivers a precious historical insight into the development of Orientalism between 1945 and 2000 in American culture, stating that the latter presents in an updated morphing of the former, "a new version of Orientalism, one that revitalizes, in a more subtle form, the insistence that fixed cultural differences must structure the organization of political power" (McAlister's, 2001, 12). Now our analysis of Bartol's novel in the context of the success of its English translation in the US poses a simple, yet intriguing question: how can Occidental self-Orientalism – the identification of the Western self with such an Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other as the Assassin, who is regarded as the forerunner of the modern Terrorist – be possible in a imperialistic context that is so infused with anti-terrorist ideology?

To answer this question, we should take a small step backward and look at the relationship between Orientalism and self-Orientalism. The first conceptualizations of self-Orientalism, or, more precisely, Occidental self-Orientalism, arose through a critical analysis of the thesis that Orientalism presupposes an imperialistic agenda. The

question was simple and yet it had radical consequences for the understanding of what the concept of Orientalism designates. Basically, this can be articulated as follows: What about the Orientalist traditions that were developed in those countries that had no colonies in the Orient and whose colonization consequently took place solely in their cultural imagination? Some scholars tried to demonstrate that self-Orientalist tendencies of identifying oneself with the Oriental Other arose precisely in those countries that had no imperialistic agenda in the East, as the already-mentioned Germana showed in the case of German self-Orientalism from the Baroque period to Romanticism. One can observe a similar movement to be taking place in the instance of Slovenian self-Orientalism, with Bartol's *Alamut* being the most exemplary case. If a large majority of Orientalist products from the Western entertainment industry (from novels to movies and video-games) consolidates the imperialism/terrorism ideology through an Orientalist move (depicting the Arabo-Islamic Other in negative tonalities as the "enemy"), then *Alamut* presents a self-Orientalist subversion of such ideology by allowing Western readers to identify with the Assassins, the alleged forerunners of modern terrorism. The black-and-white depiction of the world in *Alamut* resembles, to a remarkable degree, the world as depicted by the post-9/11 imperialism/terrorism ideology. From this perspective, it is possible to detect a curious resemblance between the subjects of these two ideologies, namely, the Seljuk Empire/Assassins and the US-led-West/Al-Qaida-led-Terrorists. At the very centre of this trans-historical transposition stands the famous sentence, "Nothing is true, everything is permitted", through which the past "Secret of Order of the Assassins" can be superimposed onto the present "Global Terrorist Organization." To be sure, these kinds of misunderstandings are not uncommon, scholarly writings not excluded. Bernard Lewis, for example, in his book *The Assassins: A radical sect in Islam*, devoted almost the entire final chapter, entitled "Means and ends", in an elucidation of the thesis that the Assassins "invented terrorism" – even if he was well aware of the fact that the Assassins did not invent political assassination, but merely lent it their name: "In one respect the Assassins are without precedent – in the planned, systematic and long-term use of terror as a political weapon" (Lewis, 2003, 129). The crucial difference between the assassination policy of the Nizari Isma'ilis and the modern terrorist organizations is the already mentioned fact that, while the latter's primary targets tend to be civilians, the former almost exclusively limited its attacks

to political and religious leaders. As already Hodgson noted in this regard:

It must be noted that the Nizaris and their Shiite predecessors have by no means been alone in using assassination as a technique. It is a weapon which had a particular appeal since it has reduced all men to a common level; for as compared with war it is relatively bloodless and merciful, striking the great and guilty rather than the small people, the large numbers who apart from ignorant prejudice are likely as not indifferent to the cause at stake. (Hodgson, 2005, 84)

Thus, to answer the question proposed above: the distinctive self-Othering of the Western subject, as mediated by Bartol's *Alamut*, is made possible precisely by allowing the reader to identify with the anti-imperialistic Oriental Other, embodied in the figure of the "Assassin", while at the same time keeping its distance from modern Terrorism. As in history, so in the novel, the main targets are not civilian ones, although the political goals of both "Machiavellian techniques" differ from each other: the Nizari Ismailis struggled for recognition in the Islamic world, while Bartol's "Assassins" fought for "national liberation" from the Seljuk yoke.

We began our analysis with a conceptualisation of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. Stating that the latter is a specific permutation of the former with potentially subversive characteristics, we put advanced a distinction between Occidental and Oriental self-Orientalism. Based on this framework we have tried to demonstrate how *Alamut* conforms to the tradition Orientalist mythology in its portrayal of the so-called "Assassins". Apart from identifying Bartol's work as a continuation of the traditional Orientalist exploitation of the mythologisation of the Assassins in Western culture, we have pointed out the distinctive self-Orientalist elements of *Alamut* in order to show its specific mediation of a subversive self-othering for the Western self. Moreover, it turned out that the actualisation of such an Occidental self-Orientalism is facilitated by a distinctive Westernisation of the Oriental Other in question (by way of projecting the dilemmas raised by the European philosophies of nihilism and Machiavellianism). Finally, considering the political and cultural context, we have attempted to discuss imperialism/terrorism ideology through our reading of *Alamut* by applying the distinction to the policies of the historical "Assassins" and their supposed modern heirs.

ORIENTALIZEM V BARTOLOVEM ROMANU ALAMUT – "NIČ NI RESNIČNO, VSE JE DOVOLJENJO"

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POVZETEK

V članku je Bartolov roman *Alamut* interpretiran kot primer orientalizma v literaturi. Skozi epistemološki okvir Saidovega Orientalizma je sam koncept razvit skozi njegovo specifično permutacijo kot samo-orientalizem. Vpeljano je razlikovanje med dvema različicama samo-orientalizma: "Orientalni" in "Okcidentalni" samo-orientalizem. Pred samo aplikacijo epistemološkega okvira na Bartolov *Alamut* je podano splošno zgodovinsko ozadje avtorja in njegovega dela, s posebno pozornostjo namenjeno spreminjajočim se recepcijam in interpretacijam romana v različnih historičnih in geopolitičnih kontekstih (negativna recepcija doma, uspeh na tujem, poleg tega pa še različne interpretacije o vsebini). Osrednji del članka sestoji iz dveh ločenih analiz *Alamuta*: prva se posveča orientalističnim ("Skrivna sekta Ašašinov", "Umetni paradiž", "Zgodba o treh šolarjih", "Starec iz gore"), druga pa samo-orientalističnim elementom (nihilizem in makiavelizem). Članek poskuša pokazati, kako so prav vsi štiri poglobljeni orientalistični motivi najprej in predvsem domišljijiski sadež samega islamskega sveta, ki se je izvozil tekom križarskih vojn in dobil veljavo na zahodu šele kasneje – in podobno, kako sta bila poglobljena dva samo-orientalistična elementa (nihilizem, makiavelizem) kot distinktivno zahodni invenciji projicirana na arabsko-islamskega Drugega par excellence, t. j. ašašine. V sklepnem delu članka je obravnavana povezava med historičnimi "Ašašini" in modernimi "teroristi" znotraj specifičnega kulturnega in političnega konteksta prevoda in izdaje romana v angleščino v post-9/11 ZDA, zaznamovano z prevladujočo imperialistično/teroristično ideologijo.

Ključne besede: Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut*, orientalizem, samo-orientalizem

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