



**UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO**

DIPARTIMENTO DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE

DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN LINGUE, LETTERATURE E CULTURE STRANIERE

XXVII Ciclo

VERNON LEE AND THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE  
PLASTICITY, GENDER, GENRE

SSD L-LIN/10 – Letteratura inglese

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Anno Accademico 2013/2014

*To my father,  
who encouraged me to take my doctorate  
long before he knew what it meant*

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# Abbreviations

References to primary works are given in the text in parentheses, using the abbreviations listed below, followed by the page number. When citing from multi-volume works, the abbreviations are followed by the indication of the volume number. Full bibliographical details are given in the bibliography at the end of this study.

## Archival sources

VLA	Vernon Lee Archive. Colby College, Waterville, ME
VLC	Vernon Lee Collection. University of Oxford, Somerville College
UC	Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago

## Primary works

B	Vernon Lee, <i>Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions</i>
BE	Vernon Lee, <i>The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics</i>
BU	Vernon Lee and Clementine Anstruther-Thomson, <i>Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics</i>
E	Vernon Lee, <i>Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance</i> (2 vols.)
GA	Vernon Lee, <i>Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies</i>
GL	Vernon Lee, <i>Genius Loci: Notes on Places</i>
H	Vernon Lee, <i>Hauntings. Supernatural Tales</i>
IVG	Edith Wharton, <i>Italian Villas and Their Gardens</i>
L	Vernon Lee, <i>Limbo and Other Essays</i>
LN	Vernon Lee, <i>Laurus Nobilis. Chapters on Art and Life</i>
R	Walter Pater, <i>The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry</i>
RI	John Addington Symonds, <i>The Renaissance in Italy</i> (7 vols.)
RFS	Vernon Lee, <i>Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion</i>
TI	D. H. Lawrence, <i>Twilight in Italy and Other Essays</i>

# Acknowledgements

Looking back at the past three years, I feel my work as a PhD student at Università degli Studi di Milano has been significantly enriched by the careful guidance, the fruitful advice, the friendship and support of a number of people.

I am aware that Umberto Eco would probably disagree, but this study would have been profoundly different without the guidance of my advisor, Professor Francesca Orestano. Under her supervision, I felt more like an early-stage researcher than a grown-up student, and I will always be grateful for her constant encouragement and tireless commitment to giving me the “tools of the trade.” Professor Giovanni Iamartino enthusiastically accepted to be my co-advisor. I sincerely thank him for trusting my work and for his endless availability. His support and advice have been invaluable in a great number of occasions.

Stefano Evangelista, Fellow and Tutor at Trinity College, University of Oxford, has given me precious suggestions and ideas that have shaped this work. I will always remember our conversations about Walter Pater and Vernon Lee at Quod. Sharon Cure, Librarian of Trinity College, and Anne Manuel, Archivist at Somerville College Special Collections, made my research visit to Oxford much easier.

An extremely significant part of my research has been conducted in the United States thanks to a scholarship awarded by the European Society for the Study of English. I would like to express my gratefulness to ESSE for granting me this opportunity. In particular, I would like to thank the Committee of the ESSE Bursary Plan, Karin Aijmer, Lilla Maria Crisafulli, and Ebbe Klitgård. Phyllis Mannocchi heartily welcomed me to Maine and shared with me her knowledge of Violet Paget. I will always keep good memories of the lunch breaks and dinners we spent talking about Vernon Lee and her circle. My research would not have been so fruitful without Patricia Burdick, Director of

## Acknowledgements

Special Collections at Colby College, who often helped me solve my philological doubts while working at the Vernon Lee Collection. I rarely met a person as efficient and available as Maggie Libby, who has allowed me to review various manuscripts and letters back in Italy. I would also like to express my sincerest gratitude to Christine Colburne, Barbara Gilbert, and Maggie Grossman of the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago for providing me with copies of Vernon Lee's correspondence with Sir Percy William Bunting.

My colleagues and friends have been incredibly supportive. Through my conversations with Anna Anselmo and Sara Sullam I learned to look at my work from a different perspective. With my fellow PhD students I shared many of my doubts and concerns. In particular, I must thank Chiara Biscella, Claudia Cremonesi, Angela Anna Iuliucci, Beatrice Vanni and Jacob Wells. Last, but not least, I am grateful to a number of non-academic friends for their constant support: Valentina Vercelli, Paola Insolia, Emilio Garavaglia, Gio Metodiev, Azadeh Baudo, Olivia Marchese, Marina Vimercati and my uncle, Maurizio Canani. They have always been attentive listeners, even when I temporarily needed to forget about Vernon Lee.

## Introduction

### Who's afraid of Vernon Lee?

In the 1930s, William Butler Yeats engaged with the ambitious task of editing *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*. Published in 1936, the volume reveals Yeats's preference for Victorian poetry over War Poets and the experimentation of Modernism. In the preface, Yeats explains that he intends to offer specimens of "all good poets who have lived or died from three years before the death of Tennyson to the present moment, except some two or three who belong through the character of their work to an earlier period."<sup>1</sup>

As is often the case in anthologies, the texts selected to introduce and close the volume are especially significant, as they are supposed to exemplify the editor's intentions and the spirit that the collection is meant to capture. Yet most readers of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* must have been – and probably would still be – surprised to find that the very first piece of poetry Yeats included in the volume is not a poem. It is, in fact, a well-known passage from Walter Pater's essay on "Leonardo da Vinci" which Yeats put into *vers libre*:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yeats, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, 1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. v.



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flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.<sup>2</sup>

It seems reasonable to argue that Pater's description of the *Mona Lisa* might have represented for Yeats the earliest instance of modern poetry, or, as Sarbu suggests, the ideal embodiment of the totality of human experience, expressing itself "in a moment of supreme repose."<sup>3</sup> Pater himself explains that "Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea" (*R*, 99). Yet only by rendering Pater's passage in *vers libre* was it possible, Yeats believed, to "show its revolutionary importance."<sup>4</sup>

Only a few years earlier, in "The Tragic Generation" – the fourth book of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) – Yeats had stressed the role of "our sage at Oxford" in shaping a generation of late nineteenth-century writers such as Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and Lionel Johnson (1867-1902):

If Rossetti was a subconscious influence, and perhaps the most powerful of all, we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy. [...] Pater had made us learned; [...] Sometimes Johnson and Symons would visit our sage at Oxford, and I remember Johnson [...] returning with a sentence that long ran in my head. He had noticed books on political economy among Pater's books, and Pater had said, "Everything that has occupied man, for any length of time, is worthy of our study." Perhaps it was because of Pater's influence that we, with an affectation of learning, claimed the whole past of literature for our authority instead of finding it, like the young men in the age of comedy that followed us, in some new, and so still unrefuted authority; that we preferred what seemed still uncrumbled rock to the still unspotted foam; that we were traditional alike in our dress, in our manner, in our opinions, and in our style.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I have quoted this passage as it appears in its original prose version in Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text*, ed. D. L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 99. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *R*.

<sup>3</sup> Aladár Sarbu, "That Extravagant Style': Walter Pater, W. B. Yeats, and Myth," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, p. vii. Yeats may also have expected his implied readership to be familiar with Pater's collection. A decade earlier, the same essay had appeared in two other anthologies: Ernest Rhys, ed., *Modern English Essays, 1870 to 1920*, 5 vols. (London: Dent, 1922), 1, pp. 160-89, and Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 868-69.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 302-303.

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In another passage in *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats recalls his first encounter with Oscar Wilde. The two met in London in 1888, and Yeats confesses having been highly impressed by Wilde's brilliant conversation during a party hosted by the poet and critic William Ernest Henley. "That first night," Yeats writes, Wilde "praised Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: 'It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written.'"<sup>6</sup>

Walter Pater's collection of biographies of Renaissance painters, sculptors, and poets is indeed a crucial work in late Victorian literature. After the works of Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt, the revival of interest in the Italian Renaissance permeated Victorian culture, finding its fiercest opponents as well as its votaries. So much so that Bullen suggests that its appropriation in English literature ought to read in terms of a myth.<sup>7</sup> For John Ruskin, the most authoritative voice of Victorian art criticism, the Renaissance had been at once the root and the expression of "certain dominant evils of modern times." It had affected the morality of society, and rendered schools and universities "useless to a large number of the men who pass through them."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of Ruskin's disparaging criticism, the art and culture of the Italian Renaissance fascinated a number of English writers from the 1860s to the fin-de-siècle. After being awarded the prestigious Chancellor's English Essay Prize, John Addington Symonds published his first essay on the subject in 1863, followed by his monumental, seven-volume *Renaissance in Italy* between 1875 and 1886, and a translation of sonnets by Michelangelo and Tommaso Campanella in 1878. In 1868, Charles Algernon Swinburne's article "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" appeared in the *Contemporary Review*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1881 *Ballads and Sonnets* featured various poems inspired by Michelangelo's and Botticelli's works.

Although she has received critical attention only over the past fifteen years or so, the name of Vernon Lee (1856-1935) should certainly be mentioned in discussing the fin-de-siècle appropriation of the Italian Renaissance. Née Violet Paget, Lee was a prolific writer, incredibly knowledgeable in Italian art, literature, music, and culture. Because of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). For an interesting account of the Victorian fascination with the Italian Renaissance, see also Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), and John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen, ed., *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, volume I, The Foundations, in *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), p. 23. All subsequent references to Ruskin's works are to the *Library Edition*.

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her unique cosmopolitan background, she was also endowed with extremely acute aesthetic sensitivity. Born in Boulogne-sur-mer to British parents, Lee spent her childhood between France, Germany, and Italy, where she was to permanently settle in 1860. After living in Rome and Florence, in 1889 she moved to Il Palmerino, a Renaissance villa near Fiesole, which was her home until her death in 1935. Known at the time as a witty woman and a brilliant talker, Lee was well acquainted with the Victorian literary and artistic circles, and in Florence she was one of the most prominent members of the local Anglo-American community.<sup>9</sup>

The Pagets never moved back to England. After a family vacation in the Isle of Wight in 1860, Lee travelled to London in 1881 in her search for literary and social connections and publishing opportunities. On July 17, she met Walter Pater at a dinner party in Oxford. Lee had read Pater's essays in the *Westminster Review* and the *Fortnightly Review*,<sup>10</sup> and her memories of their first encounter are recorded in a letter she wrote to her mother, offering an interesting portrait of the fellow of Brasenose College:

we went to sup at the Wards. Mr Ward is a tutor at Brasenose, & a sort of literary factotum, and has a charming wife & children, & a very pretty house which they are going to exchange for a dingy one in Russell square. To supper there was a Greek scholar, a Mr Arthur Sidgwick, who took up Mary; & Pater with his two sisters, rather gushing old maids. By the way our landlady, hearing us talk of Pater, said – “Ah, Mr Pater, ‘ee as is fellow of Brasenose – ‘ee lives with his sisters still in the Bradmore Road Mr Pater don’t seem to be getting married, do ‘ee, Miss?” He is a heavy, shy, dull looking brown mustachiod [*sic*] creature over forty, much like Velasquez’ Philip IV, lymphatic, dull, humourless. [...] Of all the people I have met in England he is the one who has been most civil to me. He spoke highly of my book, & of the artistic dualism paper: very different from Symonds’ flippancy. He is heavy, but to my surprise quite unaffected, & not at all like Mr Rose.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1884, Lee published her first collection of essays on Renaissance art and culture, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*. Lee dedicated

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<sup>9</sup> On this aspect, cf. Serena Cenni, Sophie Geoffroy and Elisa Bizzotto, eds., *Violet del Palmerino. Aspetti della cultura cosmopolita nel salotto di Vernon Lee: 1889-1935* (Firenze: Edizioni dell’Assemblea, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 18, 1881. Letter #76 from the Vernon Lee Archive at Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, ME. Letters and other archival material from the Vernon Lee Archive will henceforth be identified by the abbreviation *VLA* followed by their catalogue number, where available. Archival sources are quoted throughout this study according to the guidelines of the Minnesota Historical Society for Transcribing Manuscripts.

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this work “To Walter Pater, in appreciation of that which, in expounding the beautiful things of the past, he has added to the beautiful things of the present.”<sup>12</sup> In 1894, the French critic Ferdinand Brunetière contacted Lee, asking her to write an article for *La Revue des deux Mondes* to commemorate Pater’s death. Although it was Theodore de Wyzewa who eventually wrote the article on the following January issue of *La Revue*,<sup>13</sup> Brunetière must have considered Lee the most suitable person to write this *in memoriam*. His letter reveals a certain insistence as he reminds Lee that Madame Blanc had already got contacted her for the same reason, which suggests that for Brunetière Lee’s relationship with Pater was one based on mutual esteem:

Le 19 octobre 1894.

Pardonnez moi, Mademoiselle, je n’avais pas répondu [*sic*] plus promptement à votre lettre, mais elle ne m’est parvenue que hier seulement – 18 octobre. Je vous avoue que j’aurais bien aimé vous voir écrire sur Walter Pater l’article que M<sup>me</sup> Blanc vous avait proposé de donner à la Revue. Mais si ce n’est pas cet automne vous l’écrirez sans doute quelque jour, je l’espère et j’y compte.<sup>14</sup>

Vernon Lee never wrote that article, but the following year she published the collection of essays *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (1895). Pater’s presence can be felt throughout this book. In particular, in the chapter on “The Imaginative Art of the Renaissance,” Lee finds herself at a loss for words when she tries to give a verbal explanation of Botticelli’s style and perfection. For, Lee wonders, “who may speak of that after the writer of most subtle fancy, of most exquisite language, among living Englishman? [*sic*].” That writer, as she explains in a footnote, was Pater:

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<sup>12</sup> Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols. (London: Fisher Unwin, 1884). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, using the abbreviation *E* followed by the volume and page numbers.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore de Wyzewa, “Two Deaths: Pater and Froude,” *La Revue des Deux Mondes* lxiv (January 1895), pp. 219-23.

<sup>14</sup> “Forgive me Miss if I haven’t replied to your letter more promptly, but I only received it yesterday – October 18. I must confess that I would have really liked to see you write the article on Walter Pater which Mrs. Blanc proposed to you for the *Revue*. But if it is not this fall, you will no doubt write it one day. I hope so and I am confident about it” (my translation). Brunetière had been appointed editor in chief of *La Revue des deux Mondes* only the year before. Ferdinand Brunetière to Vernon Lee, October 19, 1894. *VLA*.

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Alas! no longer among the living, though among those whose spiritual part will never die. Walter Pater died July 1894: a man whose sense of loveliness and dignity made him, in mature life, as learned in moral beauty as he had been in visible.”<sup>15</sup>

In the final section of the volume, “Valedictory,” Lee dates the beginning of what she sees as the “second wave” of English interest in the Italian Renaissance to some twenty-five years before the publication of her *Fancies and Studies*. In so doing, she establishes a clear connection to the work of Pater, and this is confirmed by the last paragraph in her concluding chapter, which she dedicates to

the memory of the master we have recently lost, [...] the master who, in the midst of aesthetical anarchy, taught us once more, and with subtle and solemn efficacy, the old Platonic and Goethian doctrine of the affinity between artistic beauty and human worthiness” (*RFS*, 255).

In spite of her reputation during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, Lee’s work was considerably neglected for about fifty years after her death. Appropriating the title of Edward Albee’s play, one could almost wonder who was afraid of Vernon Lee. In fact, several factors may have contributed to her ill reception. On the one hand, her strong personality and highly opinionated character prevented her from maintaining fruitful or even peaceful relationships. As Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham remark, Vernon Lee eventually

aroused the hostility of a number of male writers and thinkers: the historian John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) resented her failure to accept his corrections, the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) appeared jealous of her sway over young women, the cartoonist Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) nastily caricatured her as a busybody who picked fights with male luminaries [...].<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this, Lee had left her executor, Irene Cooper Willis, specific instructions that “no biography of her should be published. After her death, however, a mass of letters were found, tied up in packets according to years and labelled, in her handwriting:

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<sup>15</sup> Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co.: 1895), p. 114. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *RFS*.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, Introduction to *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 10.

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‘My Letters Home. Not to be read except privately until 1980.’<sup>17</sup> Written in the early 1950s, Gardner’s *The Lesbian Imagination* – the first full-length-study on Vernon Lee – was mostly based on the author’s conversations with Lee’s friends and acquaintances, and was not published until 1987.<sup>18</sup>

Because of Lee’s complex sexuality, feminist and queer critics eventually rediscovered her writings in the 1990s. Indeed, Lee’s masculine look and seemingly “frustrated” lesbianism was well known to her contemporaries, from Ethel Smyth to Havelock Ellis. Since the 1990s, Lee’s writings have been extensively studied from the lens of gender studies, often pinpointing the connections between her work and her complex sexuality. On the one hand, the protagonists of Lee’s supernatural stories collected in *Hauntings* (1890), *Vanitas* (1892) and *Pope Jacynth* (1904) have been the object of extensive study in that they eschew neat gender categorization and repeatedly sublimate sexual drive into subjugation and murder. On the other hand, Lee’s essays as an aesthetic critic have mostly been explored in connection with the works of John Ruskin and Water Pater. With the exception of a few articles and book chapters,<sup>19</sup> however, no full-length study has investigated Lee’s writings about the Italian Renaissance.

In this study, I intend to trace the origin and the development of Lee’s fascination with the Italian Renaissance which, beginning in the early 1880s, constantly surfaces throughout her writing production. Although I suggest that her work deserves a thorough and independent study, I also argue that, because of her cosmopolitan background, and her frequent contacts with London and Oxford, such an examination requires – at least in part – an intertextual approach. I believe that Lee’s writings might profitably be read in connection with Pater’s, Symonds’s and other writers who looked into fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy not as historians or art critics, but as cultural historians. These were intellectuals for whom the Italian Renaissance did not simply design a transition in the development of the human intellect. Instead, they conceived and represented it as a meaningful category endowed with a wealth of significance. A category which is multi-faceted, and which ought to be studied in its political, artistic

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<sup>17</sup> Irene Cooper Willis, Preface to *Vernon Lee’s Letters. With a Preface by Her Executor* (Privately Printed, 1937), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style). A Psychological and Critical Study of “Vernon Lee”* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Alison Brown, “Vernon Lee and the Renaissance: from Burckhardt to Berenson,” in Law and Østermark-Johansen, *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 185-209; Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 29-57

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and historical development. As Hinojosa puts it, for such writers the Renaissance was indeed the source of “a general feeling of [...] being modern, and provided [them with] a historical model for how true culture might be reborn,” disentangling society and history from the “Christian notions of time, history and teleological fulfilment”.<sup>20</sup>

The main reason for embracing such an intertextual approach comes from Lee’s resentful response to an incident occurred in the late 1890s, and which notoriously put an end to her friendship with Bernard Berenson. In a letter dated August 24, 1897, the Berenson accused Lee of plagiarism, claiming that the views on aesthetics and bodily response to artworks she had expounded with Clementine “Kit” Anstruther-Thomson in their article on “Beauty and Ugliness”<sup>21</sup> were “hackneyed” and unoriginal elaborations of his *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896). After reading the draft copy of “Beauty and Ugliness” that Lee had sent him, Berenson sarcastically thanked Miss Paget, informing her that

I have just had my first “read off” yr. paper & it certainly will not be the last. For where else shall I find such perfect distillations, such delightful reminders of numerous conversations I have with you at the Palmerino & of even more numerous visits with Miss Anstruther-Thomson to the galleries? [...] Her memory is indeed startling. I confess it inspires me with a certain awe; it is too much like conversing with a recording angel, I must add, a benevolent recording angel, one who stores up nothing against one, but takes the whole burden upon his own shoulders.<sup>22</sup>

A few days later, Lee responds to Berenson declaring herself overtaken by disgust and indignation for the “extraordinary combination of superficial reading, of confused memory & of the rash & violent expression” she senses in Berenson’s accusation:

For the plain English of your elaborate ambiguities about “perfect distillations of numerous conversations” etc. about “a recording angel who stores up nothing against one but takes the whole burden on his (read ‘her’) shoulders”; about the Divine gift of utterance” to which “insight, experience thought” æ i.e. those of a 3<sup>d</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lynne Walkout Hinojosa, *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Vernon Lee and Clementine Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness,” *Contemporary Review*, no. 72, Part I (October 1897), pp. 544-69; Part II (November 1897), pp. 669-88. This article was later included in Vernon Lee and Clementine Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Æsthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *BU*.

<sup>22</sup> *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson*, ed. by A. K. McComb (London: Hutchinson, 1965): pp. 55-60.

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person) are only the purveyors; & <sup>finally</sup> about that “absence of consciousness, even under its ethical [illegible correction] aspect of conscience” which you connect with the possession of this gift of utterance thus attributed to my friend & myself – ~~all this~~ the plain English of all this equivocating sarcasm is: that Miss Anstruther Thomson & I have stolen the larger part ~~half~~ of our essay from ~~your~~ our conversations.<sup>23</sup>

Lee’s argument refutes each and every point of Berenson’s claim, accusing him of confusing “*meum & tuum*.” She maintains that her reason for reviewing *Florentine Painters* was to summarize Berenson’s views before the publication of “Beauty and Ugliness” in an attempt to mark their divergent views in spite of common general assumptions. In a passage she crossed out from the rough copy of the letter she sent Berenson, Lee adds that

~~The appearance of Tuscan Painters put an end to our project of communicating our views to you before their publication by showing [you] that you had (despite general resemblance) theory of a very different & irresearchable kind, which had better evolve to the full without disturbance on our part, by showing exactly how much of your views we then knew of, & how little we agreed in them.~~<sup>24</sup>

Upset for Berenson’s reaction, Lee denies any value to his theory on the viewer’s response to aesthetic perception.<sup>25</sup> However, I believe this incident justifies adopting an intertextual approach that places Lee’s works alongside that of the other fin-de-siècle writers who shared similar interests. Evidence of their contacts and exchanges will prove useful in pinpointing their similar views, as well as the way they depart from one another’s work.

In order to investigate Lee’s multifaceted interest in the Italian Renaissance, and the values and meanings she associated with the Renaissance as a cultural category, this work follows a comparative approach that mingles intertextuality with gender, queer,

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<sup>23</sup> Vernon Lee to Bernard Berenson, September 2, 1897. *VLA* #804.

<sup>24</sup> Vernon Lee to Bernard Berenson, September 2, 1897. *VLA* #804.

<sup>25</sup> In *Beauty and Ugliness*, Lee does cite *Florentine Painters* while reviewing the state-of-the-art of coeval theories on art, perception, physiological and neurological response to artworks. She praises Berenson for his focus on “muscular sensations” and “Tactile values,” and for “claiming for art the power of vitalising, or, as he calls it, enhancing life. Mr. Berenson offers a different and more intellectual reason for this fact than is contained in the present notes” (*BU*, 225). Both in the crossed-out passage from the letter I have cited here and in “Beauty and Ugliness,” Lee misquotes the title of Berenson’s study, calling it *Tuscan* rather than *Florentine Painters*. Cary offers a detailed account of this dispute, which evolved into letter exchanges between Lee and Mary Costelloe after Berenson withdrew from the matter. Cf. Richard Cary, “A Slight Case of Plagiarism, Part I: Berenson, Paget, and Anstruther-Thomson,” *Colby Quarterly* 10, No. 5 (March, 1974), pp. 303-24, and Mandy Gagel, “1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism: Letters Between Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Mary Costelloe,” *Literary Imagination* 12, no. 2 (July, 2010), pp. 154-79.



## Introduction

and genre theories. The first chapter provides a historical overview necessary to work out the phenomenology of the Renaissance as a Victorian myth. Given the number of opinions produced by the nineteenth-century historiographical and literary debate, I shall take into consideration those authors whose work influenced, either directly or implicitly, Lee's ideas of the Renaissance and her method of cultural inquiry. The selection of historians and writers on art offered in the first chapter is mostly based on specific references and allusions recurring both in Lee's writings and in her letters.

Moving from Zorn's claim that in *Euphorion* Lee exploits a citational strategy which enables her to assert her own, gendered voice, while grounding her work in the male terrain of fin-de-siècle aesthetics, the second chapter takes into consideration Lee's critical essays from the 1880s and the 1890s. My argument is that in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* this rhetorical strategy shapes not only Lee's construction of her female authorship, but also the representation of gender at a textual level. Indeed, Lee focuses on female characters who endorse transgression and prove able to master stereotypical masculine functions. In so doing, they deploy a complex representation of femininity that underpins the de-sexualisation of gender roles and marks the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. From this perspective, Lee's Renaissance essays offer a queer representation of gender in that they blur clear-cut distinctions. In addition, I will suggest that Lee's praise of Franciscanism and her attention to visual representations of the Madonna during the Renaissance provide a historical legitimization of non-normativized forms of sexual desire, which – if not identifiable as lesbian – should be viewed from a queer perspective, insofar as they defy well-defined and exclusive categorization.

Focusing on a variety of texts from the 1880s and 1890s, the third chapter investigates an element recurring throughout Lee's career as a writer, her fascination with landscapes. On the one hand, this chapter focuses on the relationship with the visual and the written word in Lee's prose works. On the other hand, I argue that the concept of "genius loci" or "spirit of place" allows Lee to move back and forth in time, connecting contemporary Italy with its past and traditions. In her travelogues, the Renaissance surface as a category endowed with epistemic and ontological significance, which she also exploits to build cultural memories and develop a democratic theory of art. Specific attention is devoted to the points of contact between Lee and the works of Edith Wharton and D. H. Lawrence, who shared her passion for Italy and its culture, and whom she met while living in Tuscany.

## Introduction

Finally, in the fourth chapter I attempt to demonstrate that even though Lee's interests shifted from aesthetics to psychology and sociology after the 1890s, the Italian Renaissance still remained a catalytic force shaping her thought and literary production. Focusing on both gender and genre, I argue that the Renaissance is a "trans-genre" *topos*, but also a heuristic tool which Lee applies to the interpretation of the present, both at an individual and an collective level.

## Chapter I

Individualism, gender, plasticity.

Phenomenology of a Victorian myth

The debate concerning the definition of the Renaissance is still lively among scholars coming from fields as diverse as history, art history and literature. The very notion of one single phase in the history of Europe to be called “Renaissance” has often been questioned, and one of the reasons why such a concept deserves thorough problematization lies in its origin.

Recent scholarship in the field of cultural history agrees that the term Renaissance became a “period concept” only in the nineteenth-century. Back then, the notion of a moment of rebirth in the cultural history of Europe, and the idea that the origins of modernity are to be found in the transitional phase stretching between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries started to be elaborated. The word was already common use in the field of fine arts, but until the nineteenth century it bore no reference to the culture that had produced such works. There is general consensus among scholars that it was Giorgio Vasari who first applied the concept of “*a renaissance*” to the field of art history.<sup>1</sup>

In the series of biographies he collected in 1550 as *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times*, Vasari proposed an organic conception of art, and in the “Proemio delle Vite” he outlines the idea of a “*rinascita*.”

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<sup>1</sup> On these aspects, see the seminal study by Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), esp. pp. 60-67; cf. also the more recent analysis provided by Hinojosa, *The Renaissance*, esp. pp. 31-32.

According to Vasari, Italian painting and sculpture had come to full perfection in the sixteenth-century, at the end of a three-stage developmental process. He argued that painting and sculpture, “like human bodies, have their birth, their growth, their growing old, and their death.”<sup>2</sup>

In Vasari’s view, the first phase of modern art – which, stretching between the mid-thirteenth to the late fourteenth century, coincided with the end of the Byzantine manner – was considerably marked by technical flaws. The second stage, beginning after Giotto (1266?-1337) and continuing through the fifteenth century, showed significant signs of improvement and technical maturity. Vasari mentions as evidence the achievements of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), Donatello (1386-1466), and Masaccio (1401-1428). From the Quattrocento onwards, sculpture and painting began to reach “that very perfection whereto [it] has risen again in our times.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the art of sixteenth-century Italy coincided with the achievement of complete perfection. The works of Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo harmoniously reconciled the mimesis of nature with the ideals conveyed by classicism. For this reason, Vasari could not help but foresee an inevitable decline.

Although it laid the groundwork for the studies on Renaissance art that were to follow, Vasari’s theory was harshly criticized for not relying on a sound scientific approach, but also for its lack of cultural materialist insights. For example, Ferguson argues that although Vasari appropriated the concept of the organic form, his analysis “fail[ed] to observe the slightest connection between the evolution of art and that of society or of economic life.”<sup>4</sup>

It was only between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century that historians established that branch of the humanities we call “cultural history.” The birth of this discipline can be traced back to the 1780s, but its pivotal study, Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, was published in Germany almost a century later, in 1860. Although interested in art, the core interest of cultural historians lies not so much on specific artists or works, but on the cultural palimpsest that nurtures them. In Burke’s words, cultural history deals with “the whole rather than the parts,” connecting cultural production to the Hegelian notion of *Zeitgeist* or “Spirit of the Age.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times 1550*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, (London: Macmillan, 1912), I, p. lix.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 7 ff. Burke attributes the establishment of cultural history as a discipline to Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in*

The revival of interest in the Italian Renaissance, its art and culture, found its way into England only in the 1860s, after the publication of the works of Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt. The many contributions that were given to the definition of the Renaissance as a cultural category produced a wealth of interesting points of view. Even though they mostly focus on historiography and art history, overlooking the works of writers on art, Portebois and Terpstra note that the nineteenth-century notion of the Renaissance was indeed

plastic and malleable, the carrier of so many conflicting identities which merged, diverged, and blended as the decades progressed, that one could better speak of Renaissances in the plural. One Renaissance participated in the great political and literary debates of the early nineteenth century, another was exchanged in the religious and cultural skirmishes of the mid-century, and then another appeared on the shelves in the rapidly expanding commercial markets of the late century.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Bullen has stressed the polysemous, plastic nature of the nineteenth-century idea of the Renaissance. Moving from the work of late eighteenth-century historians – namely Voltaire and Edward Gibbon – he concludes his analysis with the writings of Walter Pater, suggesting that the English reception of the Italian Renaissance should be read in terms of a myth. In his view, the “history of the Renaissance as a concept was highly politicized,” praised by secular historians like Jules Michelet in France and Jacob Burckhardt in Switzerland, and attacked by the champions of Christianity who despised it for its infidelity and sinfulness. Such a “highly polarized view of the Renaissance” considerably influenced English writers on art like John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, who were interested in the ontological implications of the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> Bullen’s accurate picture of the “Victorian Renaissance,” however, does not focus on the contribution provided by Vernon Lee’s extensive writings on the topic.

Peter Burke even questions the very existence of the Renaissance as a historical moment, claiming that the equation of the Renaissance as the beginning of modernity is

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*Italy and The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. According to Burke, both Burckhardt and Huizinga aimed to portray “patterns of culture” by unveiling “the characteristic thoughts and feelings of an age and their expressions or embodiments in works of literature and art.”

<sup>6</sup> Yannick Portebois and Nicholas Terpstra, Introduction to *The Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Yannick Portebois and Nicholas Terpstra (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 10-11.

not supported by historical evidence. In short, he doubts the existence of “one” Renaissance both on historical and linguistic grounds, suggesting the existence of some “pre-Renaissance” Renaissances.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Hinojosa’s maintained that the nineteenth-century notion of the Renaissance was a self-projection of the historians and writers who investigated the matter, arguing the Victorian interpretations of the Italian Renaissance provided England with a model to develop English national culture.<sup>9</sup>

My argument is that Lee’s writings confirm this critical framework, often using the Renaissance as a *topos* or a springboard to touch on various themes. Her interest in the Italian Renaissance had bloomed a good ten years before she published her first collection of essays on the subject. Writing from Bagni di Lucca on August 22, 1874, she tells Henrietta Jenkin that

[t]here is here an excellent circulating library, left to the Baths by a Mrs Broderick, a lady who appears to have flourished in at the end of last century, and who must have been a person of very uncommon literary cultivation. Thanks to her I have been able to read several excellent old works not easily met elsewhere, such as Reynolds, Burke, Blair, Roscoe, Sismondi and others. I am at present reading Mme de Staël *Mélanges*, and the history of the Italian republics. With the exception perhaps of music, there is no subject on which I read so greedily as he Italy of the Renaissance.<sup>10</sup>

An avid reader, Lee was familiar with the writings of a number of historians and writers who shared her interest, such as Michelet, Burckhardt, Ruskin, and Pater. For this reason, the next few paragraphs intend to offer a brief overview of the cultural historians and writers who steered the Victorian reception of the Italian Renaissance, influencing – whether explicitly or indirectly – Vernon Lee’s ideas and works.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Burke, the nineteenth-century cult of individualism, and the widespread interest in art were the chief elements that contributed to “fabricating” the myth of a golden age or “cultural miracle” in the history of mankind. See Burke, Introduction to *What is Cultural History?*, pp. 1-5; cf. also Melissa Calaresu, Filippo de Vivo and Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Introduction: Peter Burke and the History of Cultural History,” in *Exploring Cultural History. Essays in Honour of Peter Burke*, ed. M. Calaresu, F. de Vivo and J.-P. Rubié (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Hinojosa, *The Renaissance*, pp. 4, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, August 22, 1874. *VLA #44*. A family friend and a novelist, Henrietta Camilla Jackson Jenkin (ca. 1807-1885) was extremely supportive and encouraged Lee’s writing ambitions from the start. On this point cf. Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 52, 55-6, and Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 14-15.

I.I. An Early French “History”: Jules Michelet

Until the late 1970s it was assumed that the notion of the Renaissance had been introduced in historiographical discourse by Jules Michelet. According to Febvre, it was in the seventh volume of Michelet’s *History of France* – published in 1855 and titled *The Renaissance* – that one could find the first occurrence of the term with reference to the idealized awakening of man from the obscurity of the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> Recent scholarship has questioned Febvre’s point. Bullen argues that although the notion of the Renaissance was not rooted among historians and writers prior to the first decade of the nineteenth century, its introduction should be dated to Jean Baptiste Seroux d’Agincourt’s (1730-1814) *Histoire de l’art par les monuments depuis sa décadence au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu’à son renouvellement au XVI<sup>e</sup>*.<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, instead, records its first usage in Pierre Bayle’s (1647-1706) *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*. In this dictionary – first published in 1697 and expanded in 1702 – Bayle speaks, in a manner similar to Vasari’s, of “a renaissance des arts” and “a renaissance des lettres.”<sup>13</sup>

Michelet’s 1855 study of the Renaissance was part of his substantial seventeen-volume *History of France*. Initially a medievalist, in the 1830s Michelet progressively reviewed his positions, eventually celebrating the cultural transformation that took place in fifteenth-century Italy. Following his appointment as Professor of History and Morals at the Collège de France in 1838, Michelet’s revisionary agenda began to question the achievements of the Middle Ages, and to deplore the mortification of the individual which he thought had been strictly enforced by Catholicism.<sup>14</sup>

The onset of this ideological change can be found in the *Introduction à la Historire Universelle* that Michelet composed after traveling to Italy in 1831. In this study, Michelet still defines the Middle Ages as a long miracle, but he also adds that they had been a “merveilleuse légende dont la trace s’efface chaque jour de la terre, et dont on douterait

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<sup>11</sup> Lucien Febvre, “How Jules Michelet Invented the Renaissance,” in Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), esp. p. 261 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 27-37. Although his incomplete six-volume dictionary was published posthumously only in 1823, Bullen suggests that d’Agincourt’s theories might have been anticipated by the circle of scholars and historians he was in contact with.

<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, pp. 69-72; cf. also Edward Chaney, Introduction to John Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance: the Growth of Interest in its History and Art* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p.xii

<sup>14</sup> This new perspective also shaped Michelet’s university course in 1839, which he devoted to “The Dawn of the Renaissance.” Cf. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 158.

dans quelques siècles.”<sup>15</sup> The only evidence of their long existence are the remnants of Gothic architecture – like the cathedrals of Cologne, Strasbourg and Milan – which he considers instances of “le dernier mot du christianisme dans l’art.”<sup>16</sup> But the very existence of the Middle Ages came to an end as man was struggling to affirm his own freedom the slavery and tyranny the church had long imposed on him. At that moment, Michelet states,

La liberté a vaincu. Le monde de la fatalité s’est écroulé. Le pouvoir spirituel lui-même avait abjuré son titre en invoquant le secours de la force matérielle. Le triomphe progressif du moi, le vieil œuvre de l’affranchissement de l’homme, commencé avec la profanation de l’arbre de la science, s’est continué. Le principe héroïque du monde, la liberté, longtemps maudite et confondue avec la fatalité sous le nom de Satan, a paru sous son vrai nom.<sup>17</sup>

Michelet’s s new interest in Renaissance humanism was shaped by personal and political factors at once. Bullen suggests that his revisionary historical agenda should be read as a reaction to the growing interference of the Catholics and the Jesuits in higher education. In order to discuss the moral implications of the Renaissance revival, however, it should be noted that Michelet did not posit the advent of a complete lay, atheist society. The hallmark of the Renaissance was for him the end of the repression imposed by religious orthodoxy and dogmas, so that man could move away “du dieu-nature de la fatalité, divinité exclusive et marâtre qui choisissait entre ses enfants, pour arriver au dieu pur, au dieu de l’âme, [...] l’égalité de l’amour et du sein paternel.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Michelet’s idea of the Renaissance ought not to be considered as immoral. For certain, he was taking the distance from the Catholic orthodoxy. Along with Edgar Quinet, he was personally involved in the ideological battle that began with the “Freedom of Teaching Act” in 1833, and was later exacerbated by the Catholic “counterattack” that depicted Michelet as a degenerate and a pantheist.<sup>19</sup>

Within this process of self-development and enfranchisement, Michelet believes that Italian states stood out in comparison with the rest of Europe. Significant evidence of this process of secularization, he adds, are to be seen in the visual and applied arts: it is

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<sup>15</sup> Jules Michelet, *Histoire et Philosophie. Introduction à la Histoire Universelle, Vico-Luther*, 1831 (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1900), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>19</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 161-61.



in Italy that architecture was first conceived as a lay form of art which could fulfil civic purposes. Early instances can be found in Etruscan art – which includes many examples of villas, aqueducts and tombs – but also during the age of the communes: unlike Northern European religious buildings, Italian medieval churches were conceived as places that could host political meetings, but Michelet also praises the Italian infrastructures of the period, its roads and canals.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Introduction à la Historire Universelle* Michelet also expounds the flaws of the Italian people, which provides him with a chance to dwell on the merits and achievements of his own country. In the fourteen-year gap that separates the *Histoire Universelle* from the volume of the *History of France* which deals with the Renaissance, Michelet became profoundly involved with contemporary France and its politics. He was also engaged in an ideological battle concerning university education, and it is therefore no surprise that between 1847 and 1853 he devoted much energy to the *Histoire de la Révolution française*. All the same, it is significant that in the early 1840s his involvement with contemporary and secular issues was accompanied by a constant reflection on the Renaissance, its culture, and its emphasis on individuality and secularity.

Due to his fierce opposition against Catholic education in France, Michelet came to conceive the Christian Middle Ages as a dark and loathsome stain in history. In August 1840, Michelet had compared in his journal the “hopeless passivity” of the Middle Ages to the creativity of the Renaissance, reckoning the existence of “Two ways of enduring life: to accept it, to approve it, as the Christians, or to remake it, as the artists. Christian resignation was not part of the Renaissance as men, no longer accepting the world [as it was], began to remake it.”<sup>21</sup> Such a shift in perspective led Michelet to a reinterpretation of history which, consistently with his personal and political agenda, set the tone for his 1855 volume on the Renaissance. By that moment, the Middle Ages had become Michelet’s *bête noire*.

I suggest that Michelet’s work is especially relevant in relation to the English fin-de-siècle for various reasons, and considerable evidence can be found at a textual level. Keeping track of Walter Pater’s library records, Inman argues that by the 1860s the writer

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<sup>20</sup> Michelet, *Histoire Universelle*, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen A. Kippur, *Jules Michelet: A Study of Mind and Sensibility* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 84-85. Kippur highlights that Michelet’s journal includes several examples of his loathsome reconsideration of the Middle Ages; in the 1840, he described them as “barbaric,” “warlike,” “somber,” “a world of hate,” “frightful,” “intolerable” and “a world of illusion.”

had assimilated Michelet's "orientation in history."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Pater explicitly refers to Michelet twice in *The Renaissance*. In "Two Early French Stories," he discusses the continuity of the Renaissance spirit in a way that recalls Michelet's difficulty in finding an accurate moment marking beginning of the Renaissance. Moreover, Pater also shares his opinion about Leonardo da Vinci as a man who had "anticipated modern ideas" (R, 78).

Vernon Lee provides an accurate picture of Michelet's influence on her writings in the appendix to *Euphorion*. As she carefully makes a distinction between historical facts and "the history of this or that form of thought or of art which I have tried to elaborate," she pays homage to the French historian by stating that "[h]ow much I am indebted [*sic*] to the genius of Michelet; nay, rather, how much I am, however unimportant, the thing made by him, every one will see and judge" (E 2, 237). Indeed, in a way that recalls Pater's "Two French Early Stories," in the first essay of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, titled "The Love of the Saints," Lee cites Michelet again in order to discuss the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. She describes such a transition in terms of a spiritual change which must have taken place in or around the twelfth century:

Michelet, I think, has remarked that there was a moment in the early Middle Ages when, in the mixture of all contrary things, in the very excess of spiritual movement, there seemed a possibility of dead level, of stagnation, of the peoples of Europe becoming perhaps bastard Saracens, as in Merovingian times they had become bastard Romans; a chance of Byzantinism in the West. Be this as it may, it seems certain that, towards the end of the twelfth century, men's souls were shaken, crumbling, and what was worse, excessively arid. (RFS, 7)

According to Michelet, the main achievement of the Renaissance was the discovery of man and the establishment of freedom and individualism. In Italy, these changes were accompanied by the flourishing of the fine arts, even though, Michelet warns his readers, such changes are not to be wholly identified with art production and humanism. The Renaissance is certainly remembered for the "avènement d'un art nouveau," "la rénovation des études de l'antiquité" and the establishment of a new – and at times

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<sup>22</sup> Billie Andrew Inman, *Walter Pater's Readings. A Bibliography of His Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858-1873* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1981), pp. xi, 166. In particular, there is archival evidence that Pater borrowed the tenth volume of Michelet's *Histoire de France* in March 1868.

questionable – moral order. If all this could happen, however, this is because the period fostered the “découverte de l’homme,”<sup>23</sup> putting an end to his actual and spiritual slavery.

Although for reasons different than Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Vernon Lee’s, Michelet already used the word Renaissance as some kind of umbrella term. It identified “the renewed energy of the people”<sup>24</sup> insofar as society was going through a process of secularization, and governments were being modernized. As a consequence of this process, even tyrannies, invasions and foreign domination could be justified in the interest of man.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Charles VIII’s march across the Italian peninsula in September 1494 should be read in almost providential terms, because, Michelet argues, France saved Italy from the disastrous consequences of a potential Spanish domination. Thanks to the intervention of France, and the cross-fertilizing exchanges between the two countries, Italy “trouva sa originalité” and could become “le vivant organe de la Renaissance.”<sup>26</sup>

Michelet’s periodization of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is not so unproblematic. When he came to write the volume of the *Histoire de France* devoted to the Renaissance, he had developed quite a negative conception of the Middle Ages as a period distinguished by a “résistance obstinée au retour de la nature.”<sup>27</sup> However, Michelet can hardly find definite social, historical or political factors that might indicate the end of the Middle Ages. Interestingly, such clear-cut boundaries are also amiss in Vernon Lee’s work, and so they are in Pater’s. Indeed, they both consider the Renaissance as a category, and in so doing they reject a historiographical, chronological perspective.

For Michelet, the barbarianism of the Middle Ages began to fade out gradually after the twelfth century. He finds single evidences suggesting that such a process repeatedly and discontinuously took place in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth

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<sup>23</sup> Jules Michelet, *Renaissance*, vol. 7 of *Histoire de France au XVIème siècle* (Paris: Chamerot, 1855), pp. i-ii.

<sup>24</sup> James E. Housefield, “The Nineteenth-Century Renaissance and the Modern Facsimile: Leonardo da Vinci’s Notebooks, From Ravaisson-Mollien to Péladan and Duchamp,” in Portebois and Terpestra, *The Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Michelet’s analysis is significantly shaped by his engagement with contemporary French politics, so that he sees in the Enlightenment the last – if not the latest – fruit of the Renaissance. Likewise, Jean Charles Sismondi’s analysis was also affected by the ideals of post-revolutionary France. In his view, Italy could only be saved by the French Empire. It was Napoleon who had eventually given liberty back to Italy, and, although still submitted to a foreign emperor, the Italians could benefit from “all the advantages of the conquerors.” See Alan Kahan, “The Burckhardt-Sismondi Debate over the Meaning of the Italian Renaissance,” in Portebois and Terpestra, *The Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> Michelet, *Renaissance*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

centuries, connecting these instances with specific individuals, or with discoveries associated with the individuals he mentions. The medieval period

finissait dès le douzième siècle, lorsque la poésie laïque opposa à la légende une trentaine d'épopées ; lorsque Abailard, ouvrant les écoles de Paris, hasarda le premier essai de critique et de bon sens.

Il finit au treizième siècle, quand un hardi mysticisme, dépassant la critique même, déclare qu'à l'Évangile historique succède l'Évangile éternel et le Saint-Esprit à Jésus.

Il finit au quatorzième, quand un laïque, s'emparant des trois mondes, les enclot dans sa *Comédie*, humanise, transfigure et ferme le royaume de la vision.

Et définitivement, le Moyen-âge agonise aux quinzième et seizième siècles, quand l'imprimerie, l'antiquité, l'Amérique, l'Orient, le vrai système du monde, ces foudroyantes lumières, convergent leurs rayons sur lui.

Michelet's polarization reveals opposite sets of values which he projects onto his conceptualization of Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Chronological boundaries, however, are not theorized accordingly, so that the two historical periods seem at times to identify two categories. The moral and intellectual tyranny of the Middle Ages began to weaken in the twelfth century, but they only finally collapsed two hundred years later. Michelet identifies cyclical relapses which support him in creating a historical discourse in which he allocates a phase that hindered the development of man and modernity. Thus, he writes, “[le Moyen âge] repousse toujours en dessus [...] d'autant plus difficile à tuer qu'il est mort depuis longtemps.”<sup>28</sup>

It should be noted that Michelet's writing not only creates a discourse of pathologization, but at some points also a gendered and subtly sexualized one. Charles VIII's invasion is depicted as a sensual encounter in which a male-gendered France discovers a female-gendered Italy:

Aucune armée n'avait, come celle de Charles VIII, suivi la voie sacrée, l'initiation progressive qui, de Gènes ou de Milan, par Lucques, Florence et Sienne, conduit le voyageur à Rome. La haute et suprême beauté de l'Italie est dans cette forme générale et ce *crescendo* de merveilles, des Alpes à l'Etna. Entré, non sans saisissement, par la porte des neiges éternelles, vous trouvez un premier repos, plein

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

de grandeur, dans la gracieuse majesté de la plaine lombarde, cette splendide corbeille de moissons, de fruits et de fleurs. Puis la Toscane, les collines si bien dessinées de Florence, donnent un sentiment exquis d'élégance, que la solennité tragique de Rome change en horreur sacrée... Est-ce tout? Un paradis plus doux vous attend à Naples, une émotion nouvelle, où l'âme se relève à la hauteur des Alpes devant le colosse fumant de Sicile.<sup>29</sup>

At this point, Michelet's historical account seems to turn into a *récit*. Italy is described in terms of a *femme fatale*, one distinguished by black eyes, "généralment plus forts que doux," which "exercèrent sur les hommes du Nord une fascination invincible."<sup>30</sup> As a result, French men could not help but fall under the spell of Italian women. The Italian Renaissance is thus described by Michelet as the offspring of a sexual intercourse between two races. Such a metaphor would also be used by Symonds and Lee, although their Euphorion is not the son of two civilizations existing synchronically but distant in time. In addition, in certain passages Michelet's narrative reads like a sexual assault told from the perspective of the male: one which was committed by France, but which Italy "voulait et y travaillait."<sup>31</sup> Italy is described as a female body that was explored and penetrated by France. Besides, Michelet further explains in the same chapter that it was "[e]n pénétrant dans la Toscane" that the French realized the moral decay and corruption of Italy in spite of her "contrées si fertiles."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, it should be remarked that although Michelet was a historian and not a writer on art, his study anticipates the use of the literary portrait that would become a distinctive subgenre in the late Victorian Age. Bullen, for example, defines the seventh volume of *Histoire de France* as a romance in which Michelet weaves a heroic myth of "the triumph of the human will and imagination," putting at the centre of his enquiry "powerful and self-determining individuals who were prepared to assert themselves against the deadening affects of prevailing orthodoxies."<sup>33</sup> Much of his approach was later shared by Pater, Lee and Symonds. Not only were they interested in such figures for their rebellion against the "prevailing orthodoxies" of Renaissance Italy – their reception and appropriation of the discourses of the Renaissance was also an act of rebellion

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 181.

against the critical orthodoxy established by Ruskin but, broadly speaking, also the one embedded underneath Victorian morality.

## 1.2. Jacob Burckhardt and the cultural history of Renaissance Italy

Published in 1860, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of Renaissance Italy* might be said to have laid the foundations of cultural history. Although his study was translated in English only in 1878, Burckhardt's ideas soon flourished outside the German-speaking world, providing an example and an interpretational approach for the discourses of the Renaissance at the fin-de-siècle.

A member of a wealthy Protestant family, Burckhardt studied first at the University of Basel and then at the Frederick William University, Berlin, where he was a pupil of Leopold von Ranke. His work as a historiographer, however, is also indebted to the eighteenth-century German tradition of social and historical essays.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, his *Civilization* reveals a trans-disciplinary approach: he refuses the dogmatism of chronology, and attempts to blend different fields of knowledge. As a matter of fact, his interest in Renaissance Italy is a result of his fascination with Italian art. As early as 1847 he had contributed to the second edition of Franz Kugler's *Handbook of the History of Painting from Constantine the Great to the Modern Age*, which shares Vasari's basic assumption that the art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were preparatory for the golden age of the Cinquecento.<sup>35</sup>

Reconsidering his approach, Burckhardt was to maintain that "I have never in my life thought philosophically."<sup>36</sup> To some extent, however, he seems more like a philosopher than a historian. Even though in the posthumously published *Observations on World History* (1905) he stated that "we make no claim to 'world historical ideas,' but are content with observation and give cross sections through history [...]; we give above all no philosophy of history," such a claim was based on the premise that "we renounce

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<sup>34</sup> According to Burke, Burckhardt was influenced by the late eighteenth-century tradition of the German historical essays, namely by Johann Christoph Adelung's *Versuch einer Geschichte der Cultur des menschlichen Geschlechts* (1782), David Gottfried Herzog's *Versuch einer allgemeinen Geschichte der Kultur der deutschen Nation* (1795) and Johann David Hartmann's *Versuch einer Kulturgeschichte vornehmsten Völkerschaften Griechenlands* (1796). Burckhardt's biographer Werner Kaegi sees also a debt to Voltaire's *Essai sur les Mœurs et l'Esprit des Nations* (1756). See Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420-1540* (London: Batsford, 1972), p. 8; Id., "Il prospettivismo di Burckhardt e la tradizione del saggio storico," in *La formazione del vedere: lo sguardo di Jacob Burckhardt*, ed. A. Pinotti and M. L. Roli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011), p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 147. The first edition of Kugler's *Handbook* was published in 1837.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

all history.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, his work is an artistic – rather than historiographical – product, distinguished by a constant investigation into the foundations of knowledge,<sup>38</sup> but also by the rejection of the historical perspective – an element that found a particularly fertile ground in the essays of Walter Pater and Vernon Lee.

Burckhardt would explain his approach to history in theoretical terms in *The Cultural History of Greece* (1898-1902). In this two-volume study, largely neglected in England,<sup>39</sup> Burckhardt explains that his aim as a cultural historian is not to illustrate facts or events, but to unveil

the living forces, constructive and destructive, that were active in Greek life. [...] To this, to the history of the Greek spirit, must the entire study be directed. The particular fact and, above all, the so-called event can be valued here only as evidence of the common, not for its own sake; for the data we seek are the ways of thinking, which are also facts. But the sources, if we consider them from this point of view, will speak very differently than in mere research for antiquarian material.<sup>40</sup>

According to Burckhardt, cultural historians should focus “on what the sources and monuments indicate unintentionally, without self-interest, despite themselves.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, his achievement lies in the way he unifies a variety of sources and reconciles existing trends. Nineteenth-century idealism and new humanism had already emphasized the importance of individual freedom and moral autonomy in the development of modernity. However, no one stressed the role of individualism in the development of modern culture as convincingly as Burckhardt.<sup>42</sup>

Burckhardt’s focus on individualism has also been read in biographical terms. While at university, he abandoned his studies of theology and underwent a moment of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Pietro Conte, “Vedere il mito. Bachofen e Burckhardt per un’estetica della storia,” in Pinotti and Roli, *La formazione del vedere*, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 297. Gossman blames Palmer Hilty’s 1963 translation for the unfavorable reception of Burckhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* in English-speaking countries, arguing that Hilty’s translation is far more inaccurate and incomplete than the abridged German edition it was based on.

<sup>40</sup> I am quoting from Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 187, which refers to the original German text. I believe it is significant that Ferguson translates Burckhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* as *The History of Greek Civilization* and not as *The Cultural History of Greece*. In so doing, he evidently molds his title on *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 182 ff.

apostasy.<sup>43</sup> Years later, when he analysed the influence of religion on Italian art, Burckhardt blamed Christianity for quenching individual creativity. In *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy for the Use of Travellers and Students* (1855), he cites mosaic art as an example of the creative stiffness produced by the moral constraints and artistic dogmas of Christianity, which

prompt[s] the use of materials which exclude the artist from participation in any labours but those of drawing cartoons or choosing glass pastes. The Church desires and only permits what Church purposes strictly demand. Her requirements must be satisfied in an imposing manner. [...] The artist no longer invents; he has only to reproduce what the Church has discovered from him. For a time art still keeps up some remains of the joyous spirit inherited from ancient times [...]. But gradually it sinks and falls back at last into mere mechanical repetition.<sup>44</sup>

The fifth chapter of this “handbook” of Italian art is devoted to the “Painting of the fifteenth century” or – as Burckhardt labels it in the chapter subtitle – “The Renaissance.” To some extent, his work seems to follow the interpretational paradigm inaugurated by Vasari and partly shared by Michelet. However, it should be noted that the noun “Renaissance” significantly appears between quotation marks. Before examining the works of the various painting schools of the fifteenth century (among the others, the Florentine, Paduan, Venetian, Umbrian and Neapolitan) and the masters of the sixteenth century, Burckhardt devotes an introductory paragraph to sketching the character of the Renaissance, which he defines as a new spirit that was first born in the Italian Quattrocento. Such a change was possible, Burckhardt explains, because in the fifteenth century artists were finally set free from the constraints imposed by the ecclesiastical function of art. For the first time, they were allowed to focus on “the outward appearance of things,” “the various manifestations of the human form,” and its surroundings.<sup>45</sup>

*The Cicerone* contains the germs of Burckhardt’s idea that art is the product of a specific civilization. However, it is in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* that he

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<sup>43</sup> According to Howard, this religious crisis significantly shaped *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1852), which reveals his quest for a “post-theological sense of personal identity.” In general, Burckhardt’s secular analysis emphasizes the crisis of Christian values in post-medieval history, as if Christianity had represented only a transitional – although historically necessary – phase. See Thomas Albert Howard, “Jacob Burckhardt, Religion, and the Historiography of ‘Crisis’ and ‘Transition,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 1 (January, 1999), p. 154.

<sup>44</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy for the Use of Travellers and Students*, trans. A. H. Clough (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), pp. 9-10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.



expands his analysis of the context and the social and political factors that moulded the Renaissance and its cultural production. This study is primarily concerned with the revival of man and the rise of individuality, elements that were crucial for the fin-de-siècle reception of the Italian Renaissance in England. Thus, although she is concerned with historiography and does not take into account nineteenth-century literature and culture, I embrace Wojciehowski's definition of Burckhardt's *Civilization* as a Foucauldian "transdiscursive" text insofar as it provides "the possibilities and 'rules' of other texts."<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, scholars have acknowledged the influence of Burckhardt's cultural approach on the writings of Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, and John Addington Symonds.<sup>47</sup> Billie Inman, for example, provocatively argues that Pater's conception of the Renaissance was born out of a mere chronological accident. If Pater had been born some twenty years earlier, his idea of the Renaissance would have probably been indebted to the early nineteenth-century German philosophy, according to which the revival of pagan elements at the end of the Middle Ages resulted in widespread moral corruption. In other words, Pater's views might have been much closer to Ruskin's. Having developed in the 1860s, Pater's idea of the Renaissance was steered by the works of Michelet and Burckhardt, who, *mutatis mutandis*, both conceive the post-medieval period as a Golden Age. According to Inman, Pater especially derived from Burckhardt the idea that fifteenth-century Italy came to a perfect synthesis of pagan and Christian elements.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Wendell V. Harris pointed out that Pater's essays celebrate "that assertion of individuality that Burckhardt had already made the essence of the Renaissance spirit."<sup>49</sup> Both of them, to quote Leighton's words, were interested in the "'secular process' at the very heart of things."<sup>50</sup> More recently, Fisher has suggested that Burckhardt's focus on individualism can be perceived in the socially transgressive instances of "rebellion" or "rebelliousness" that recur throughout Pater's *The Renaissance*.<sup>51</sup> Such feelings pave the way for characters like Abelard to trespass the

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<sup>46</sup> Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, *Group Identity in the Renaissance World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Francesca Orestano, "La ricezione di Burckhardt nel mondo anglosassone: fascino del Rinascimento, forma significante e forma simbolica," in Pinotti and Roli, *La formazione del vedere*, pp. 157-61.

<sup>48</sup> Billie Andrew Inman, "Pater's Conception of the Renaissance: From Sources to Personal Ideal," *Victorian Newsletter* 47 (Spring, 1975), pp. 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Wendell V. Harris, "Ruskin and Pater – Hebrew and Hellene – Explore the Renaissance," *Clio* 17, no. 2 (January, 1988), p. 182.

<sup>50</sup> Angela Leighton, "Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater," in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Will Fisher, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Historiographical Writing about the 'Renaissance,'" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 1 (2008), p. 49.

“prescribed limits of the system” (R, 6), and hence prefigure the very “character of the Renaissance” (R, 5), understood in Burckhardtian terms.

Although in the dedication to *Euphorion* and in the “Valedictory” to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* Vernon Lee states that her criticism was born out of the tradition established by Pater, her debt to Burckhard is not only indirect. In a long letter written in April 1874, Lee confesses to Henrietta Jenkin her commitment to art and “comparative aesthetics,” explaining that “there is no subject on which I reflect with more pleasure or write with more zest.” This letter suggests that Lee began her work as an aesthetic critic at the suggestion of Henrietta Jenkin, who had advised her to “keep a commonplace book.” Her first attempt at the task is, as Lee tells Jenkin, an “imitation” of Burckhardt:

Writing, as writing I detest – All my desire is to fit myself to study aesthetics, more especially those of music, illustrated by the principles of the other arts. The little essay I sent to Mrs Turner was an attempt of this sort, but only the part of music is really my own; the rest, excepting the incoherent remarks on literature, is a résumé of some books I read last year, especially those of Otfried Müller and Burckhardt [...].<sup>52</sup>

Lee pays explicit homage to Burckhardt in *Euphorion*, where she mentions his name along with Michelet’s and Symonds’s. In the appendix at the end of the second volume, she admits that

With regard to positive information I must express my great obligations to the works of Jacob Burckhardt, of Prof. Villari, and of Mr. J. A. Symonds in everything that concerns the political history and social condition of the Renaissance. (E2, 237)

Lee interestingly mentions Symonds’s name in connection with Burckhardt’s. On the one hand, she borrows from *The Revival of Learning* (1877) the idea of the child of Faustus and Helena as the embodiment of the modern sentiment, quoting Symonds’s passage in the epigraph to the introduction to *Euphorion*.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, *Renaissance in Italy* has been defined as the only detailed study undertaken by one single author that can be reasonably compared to Burckhardt’s, insofar as both authors share the same conception

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<sup>52</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, April 19, 1874. VLA #42. Karl Otfried Müller (1797-1840) was a German scholar, especially interested in Greek mythology.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *supra*, 4.2.

of cultural history.<sup>54</sup> Just like Burckhardt's *Civilization* begins with an outlook of Italian politics, Symonds dedicated the first volume of his study to *The Age of the Despots* (1875). Moreover, in the preface he writes to this first volume, Symonds mentions Burckhardt as the writer he feels most indebted to:

To [Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*] I must acknowledge especial obligations. It fell under my notice when I had planned, and in a great measure finished, my own work. But it would be difficult for me to exaggerate the profit I have derived from the comparison of my opinions with those of a writer so thorough in his learning and so delicate in his perceptions as Jacob Burckhardt, or the amount I owe to his acute and philosophical handling of the whole subject.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, Symonds, like Vernon Lee, finds in *Cicerone* one of his main sources. In the preface to the third volume of *Renaissance in Italy*, which he devotes to *The Fine Arts* (1877), he explicitly mentions his debt to *Cicerone* as far as his knowledge of Italian architecture, sculpture and painting is concerned (RI 3, 1).<sup>56</sup>

In addition, in an unpublished manuscript titled "Aesthetics, My Confession," Lee describes her reading of Burckhardt in epiphanic terms. She confesses that *Cicerone* significantly shaped her views on aesthetics in general and on the artists of the Italian Renaissance in particular. Until that moment, she had considered Renaissance painting boring, because her personal appreciation was limited to the mere technical and formal aspects:

I remember {distinctively} saying to myself & others that Titian, as I think Raphael, etc. were soulless, had mere technical merit, and were a bore. Guido had soul, expression etc. All this lasted I think until I read Burckhardt's *Cicerone*, I fancy Flasch must have been shocked by my views. Indeed I think almost he lent me Burckhardt with a view to conversion.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, pp. 198, 200.

<sup>55</sup> John Addington Symonds, *The Age of the Despots*, in *Renaissance in Italy*, 7 volumes (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900), I, p. 1. All subsequent references are incorporated in the text, abbreviated to RI followed by the volume and page number.

<sup>56</sup> Whilst in the preface he only refers to Burckhardt's *Cicerone*, in chapter 9, "Life on Benvenuto Cellini," Symonds's notes show that one of his sources is the German edition of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (RI3, 368). Symonds's translation of the autobiography of the Cellini was published ten years later, in 1887.

<sup>57</sup> Vernon Lee, "Aesthetics, My Confession," unpublished holograph manuscript. VLA.

Burckhardt's legacy in England – which he visited twice, in 1860 and in 1879 – contributed to overcome the Ruskinian idea of the Renaissance as a moral disease, but also to establish the notion of the Renaissance as a cultural category distinguished by supreme individual freedom.<sup>58</sup> So much so that, in an unsigned editorial in 1943, *The Burlington Magazine* complained that relatively scarce critical attention had until then been paid to Burckhardt, “the importance of [whose message had been] increasingly realized by ever-growing circles of readers.”<sup>59</sup> Only a decade earlier, one of the “Founding Fathers” of cultural history, Huizinga, had noted that the challenge faced by cultural discipline was to “[free] itself from Burckhardt, yet this does not in the least cloud his greatness nor lessen the debt we owe to him.”<sup>60</sup>

### 1.3. Burckhardt's *Civilization*: Italian modernity and the rise of individualism

Interestingly, the subtitle of the original edition of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* is “ein Versuch.”<sup>61</sup> This might be translated as both “essay,” and “attempt.” And what Burckhardt was attempting with this study was not to provide a detailed historical account of Italy between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, but to capture “the spirit of the age,” the Italian people and their ways of thinking.

Burckhardt's work follows a descriptive and intuitive method, which is topical rather than historical. For this reason it has been argued that his study departs from Hegel's conception of history by transposing romantic idealism to the field of historical research. He does not consider the Renaissance as a historical period, but rather as a category, and in so doing his main interest is in the innovative character of the centuries he investigates.<sup>62</sup> The book relies on a variety of parallel perspectives and viewpoints which, taken altogether, not only form a coherent picture, but also provide a chance for

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<sup>58</sup> Orestano, “La ricezione di Burckhardt nel mondo anglosassone,” pp. 149-51.

<sup>59</sup> “Editorial: Jacob Burckhardt and England,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 83, No. 487 (October, 1943), p. 237; cf. also Orestano, “La ricezione di Burckhardt nel mondo anglosassone,” pp. 151-55.

<sup>60</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Wege der Kulturgeschichte* (München: Drei Masken, 1930), p. 140, qtd. in Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 185.

<sup>61</sup> The text of the third German edition of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was expanded by Ludwig Geiger in 1891. Burckhardt's original text was eventually restored in the thirteenth edition of the book.

<sup>62</sup> William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden, *The Idea of the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 4, 10.

establishing synchronic relationships.<sup>63</sup> The method he follows is founded on that principle of “cross sections” or *Querdurchschnitte*.

From the very first page of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt maintains that any inquiry into the nature of a given civilization can only be subjective. For this reason, he intends to look into the Italian Renaissance, its civilization and culture, from a fresh viewpoint in spite of the multitude of recent writings on the subject:

[t]o each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a given civilization present a different picture; and in treating of a civilization which is the mother of our own, and whose influence is still at work among us, it is unavoidable that individual judgement and feeling should tell every moment both on the writer and on the reader.<sup>64</sup>

The novelty of Burckhardt’s approach relies on his rejection of the historical approach. Instead, he devises a topical method which shapes the six sections of the book: “The state as a work of art,” “The development of the individual,” “The revival of antiquity,” “The discovery of the world and of man,” “Society and Festivals,” and, finally, “Morality and Religion.”

The organizing principle followed by Burckhardt creates a series of binary oppositions, which enable him to investigate each of the distinguishing features of Renaissance Italy in its seemingly contradictory implications. Burke notes that the kernel of *The Civilization* – its four central chapters – focuses on culture *tout court*, whilst the first and the last one connect culture to the state and to religion.<sup>65</sup> However, I also suggest that Burckhardt’s analysis of despots and tyrannies is counterbalanced by the effects that such governments produced on society and the individual, whilst the revival of classical learning is complemented by his emphasis on the advent of a modern individual consciousness. In addition, the last two chapters provide a coherent analysis of morality and customs, which Burckhardt examines first from a secular and then from a religious point of view. Both Vernon Lee and John Addington Symonds borrowed Burckhardt’s general structure in their respective works on the Italian Renaissance: their writings are organized thematically, and in *Euphorion* Lee even adopts the structure of his chapters. Symonds, instead, expands Burckhardt’s sections and transforms them into volumes.

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<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 185.

<sup>64</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (Vienna and New York: The Phaidon Press and Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy*, p. 9.

Burckhardt deconstructs the Renaissance and breaks it into subcategories which he explores in sections that one might as well read separately, following the glosses he provides. These sections contribute to creating a comprehensive account, by focusing on specific aspects of Renaissance Italy and its culture. Thus, Burckhardt opens his essay expressing the hope that his work will be “judged as a whole,” since, he adds, “[i]t is the most serious difficulty of the history of civilization that a great intellectual process must be broken up into single, and often into what seem arbitrary categories in order to be in any way intelligible.”<sup>66</sup>

“The Revival of Antiquity,” which is usually considered the most distinctive feature of the Renaissance, significantly comes third in Burckhardt’s study. His first chapter is devoted to the political situation of Italy, and to his definition of the State as a work of art. In the various political forces that parcelled the country, Burckhardt recognizes the earliest examples of “the modern political spirit of Europe,” which “surrendered freely to its own instincts [and] unbridled egotism” and produced a new fact in history: “the State as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the State as a work of art.”<sup>67</sup>

In order to explore the mentality and the culture of the Renaissance, Burckhardt begins by highlighting the various circumstances that originated them. This is why his inquiry starts from the political architecture of Italy. In his belief that “[t]he deliberate adaptation of means to ends, [...] joined to almost absolute power within the limits of the State, produced among the despots both men and modes of life of a peculiar character,”<sup>68</sup> Burckhardt establishes a well-defined relationship between the political configuration and the character of the people. From the point of view of historical materialism, one could say that Burckhardt posits the existence of a relationship between structure and super-structure, although he does not interpret the former in fully Marxist terms. In his historical model, culture is not the product of social and economic forces, but it responds to political structures.

Even the revival of antiquity is connected with tyranny: “the example was set by the rulers themselves, who, both in their conception of the State and in their personal

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<sup>66</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. Although I have quoted directly from Burckhardt’s text, I think it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of “peculiar characters.” In this first chapter, Burckhardt actually takes into consideration the political situation of Italy distinguishing between the tyrannies of each of the three centuries he examines.

conduct, took the old Roman empire avowedly as their model.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, when Burckhardt admits that the citizens of Medicean Florence were the prototype of the modern Europeans, he clarifies that his attempt was “not to write the history of this remarkable State, but merely to give a few indications of the intellectual freedom and independence for which the Florentines were indebted to this history.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, Burckhardt stresses the way the political organization of the Italian States shaped its inhabitants as individuals, making them “the first born among the sons of modern Europe.”<sup>71</sup> In Italy,

an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.<sup>72</sup>

Being a force maintained through political ability, despotism fostered individuality at all levels, from the tyrants to their circle and protégés, until it eventually trickled down through the whole of society. In the fifteenth century, this political situation generated an individual type which existed in Italy alone, the “all-sided” or universal man. Although the examples he provides are Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci, Burckhardt’s description of the “universal man” recalls Pater’s characterization of Pico della Mirandola. In the book, however, Burckhardt does not really dwell on Italian art; he only relates to it to draw relevant examples to support his argument. Burckhardt was probably aware that this might have been perceived as a shortcoming, which is why he had planned to complement *The Civilization* with a separate treatise on Renaissance art.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, Burckhardt posits a connection between the revival of antiquity and classical learning with the development of individuality. Certainly important, antiquity was only one among the distinctive aspects of the Renaissance, although its role was crucial in giving the overall phenomenon “a certain colouring”:

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 1: “It was formerly our intention to fill up the gaps in this book by a special work on the ‘Art of the Renaissance,’” Burckhardt writes at the beginning of the first chapter, “an intention, however, which we have been able to fulfill only in part.” This partial fulfillment was the section on the “Architecture and Decoration of the Italian Renaissance” which he had contributed to Kugler’s *History of Architecture*.

The conditions which have been hitherto described would have sufficed, apart from antiquity, to upturn and to mature the national mind; and most of the intellectual tendencies which yet remain to be noticed would be conceivable without it. But both what has gone before and what we have still to discuss are coloured in a thousand ways by the influence of the ancient world;<sup>74</sup>

Again, Burckhardt insists that the key element of the Italian Renaissance was the spirit of the people – the revival of antiquity was not important in itself. In his view, the revival of learning works as a catalyst, whose essential function is to make a chemical reaction possible:

The Renaissance would not have been the process of world-wide significance which it is, if its elements could be so easily separated from one another. We must insist upon it, as one of the chief propositions of this book, that it was not the revival of antiquity alone, but its union with the genius of the Italian people, which achieved the conquest of the western world.<sup>75</sup>

The notion of antiquity did not exactly influence the Italians: its revival is the consequence of the new culture. Besides, “with many antiquity was only a fashion, even among very learned people.”<sup>76</sup> This also explains the final “fall” of the humanists in the sixteenth century: the invention of the printing press certainly contributed to change their role in society, yet they also began to be condemned for their “abominable profligacy.”

Such a revival could not take place before the fourteenth century, as its advent was subordinated to the establishment of urban life, which, by mingling nobles and citizens, made it possible for “a social world [to] arise.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the advancement of modernity seems to have been possible, in Burckhardt’s reconstruction,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 89. Interestingly, in his essay on “Pico della Mirandola,” even Pater expresses his interest “in the local colour of a great age” (*R*, 27).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 89. Interestingly, in analyzing Burckhardt’s legacy in British fin-de-siècle one should note that chemical metaphors also recur in Pater and Lee. In the Preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater argues that his aim is to unveil, as if he were a chemist, “the active principle” of any form of art – forms which he conceives as concrete manifestations of the human thought – by polishing off them “the commoner elements” that they are likely to be found in association with (*R*, xxi); likewise, in *Euphorion*, Lee explains that “[t]he Renaissance has interested and interests me, not merely for what it is, but even more for what it sprang from, and for the manner in which the many things inherited from both Middle Ages and Renaissance, the tendencies and necessities inherent in every special civilization, acted and reacted upon each other, united in concord or antagonism; forming, like the gases of the chemist, new things, sometimes like and sometimes unlike themselves and each other” (*E*, 7-8).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 91.



as a result of the transition from the life of the community to that of the society, a process which sociology was investigating exactly when Burckhardt was writing his work. According to Tönnies's notable difference between community and society, within the latter "there are no activities which are derived from an *a priori* and pre-determined unity." As a result, "[n]othing happens in [a society] that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself [...], everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension against everyone else."<sup>78</sup> For Tönnies, the members of a society are "power-conscious" and hence highly individualistic. One may reasonably object that Tönnies sets the tone for a discussion of economic forces which was absent in Burckhardt, yet his argument is based on an opposition between natural and rational will that dissolves "the body social" into embodied individuals. And, like Burckhardt, he considers the State the embodiment of society, and the city its most representative expression.

As a last point it should be noted that in the section on "Society and Festivals" Burckhardt's highlights that the self-development of the individual had also interesting implications at the level of gender. He maintains that in Renaissance Italy women and men enjoyed some "perfect equality" in spite of the gender mockery occasionally offered by some literary representations of women, such as Ariosto's satires. The equality he speaks about, however, seems to be restricted by social status. Within the upper classes, both genders were given equal education and training in classical learning, so that also "the individuality of women [...] was developed in the same way as that of men."<sup>79</sup> Until at least the Reformation, this aspect was to be found only in Italy. The few other evidences of empowered women that one could find elsewhere in Europe – such as Isabella of Baviera, Margaret of Anjou and Isabella of Castille – are not representative of a culture of self-development and enfranchisement, as their particular social and political status suggests. In fourteenth-century Italy, instead,

[t]here was no question of "woman's rights" or female emancipation, simply because the thing itself was a matter of course. The educated woman, no less than the man, strove naturally after a characteristic and complete individuality. The same

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<sup>78</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* [1887], ed. Jose Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 52. I am using the word "society" between square parentheses since in their translation Harris and Hollis prefer to keep the German words *Gemeinschaft* ("community") and *Gesellschaft* ("society").

<sup>79</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 204.

intellectual and emotional development which perfected the man, was demanded for the perfection of women.<sup>80</sup>

Residual social restrictions ought to be taken into account, since Burckhardt explicitly connects education with class; nevertheless, he considers gender equality a crucial element of Renaissance culture in Italy. So much so that one must be aware of this factor in order to understand its social network and relationships, or, as Burckhardt states by employing what is today a highly sexually connoted word, “the higher forms of social intercourse at this period.”<sup>81</sup> It is within this intercourse – to be contextualized at the time of Burckhardt’s inquiry – that his conception of gender equality should be seen.

Burckhardt’s idea of equal opportunities ought to be understood from a different perspective than the one that has been developed since the advent of feminism. This difference accounts for his clarification that the social function of these women was only defined in relation to men, whose impulses and caprices they were supposed to moderate. As a consequence, their artistic activity was generally limited, although his analysis of Renaissance women and their contribution to poetry deserves some further attention. Burckhardt finds in the “immortal” Vittoria Colonna the example of an art form which goes beyond gender. In Colonna’s love sonnets and religious verse he recognizes a “precise and definite” character, without “the tender twilight of sentiment” and the “dilettantism” which he considers as common features of women poetry.<sup>82</sup>

Colonna’s poetry is notable for being manly, and this is in fact a quality that Burckhardt considers desirable in and praiseworthy for “the great Italian women” of the Renaissance.<sup>83</sup> Anticipating cultural studies, and especially their focus on cultural representations,<sup>84</sup> Burckhardt relies on literary sources as a means to infer cultural phenomena and ideas of gender. In order to support his argument, he cites as examples the women prototype recurring in the heroic poetry of the period – namely in Ariosto’s and Boiardo’s writings – to suggest that the Renaissance female ideal was embodied in the virago. Burckhardt carefully contextualizes his statement, pointing out that “[t]he title ‘virago,’ which is an equivocal compliment in the present day, then implied nothing but praise.”<sup>85</sup> He is clearly aware of the gender transgression implied in the term he uses.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 204

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. for instance Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 3 ff.

<sup>85</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 205.

On the one hand, he quotes as the first and most suitable example of the Renaissance virago Caterina Sforza, whose enduring character won her the nickname of “prima donna d’Italia.”<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, however, Burckhardt adds that such women could even “listen to novels like those of Bandello, without social intercourse suffering from it.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, what the nineteenth century defended as respectability and earnestness was not at risk. Rather than an expression of femininity and womanhood, the Italian women of the Renaissance were aware that they had to preserve “the consciousness of energy, of beauty, and of a social state full of danger and opportunity.”<sup>88</sup> The risk of immoral behaviour was counterbalanced by their resolute character, so that indecency was prevented by the virago nature of the Renaissance woman.<sup>89</sup>

I suggest that this characterization of Renaissance women should not be read in terms of mere masculinization or androgyny. In choosing the term “virago,” Burckhardt certainly establishes a well-defined, explicit nexus with the Latin noun *vir*, which raises a series of values and virtues associated with manliness. On top of that, his disclaimer that contemporary readers would probably perceive his definition as an “equivocal compliment” demonstrates that he was aware of the connection he was making. Yet he does not posit a rapprochement of the genders towards general masculinization. The process of gender-convergence he describes relies on a common development of the self, driven by a general impulse towards individuality, and supported by what Bourdieu would label “institutionalized cultural capital.” However, whilst Bourdieu recognizes gender as “a distributive mechanism” in a given social group,<sup>90</sup> Burckhardt believes that the distribution of the institutionalized cultural capital in Renaissance Italy was gender-neutral. Besides, in speaking of the virago woman in terms of a respectable, and to some

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Known as “the new Boccaccio,” Matteo Bandello published 214 *novelle* – or short stories – in 1554. Many of his stories were invented, but he also often drew on contemporary events. Being so wide, his literary corpus deals with a variety of themes. Most of Bandello’s novellas have a tragic aftertaste, and tell stories of crime, revenge, rape, incest and thwarted love – like the story of Romeo and Giulietta, which was the main source of Shakespeare’s drama. Bandello’s more comic stories are often centered on sexual mockery, as in the cases of adultery. Cf. Maurice Daumas, *Adulteri e cornuti. Storia della sessualità maschile tra medioevo e modernità* (Bari: Dedalo, 2008), p. 290.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>89</sup> Burckhardt follows this interpretational approach even in the next and last chapter, which specifically deals with “Morality and Religion.” On the one hand, he highlights that Renaissance culture was aware of widespread moral corruption – Machiavelli being the spokesperson to this regard – exacerbated by the unfavorable influence of antiquity, which fostered the celebration of historical greatness (*Civilization*, p. 223). On the other hand, however, honour was frequently mistaken for the moral force that would counterbalance evils. In most cases, however, it worked as an “enigmatic mixture of conscience and egotism which [...] is compatible with much selfishness and great vices, and may be the victim of astonishing illusions” (*Civilization*, p. 224).

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Leslie McCall, “Does gender fit? Bourdieu, feminism, and conceptions of social order,” *Theory and Society* 21, no. 6 (December, 1992), pp. 841-42.

extent desirable identity, he seems to try to detach this gender characterization from potentially underlying sexual hints. Women constructed this identity in an attempt to preserve a socially determined consciousness, and here one finds *in nuce* the idea that gender identity relies on a process of performativity, “a doing, constituting the identity it is purported to be.”<sup>91</sup>

The cultural capital Burckhardt speaks about is gender-neutral in so far as those who acquire it strive towards a “complete individuality.” The careful distinction he makes between the “objective treatment” of the state and the “subjective side” of the individual – both adjectives are italicized in Burckhardt’s text – suggests that individuality should be understood as an attitude that fosters “a sense of particularized identity.”<sup>92</sup> The result is a “performative self-consciousness [that] responds to an edgy social fluidity in which individual style carries new weight.”<sup>93</sup>

According to Kerrigan and Braden, Burckhardt’s individualism reveals a hidden debt to Hegel, and especially his definition of Hellenism as the cult of spiritual individuality, which was not spontaneous but the product of a dialectic relationship between the self and external reality.<sup>94</sup> Given this comparison, and in order to outline as complete a picture as possible of what the Renaissance came to symbolize in late Victorian England, I intend now to briefly look at the works of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin.

#### 1.4. Matthew Arnold, the Renaissance and the polarization of forces in Western civilization

The work of Matthew Arnold, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, significantly contributed to the Victorian debate on the Italian Renaissance. Although he never wrote a full-length study about it, the Renaissance was central to a number of his essays and university lectures between the 1850s and 1860s. Taken altogether, however, these contributions somehow fail to give a coherent or definite picture. Arnold’s appreciation of the Renaissance changed significantly during a brief span of time: for this reason, Bullen has suggested that his writings seem to trace a threefold trajectory, which, moving out of

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<sup>91</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> Kerrigan and Braden, *The Idea of the Renaissance*, p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

genuine curiosity in the early 1850s, goes through a phase of enthusiastic engagement and then ends up in disillusionment.<sup>95</sup> I suggest that, in a way, Arnold's enthusiasm follows a developmental pattern opposed to Michelet's, notwithstanding the evident debt, which is based on Arnold's appreciation of and direct acquaintance with the French historian. In its final stance, it actually comes close to Ruskin's moral distaste.

The earliest testimony of Arnold's fascination with the Renaissance is a letter he wrote to Arthur Hugh Clough on September 6, 1853.<sup>96</sup> First and foremost, in this letter one finds evidence of an underlying idea of the Renaissance as "a spirit," an idea that recalls the point I have already made with reference to Burckhardt. According to Arnold, art is the product of an age, and the spirit that produced the Renaissance first realized itself in Italy. Only later, Arnold adds, did such a spirit take root in England:

I do not believe that the Reformation caused the Elizabethan literature – but that both sprang out of the active animated condition of the human spirit in Europe at that time. After the fall of the Roman Empire the barbarians powerfully turned up the soil of Europe – and after a little time when the violent ploughing was over and things had settled a little, a vigorous crop of new ideas was the result. Italy bore the first crop – but the soil having been before much exhausted soon left bearing. The virgin soils of Germany and England went on longer – but they too are I think beginning to fail.<sup>97</sup>

Arnold does not employ the term "Renaissance" here, yet the reference can easily be inferred, and at the end of this same letter his mention of the Reformation and the Elizabethan Age is followed by a praise of the works of Raphael. In addition to this, he is resorting to the same semantic field which is embedded in the metaphor conveyed by the very word Renaissance: its spirit, and the literature produced by such a spirit, are for Arnold an intellectually powerful "crop." Arnold describes a regeneration, a re-birth he detaches from religious influence by establishing an explicit connection with the fertile action of the barbarians, but also as by denying a direct influence of the Reformation.

Arnold's interest in the Renaissance developed only ten years after this letter. In the meantime, he read extensively on the subject. Among Arnold's main sources, Bullen lists the work of Sismondi, but also Charles Clément's *Michel-Ange, Léonard de Vinci*,

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<sup>95</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 242.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, September 6, 1853. Cecil Y. Lang, ed., *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, volume 1, 1829-1859 (Charlottesville and London: The University of Virginia Press, 1996), p. 273.

*Raphael* (1861).<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Arnold was certainly familiar with Michelet's *History of France*, as he also met the French historian twice, first in 1847 and then in 1859 on an official visit to France on behalf of the Education Commission.<sup>99</sup> Arnold's ideas on the Renaissance, paganism and Christianity are considerably indebted to Michelet, as he himself confesses. In a letter written in January 1858, for example, one can read that

Michelet has well shown that Christianity has had credit given to it with regard to the extinction of slavery which it does not deserve: and I cannot but think that the same may be said with respect to the treatment of women. The influence of women in Greece was immense.<sup>100</sup>

In 1863 the Renaissance begins to make its way in Arnold's writing and university lectures, where one can feel his debt to Michelet's idea of the Middle Ages as a period of barbarism opposed to the lively spirit of the Renaissance. That year Arnold published "A French Eton," a pamphlet concerned with the prospect of a reform of education in England, in the belief that the prestigious public schools were responsible for training the future ruling class of the nation. Here, Arnold posits a direct relationship between culture and national progress, although his views are not exactly democratic. He notes with grief "that the culture of our highest class has declined, and that this declension, though natural and venial, impairs its power."<sup>101</sup> Arnold acknowledges the importance of granting liberal education to the bulk of the middle class, entrusting the future development of England to its hands rather than to aristocracy. Such a view of culture is the cornerstone to the foundation of a successful social structure, and Arnold supports his argument with historical examples he finds especially relevant:

[I]t is when such a broad basis is obtained, that individual genius gets its proper nutriment, and is animated to put forth its best powers; this is the secret of rich and

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<sup>98</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 243.

<sup>99</sup> According to Super, meeting Michelet was "[o]ne of the greatest satisfactions" of Arnold's travel. See Super's critical introduction to Arnold's "The Literary Influences of Academies," in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol 3, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Harbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 462. Arnold also recalls that Michelet praised his father's unfinished *History of Rome* (1838-1842). See Arnold's letter to Michelet, April 10, 1859, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 1, pp. 431-32.

<sup>100</sup> Lang, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 1, pp. 377-78.

<sup>101</sup> Matthew Arnold, "A French Eton," in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 2, *Democratic Education* (Ann Harbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 316.

beautiful epochs in national life; the epoch of Pericles in Greece, the epoch of Micheal Angelo in Italy, the epoch of Shakespeare in England.<sup>102</sup>

As in the letter he had sent Clough a decade before, Arnold does not explicitly mention the word “Renaissance,” yet he acknowledges the epoch of Michelangelo as distinguished by national beauty and wealth. More importantly, he relates these qualities to the widespread “high culture or ardent intelligence” which, by pervading the entire community, made it possible for individual genius to evolve. Because such an element developed in Italy between the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth centuries, Arnold likens the Renaissance to fifth-century Greece, the golden age in Athenian history. To him, both epochs stood out for their “strong intellectual ferment,” their “real mental ardour,” and their “real curiosity.”<sup>103</sup> Since in these elements Arnold sees the essential drive toward the advancement of civilization, by borrowing a metaphor we have already seen he attributes them the role of catalysts. Such a spark provided the “indispensable initiator” which makes it possible for a civilization to perfect itself. Here, Arnold lays the basis of what would become his cultural battle against Philistinism. In his opinion, the English middle class could prosper as the population of Pericles’s Athens and the Medicis’ Florence, and thus he hopes England will eventually be pervaded by that “fine culture, or the living intelligence, which quickened great bodies of men at these epochs.”<sup>104</sup>

Arnold had already pointed this out in the inaugural lecture he delivered at Oxford in 1857, following his appointment as Chair of Poetry. At the beginning of this talk – which was published in 1869 as “On the Modern Element in Literature” – Arnold remarked that

[a]n intellectual deliverance is the peculiar demand of those ages which are called modern; and those nations are said to be imbued with the modern spirit most eminently in which the demand for such a deliverance has been made with most zeal, and satisfied with most completeness.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Matthew Arnold, “On the Modern Element in Literature,” in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. I, *On the Classical Tradition* (Ann Harbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 19.

The “intellectual deliverance” Arnold speaks of would become his notable plea for culture, which he was later to define as “the disinterested endeavour after man’s perfection.”<sup>106</sup> Like in “A French Eton,” he argues that the most complete example of a modern civilization comes from fifth-century Athens, adding that the age of Pericles may be considered even superior to Elizabethan England. Interestingly, Arnold’s focus not so much on the artistic achievements of a given period, but on the general spirit pervading the epoch he takes into consideration.

Ideally, as Arnold puts it in “On the Modern Element in Literature,” “what will most enlighten us, most contribute to our intellectual deliverance” are the examples of great historical epochs which fostered a great literary production. And if Pericles’s Athens provides such an example, this is because “in the body of Athenians of that time there was [...] the utmost energy of mature manhood, public and private; the most entire freedom, the most unprejudiced and intelligent observation of human affairs.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, according to Arnold the literature of fifth-century Greece may provide the modern times with “a mighty agent of intellectual deliverance,”<sup>108</sup> the same intellectual condition to he alludes to in “A French Eton.” In 1863 Arnold also brings up the subject of the Renaissance and its spirit in two university lectures. There seems to be no record left of the former, which Arnold gave in March and titled “Romanticism: Renaissance.”<sup>109</sup> The second lecture worth considering is the one on Heinrich Heine: delivered at Oxford in June the same year, it was published in *The Cornhill Magazine* in the following August. Here, Arnold considers Heine the true heir of Goethe insofar as he proved to be “a most effective soldier in the Liberation War of humanity.”<sup>110</sup> In tracing Goethe’s legacy in Heine’s poetry, Arnold establishes a curious – although this is most likely coincidental than the result of direct influence – connection to Burckhardt’s characterization of the Renaissance type. Indeed, like the portrait of the Renaissance humanists Burckhardt was drawing in his *Civilization* but a few years before, “Heine had his full share of love of fame.”<sup>111</sup> And, even more interesting, what Goethe had taught contemporary German poets was the importance of cultivating and developing one’s own individuality. Not only

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<sup>106</sup> Matthew Arnold, Preface to “Culture and Anarchy,” in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 5, *Culture and Anarchy, with Friendship’s Garland and Some Literary Essays* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 249.

<sup>107</sup> Arnold, “On the Modern Element in Literature,” p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>109</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 243. To my present knowledge, there is no reference to such a lecture in the letters collected in Lang’s six-volume edition.

<sup>110</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Heinrich Heine,” in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol 3, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 107.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*



must the ordinary man be aware of his own inward life, also the artist ought to bring it to the fore in order to create truly genuine and original instances of the poetry of nature. If Goethe may be said to have begun a process of liberation of the Germans, and if those whom he influenced may be said to be fully modern, this is because, Arnold argues, “he puts the standard, once for all, *inside* every man instead of outside him,”<sup>112</sup> and this happened at a time when “the old Middle-Age machine was still creaking on.”<sup>113</sup>

Whilst Arnold takes Goethe as a complete and perfect example of the modern spirit, in the end his judgment on Heine does not seem to be equally positive. He certainly believes Heine to be a modern poet, especially because he was able to absorb the influence of the Middle Ages without being entrapped: “he is a great modern poet, he is not conquered by the Middle Age, he has a talisman by which he can feel, – along with but above the power of the fascinating Middle Age itself, – the power of modern ideas.”<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, at the end of the essay Arnold admits Heine’s difficulty in becoming a true interpreter of the modern spirit, in spite of his valiant and brilliant effort in the “Liberation War of Humanity” Goethe had already engaged in. According to Bullen, this does not mar Arnold’s overall characterization of Heine as a genuine example of the “free Renaissance spirit” – one which, by breaking with the Romantic tradition, was also rejecting the last relics of the “reactionary medieval ideas”<sup>115</sup> that had lived into the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding the fact that “in his head fermented all the ideas of modern Europe,” however, Heine’s was for Arnold but a “half-result.”<sup>116</sup>

Apart from the interesting nexus that connects Arnold’s portrait of Heine with Burckhardt’s characterization of the Renaissance type, this lecture specifically focuses on the Renaissance spirit in two passages. As in the essay “On the Modern Element,” the first occurrence appears with reference to England. If the Elizabethan Age can be apex of the literary civilization of his country, this is because, Arnold maintains, during

the Elizabethan age, English society at large was accessible to ideas, was permeated by them, was vivified by them, to a degree which has never been reached in England since. Hence the unique greatness in English literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. They were powerfully upheld by the intellectual life of their nation; they applied freely in literature the then modern ideas, – the ideas of the Renaissance

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 110, my emphasis.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 110-11.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>115</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 244.

<sup>116</sup> Arnold, “Heinrich Heine,” p. 132.

and the Reformation.<sup>117</sup>

Arnold thus relates the literary achievements of the Elizabethan Age to what elsewhere in the same essay, as I have already pointed out, he calls a process of intellectual fermentation. This process is described in terms of an awakening of the mind which was possible due to a general disposition of the age towards absorbing new, modern ideas which influenced the mind and supported the intellectual life of the nation. Such ideas are for Arnold the product of a dual factor, the contemporary emergence of the Renaissance – which he tries to acclimatize through the spelling “Renasceance” – and the Protestant Reformation.

Interestingly, Arnold’s discussion on Heine’s Jewishness is the starting point for introducing the polarization of the Renaissance spirit, which he would complete in 1869 in his essay on “Hebraism and Hellenism.” Of these two elements Heine is a paramount example:

[H]e has excellently pointed out how in the sixteenth century there was a double renaissance, – a Hellenic renaissance and a Hebrew renaissance, – and how both have been great powers ever since. He himself had in him both the spirit of Greece and the spirit of Judæa; both these spirits reach the infinite, which is the true goal of all poetry and all art, – the Greek spirit by beauty, the Hebrew spirit by sublimity. By his perfection of literary form, by his love of clearness, by his love of beauty, Heine is Greek; by his intensity, by his untamableness, by his “longing which cannot be uttered,” he is Hebrew. Yet what Hebrew ever treated the things of Hebrews like this?

In the rest of the essay Arnold quotes extensively from Heine’s poem “Princess Sabbath,” although the commentary he provides to the text is on the whole scanty. Arnold’s polarized conception of the Renaissance spirit is central to the fourth chapter of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), titled “Hebraism and Hellenism,” where again he cites Heine as the example of an individual whose essence was defined by the supremacy of the latter element. The poles of this binary opposition are defined in terms of rival forces, tendencies and powers constantly opposing each other throughout human history, which at any given moment is determined by the relative predominance of either. Whilst both forces share a common goal – which Arnold sees in man’s ultimate perfection and

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

salvation – and a common source, the love of God, they diverge in the way they pursue such an aim. Their essence can therefore be reduced to their intrinsic principles:

The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience. Nothing can do away with this ineffaceable difference. The Greek quarrel with the body and its desires is, that they hinder right thinking; the Hebrew quarrel with them is, that they hinder right acting. [...] The governing idea of Hellenism,” Matthew writes, “is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*.”<sup>118</sup>

These tendencies or forces in history arise in order to cope with the needs and inadequacy of human nature. However, they should not be intended as laws governing the history of mankind. Arnold rather sees them in terms of powers equally contributing to human development, and the two different models of conduct they posit prefigure Nietzsche’s dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Whilst Hellenism invites man to follow “the whole play of the universal order,” thus leading to “[a]n unclouded clearness of mind,” and “an unimpeded play of thought,”<sup>119</sup> Hebraism is founded on the ethics of renunciation. First and foremost, this implies giving up one’s own individual will, hence sacrificing the process of self-development that was one of the distinctive characteristics of Renaissance culture. The disturbing emphasis Hebraism lays on sin, Arnold argues, seems to act as a sort of controlling device hindering the individual process of self-perfection.

The desirability of the Hellenic character becomes evident as Arnold compares it to the Hebraic one through a series of adjectives. The “gentle,” “simple” and “divine” nature of Hellenism is opposed to the “unhappy,” “chained” and “captive” nature of Hebraism, under whose influence man toils “with groanings that cannot be uttered to free himself from the body of this death.”<sup>120</sup> Yet Hellenism seems to Arnold to have established itself in a far too immature age, which is why it was to succumb to Hebraism. The unprofitability of Hebraism, instead, was mainly due to the emergence of Christianity, which was based on the ethics of sufferance, obedience and toiling. This self-sacrifice, Arnold suggests, was necessary in order to avoid, if not to defeat, temptation and sin.

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<sup>118</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 5, p. 165.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

Thus, whilst Hebraism developed into Christianity, Hellenism had its counterpart in the Renaissance, as around the fifteenth century the times were ready for its spirit to dominate again. “As the great movement of Christianity was a triumph of Hebraism and man’s moral impulses,” Arnold explains, “so the great movement which goes by the name of the Renaissance was an uprising and re-instatement of man’s intellectual impulses and of Hellenism.”<sup>121</sup> Yet he underlines once more the impossibility to separate the two forces, neatly and completely, at any given moment. This especially applies to the sixteenth century, where Hellenism re-established itself with “a Hebraism renewed and purged.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, in England, the Renaissance was only known through its secondary force, the Reformation, which was the offspring of Hebraism and Hellenism at once, with the former positing a much desired return to the Scriptures, and hence to the very word of God.<sup>123</sup>

In 1864, one year before “Hebraism and Hellenism,” Arnold had begun to reflect on paganism, Christianity and their direct influence on the people who lived according to either religion. In the essay “Pagan and Mediæval Religious Sentiment,” Arnold defends paganism against the accusation of moral sickness and sorrowfulness. The “natural end” of the pagan life, Arnold maintains, is “a life which by no means in itself suggests the thought of horror and misery, which even, in many ways, gratifies the senses and the understanding.”<sup>124</sup> Having clarified this, he suggest that the “Renaissance” was in part a return to paganism and to its emphasis on the senses. The Reformation, instead, was by no means connected with this spirit, since it was not a revival of paganism, but the revival of Christianity against Catholicism.

Yet in his Vichean theorization of these cultural cycles, Hellenism was doomed to perish again under the renewed influence of Hebraism. Interestingly, not only does this happen in the sixteenth century – when historians, notwithstanding individual differences, locate the end of the Renaissance – but Arnold also attributes its fall to moral lassitude, which was especially evident in Italy:

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 172. Arnold uses again the Anglicized spelling he had already introduced in his essays on Heine and the one on the “Pagan and Mediæval Religious Sentiment” (1864). Here, however, he explains in a footnote that he has “ventured to give to the foreign word Renaissance, – destined to become of more common use amongst us as the movement which it denotes comes, as it will come, increasingly to interest us, – an English form.” Interestingly, again at the beginning of his Heine essay he had declared the impossibility of finding an English equivalent to use in place of the loanword “Philistinism.”

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 173

<sup>123</sup> Thus Protestantism was for Arnold morally superior to Catholicism.

<sup>124</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Pagan and Mediæval Religious Sentiment,” in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 3, pp. 222-23. Interestingly, as a proof of what he has just stated, Arnold quotes (p. 218) the last line in the first stanza of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but he changes the question marks into exclamation in order to further support his argument: “What pipes and timbrels! What wild ecstasy!”

The Renaissance, the great re-awakening of Hellenism, that irresistible return of humanity to nature and to seeing things as they are, which in art, in literature, and in physics, produced such splendid fruits, had, like the anterior Hellenism of the Pagan world, a side of moral weakness and of relaxation or insensibility of the moral fibre, which in Italy showed itself with the most startling plainness, but which in France, England, and other countries were very apparent too.<sup>125</sup>

According to Arnold, the reaction came, at least in the English-speaking world, with Protestantism, which rose “against the moral indifference and lax rule of conduct which in the sixteenth century came in with the Renaissance.”<sup>126</sup>

Arnold also makes a clear-cut distinction between the two major defeats of Hellenism by Hebraism, the emergence of what he calls “primitive Christianity” at the end of paganism, and Puritanism after the Reformation, which, unlike the former, he considers but “a side stream crossing the central current and checking it.”<sup>127</sup> Although Hebraism was a necessary counterpart to the moral evils that he sees as by-products of the Renaissance, the predominance of what was only a secondary cultural current led in turn to a “contravention of the natural order,” “the confusion and false movement”<sup>128</sup> which he reads in Victorian society. One can find here the germs of Woolf’s assertion that “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age.”<sup>129</sup> This confusion ought to be cleared, Arnolds suggests, by a return to Hellenism, the principle that ultimately enables man to understand “the actual instincts and forces which rule our life, seeing them as they really are, connecting them with other instincts and forces, and enlarging our whole view and rule of life.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” p. 173.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>128</sup> Arnold, “On the Modern Element in Literature,” p. 30.

<sup>129</sup> Virginia Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, volume 4, 1925-1928, ed. A. McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 51.

<sup>130</sup> Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” p. 175.

1.5. A “flood of folly and hypocrisy”: Ruskin’s moral, gendered indictment of the Renaissance

No account of the Victorian reception of the Italian Renaissance would be complete without at least some remarks on the works of John Ruskin. The English writers on art and culture who, like Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, engage with Renaissance history and culture after the publication of such studies as *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) are more than familiar with Ruskin’s work. In a way, their writings respond to Ruskin’s, even though such a response is to some extent an indirect one. Laurel Brake, for example, reads Pater’s relation to Ruskin in terms of a towering presence whose works, like *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, leave an evident mark in his writings. The essays that Pater and Lee collected in *The Renaissance, Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, are based on subjects which Ruskin had strongly contributed to establish in mid-Victorian criticism, making aesthetics a dominant discourse at the time.<sup>131</sup>

Lee’s dialogic response to Ruskin is especially significant, and it is not only implicit. In 1883, while working on her Renaissance essays, she rejects Ruskin’s moral aesthetics and partly embraces some of the key ideas of aestheticism. In *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (1883), she dedicates a chapter to “Ruskinism. The would-be study of a conscience.” According to the poet May Probyn, this essay proves Lee’s passionate engagement with art and aesthetics. After reading *Belcaro*, Probyn wrote to her friend

The “Dialogue on Poetic Morality” particularly interested me very much, and so did the paper on “Ruskinism”. You put so much of your heart into your argument – all of your heart indeed, I think – that you have carried me away with you almost before one knows or is convinced.<sup>132</sup>

In *Belcaro*, Lee explains that Ruskin’s aesthetic system was quite different from that of his predecessors – interestingly, Lee mentions Winckelmann, Lessing, Hegel and Taine, but not Pater – and to the phallacy of judging art in the binary terms of moral legitimacy or

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<sup>131</sup> Laurel Brake, “Degrees of Darkness: Ruskin, Pater and Modernism,” in *Ruskin and Modernism*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 49-52. Brake’s analysis only focuses on Pater’s relationship with Ruskin.

<sup>132</sup> May Probyn to Vernon Lee, January 12, 1881 or 1882. Letter from the Vernon Lee Papers, Somerville College Special Collections, University of Oxford, Box XII. Letters from the Vernon Lee Papers at Somerville will henceforth be identified by the abbreviation *VLP* followed by their box number.

illegitimacy.<sup>133</sup> While Lee is aware of the importance of Ruskin in Victorian culture, she also rejects his binary system of good and evil as categories for aesthetic appreciation. Such a system is based on falsehood and a misconception, and unlike Ruskin she maintains that

[i]n this world of reality where evil leads to good and life to death; where harmonies are imperfect, there is no unvarying correspondence between things, no necessary genesis of good from good, and evil from evil. There is much conflict and much isolation. [...] For the qualities of right and wrong, and of beautiful and ugly, and our perceptions of them, belong to different parts of our being, even as to a yet different part of our being belong our perception of true and false, that is, of existing and non-existing. (B, 207)

I suggest that in this article one can see Lee taking the distance from Ruskin not because of their different views on art on a merely aesthetic levels, but rather because she denies the existence of binary distinctions on an epistemological level – those “paradigms of binaries”<sup>134</sup> which, fuelled by the evangelical background of Ruskin’s family, Brake acknowledges as a distinguishing feature of his works.

At the time for Lee – as much as Pater and Wilde – there seems to be no connection between morality and physical, sensual beauty, both of them retaining some degree of wholesomeness.<sup>135</sup> Twenty years later, however, her “Postscript on Ruskin” – first published in the *North American Review* in 1903,<sup>136</sup> and then included in *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (1908)<sup>137</sup> as “Ruskin as a Reformer” – shows Lee’s reconsideration of some of her previous statements in another attempt at restoring the reception of Ruskin’s work. In this article, after stating that Ruskin’s achievement has not

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<sup>133</sup> Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell & Co., 1883), p. 198. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to B.

<sup>134</sup> Brake, “Degrees of Darkness,” p. 53.

<sup>135</sup> I believe her statement that “[b]eauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad: it is aesthetically good, even as virtue is neither aesthetically good nor aesthetically bad, but morally good. Beauty is pure, complete, egotistic: it has no other value than its being beautiful” (B, 210) is to a certain extent an anticipation of Wilde’s claim that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” On the influence of Pater and aestheticism on *Belcaro*, see Stefano Evangelista, “Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism,” in Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, eds., *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 92-7.

<sup>136</sup> Vernon Lee, “A Postscript on Ruskin,” *North American Review*, Vol. 177, No. 5 (November, 1903), pp. 678-690.

<sup>137</sup> Vernon Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1909), pp. 299-322. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to GA.

been fully acknowledged, but rather viewed as the product of symbolical metaphysics and dogmatic morals, she purports to analyse

some of the possibilities and habits of thought and feeling which I am myself aware of owing, at least in definite and imperious form, to the teachings of this great prophet of righteous happiness. [...] [B]ecause I am convinced that, far-spreading as was his influence on his immediate contemporaries, and large as is the debt (though often second-hand and unacknowledged) due to him by the following generation, the very best of Ruskin's efficacy can be expected in the future. (GA, 301-2)

In Ruskin's works the Renaissance progressively comes out as an evil and morbid spirit. The picture he draws in his letters from Italy, and in works like *The Stones of Venice* and *Praeterita* (1885-89), turns Michelet's argument and appreciation upside down: according to Ruskin the Renaissance spirit acted like a pathogenic agent, which he held responsible for the final collapse of the Western civilization. Unlike Michelet and Burckhardt – but also Vasari before them – Ruskin does not consider the Renaissance as a moment of regeneration or rebirth, but as the lowest possible moment in the development of Western culture.<sup>138</sup> This is most evident in *The Stones of Venice*, where Ruskin's approach to the architectural history of the Serenissima is that of a pathologist who performs a post-mortem examination with the utmost accuracy.

Ruskin's interest in Italian art, however, began long before he matured such distaste. He first visited Italy during his family's three continental tours in 1833, 1835 and 1840, and then again in 1845, when he first left England on his own, at the age of twenty-six, right after the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters*. In 1846, by the time the second volume of his massive study on painting was in the press, he left again, willing to take his parents to Lucca, Pisa and Venice. After getting married to Effie Gray, the newlywed Ruskins travelled to Venice twice between 1849 and 1852. His subsequent and final Italian trips took place in 1858, 1869, 1872, 1874 (when he ventured for the first time south of Naples), 1876, 1882, and 1888.<sup>139</sup>

Many of the sketches and notes Ruskin jotted down during his early Italian travels informed works like *Modern Painters*, *The Stones of Venice*, and eventually his autobiography, *Praeterita*. Interestingly, Lee's correspondence is also rich in sketches and

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<sup>138</sup> See also Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 123, 145.

<sup>139</sup> An interesting account of Ruskin's Italian travels is offered by Alexander Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy* (Ann Harbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).



drawings with which she visually accompanies her interest for landscape or topographic details, and in “Ruskin as a Reformer” she points out that,

in order to get Ruskin’s full meaning, we must never separate his writings from those wonderful illustrations which tell us all the things words can never say. It is in them that he has given us [...] not merely the æsthetic loveliness, but also the imaginative fascination, of Venice and Verona. (GA, 306)

Of course Ruskin’s writings are also supported by substantial readings, which demonstrate that Ruskin’s interest in Italy developed well before his first Italian travel. His early sources, especially as far as the idea and the representations of Venice are concerned, come from Romantic poetry. In *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (1982), John Dixon Hunt records an interesting passage from an unpublished manuscript, now in the John Ruskin Collection at Princeton, which Ruskin wrote as a preface to *St. Mark’s Rest: the History of Venice* (1877-84). Here Ruskin refers to his first visit to Venice – which, as Bradley has noted, took place in 1835, and not in 1833, as Ruskin mistakenly wrote – and recalls all the literary luggage he had taken to the city:

I knew the Two Gentlemen, the Merchants of Verona and Venice, better than any gentlemen or merchants in London, and had learned most of Romeo and Juliet by heart; and all the beautiful beginnings of Othello. From Byron, though with less reverence, I had received even deeper impressions. [...] Add to them Rogers’ poems, with Turner vignettes – and Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo,” Prout drawings in the Watercolour Room of the Old Society and the list of my first tutors in Venetian work will be full.<sup>140</sup>

Ruskin’s passion for Italy was born out of his early “Italian readings” and a few etchings, vignettes and watercolours. Bradley has especially stressed the role of Samuel Roger’s *Italy: A Poem* in shaping his vision of the country. On his thirteenth birthday, Ruskin had received a copy of the 1830 edition of the collection, lavishly illustrated with engravings by J.M.W. Turner, whom Ruskin particularly appreciated, and would later praise in *Modern Painters*.<sup>141</sup> Roger’s poem must have impressed the young Ruskin quite strongly, since fifteen years later, in May 1845, the mist and calmness of the landscape of Lucca

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<sup>140</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (New York, Viking Press, 1982), p. 69, qtd. in Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy*, p. 12.

<sup>141</sup> Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy*, p. 1. Other etchings were by Thomas Stothard and other artists.

bring back to his mind Roger's lines on the gulf of La Spezia, which he transcribes in a letter to his father.<sup>142</sup>

While in Italy, Ruskin also studied Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics* (1832) – which he mentions several times in 1840 and 1843, and then read again daily, during his stay in Tuscany in 1845 – and Franz Kugler's *Handbook of Painting*.<sup>143</sup> In Venice he also became acquainted with Anna Jameson, the author of *The Diary of an Ennuyée* (1825), a work of fiction based on her Italian tours, and *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* (1845), whose strong biographical and historicist approach owes much to Vasari's *Lives*.<sup>144</sup> Ruskin met her while she was working on a volume on Venetian painting entitled *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), both of them staying at the Danieli's. His opinion about Jameson and her work, though, are quite caustic.<sup>145</sup>

Vasari's influence on Jameson may help explain Ruskin's scarce admiration for her work on Italian painting. No matter how familiar he certainly was with Vasari, Ruskin's appreciation for his work was not unflawed. While in a way he recognizes the importance of the *Lives*, at the same time he firmly rejects his idea of the Renaissance as the highest moment in the development of Italian art. It is thus no surprise that when Ruskin came to teach Vasari at Oxford, in the fall of 1872, he felt the need to "filter" and correct his organicist theory of art:

I am myself going to give, this autumn at Oxford a summary of the *points* in the lives of the Florentines as related by Vasari – i.e. *assuming* Vasari to be correct – what thoughtful conjecture may be made as to each life. Then I shall correct Vasari afterwards as I can; but I want to make him understood, first, sifting the points in each life from the rubbish. – I shall do Verrocchio, Mantegna, Sandro Botticelli – Pollajuolo – Lorenzo di Credi – Perugino, and the Lippis. [...]

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<sup>142</sup> See *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, vol. 1, 1835-1847 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 120-21, 249, and Harold I. Shapiro, ed., *Ruskin in Italy. Letters to His Parents, 1845* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 56.

<sup>143</sup> See the letter Ruskin addressed to his father on May 6, 1845, in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 53. Shapiro suggests that Ruskin probably used an 1838 Brussels edition of Sismondi; Cf. also Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 125-30.

<sup>144</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 45.

<sup>145</sup> As one can read in *Praeterita*, Ruskin thought Jameson was "absolutely without knowledge or instinct of painting; and had no sharpness of insight for anything else; but she was candid and industrious, with a pleasant disposition to make the best of all she saw, and to say, compliantly, that a picture was good, if anybody had ever said so before. Her peace of mind was restored in a little while, by observing that the three of us [Ruskin, Boxall and Harding], however separate in our reasons for liking a picture, always fastened on the same pictures to like; and that she was safe, therefore, in saying that, for whatever other reason might be assigned, other people should like them also." See John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, volume 35 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1908), p. 374.

Nothing I have ever seen in mystic and religious art has interested me or delighted me so much as Sandro and Perugino in the Sistine Chapel – Perugino at Perugia was another piece of new life to me.<sup>146</sup>

Elsewhere in his work Ruskin recognizes the importance of Vasari, but he always rejects the idea that Italian art came to full maturity in the sixteenth century. Talking about the *Loggia della Signoria* in Florence, in the miscellany he collected as *On the Old Road* (1885), Ruskin disparagingly states that “Vasari is an ass with precious things in his panniers; but you must not ask his opinion on any matter.”<sup>147</sup> In any case, as Hillary Fraser warns, given the role of Vasari in so much Victorian historiography, art criticism and writing, his influence on Ruskin ought not to be overlooked.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, later in his life Ruskin would still stress the significance of the *Lives* for those who were visiting Italy for the first time: “So that my general directions to all young people going to Florence and Rome,” Ruskin says in *Mornings in Florence* (1877), “would be very short: ‘Know your first volume of Vasari, and your two first books of Livy; look about you, and don’t talk, nor listen to talking.’”<sup>149</sup>

Rio’s *De la Poésie Chrétienne* (1836), however, seems to have most significantly influenced Ruskin in the long run, especially as far as his moral condemnation of Renaissance art is concerned. Ruskin probably found in Rio an example of religious aestheticism that matched his own critical inclinations and artistic preferences. Nevertheless, Bullen notes that in none of the many letters Ruskin addressed to his father during his Italian tour in 1845 does Rio’s name appear, not even in the ones containing descriptions of artworks which show an evident debt to *De la poésie chrétienne*. Bullen suggests that this is likely to depend on the strong Protestant background of Ruskin’s family, as if he had wished to avoid any accusation of apostasy given Rio’s firm Catholicism.<sup>150</sup>

Further evidence of the influence of Ruskin’s Evangelicalism on his appreciation of Renaissance artworks can be seen in his dislike for the *Stanze Vaticane*. In 1840 he visits

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<sup>146</sup> John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton, August 10, 1872, in *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*, ed. John Lewis Bradley and Ian Ousby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 261–62.

<sup>147</sup> John Ruskin, *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, On the Old Road, Arrows of the Chace, Ruskiniana*, volume 34 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1908), p. 132.

<sup>148</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 47.

<sup>149</sup> John Ruskin, *Val d’Arno, The Schools of Florence, Mornings in Florence and The Shepherd’s Tower*, volume 23 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 370.

<sup>150</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 125, 127.

Raphael's rooms at the Vatican with his family, and in *Praeterita* he would still record his disparaging opinion of the frescoes. Ruskin is taking the distance from Sir Joshua Reynolds, who had stated in his fifth Discourse that "Raffaele, who stands in general foremost of the first painters, owes his reputation [...] to his excellence in the higher parts of the Art: his works in *Fresco*, therefore, ought to be the first object of our study and attention." Indeed, the *Stanze Vaticane* represented for Reynolds the most perfect example of Raphael's artistry, and he judged his frescoes way superior to his oil paintings: "When he painted in oil, his hand seemed to be so cramped and confined, that he not only lost that facility and spirit, but I think even that correctness of form, which is so perfect and admirable in his *Fresco*-works."<sup>151</sup> Ruskin's reaction upon seeing the Vatican Rooms considerably diverges from Sir Joshua's enthusiastic response: in December 1840 he records in his diary, on the spur of the moment, that "Raphael is still a dead letter to me, and must long be so."<sup>152</sup> In his autobiography, such puzzlement is explained in a way which seems consistent with Bullen's observations regarding the role of Protestantism in the development of Ruskin's aesthetic judgment. For, as Ruskin was to admit in *Praeterita*,

all the great religious paintings, Perugino's ante-chamber, Angelico's chapel, and the whole lower story of the Sistine, were entirely useless to me. [...] Everybody told me to look at the roof of the Sistine chapel, and I liked it; but everybody also told me to look at Raphael's Transfiguration, and Domenichino's St. Jerome; which also I did attentively, as I was bid, and pronounced – without the smallest hesitation – Domenichino's a bad picture, and Raphael's an ugly one [...].

Sir Joshua's verdict on the Stanze was a different matter, and I studied them long and carefully, admitting at once that there was more in them than I was the least able to see or understand, but decisively ascertaining that they could not give me the least pleasure, and contained a mixture of Paganism and Papacy wholly inconsistent with the religious instruction I had received in Walworth.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, illustrated by explanatory notes by J. Burnet, F. R. S. (London: James Carpenter, 1842), p. 78. This is the discourse Reynolds delivered as President of the Royal Academy on December 10, 1772.

<sup>152</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, 1, p. 126.

<sup>153</sup> Ruskin, *Praeterita*, p. 273. As the editors of the Library Edition of Ruskin's works have pointed out, it is not clear what Ruskin refers to when he mentions "Perugino's antechamber," since the antechamber of the *Stanze Vaticane* was originally painted by Raphael and contains other paintings by Giovanni da Udine.

Thus it is not surprising that the pre-Renaissance period – which, as I have shown, was the *bête noire* of a man like Michelet, who was battling an ideological, lay campaign against the Jesuits – was for Ruskin an age of uncorrupted talent. His avowed dislike for what he defines a “mixture of Paganism and Papacy” cannot be overemphasized: although such a remark belongs to Ruskin’s late years, it does help explain his early impressions as well. Lee’s reception of Ruskin, however, is based on her attempt at disentangling Ruskin’s criticism from his strong religious views. Whilst in her essay on “Ruskinism” Lee had suggested that Ruskin’s criticism revolved not around issues “of æsthetic right and wrong, suggested by a given work of art, but of moral fitness and unfitness” (B, 197), in “Ruskin as a Reformer,” her argument would be different. In this latter article, Lee posits that the orthodox reading of his Evangelicalism had resulted in a distorted assimilation of his writings, urging her readers to separate “what Ruskin can give the future from what [...] Ruskin got foisted on him by the past” (GA, 319).

Ruskin’s diaries also offer his fresh impressions upon seeing Renaissance artworks, and after 1840 – when he left on his third trip to Italy – his entries become more frequent. On his first day in Genoa, on October 31, 1840, Ruskin probably went to Palazzo Pallavicini and saw Raphael’s *Madonna della Colonna*, which he says “was worth going a thousand miles for.”<sup>154</sup> A few months later, when he arrives in Venice on May 6, 1841, he thanks God for finally being in “the Paradise of cities.”<sup>155</sup> Here he is able to study several paintings by Titian, but, although he considers them excellent from a technical point of view, they seem not to raise any enthusiastic response:

Quantities of Titians and Guidos about the Morosini and Barbarigo – the latter singularly rich, but most of them utterly ruined; his first and last picture together, both half invisible, though the unfinished St. Sebastian seems noble. The others are evidently masterly, but I don’t like them; one huge naked backed Venus, from the painting of which what good or pleasure can be proposed to any human being, I cannot conceive – it is neither pretty nor pure, neither voluptuous nor delicate. One thing interesting there – four china plates painted by Raphael, with all his qualities of telling story, and a good deal of the watery, playing colour of his last days.<sup>156</sup>

As in 1840, the painter who catches Ruskin’s attention is Raphael, and the remark he makes mostly concerns his “story-telling” skills. The story embedded in the Venus

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<sup>154</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, 1, p. 100.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

painting may be altogether not worth re-telling, but Ruskin is also at pains to decode what this womanly figure is meant to convey. When, at the end of the same month, he arrives in Milan, he is struck by the pictorial quality of Raphael's *Sposalizio della Vergine* at Pinacoteca di Brera, but he points out that the oil does not really stand out in terms of originality. In his diary entry for May 28, he even uses the same verb he had employed with reference to Titian and Reni, "conceive." Whilst he confesses preferring Garofalo's *Crucifixion* over "most Raphaels,"

The Marriage of the Vergin [*sic*], in same gallery, [*is*] equally exquisite, though not quite so unique. I cannot conceive what mechanical means were used to give the fineness of touch, or even to render it possible. I cannot conceive such a piece of hair as in one of the back figures, painted by human hand.<sup>157</sup>

So, if Raphael is a peak, he is so because of his almost mechanic skills, and not because of inspiration, high art, or his subjective response to the theme portrayed; much less for the "powerful feelings" that the spectator might experience upon seeing his work.

Even after this third Italian trip, Ruskin's ideas on art are still considerably linked to a Romantic conception which, I suggest, one may define almost Wordsworthian. There is a passage in his diary – the entry is dated May 15, 1843 – in which he recalls being impressed by a conversation he had with the painter Thomas Richmond concerning Raphael, Michelangelo and their technical merits:

[Richmond] mentioned with respect to Raphael what I had never heard before: that in all his early and finest works the line was evidently laid down at once, as the representation of something in the mind, and an *emanation* from it – not with crude or harsh decision, like German work, but as the first overflowing and fullness of the mind which never could be improved; while even M. Angelo always felt after the truth: laid down two or three lines loosely, and chose the best, and so Raffaelle, in his later works. [...] Richmond told me something else, too, about Raffaelle which I should remember but cannot – says there is something in the colouring which is not valuable merely as a representation of anything; but in itself precious to those who look for it.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

Richmond's theory must have resonated in Ruskin's mind, since it is consistent with his idea of art as the expression of individual genius and moral rectitude. For Ruskin, there is actually no such thing as a man "being a great or a little Painter: [...] what the man is, such is his picture – not the achievement of an ill or well practised art, but the magnificent or miserable record of divine or decrepit mind."<sup>159</sup>

I argue that Ruskin's correspondence and diary entries also suggest that – at least at the beginning of his career – he did not conceive the Renaissance in terms of a lascivious, corrupted spirit that had done away with the excellence of the Gothic. Or, at least, he seems not to have been able to make an ekphrasis in which he articulates the reasons why he cannot appreciate it. It is true that his ideas on painting are considerably different from those he matured about architecture. What matters most to him, anyway, is the subject of paintings, which explains why he praises moral themes and discards those "stories" which he finds unable to account for. Thus his appreciation of a portrait of Giorgione at the Royal Academy depends on its representing "the sort of picture one expects to light a room in the dark; and yet no Rembrandtism. Pure green sky behind head; deep eyes; and a cast of countenance more noble than anything I remember even in Raphael."<sup>160</sup>

Painting is also the reason why Ruskin embarks on his fourth journey to Italy – the first he makes on his own – in 1845. Having just published the first volume of *Modern Painters*, he was looking for further specimen of scenery and specifically intended to study Italian painting even if his chief interest – as much of his correspondence suggests – was already architecture. Reaching Italy through France, Ruskin first arrives at Oneglia on April 24, 1845. In Genoa he visits Palazzo Durazzo, Palazzo Pallavicini, and Palazzo Rosso, where he most likely sees Veronese's *Judith* (ca. 1580), which he considers "a very grand picture."<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless he confesses to his father that he intends to leave Liguria quite soon in order to spare all the time he has to visit Lucca, Pisa, and Florence. It is during these Tuscan weeks that Ruskin's artistic taste comes to maturity. In his letters, which often include sketches, one sees Ruskin measuring and testing his own judgment against that of his father – and, more in general, against the generation his father

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<sup>159</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. J. Evans and J. H. Whitehouse, vol. 2, 1848-1873 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 437-38.

<sup>160</sup> Ruskin and Joseph Severn had seen an exhibition displaying Renaissance paintings at the Royal Academy in February 1844. As a proof of his diverging opinions in matters of painting and architecture, one should consider that, in the same passage from his diary, he also recalls seeing "A Venus of Titian, and a chalk drawing by Leonardo invaluable, as well as a glorious Gainsborough in the Presentation room." See *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, I, p. 265.

<sup>161</sup> Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 44n.

belonged to. Unlike them, Ruskin considers the Early Renaissance masters much more vivid and powerful in comparison with High Renaissance paintings, which on the whole he dismisses as “tawdry, tired, and vulgar.”<sup>162</sup> Along with his religious background, this explains his appreciation for the work of Fra Bartolomeo. In Lucca, Ruskin often visits the church of San Romano, where there used to be two great paintings of his – now at the Pinacoteca of Lucca – *God the Father with Mary Magdalene and St Catherine of Siena* and the *Madonna della Misericordia*.<sup>163</sup>

It is to the Campo Santo in Pisa, however, that most of Ruskin’s interest is directed. The old cemetery, begun in 1278 and completed in 1464, impresses him so much that, in his second lecture on “The Political Economy of Art” (1857), Ruskin would emphasize to his audience that “the energies which have given the only true life to your existing art were first stirred by the voices of the dead that haunted the Sacred Field of Pisa.”<sup>164</sup> The Campo Santo embodies all that Ruskin was looking for in art in 1845. He considers it, as he writes to his father, “*the thing*.”<sup>165</sup> He is especially drawn to the frescoes that decorate the interior walls of the building, and which are fine examples of that pre-Renaissance painting style which is now known as the Giottesque School. A style so distinctive, however, that Ruskin wrongly attributes the frescoes to Giotto himself.

In order to understand Ruskin’s fascination with the Campo Santo at a moment in which he is developing his own aesthetic judgment, traveling for the first time without parental guidance, one should bear in mind that the building is an example of late Gothic architecture. If one reads, for example, the description of the Campo Santo included in the *Museo scientifico, letterario ed artistico*, edited by Luigi Cicconi in 1839, it is easy to understand why Ruskin considered the old Pisan cemetery a masterpiece:

Il magnifico porticato che precinge il Campo Santo presenta sessantadue arcate a sesto acuto, di uno stile che sente del gotico, foggiate però alquanto sul gusto ispirato dalla leggiadria italiana. In giro a questo portico sono distribuiti

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<sup>162</sup> Cf. Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy*, pp. 25-27, and Bullen, *The Renaissance Myth*, pp. 126, 128.

<sup>163</sup> Ruskin to James Ruskin, May 6, 1845, in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 53. Shapiro notes, however, that in his notebook – now at the Ruskin Galleries at Bembridge School – Ruskin defined the *Madonna della Misericordia* “an utter failure in every respect.”

<sup>164</sup> John Ruskin, *A Joy for Ever and The Two Paths with Letters on the Oxford Museum and Various Addresses 1856-1860*, volume 16 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), p. 72, qtd. in Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 32.

<sup>165</sup> Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 67 (my emphasis). The letter is dated May 18, 1845.



monumenti sepolcrali, avanzi preziosi di antichità, e le pareti sono dipinte a buon fresco da artisti del trecento e del quattrocento.<sup>166</sup>

When Ruskin arrives in Pisa in May 1845 – with his pen and “plain white paper”<sup>167</sup> at hand in order to make sketches and drawings – his first reaction is one of grief. He laments the current conditions of the edifice, and in a letter dated May 13 he makes the sorrowful remark that the Campo Santo has much changed, and for worse, since the publication of John Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy* in 1842.<sup>168</sup> Ruskin complains about the ineffective and disastrous reparations made to the edifice, but also about the continuous building of new tombs:

Poor dear old Baptistery – all its precious old carving is lying kicking about the grass in front of it – the workmen are wonderful at the “knocking down,” like Sam Weller [in Dickens’s *The Pickwick’s Paper*]. Where there used to be black marble they put up common stone painted & varnished – but it don’t matter. All’s one for that? – the old baptistery’s gone. I have picked some of the old bits for love, and shall send ‘em home to MacCracken in a box with the Lucca fragme[nts].<sup>169</sup>

The inaccurate, careless, and harmful works done at the Campo Santo upset Ruskin so much that his rage is also directed against the indifference of his countrymen. Those “ostentatiou[s] English idiots,” Ruskin maintains, were willing to spend money on frivolous events, but would decline spending “their money on foreign institutions.”<sup>170</sup> In any case, his schedule in Pisa is hectic, studying not only the “false” Giotto’s – which he finds “hard[er] to copy than anybody I have tried yet”<sup>171</sup> – but also the works of Benozzo, Memmi, Veneziano, and Orcagna.<sup>172</sup>

Likewise, after arriving in Florence, Ruskin is disappointed with the restoration of Palazzo Pitti, recording that the two paintings by Salvator Rosa he sees there are nothing but garbage. Again, the only pictures he considers worth seeing are some Peruginos and

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<sup>166</sup> Luigi Cicconi, ed., *Museo scientifico, letterario ed artistico, ovvero scelta raccolta di utili e svariate nozioni in fatto di scienze, lettere ed arti belle* (Torino: Alessandro Fontana, 1839), p. 386.

<sup>167</sup> Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 63.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72. The letter is dated May 21, 1845. Shapiro writes that James and Robert McCracken were London-based agents specialized in shipping and storing artworks.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92. The letter is dated May 31-June 1, 1845. Among the recent interventions done at the Campo Santo, a significant case is that of Francesco Algarotti’s monument: added in 1764, it destroyed some of the frescoes by Taddeo Gaddi, one of Giotto’s disciples. Ruskin attributes such frescoes – representing some biblical scenes about Job – to Giotto.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70. The letter is dated May 19, 1845.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68. The letter is dated May 18, 1845.

some Raphaels: in particular, when he visits the Uffizi, the works that catch his attention are some paintings by Fra Angelico, Simone Memmi and Raphael's *Madonna del Cardellino*.<sup>173</sup>

A quite significant and visual indication of Ruskin's response to Italian art in this period comes from a "to-do" list he sketches in Florence in a letter dated June 8, 1845. As he counts down his remaining time in the city, which roughly amounts to four weeks, Ruskin draws up a detailed "plan of action," resolving to devote his last days to the following:

Pitti – 3 (where I have to copy a bit or two of Salvator)  
Great Gallery [Uffizi] 3 (I have done nearly half of it, in two),  
Santa Maria Novella, 3 – to finish Angelico if I can, Domenico Ghirlandajo's  
frescoes, & Orcagna's  
Gallery of Academy, 3 (not quite enough).  
Santa Croce, 3 Taddeo Gaddi & Giotto, and a wonderful fresco of Ghirlandajo,  
St Mark's convent  
    & Annunciata                      } 3, Angelico & Andrea del Sarto,  
Carmine & Santo Spirito, 3, Masaccio & Perugino.<sup>174</sup>

Ruskin accompanies his detailed plan with the remark that he is not going to waste too much time on the Medicis Chapel, his opinion about Michelangelo being already "pretty settled & comfortable."<sup>175</sup> Indeed, in the 1840s – while still at work on his "modern" painters – Ruskin begins to be quite opinionated about Renaissance art. Having compared Perugino's "prosaic" quality to Raphael's less inspiring sensuality, Ruskin concludes that "Raffaelle & M Angelo were great fellows, but from all I can see they have been the ruin of art. Give me Pinturicchio & Perugino & you shall have all the Raffaelles in the world."<sup>176</sup> During this period, however, the Renaissance seems not yet to represent for Ruskin that moral "dumping ground" which, in *The Stones of Venice*, he views as the source of all the spiritual evils of the Western civilization. Or, at least, his judgment

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp. 101, 105. The letters are dated June 5 and June 7, 1845.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 97. The letter is dated June 4, 1845. In *Ariadne Fiorentina* (1872), Ruskin would define Perugino as "A noble, gracious, and quiet labourer from youth to death, – never weary, never impatient, never untender, never untrue. Not Tintoret in power, not Raphael in flexibility, not Holbein in veracity, not Luini in love, – their gathered gifts he has, in balanced and fruitful measure, fit to be the guide, and impulse, and father of all." See John Ruskin, *Lectures on Landscape, Michael Angelo & Tintoret, The Eagle's Nest, Ariadne Fiorentina with Notes for Other Oxford Lectures*, volume 22 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 346.

concerning Renaissance paintings is considerably different from his ideas on architecture. Architecture is for Ruskin the equivalent of poetry in Arnold's thought – the great art form that enables him to test and assess the wholesomeness of society. Even in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* – the one which he conceives as a fierce denounce of the Renaissance, its evil spirit and artistic corruption – Ruskin would admit that, in sculpture and painting, the Italian Cinquecento certainly

produced the noblest masters whom the world ever saw, headed by Michael Angelo, Raphael, and Leonardo; but [...] failed of doing the same in architecture, [...] and failed more totally than it would otherwise have done, because the classical enthusiasm had destroyed the best types of architectural form.<sup>177</sup>

Nevertheless, I suggest it is in Ruskin's early reflections – which one can follow, almost “instalment after instalment,” in his correspondence and diaries – that one finds the germs of his strong indictment of the Renaissance. A moral indictment which he would painfully associate with the decay of architecture in its transition from the Gothic to the Renaissance forms. Thus, almost thirty years later, his condemnation of Michael Angelo, which is already to be found in his Florentine days in 1845, becomes more incisive: “The main point in the Sistine Chapel,” Ruskin would maintain in 1872, “is the destruction by the knowledge of anatomy of what sentiment he [Michel Angelo] was capable of. The Judith, David and Brazen serpent especially to be noted, and the artifices for showing of legs.”<sup>178</sup> At the same time, however, he still reckons that Perugino's Moses at the Sistine Chapel was “glorious.”<sup>179</sup>

Once Ruskin's disgust for the architectural forms of Renaissance Italy was thoroughly established, Venice became the city which, in his mind, epitomized all that lasciviousness and moral degradation he was associating to the Italian Cinquecento. So much so that, although at the beginning of *The Stones of Venice* he points out that “The state of Venice existed Thirteen Hundred and Seventy-six years,”<sup>180</sup> the architectural history he traces in its three volumes is quite fast in turning, as Tanner has put it, “from

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<sup>177</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume 3: The Fall and Examples of the Architecture of Venice*, volume 11 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), pp. 15-16.

<sup>178</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, 2, p. 725. The entry is dated May 15, 1872.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* This entry is dated May 17, 1872.

<sup>180</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume 1: The Foundations*, volume 9 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), p. 18.

gorgeousness to garbage.”<sup>181</sup> Indeed, the specific focus of Ruskin’s next trip to Italy in 1846 is architecture. Ruskin leaves England after completing the second volume of *Modern Painters*, and once in Tuscany he carefully examines the examples of Gothic architecture he finds in Lucca and Pisa, getting ready for *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). It is in this study that Ruskin employs the word Renaissance for the first time. And it is here that, for the first time, the Renaissance not only identifies a “painful,” “pitiful” and “corrupt” architectural style, but also a personified force, directly and painfully connected with “the moral and the human.”<sup>182</sup>

In this period Ruskin was already cultivating the project of *The Stones of Venice*, which is announced as forthcoming in the first edition of *The Seven Lamps*.<sup>183</sup> His reputation as “A Graduate of Oxford” being by then established, Ruskin probably felt the need not only to concentrate on architecture, but also to narrow the scope of his inquiry and focus on a well-defined social and historical context. The architecture of Venice, along with its historical, social, and economic background, provided him with the example that would best suit his plan.<sup>184</sup> As E. T. Cook remarked in his introduction to *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin had defined himself, in a letter he wrote to Count Zorzi, “a foster-child of Venice,” explaining that the city “has taught me all that I have rightly learned of the arts which are my joy.”<sup>185</sup>

#### 1.6. *The Stones of Venice* and the lasciviousness of Renaissance forms

With *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin intended to write in a systematic study what he had learned about art, and especially about architecture, in the city that – inspired by the

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<sup>181</sup> Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 118. Ruskin had already described his stay in Venice in September 1845 as “painful,” although his at that time critique was directed to the present condition of the city: “There is no single spot [...] where her spirit remains – the modern work has set its plague spot everywhere.” Such grief recalls his unease at seeing the barbarous interventions made at the Campo Santo in Pisa and at Palazzo Pitti at Florence. And, in his mind, the general indifference of the “rascally Italians” was especially to blame. Careless works like the ones he had noted in Tuscany had resulted in the Doge’s Palace looking like “the Austrian national distillation of coffins & jaundice,” and far worse were the works done at St. Mark’s: “Off go all the glorious old weather stains, the rich hues of the marble which nature, mighty as she is, has taken ten centuries to bestow – and already the noble corner farthest from the sea [...] is reduced to the colour of magnesia, the old marble displaced & torn down.” Likewise, he writes with grief about the changes made to the old bridges: in order to visually emphasize the damages, he provides a sketch documenting the adjustments that had been made in order to lay gas pipes over them. See Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 201-2.

<sup>182</sup> Bullen, *The Renaissance Myth*, p. 132.

<sup>183</sup> Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy*, p. 27.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>185</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume 2: The Sea-Story*, volume 10 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), p. xlvii.

images of decay he had found in Byron's poetry – he had previously defined a "Paradise." All the more, he felt the need to re-write the history of Venice by undertaking a corrective action which would bring to the fore the artistic and moral history of the city. A history which Ruskin, almost inspired by the romantic approach of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), believed to embody a clear paradigm of growth, splendour and decline. Such was Ruskin's aim when he set out to write *The Stones of Venice*, and one finds evidence of his intentions in *Praeterita*. "All that I did at Venice," Ruskin records in his autobiography,

was by-work, because her history had been falsely written before, and not even by any of her own people understood; and because, in the world of painting, Tintoret was virtually unseen, Veronese unfelt, Carpaccio not so much as named, when I began to study them; something also was due to my love of gliding about in gondolas.<sup>186</sup>

Ruskin's interest in Venice was kindled by his epiphanic encounter with Tintoret's paintings at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco,<sup>187</sup> and this gives further evidence of his double standard of judgment concerning Renaissance painting and architecture:

Tintoret swept me away at once into the "mare maggiore" of the schools of painting which crowned the power and perished in the fall of Venice; so forcing me into the study of the history of Venice herself; and through that into what else I have traced or told of the laws of national strength and virtue. I am happy of having done this so that the truth of it must stand; but it was not my own proper work.<sup>188</sup>

Scholars like Bradley and Abse have remarked that *The Stones of Venice* holds a unique place in Ruskin's writings. In particular, Bradley has suggested that *The Stones* shows Ruskin's maturity as a critic, insofar as the ambitious project he was now undertaking was the result of a much bigger endeavour in comparison with what he had written up to that point. Ruskin even modified his method of note-taking and sketching, adding to his usual notebook a second one, which he meant to employ for historical and archival

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<sup>186</sup> Ruskin, *Praeterita*, p. 156.

<sup>187</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 131.

<sup>188</sup> Ruskin, *Praeterita*, p. 372.

research.<sup>189</sup> True, as early as 1845 Ruskin had declared his intention to engage with a different kind of criticism, connecting artistic production with political structure. A declaration he made at a defining moment in the development of his artistic taste, since, as I have already pinpointed, in 1845 his critical judgment was going through a phase of enfranchisement, detaching itself from paternal authority.<sup>190</sup> Nevertheless, his gaze towards Venice, its architecture, and its culture, was not neutral. It still revealed, as Abse puts it, “the religious attitudes of a Protestant bigot.”<sup>191</sup>

Ruskin’s study of the architecture of Venice is threefold. After an introductory volume (*The Foundations*), the second (*The Sea Stories*) and the third (*The Fall*) discuss the architecture of Venice during the Byzantine and the Gothic (vol. 2), and the Renaissance period (vol. 3). Throughout the book he dissects and carefully comments on each style, taking as examples the buildings he considers most representative to its avowed aim, which is a defence of the moral qualities of Gothic architecture. In his argument, the Gothic stands out as a period of great achievement, against which Byzantine and Renaissance compare only unfavourably.

In the opening chapter, “The Quarry,” Ruskin provides a date to mark the beginning of the fall of Venice, the death of Carlo Zeno on May 8, 1418. What followed reduced the city to “a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak – so quiet –, so bereft of all but her loveliness.”<sup>192</sup> After an overview of the political history of Venice, Ruskin shifts to architecture, initially adopting an informative, slightly didactic tone. This enables him first to expound his views on the genealogy of European architecture, which he believes “thoroughly derived from Greece through Rome, and coloured and perfected from the East.” In an attempt to help the reader familiarize with his view, he finds a sort of formula by stating that “those old Greeks gave the shaft; Rome gave the arch; the Arabs pointed and foliated the shaft.”<sup>193</sup> The architecture of the late Roman Empire, Ruskin adds, was highly polarized: the style usually known as Christian Romanesque was under the influence of both Rome and Byzantium, whilst at the same time “a patois of

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<sup>189</sup> Bradley, *Ruskin and Italy*, p. 31. See also Joan Abse, “The Lessons of Stone: Ruskin’s Mission in Venice,” in *Ruskin e Venezia. La bellezza in declino*, ed. Sergio Perosa (Firenze: Olschki, 2001), p. 49. Bradley notes the two notebooks, however, eventually ended up containing mixed information.

<sup>190</sup> In a letter dated August 6, 1845, Ruskin confesses to his father that “[f]ormerly I hated history, now I am always at Sismondi. I had not the slightest interest in polit[ica] science, now I am studying the constitutions of Ital[y with] great interest. [...] [M]y mind is strangely developed within these two years, [...] into a quiet, truth-loving, fishing, reasoning, moralizing temperament.” See Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 168.

<sup>191</sup> Abse, “The Lessons of Stones,” in Perosa, *Ruskin e Venezia*, p. 49.

<sup>192</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, I, p. 17.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Romanesque<sup>194</sup> was developing into the distant provinces of the Empire. Meanwhile, the example of the Northern barbaric nations, and the work of the Lombards, provided the substratum for Gothic forms to develop. Ruskin actually defines the Gothic as “the refinement and spiritualisation of Northern work”<sup>195</sup> under the influence of the warmer “lava stream” of the Arab.<sup>196</sup> It is under these conditions that man produced the “noblest buildings of the world, the Pisan-Romanesque, Tuscan (Giottoesque) Gothic, and Veronese Gothic.”<sup>197</sup> It is quite easy to recognize in this threefold classification the impression that the Campo Santo at Pisa – itself an example of Tuscan Gothic – had left on his mind some fifteen years before.

This initial historical outline allows Ruskin to trace the theoretical framework which supports his study of the architectural history of Venice, dividing it into a Byzantine, a Gothic, and a Renaissance period. Ruskin posits a direct connection between the development of architecture and the corruption of society, which he defines in terms of the state of religion all over Europe:

Venice, as she was once the most religious, was in her fall the most corrupt, of European states; as she was in her strength the centre of the pure currents of Christian architecture, so she is in her decline the source of the Renaissance. [...] and the dying city, magnificent in her dissipation, and graceful in her follies, obtained wider worship in her decrepitude than in her youth, and sank from the midst of her admirers into the grave.<sup>198</sup>

Ruskin does not condemn the aesthetics of Renaissance architecture *per se*, but rather as the outer symptoms of the moral evils they sprang from. Thus, as I have suggested earlier in this paragraph, his indictment of the Renaissance spirit – or of the civilization of the Renaissance, to put it in Burckhardt’s words – becomes a denouncement against a pathogenic agent corrupting society. In “Ruskinism,” Lee harshly criticizes this aspect of Ruskin’s moral aesthetics, and his inability to formulate an organic theory of art which would lead him to understand that the decline of Gothic was in fact positive insofar as it permitted the development of new, fresh art forms (*B*, 220-21). Before articulating his critique of Renaissance architecture, Ruskin lists a set of rules that support his argument

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

in defining a principle by which he distinguishes between good and bad architecture.<sup>199</sup> Then, in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, he engages in a demonstration of the primacy of Gothic architecture over Renaissance buildings. In so doing, he purports to “read” architecture like a text, in the same way as one “would read Milton or Dante, and getting the same kind of delight out of the stones as out of the stanzas.”<sup>200</sup>

According to Leoni, *The Stone of Venice* is “a compendium of all western architecture.”<sup>201</sup> Given the aims of this chapter, I am not going to delve into the details of the first part extensively. It should be noted, however, that in “The Byzantine Period” Ruskin’s depiction of Venice as a city that has lost its old glory coincides with the rejection of those Romantic images which had first triggered his fascination with Italy. He discharges the representation of Venice provided by modern drama and fiction as

mere efflorence[s] of decay, a stage dream which the first ray of daylight must dissipate into dust. No prisoner, whose name is worth remembering, or whose sorrow deserved sympathy, ever crossed that “Bridge of Sights,” which is the centre of the Byronic ideal of Venice; no great merchant of Venice ever saw that Rialto under which the traveller now passes with breathless interest: the statue which Byron makes Faliero address as one of his great ancestors was erected to a soldier of fortune a hundred and fifty years after Faliero’s death;<sup>202</sup>

Notwithstanding Ruskin’s contempt for Byron’s Venice, his harsh critique of the city still seems to find its origin in Byron’s lines. Both in the “Ode to Venice” and in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron had represented Venice as a decadent, fallen city, although he compares its doom to that of other great cities, as the history of Rome shows. As Donoghue has suggested, however, Ruskin was exposing what Byron was rather simply mourning. Thus, whilst moving away from the images offered by Romantic poetry, Ruskin “excoriated the Venice that Byron took as an instance of inevitable decay.”<sup>203</sup> In any case, such critique enables him to further emphasize his purpose, that is, to restore “the faint image of the lost city,” the city of the mighty Doge,

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<sup>199</sup> Such is the purpose of the chapter he devotes to expounding “the virtues of architectures,” which can be paraphrased as (a) functionality, (b) propriety of expression and (c) enjoyment for the beholder.

<sup>200</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2, p. 106.

<sup>201</sup> Giovanni Leoni, “Architecture as Commentary: Ruskin’s Pre-modern Architectural Thought and its Influence on Modern Architecture,” in Cianci and Nicholls, *Ruskin and Modernism*, pp. 200-1.

<sup>202</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2, p. 8.

<sup>203</sup> Most of “Ruskin’s masters,” as Donoghue calls them, were Romantics. Donoghue especially feels the influence of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Scott, Shelley and Coleridge. See Denis Donoghue, “Ruskin, Venice, and the Fate of Beauty,” in Perosa, *Ruskin e Venezia*, pp. 8, 14.



which was certainly “more gorgeous a thousandfold than that which now exists.”<sup>204</sup> This is because the glory of the old days of Venice, Ruskin seems to imply, cannot be enjoyed by means of a Romantic, almost Keatsian “indolence of imagination, but only after frank inquiry into the true nature of that wild and solitary scene, whose restless tides and trembling sands did indeed shelter the birth of the city.”<sup>205</sup> Such an objective inquiry seems to have been all the more important for Ruskin, as in Venice, perhaps more than in Pisa and Florence, the perception of decay, which resulted in the loss of the old beauty of the city, was for him a way to measure its decline both in moral and social terms.<sup>206</sup>

Ruskin’s aim is primarily to counterpoise the moral supremacy of Gothic over Renaissance architecture, thus he first offers a general definition of “Gothicness.” I believe it should be stressed that his tentative and multifaceted approach towards a definition of Gothicness provides both a bridge to and a point of departure from the ideas of the Renaissance that one finds in fin-de-siècle literature. Ruskin complains about his difficulty in finding a way to make such an “abstraction perfectly intelligible”<sup>207</sup> – the kind of task Pater questions in the Preface to *The Renaissance*. “Many attempts,” Pater writes,

have been made by writers on art and poetry to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms, to find some universal formula for it. [...] Such discussions help us very little to enjoy what has been well done in art or poetry, to discriminate between what is more and what is less excellent in them, or to use words like beauty, excellence, art, poetry, with a more precise meaning than they would otherwise have. Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. (*R*, xix)

Not unlike the Renaissance for Pater and Lee, according to Ruskin Gothic architecture embodies a complicate, many-sided spirit. It is the product of “many mingled ideas,” and as such, Ruskin maintains, it “can consist only in their union.”<sup>208</sup> His assertion that in studying – and appreciating – Gothic architecture one should “determine first, what [...] the Mental Expression, and secondly, what the Material Form of Gothic architecture,

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<sup>204</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2, p. 9

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Abse, “The Lessons of Stones,” in Perosa, *Ruskin e Venezia*, 50.

<sup>207</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2, p. 181.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

properly so called”<sup>209</sup> are, would find an echo in Pater, Lee and Symonds’s belief that the culture of an age is embodied in the many forms of its intellectual life. Besides, in his analysis Ruskin employs the metaphor of chemistry which we have already seen with reference to Burckhardt, Arnold, Pater and Lee. Given the complex nature of what may be defined as “Gothicness,” the critic needs to operate as a chemist, in Ruskin’s words, in order to study, analyse and understand the external forms and the internal elements of Gothic architecture. Ruskin suggests that

the chemist defines his mineral by two separate kinds of character, one external, its crystalline form, hardness, lustre, etc.; the other internal, the proportions and nature of its constituent atoms. Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others. Its external forms are pointed arches, vaulted roofs, etc. and unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic.<sup>210</sup>

As in chemical compounds, the various elements that form Gothic architecture must be present in a building in order for it to be defined as Gothic. However, the different proportions in which they are to be found determine slightly different degrees of Gothicness.<sup>211</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, such is also Ruskin’s line of thought as he develops his condemnation of the Renaissance, which, from the very beginning of the section he entitles “The Fall,” he qualifies as corrupted, unwholesome and evil. His dissection of Renaissance architecture is thorough, distinguishing between Early, Central or Roman, and Grottesque Renaissance, the last of the three being but a corrupted version of the very Renaissance spirit. Whilst Early Renaissance buildings were mostly specimen of deteriorated Gothic forms, the formal degradation of the Central Renaissance was caused by a constant and unhealthy search for universal and “manipulative” perfection.

According to Ruskin, the example of the great masters in painting, like Verrocchio and Ghiberti, set unattainable standards of execution on the common

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ruskin outlines a hierarchic and almost scientific taxonomy of the moral elements conveyed by Gothic buildings, and which he classifies as follows: (1) Savageness; (2) Changefulness; (3) Naturalism; (4) Grottesqueness; (5) Rigidity; (6) Redundance.

workman. The suffocation of the liberty of execution turned them into mere copyists of classical forms, depriving Renaissance buildings of that “Variety” he had mentioned as one of the moral elements of Gothic architecture, arguing that the Gothic spirit “not only dared, but delighted in, the infringement of every servile principle,”<sup>212</sup> safeguarding irregularity and variation in form and ornament as well as the expression of the builder’s individuality.<sup>213</sup> As the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* was being published, Ruskin stressed a similar point with reference to Greek architecture. The problem of Greek forms, Ruskin maintains, lay in the condition of slavery under which Greek men were forced to operate. In the “Lectures on Architecture and Painting” (1853), he suggests that “the worst feature of Greek architecture is, indeed, not its costliness, but its tyranny. These square stones are not prisons of the body, but graves of the soul.”<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, Ruskin emphasizes the importance of individuality which, in the same years, Burckhardt was recognizing as a prominent feature of the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy. Unlike Burckhardt, however, Ruskin associates individuality with the artistic freedom of workmen and sculptors, and not with the dawn of modernity. Thus, whilst he defines Renaissance individualism as “blank, hopeless, haughty self-sufficiency,”<sup>215</sup> his praise of Gothic architecture depends on the importance he gives to medieval society, which was still based on an organic and interdependent structure.<sup>216</sup>

Such a crucial element was lost in the Renaissance. Consequently, Ruskin notes in a way that almost calls to mind Marx’s denunciation of the worker’s alienation from the product of his labour that “[t]he lower workman secured method and finish, and lost, in exchange for them, his soul.”<sup>217</sup> Hence one understands why Ruskin posits a direct relationship that connects the Renaissance style of architecture “from the Grand Canal to Gower Street.”<sup>218</sup> His references to contemporary England should be understood not only as artistic recommendation, but also as a warning directed to a nation whose naval and commercial skills reminded him of the old glorious day of Venice. According to

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<sup>212</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 2, p. 108.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258. Ruskin cites as an example the ornamental system of Foliation. The different types of arches, as for instance the soft or the thorny leafage employed in Northern and Southern Gothic buildings, suggest that their executors were not merely meant to copy and replicate pre-existing forms. Rather, such arches reveal the extent to which they are “invested with the same characters of beauty which the designer had discovered in the leaf.”

<sup>214</sup> John Ruskin, *Lectures on Architecture and Painting (Edinburgh, 1853), with Other Papers (1844-1854)*, volume 12 of *The Works of John Ruskin, Library Edition*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), p. 62.

<sup>215</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3, p. 74

<sup>216</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 139.

<sup>217</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3, p. 18.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Sarah Quill, in looking at Venice, Ruskin was also looking critically at England.<sup>219</sup> This is a point that Vernon Lee had also made in noting that “[t]he diseased newness of Leeds or Manchester and the diseased decay of Venice or Verona affected him, equally, as the desecration of the soul’s sanctuary” (GA, 305).

Ruskin certainly despised Renaissance architecture for the same reason he was critical about many paintings of the same period. The replacement of Christian subjects with pagan ones in art are for him the expression of “a flood of folly and hypocrisy”:

Mythologies ill understood at first, then perverted into feeble sensualities, take the place of the representations of Christian subjects, which had become blasphemous under the treatment of men like the Carracci. Gods without power, satyrs without rusticity, nymphs without innocence, men without humanity, gather into idiot groups upon the polluted canvas, and scenic affectations encumber the streets with preposterous marble. [...] [T]he base school of landscape gradually usurps the place of the historical painting, which had sunk into prurient pedantry.<sup>220</sup>

To put it in terms of Arnold’s polarization, and to compare Ruskin’s and Arnold’s aesthetics, Ruskin sense of beauty seems to have been more Hebraic than Greek.<sup>221</sup> As a last point, it should be highlighted that Ruskin’s history of Venice and its architecture constructs a gender discourse that abounds in sexual allusions. His fascination with the fallen city relies not only on purely artistic grounds, but also on a personal, almost psychosexual basis. His representation of the city is marked by a strong erotic element:<sup>222</sup> “Venice, as she was once the most religious, was in her fall the most corrupt, of European states; and as she was in her strength the centre of the pure currents of Christian architecture, so she is in her decline the source of the Renaissance.”<sup>223</sup>

Not only is the city gendered female, but her fall during the Renaissance is described in terms of the loss of virginity: “[h]er glorious robe of gold and purple was given her when first she rose a vestal from the sea, not when she became drunk with the wine of her fornication.”<sup>224</sup> Such a transition from an age of innocence to a phase of sexual overindulgence was responsible for the final collapse of the city, so that, “[b]y the

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<sup>219</sup> Sarah Quill, *Ruskin’s Venice. The Stones Revisited*, with introductions by Alan Windsor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 19-20; see also Tanner, *Venice Desired*, p. 76.

<sup>220</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, I, p. 45.

<sup>221</sup> Donoghue, “Ruskin, Venice, and the Fate of Beauty,” p. 9.

<sup>222</sup> Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 141.

<sup>223</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, I, pp. 46-47.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

inner burning of her own passions, as fatal as the fiery rain of Gomorrah, she was consumed from her place among the nations; and her ashes are choking the channels of the dead, salt sea.”<sup>225</sup> Whilst pre-Renaissance Venice is represented in terms of chaste femininity, in the fifteenth century the city turns into a lascivious female, overindulging in pleasure and calling to mind – in a mixture of pagan and Christian elements like Botticelli’s Aphrodite – both the myth of Medusa and St. John’s prophecy of the “great whore that sitteth upon many waters.”<sup>226</sup>

Bullen connects Ruskin’s obsessive construction of Venice in highly sexualized terms with his frustrated marital life with Effie Gray, suggesting that his interest in the city ought to be read in terms of a sublimation of sexual drive. As an instance, he cites Ruskin’s repulsion towards Renaissance ornament in Venice, which – as opposed to Gothic design – expressed

a violence and coarseness in curvature, a depth of shadow, a lusciousness in arrangement of line, evidently arising out of an incapability of feeling the true beauty of the chaste form and restrained power. I do not know any character of design which may be more easily recognised at a glance than this over-lusciousness [...].<sup>227</sup>

Ruskin marks the beginning of the fall of Venice with the death of Carlo Zeno on May 8, 1418. According to Ellmann and Bullen, the autobiographical element at the basis of Ruskin’s gendered, highly sexualized image of Venice is such that they also explain in these terms his choice to focus on this particular moment in history. On the one hand, that date might indicate the day his parents conceived him, whilst on the other it is the day before Effie’s birthday, the woman who had been born on May 7, 1828 and with whose sexuality he struggled to cope throughout their marriage.<sup>228</sup> Whilst such a reading of Ruskin’s indictment of the Renaissance may sound far too Freudian, it certainly provides interesting considerations that may be profitably applied to fin-de-siècle literature, and precisely to those writers whose endorsement of the Renaissance may be explained on a discursive basis.

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>226</sup> J.B. Bullen, “Ruskin, Gautier, and the Feminization of Venice,” in *Ruskin and Gender*, ed. Dinah Birch and Francis O’Gorman (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 77.

<sup>227</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 3, p. 6.

<sup>228</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 48, qtd. in Bullen, “Ruskin, Gautier, and the Feminization of Venice,” in Birch and O’Gorman, *Ruskin and Gender*, p. 77.

## Chapter II

Through the fin-de-siècle glass:

Semi-fictional Renaissance portraits

After the first wave of interest in the sixteenth century, the rediscovery of the Italian Renaissance in England dates to the 1860s. In 1863, John Addington Symonds, Fellow of Magdalen College, was awarded the prestigious Chancellor's English Essay Prize for his essay titled "The Renaissance." The piece, read at Oxford Theatre on June 27,<sup>1</sup> paved the way for his career as a scholar and laid the groundwork for the seven volumes of his *The Renaissance in Italy*, which he published between 1875 and 1886. Ten years after Symonds's essay, Macmillan published Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which included quite a few essays he had already published in several magazines between 1867 and 1871. Following the charges of hedonism and the scandal aroused by the book, the collection was reprinted, with slight changes, as *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry*, in 1877, 1888 and finally in 1893.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was published as John Addington Symonds, *The Renaissance. An Essay* (Oxford: Henry Hammans, 1863).

<sup>2</sup> This first edition included a Preface, the notorious Conclusion, and eight essays: "Aucassin and Nicolette," "Pico della Mirandola," "Sandro Botticelli," "Luca della Robbia," "The Poetry of Michelangelo," "Leonardo da Vinci," "Joachim Du Bellay" and "Winckelmann." Five of Pater's essays had already been published in periodicals: "Winckelmann" first appeared in *Westminster Review* XXXI, n.s. (January 1867); "Notes on Leonardo da Vinci," *Fortnightly Review* VI, n.s. (November 1869); "Sandro Botticelli," *Fortnightly Review* VIII, n.s. (August 1870); "Pico della Mirandola," *Fortnightly Review* X, n.s. (October 1871); "The Poetry of Michelangelo," *Fortnightly Review* X, n.s. (November 1871). The essay on "Aucassin and Nicolette" was later expanded and was renamed "Two Early French Stories" in the following editions, which were published in 1877, 1888 and 1893. The Conclusion had also already appeared as the second half of Pater's review of the "Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review* 34 (Oct., 1868). He later removed the Conclusion from the second edition of the collection but then he re-included it – with some modifications – in the third and fourth editions. The essay on "The School of Giorgione," instead, was first published in

It is within this cultural context that Vernon Lee's works on the Italian Renaissance should be placed, whilst certainly bearing in mind the specific approach which she developed thanks to her unique cosmopolitan background. I have already discussed Lee's views on plagiarism and intertextuality, as they emerged from her quarrel with Bernard Berenson concerning aesthetic psychology. And in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee had made explicit references to her critical sources, acknowledging her debt to the scholars and writers on art who had touched on similar subjects. Yet – as one can read in her essay “Can Writing Be Taught?” – she is also aware of her own distinctive voice, notwithstanding her belief that

it is the rarest thing in the world for a writer to be, so to speak, himself from the very outset. Among my own contemporaries, especially in the one I know best, I can recognize long preliminary stages of being *not oneself*; of being; *being* not merely *trying* to be, an adulterated Ruskin, Pater, Michelet, Henry James, or a highly watered-down mixture of these and others, with only a late, rather sudden, curdling and emergence of something one recognizes (even if there is no one else to recognize!) *as oneself*. Whether that *oneself* is better or worse is neither here nor there. What I am driving at is only the fact that writers learn most from what they read, because the mind is not a Pallas Athena bursting full grown and in full dress from even the most Olympian brain, but takes its substance and shape mainly from what it feeds on. Or, if you prefer a biological simile such as fashion requires, that our mind observes a law of heredity unlike that of our bodies, whether those be obedient to Lamarck or Weissmann or Dr. Semon or Mr. Bateson.<sup>3</sup>

Archival evidence suggests that Lee's interest in the Renaissance began to develop a good ten years before the publication of her first collection of essays on the subject was published. Her letters to Henrietta Jenkin reveal that by 1874 she was already familiar with the work of Burckhardt. In addition to this, that same year, after a trip to Salzburg in mid-July, the Pagets spent part of the month of August at Bagni di Lucca. Here Lee, after reading Murray's “handbook on Italian painting on the road,” had the chance to access a

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*Fortnightly Review* XIII, n.s. (October 1877) and later reprinted in the third edition of *The Renaissance*. For every edition that was published in his lifetime, Pater revised each of the essays included. A fifth edition of *The Renaissance* was published by Macmillan in their eight-volume series of Pater's *Works*, which was based on the 1888 and not on the 1893 edition. The sixth edition was published in 1910 in the Macmillan ten-volume Library Edition of *The Works of Walter Pater*. See Hill's Editor's Preface and Critical and Explanatory Notes in the edition of *The Renaissance* used for this study.

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923), p. 296.

circulating library arranged by “a Mrs Broderick” and continue her studies in aesthetic and Italian history and art, reading, among others, the works of William Roscoe, Jean-Charles Sismondi, Joshua Reynolds and Edmund Burke.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in July 1874, she confesses to Mrs. Jenkin that “[n]othing dating from the Renaissance seems to me depressing – there was in [that] epoch such a life, such power, that even its ruins seem full of it.”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 1870s, however, Lee felt still inexperienced enough to begin writing extensively on art and aesthetics. As she writes to Henrietta Jenkin in April 1874, her “very love of art which makes me abhor mediocrity would prevent my ever rising above it.”<sup>6</sup> Fearing she would be written off as a “dilettante,” she tells Mrs. Jenkin that, “much as may appear to the contrary, I am not a literary whippersnapper. The idea of compiling purple bound gold edged works on art is hateful to me and I do not care for writing as writing.”<sup>7</sup> It is only in the fall of that year that she starts considering turning her extensive readings on aesthetics, Italian art and music into “several papers, as interesting I should say as the generality of literary articles in magazines.”<sup>8</sup>

Such articles – which were published in *Fraser’s Magazine* and *New Quarterly Magazine* between 1877 and 1880 – form the bulk of essays that were collected as *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in 1880. Her first essay on Renaissance Italy was “The Anomaly of the Renaissance,” which appeared in the March 1879 issue of the *Contemporary Review* and then, reprinted as “The Sacrifice,” was to become the first essay in *Euphorion*.<sup>9</sup> The two volumes of *Euphorion* were published in 1884, and one year later she was already planning to write a “sequel” to it and a “Renaissance story,”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, April 19 and August 22, 1874. *VLA* #42 and #44.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, July 15, 1874. *VLA*.

<sup>6</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, April 19, 1874. *VLA* #42.

<sup>7</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, September 4, 1874. *VLA* #45.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, October 23, 1874. *VLA* #49. In this letter, Lee consults Mrs. Jenkin about publishing opportunities in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, asking her in a post-script: “[i]f not Blackwood could not you through Mr Constable, or perhaps your [son] obtain me a reading from Fraser or Macmillan or any other magazine of the kind? Perhaps this might be suggested to Mr Constable.”

<sup>9</sup> Lee’s first collection of essays on the Renaissance bears resemblance to Pater’s also from a genetic viewpoint. The essays included in *Euphorion* were first published in reviews and journals between 1879 and 1884. “The Anomaly of the Renaissance” was followed by “The Artistic Dualism of the Renaissance,” *Contemporary Review*, 36 (September 1879), rpt. as “Symmetria Prisca”; “The Portrait Art of the Renaissance,” *Cornhill Magazine*, 47 (May 1883), also rpt. in *Living Age*, 157 (1883) and *Eclectic Magazine*, 101 (1883); “The Transformations of Chivalric Poetry,” *National Review*, 2 (December 1883), which investigates the subjects that Lee would expound in “The School of Boiardo” and “Mediaeval Love”; “The Outdoor Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Contemporary Review*, 45 (January 1884), also rpt. in *Living Age*, 160 (1884). A thorough and interesting chronology of Lee’s works is offered by Phyllis F. Mannocchi, “Vernon Lee: A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 26, No. 4 (1983), pp. 231-67.

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 16, 1885. *VLA* #218. In this letter, Lee informs her mother that she has signed an agreement with Unwin for the upcoming *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations*, and



presumably the story of Domenico Neroni she would include in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*.<sup>11</sup>

One year after publishing *Belcaro*, Lee took frequent trips to England to look for further publishing opportunities and literary connections. In the summer of 1881, Lee went to London to spend time with her beloved Agnes Mary Frances Robinson, the daughter of a well-known London banker. Their first documented encounter dates to a year before – in 1880, the Robinsons had decided to tour Italy, and when in Florence they stayed at the Pagets' at 12, via Solferino.<sup>12</sup> In addition to her personal relationship with – and deep affection for – Mary, the Robinsons also offered her a perfect place to make relevant contacts. Located in Gower Street, their house was the site of parties and teas attended by writers like the Rossettis, the Morrises, Robert Browning, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Thomas Hardy, as well as Victorian artists like George Frederick Watts and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.<sup>13</sup> The letters she wrote home document her frequent literary encounters. For example, on July 11, 1884, she enthusiastically tells her mother, Matilda Paget, that

[t]he afternoon tea [at the Robinsons'] was a great success; the Wards, Rossettis, Madox Brown, Theo. Watts, Henry James, John, Paters, Sharps, Stillmans, Pennells & Mme Villari. Theo. Watts was most charming & friendly [...]. But Henry James was even nicer: he takes the most paternal interest in me as a novelist, says that Miss Brown is a very good title, and that he will do all in his power to push it on.<sup>14</sup>

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that she may accept their offer for a history of the Italian Republics which will help her research for a sequel to *Euphorion*: “[Unwin] also proposes, from an American firm, a commission to write a brief history (333 ps) of the Italian Republics, one of a series. He says he thinks they w<sup>d</sup> give me a year or 18 months & pay £100. I feel disposed to accept, as all the reading is useful both for my second series of *Euphorion* & for my Renaissance story.”

<sup>11</sup> Also the essays included in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* were published individually, between 1887 and 1895. “The Imaginative Art of the Renaissance” first appeared in *Contemporary Review*, 51 (April 1887), also rpt. in *Living Age*, 173 (1887); “*Pictor Sacrilegus*: A.D. 1483; Life of Domenico Neroni (Part I),” *Contemporary Review*, 60 (August 1891); (Part II), *Contemporary Review*, 60 (September 1891); “The Tuscan Sculpture of the Renaissance,” *Nineteenth Century*, 31 (June 1892), also rpt. in *Living Age*, 194 (August 13, 1892); “The Love of the Saints,” *Contemporary Review*, 67 (April 1895). Interestingly, Lee’s article on “The Tuscan Sculpture of the Renaissance” was also translated into Italian as “La scultura del rinascimento,” in *La vita italiana nel rinascimento. Conferenze tenute a Firenze nel 1892, 1899* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1931), pp. 293-308.

<sup>12</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 47. Although they became close friends in 1880 – and Robinson was to write her recollections of that summer in an article titled “Casa Paget” in 1907 – Pieri has suggested that Violet and Mary are likely to have met some years before. See Giuliana Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin-de-Siècle Italy. Art, Beauty, and Culture* (Leeds: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007), p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 11, 1881. *VLA* #188. The case of Henry James is another paramount example of Lee’s difficulty in maintaining long-time friendly relationships with the authors whom she admired, and who also had an influence on her writing. According to James’s biographer Leon Edel, the two met in several London homes in the early 1880s, and then he stayed at the Pagets in Florence in 1887,

I have already mentioned Lee's recollections of her first encounter with Pater in July 1881. In a letter she had written to her mother from Oxford, she had defined him a "lymphatic" and humourless type, who reminded her of Velazquez's portrait of Philip IV. Pater pleasantly impressed Lee, and so did she. A couple of days later they had another dinner together, after which she confirms to her mother her positive impressions:

July 20<sup>th</sup>. The Paters gave us a really beautiful dinner, ~~beautiful~~ served with beautiful porcelain & glass; it was very kind of them, for only us three girls. There was one of the Bodleian Librarians, and a young fellow of Brasenose; that was all. The Paters are all very friendly. The sisters are younger than he and very pleasant. He is very plain & heavy & dull, but agreeable; What strikes me is how wholly unlike Pater is to the Mr Rose of Mallock –; so much so that, in some of Mr Rose's sentiments & speeches, I could almost imagine him meant for Symonds rather than for Pater. They have a very pretty house, with a great many pretty things in it, aesthetic but by no means affected & cheap, like for instance the Gosse's.<sup>15</sup>

There is evidence suggesting that Lee also spent a considerable amount of time at the Paters' the following summer. On August 2, 1882, she writes home from "Casa Pater Oxford," telling her mother that

[t]he Paters are extremely hospitable & kind. I have a sweet little room at the top of the house, with Arundels of Luini and Francias. This is one of the prettiest houses I have ever seen; and it is such an odd feeling to come from our Sussex cottage with its peasant furniture & bible genealogical trees & prints of people of the year '20

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where he could appreciate her ability as a cosmopolitan host. James, Edel writes, considered Lee "the most intelligent person" in her polyglot Florence salot. Being able to discuss "all things in any language" in his company James felt "a little less ashamed of the stupid English race." The incident that first mined their friendship was born out of the publication of *Miss Brown* in 1884, a *roman à clef* in which Lee exposed and ridiculed aestheticism and its key figures. The novel is a fin-de-siècle adaption of the myth of Pygmalion. The main character, the young governess Anne Brown, is adopted by the aesthete Walter Hamlin, who sends her off to be educated in the Continent, hoping to marry her when she comes back. Upon returning to England, however, Anne is horrified by the moral lassitude of Hamlin and his circle of friends. As James's letters from 1884 and 1885 reveal, however, it took another similar incident and Lee's recidivism to mar their relationship, which came to an end after the publication of the short story "Lady Tal" in the collection *Vanitas: Polite Stories* in 1892. According to Vineta Colby, the story is a comedy of manner *à la* James, based on a Jamesian plot and characters. Vineta Colby has stressed that there are many aspects of Marion who recall not only James the novelist, but also James the friend Lee knew. Yet what may have disturbed James was the autobiographical aspect that one can read in *Atalanta Walkenshaw*, the "Lady Tal" of the title. She intends to dedicate her first novel to Marion – like Lee did to James – and is nursing an invalid brother – like Lee did with Eugene. On Lee's relationship with Henry James after the publication of *Miss Brown* and "Lady Tal," cf. Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Middle Years: 1882-1895* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 211; Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 101-5; Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 97-98, 190-97.

<sup>15</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 19, 1881. *VLA* #77.

offering each other five scraggy flowers as a “Friendship’s Offering” to this dainty & dapper little house, with a sort of dinner-party dinner.<sup>16</sup>

The next day, she adds enthusiastically that

[a]fter lunch we sat for a long time in Mr P’s study, & he gave me a copy of the new edition of his book & the photo I enclose. It is old, and he is much balder, fatter & uglier, about 40 or so. A very simple, amiable man, avowedly (almost) afraid of almost everything.<sup>17</sup>

Lee’s close relationship with Pater – but also with his sisters, Clara and Hester<sup>18</sup> – continues throughout the 1880s, and every time she was in Oxford she would have “a long private audience in [Walter’s] study.”<sup>19</sup> According to Laurel Brake, the intellectual exchange Pater had with Lee, and his esteem for a woman scholar who shared his own interests, should be regarded as a unique case in “the blurred map of Pater’s personal relations.”<sup>20</sup> In June 1886, after staying at the Robinsons’, she heads to the Paters’, who had moved to Kensington,<sup>21</sup> presumably following Walter’s disappointment and withdrawal from the Slade Professorship of Fine Arts at Oxford, left vacant after Ruskin’s resignation.<sup>22</sup>

I agree with Christa Zorn’s comment that Lee “did not adopt Pater’s style uncritically”;<sup>23</sup> yet I believe that, in a way, one might almost label Pater Vernon Lee’s “Absent Father,” to borrow Perry Meisel’s definition of Pater’s relationship to Virginia Woolf.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Lee held Pater in such high regard is also revealed by the great care with which she organizes the Paters’ stay at Il Palmerino – where Lee had been

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<sup>16</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 2, 1882. *VLA* #116.

<sup>17</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 3, 1882. *VLA* #117.

<sup>18</sup> Lee was in such good terms with Hester Pater that their relationship survives Walter’s death in 1894. There is evidence that Hester invited Lee to join Clara and herself in Dover in August 1905 or 1906, where they had rented a cottage for the summer holiday. Likewise, in a letter undated, but presumably written around September 1907, Hester Pater expresses her condolences on the death of Eugene Lee-Hamilton. See the unnumbered letters from Hester M. Pater to Violet Paget, *VLA*.

<sup>19</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, June 20, 1884. *VLA* #183.

<sup>20</sup> Laurel Brake, “Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle,” in Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> See Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, June 13, 1886. *VLA* #264.

<sup>22</sup> Again, a letter dated July 16, 1885, suggests Lee’s closeness to Pater and the issues he was facing by that time at Oxford. On that day, she writes to her mother: “Did I tell you Mr Stillman is one of the candidates for the Oxford Slade Professorship, left vacant by Ruskin? One of the others is Pater, who ought certainly to get it, but certainly, I think, will not.” Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 16, 1885. *VLA* #218.

<sup>23</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980).

living since 1888 – in late August 1891. Lee, who was in London, writes a detailed, bullet-pointed letter to her mother, informing her that “[t]he Paters will be in Florence for two days next Monday & Tuesday.[...] As they have been so exquisite to me, I want to be civil. I am sure that they would awfully like to come to tea with you, but you must not be bothered.”<sup>25</sup>

By June 1884, slightly before the turmoil aroused by the publication of *Miss Brown*,<sup>26</sup> Lee’s English reputation as an aesthetic critic was established. That summer, while staying at the Paters’, she tells her mother about the acknowledgment she was gaining as a writer:

Mrs. Augusta Webster, Mme Hildebrand turned Muse, made elaborate speeches to prove that if only she had known that the Miss Paget brought a few days before to her house in a blue dress was Vernon Lee, she wd. have bestowed more notice on her; to which Vernon Lee replied that this unfortunate circumstance had not prevented her having an excellent supper, which after all was the principal thing. (I am writing at an attic window at the Paters, more out than in on account of a smuggled cigarette the odour of which alarms me, hence the handwriting).<sup>27</sup>

Pater read and appreciated *Euphorion*, and after that collection he would give Lee advice on her next works, and even review them. This happened, for example, in July 1886 with the short story “A Phantom’s Lover,”<sup>28</sup> and with *Juvenilia* the following year.<sup>29</sup> As this brief biographical outline shows, Pater was an important presence in Lee’s development as an aesthetic critic, which justifies looking into her work by following – at least in part – an intertextual approach. *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* offer ample textual evidence supporting such a critical perspective. These texts will be substantially explored in this chapter, with specific focus on the analysis of Renaissance figures – both historical and imaginary – which Lee resorts to in order to explore the art and culture of Renaissance Italy.

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<sup>25</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 18, 1891. *VLA* #570.

<sup>26</sup> Pater, however, expressed his disapprobation of *Miss Brown* like Henry James. Laurel Brake, unlike Vineta Colby, suggests that their relationship changed after the novel was published. See Brake, “Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle,” in Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, June 18, 1884. *VLA* #182.

<sup>28</sup> “Yesterday evening I read the proofs of “Oke” (it is called a Phantom Lover) to the Paters, & they liked it or pretended to do so.” Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 20, 1886. *VLA* #305.

<sup>29</sup> “Pater has written a review of *Juvenilia* for the Pall Mall, which hasn’t yet appeared.” Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 30, 1887. *VLA* #349.

It should be stressed here, however, that in the “Valedictory” to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee explicitly comments on her debt to Pater, “the master we have recently lost,” and who, “in the midst of æsthetical anarchy, taught us once more, and with subtle and solemn efficacy, the old Platonic and Goethian doctrine of the affinity between artistic beauty and the human worthiness” (*RFS*, 255). As she wraps up her second collection of “samples, fragments” (*EI*, 16) on the Italian Renaissance, Lee acknowledges the merits and the teachings of Walter Pater, but she also makes room for her own writing. Her two essays on “Ruskinism” and “Ruskin as a Social Reformer,” as we have seen, suggest that, although she refuted Ruskin’s ideas on art and morality, arguing that the former is not linked to the latter, at the same time she did not renounce morality *tout court*. Thus, she praises Pater for his “highest æsthetic doctrine” and “refined wholesomeness” (*RFS*, 258). These qualities, Lee argues, almost safeguarding his reception and dusting off any taint of moral corruption that may still have been associated with Pater’s work after the scandal brought about by the Conclusion<sup>30</sup> to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, made it impossible for him to waste his “powers of perception and expression to idle and irresponsible exercises” (*RFS*, 259). As a result, Lee corrects the credo of aestheticism, arguing that Pater’s conception of art should not be reduced to the inappropriate formula “art for art’s sake,” as it was rather one “of art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence” (*RFS*, 259).

In a way, such reassessment of Pater’s role in the closing pages of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* suggests that Lee, as Zorn points out, has turned from a young disciple to a more mature writer.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in defining Pater’s teaching, she uses the same metaphor she has employed to define her own writing on the same subject. According to Lee, Pater has left his readers with “unfinished systems, fragmentary, sometimes enigmatic, utterances” (*RFS*, 259) to meditate on. The reconstruction of such unfinished

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<sup>30</sup> Partly based on his 1868 review of the “Poetry by William Morris,” Pater’s Conclusion to the first edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) generated a scandal, especially within the conservative academic environment at Oxford. In *A Writer’s Recollection* (1918), for instance, Mary Augusta Ward recalls “very clearly the effect of that book, and of the strange and poignant sense of beauty expressed in it; of its entire aloofness also from the Christian tradition of Oxford, its glorification of the higher and intenser forms of esthetic pleasure, of ‘passion’ in the intellectual sense—as against the Christian doctrine of self-denial and renunciation. It was a doctrine that both stirred and scandalised Oxford. The bishop of the diocese thought it worthwhile to protest. There was a cry of neo-paganism, and various attempts at persecution.” See R. M. Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: the Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 19. Because of this scandal, Pater removed the Conclusion from the second edition of his collection in 1877, but he eventually restored it in the third one in 1888. In her analysis of Pater’s philosophy, however, Carolyn Williams has argued that such a scandal was the product of a misreading of the text, which was often misunderstood for endorsing philosophical principles such as subjectivism, nihilism and hedonism that Pater was actually trying to refute. On this point, see Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World. Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 59.

systems, Lee maintains, is delegated to the readers and their “grateful appreciation” of Pater’s writings. On the one hand, such a statement seems still consistent with the cornerstone of aestheticism, and especially with Wilde’s claim that any form of art conveys an embedded message which is left to the reader or spectator to decode. On the other hand, however, it also backs Zorn’s assumption that in her “Valedictory” Lee is expressing her disenfranchisement from Pater. Having been herself a reader of Pater, Lee is also stating that she has participated in the process of “the rounding of his doctrine” (*RFS*, 259). Thus, the book is not only a farewell to Pater; it also marks the end of Lee’s interest in art philosophy. She was leaving aside aesthetic criticism and the “question of the social and moral value of art” she had been interested in since the early 1880s, ready to experiment with psychological aesthetics and the bodily response to art.<sup>32</sup> In acknowledging Pater’s transition from Swinburne’s aestheticism into ascetic morality, Lee was also stating, as Gunn noted, that her own writing had come to a turning point.<sup>33</sup>

In a way, as Lee participated in the reception of Pater’s doctrine, Pater participated in Lee’s commitment to the study of aesthetics. He provided her, as Colby has pointed out, with an example of scholarship combined with imagination in order to “enlighten and ennoble the human spirit” through “exercises in self-exploration and self-discovery.”<sup>34</sup> In 1883, Lee starts considering collecting her first group of essays on Renaissance art and culture,<sup>35</sup> which had been published individually in magazines and reviews. Pater responds enthusiastically to Lee’s project of publishing *Euphorion*, believing that her Renaissance essays

certainly deserve republication, and I shall be pleased and proud of your dedicating them to me, and thus in a way associating me in your so rapidly growing literary fame. I feel great interest in all you write and am really grateful for pleasure thereby. The title of your proposed volume is I think *ben trovato*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 75, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>35</sup> *Euphorion* was published by T. Fisher Unwin in 1884. The previous year, Lee had considered submitting it to Ellis & White, having had some bad experience with Macmillan. On July 18, 1883, she writes her mother: “I think I may offer [Mr. Ellis] *Euphorion*, which I shall try & finish this autumn. My attempt with Macmillan has greatly depressed me.” *VLA* #150

<sup>36</sup> *Letters of Walter Pater*, ed. Lawrence Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 50-51.

*Euphorion* certainly helped establish Lee's literary fame in England. William Sharp, for instance, defined the collection "a [truly] remarkable series of essays."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in a letter dated July 30, 1884, Lee writes to her mother about the favourable reception of the book:

Enclosed is Contemporary on Euphorion. They having published the bulk of it could naturally not be very grand about it. But the Buntings with whom I dined the other day, so to speak, strewed my path with flowers, that is with invitations to write for the Contemporary.<sup>38</sup>

From a commercial point of view, Lee's Renaissance collections of essays were both quite successful.<sup>39</sup> The critical reception of *Euphorion*, however, is marked by the same contradictory aspects that characterize Lee's writing, especially because of her generalizations and paradoxes, which are due not only to her impressionist, subjective method, but also to her style.<sup>40</sup> One of the first reviewers of the book was Lee's Italian friend Enrico Nencioni. In the Florentine journal *Nuova Antologia* (June 15, 1884), Nencioni praised Lee's wit and fine critical spirit, as well as her lively and visually powerful images, which he believed she had inherited from French criticism. At times however, Nencioni argues, Lee indulges in generalizations and paradoxes, which she presents in a dogmatic way. In his opinion, this depends on the fact that Lee often adopts a far too conversational style.<sup>41</sup> Her "nervosa e passionata intelligenza" results in

aver troppe cose da dire, e aver voglia e fretta di dirle tutte in una volta, affollandole talora in un solo lungo periodo magnificamente architettato, sfolgorante di colori, e di ardimenti; questa scherma dialettica, questa ginnastica intellettuale, finiscono con affaticare e confondere la mente del lettore.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> William Sharp to Vernon Lee, unnumbered letter, *VLA*. The letter is also undated, but because Sharp expresses his disappointment over *Miss Brown*, while at the same time apologizing for not congratulating Lee on *Euphorion* earlier, it seems to me reasonable to argue that the letter must have been written in late 1884/early 1885.

<sup>38</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 30, 1884. *VLA* #194.

<sup>39</sup> In 1891, Unwin was already selling the second edition of *Euphorion*, while in January 1895m Smith & Elder agreed to give Lee "£50 for 1000 copies of my new Renaissance volume & 1 shg. after on subsequent ones." See *VLA* #563 and #752.

<sup>40</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>41</sup> Enrico Nencioni, *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1910), p. 79: "più il giudizio ha apparentemente l'aria di un paradosso più l'accento si fa assoluto, dommatico, quasi imperativo. Leggendo questo libro, ci par di ascoltare la viva conversazione di una persona di rara e varia coltura e di più raro ingegno."

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

The main fault of *Euphorion* seems to be Lee's verbosity. According to Nencioni, this is most evident in Lee's long descriptions, which she uses to introduce the subjects of the various essays and often to explain the process by which she came to develop the ideas she is going to expound. Such a point of view seems to be shared by other contemporary reviewers. Whilst finding faults in some of its ideas, especially with reference to the origins of the medieval conception of love, *The Pictorial World* (Dec. 24, 1885) acknowledges that "the book has merit and fascination of its own." Vernon Lee's mind, the reviewer argues, "is sensitive and many-sided, her knowledge of books and art of all kinds remarkable, and her criticism always suggestive and often eminently just," although "she pushes her outworks of theory, as many have done before, into situations that apparently strengthen but really imperil her whole position."<sup>43</sup>

Such intricacy of ideas seems to be central even for those who express a favourable opinion of *Euphorion*. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* praised Lee for her "width of intellectual range and closeness of illustrative argument," adding that the collection "bases on a scrutiny of the Renaissance many original and felicitous ideas, [putting] them finely, clearly and impressively before the minds of thoughtful readers."<sup>44</sup> Such were also the comments of the other great historian of the Renaissance in late Victorian England, John Addington Symonds. As we have already seen, despite admiring his achievement as a scholar and critic, Lee had written Symonds off as flippant. As a matter of fact, his correspondence shows a sarcastic and ambiguous attitude towards Lee, which may be due to personal jealousy. Symonds was very close to Mary Robinson, who had dedicated to him *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881), and Colby argues that he may have resented Mary's attachment to Lee.<sup>45</sup>

Although they had not yet met, Lee had been in contact with Symonds since the publication of her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in 1880, eager to receive his impressions and comments. His response shows an honest approach, praising the strong points of Lee's work before encouraging her to polish it off and pointing out some elements which he feels need improving:

As an older craftsman, may I speak to you, a younger craftsman, frankly? I think you have a real literary gift. You have the main thing – Love; [...] You love your subject

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<sup>43</sup> "Modern Love: Its Origin and Development," *The Pictorial World*, December 24, 1885, p. 611. VLA.

<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, this review from the *Daily Telegraph*, which is part of the various clippings in the VLA, is undated. As it is a review of *Baldwin*, however, it must have been published in 1886 or early 1887.

<sup>45</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 50.



simply, & you bring to the treatment of it rare qualities—almost to exuberant in their unpruned vigour.

I should like to write the phrase of Sacchini over your desk – “Chiarezza, bellezza, buona modulazione.” On the point of clearness, I feel that each of your chapters (except perhaps the “Musical Life”) suffers from want of previous thinking out. They lack a leading motive, an organic gliederung. There is a kind of allusiveness & outpouring in your way of dealing with material, which cannot fail to confuse people for whom the whole set of musicians & literary people are unknown. [...]

On the point of beauty, you must abandon superfluous adjectives, repetitions, & incoherent strings of clauses with a dash to save all at the close. Relentless compression would add infinitely to the grace of your style.<sup>46</sup>

In *Studies*, Symonds had already found those faults which he would criticize in Lee’s work on the Italian Renaissance, a territory he was even more familiar with. He praises Lee’s passionate and knowledgeable approach, yet he suggests she refine her writing by means of clarity, modulation and articulation. In a way, Symonds forestalls Nencioni’s critique, which centred on Lee’s verbosity and over structured argumentations. In his letters to Lee, Symonds maintains a friendly tone, seemingly encouraging her literary endeavours and acknowledging her achievements, as when he recommends Lee to the editors of *Encyclopædia Britannica* for the entry on Metastasio – about whom Lee had written extensively in *Studies* – suggesting she take that opportunity so as to increase her visibility within the British literary milieu.<sup>47</sup> His comments about Lee to Mary Robinson, however, appear less muffled. While he defines her a swift-spirited and “most electrical companion,” in commenting on her writings on painting he overtly expresses his disgust for what he labels “Vernon’s stylistic perversities”:

Good God! How I wish she would but discipline her powers! I have been reading that last paper of hers in the Cornhill. She can “write,” as George Meredith means writing – carve the thing out for us in her words; so that we see it there, & see it never fresher, its own inner self. But she shocks & irritates by the ineffable ugliness

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<sup>46</sup> John Addington Symonds to Vernon Lee, May 23, 1880, in *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, ed. Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, 3 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967-1969), 2, pp. 635-6.

<sup>47</sup> See Symonds’s letter to Lee, July 30, 1882: “The Editor of Encycl Brit writes to ask me to do for him Metastasio. I have told him that I am not unwilling to do it, but that I think you are far more capable of doing it well, & have given him your address at 84 Gower Street. [...] Of course I do not know whether you will care for this kind of work. But it always seems to me worth doing, inasmuch as the Encycl Brit has an enormous circulation in all English-speaking countries.” Ibid., p. 761.

& vulgarity into wh[ich] she so willingly plunges. Only women seem capable of that stylistic dévergardage. I do not think I am a purist. But I cannot stomach “flobbery & flobby,”<sup>48</sup> “greengrocers’ garlands,” “besotten barmaid” “sordid slut,” & all the “creases” “flaccid” “flesh” so liberally showered upon us in a douche of mud.

May 4. I was stopped here in the midst of my invective yesterday. But really I do feel pretty strongly about Vernon’s stylistic perversities. The passage on Velasquez is so powerful [so luminous] that certain other passages—ugly, incoherent, ungrammatical, as (to use her own words) of a “sordid slut”—cause one *absolute pain*.<sup>49</sup>

In 1883, after reading Lee’s “The Responsibilities of Unbelief” – included in *Baldwin* – as well as her brother Eugene’s sonnets, he writes to suggest that she visit him in Switzerland.<sup>50</sup> But in the letters he addresses to other correspondents, one detects a different tone, as for example when he asks Miss Poynter about Mary Robinson and Lee, saying that “[t]he latter becomes more insufferable in her ignorant conceit every day.”<sup>51</sup> His letters to Lee, however, become more caustic as she starts publishing on Renaissance topics. In early April 1884, while admitting that he has already told her “too often & too rudely what has always made me slightly unsympathetic to your published writings, in spite of the very great admiration I have felt for their intellectual force & fearless originality,” he also wants to make sure he has “hit the mark precisely.” Thus, he proceeds to a thorough critique of her writing style. Symonds especially criticizes her for being too self-assured and adopting an arrogant, patronizing tone:

I feel that you imagine yourself to be so clever that every thing you think is either right or else valuable. And your way of expressing yourself is so uncompromising that your belief in yourself grates upon my sense of what is just and dignified. [...]

It is possible to be frank without being flippant, rude, or patronising. You can be firm without appearing to have posed as an oracle.

[...] I cannot help thinking you would be really greater & more effective, if you were (to use a vulgar phrase) less cocksure about a heap of things.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Perhaps a misprint for “slobbery & slobby.”

<sup>49</sup> John Addington Symonds to Mary Robinson, May 3, 1883, in *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, 2, pp. 813-14.

<sup>50</sup> John Addington Symonds to Vernon Lee, May 22, 1883, *ibid.*, pp. 814-15.

<sup>51</sup> John Addington Symonds to Eleanor Frances Poynter, October 17, 1883, *ibid.*, p. 853.

<sup>52</sup> John Addington Symonds to Vernon Lee, April 4, 1884, *ibid.*, pp. 897-98.

Notwithstanding the harsh critique, Symonds concludes his letter by proposing once more that Lee should go visit him, adding that he is looking forward to receiving a copy of the upcoming *Euphorion*. Lee sent him a copy the next June, but in the letter of appreciation he sent her he gave the book a slating. He sounds a bit sarcastic in his praise of “the freedom” of Lee’s method. He seemingly compares it favourably to his *The Renaissance in Italy*, whose style he defines “stiff & hampering.” In the first part of the letter, he also expresses his admiration for “the imagination, the learning visited with emotion[,] the originality & audacity of your view, even the paradoxes”<sup>53</sup> which, as we have seen, were also some of the faults that Nencioni finds in Lee’s work. As he proceeds to examine into detail each of Lee’s essays, however, Symonds constantly makes reference to his own work on the same subjects:

With “The Sacrifice” and “Italy of the Elizn Dr” I almost wholly concur. The gist of the former article is what I always tried to impress in each session of the book I wrote. You will find the latter in quite remarkable harmony with my chapter on the Drama in Vol 5 of “Rn in It,” as well as with the essay on Vittoria Accoramboni & A Cinque Cento Brutus in my “Italian Byways.”

Your defence of L.[orenzo] de Medici’s genius interests me. You rate him higher as a poet than I do. But I believe you will find that I had (in Vol 4 of R in It) done justice to the versatility & originality of his initiative.

With what you say about Boiardo, especially as to his relations to Ariosto, you will see that I am again in harmony, if you turn to my chapter on him in Vol 4 of “R in It.” Perhaps, however you know that already, for it appeared in the Fortnightly some 9 years ago. I think you neglect the fact that he was a sound s[c]holar, a wider read scholar than Ariosto, & that Ariosto’s transmutation of classical material existed already in Boiardo’s work.<sup>54</sup>

What Symonds may have found particularly irritating in Lee’s work were probably not the similarities to his own viewpoints on similar subjects. *Euphorion* begins with a quotation from Symonds’s *The Revival of Learning*, from which Lee borrows the metaphor of Euphorion as the embodiment of the Renaissance spirit. In the Appendix, however, she explains that she has deliberately avoided reading Symonds’s study on Italian literature – that is, the fourth volume he specifically refers to in the letter – “from a fear that finding myself doubtless forestalled by him in various appreciations, I might

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<sup>53</sup> John Addington Symonds to Vernon Lee, June 20, 1884. Ibid., p. 922.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

deprive my essays of what I feel to be their principal merit, namely, the spontaneity and wholeness of personal impression" (E2, 238).<sup>55</sup>

In the rest of the letter, wherever Symonds cannot connect the points of Lee's argument which he appreciates to his own published work he lingers on the elements of her analysis which he disagrees with, as for example Lee's portrait of Fra Angelico, which he dismisses as "crudely unintelligent." According to Colby, throughout this letter Symonds's prose is "calculatedly ambiguous," because even in the passages where he praises Lee's works, he is in fact pointing out that his own studies had already forestalled those points, often coming to very similar conclusions. Colby also argues that the most interesting part of his criticism of *Euphorion*, especially given Symonds's same-sex interest, is to be found at the end of this letter, where he examines Lee's essay "Medieval Love."<sup>56</sup> He considers the chapter too wordy as far as her prose is concerned, and while agreeing with her argument that chivalrous love sprang out of illicit passions, he dismisses her tone not only as simplistic, but also as judgmental. And in so doing, he compares adultery to same-sex desire:

"Medieval Love" is an attractive specimen of modern reconstructive criticism. No one ever doubted that Chivalrous Love in its feudal manifestations, was adulterous. Surely you have spent too much time in trying to make us believe that it was adulterous in its origin & essence, & in so copiously illustrating what Tennyson has packed into 4 words—"honour rooted in dishonour." Your treatment of the more repulsive side of the subject is pretty much the same as that of a man who, dealing with the real Greek Platonic Love, should insist upon the patent fact that it had more or less of an indissoluble connection with a vice wh[ich] bears an uglier name than Adultery.<sup>57</sup>

After the publication of *Euphorion*, Lee's contacts with Symonds seem to come to an end. Lee's letters suggest that she felt a strong intellectual admiration for him, but she did not hold him in equally high regard from a personal point of view. Her consideration for Pater was clearly different, yet I believe both should be mentioned in order to place and understand Lee's work on Renaissance Italy. Symonds's letter on *Euphorion* certainly raises some aspects that may be worth some critical comparison.

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, in a review appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1884, one reads a very similar critique: "[Lee] should have read Symonds, whom she says she has avoided, for his *Italian Byways* and *Italian Literature* have preceded her and might have aided her." The review is qtd. in Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>57</sup> *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, 2, p. 923.

Interestingly, the first element that connects Lee's Renaissance work to Pater's and Symonds's is their focus on specific personalities and figures, both historical – as in the case of St. Francis, Ariosto and Boiardo, and the masters of the Italian Quattrocento and Cinquecento – and mythological or imaginative – as in the case of Euphorion, Orlando and Rinaldo, Nicolette and Aucassin and especially Domenico Neroni. Lee notably conceived her narration of the life of this imaginary fifteenth-century artist as an “imaginary portrait” similar to the ones Pater had published in *Macmillan's Magazine* between 1885 and 1887. I argue that the portrait form is an interesting critical category to investigate the nineteenth-century representations of Renaissance Italy. I embrace, and extend to the works of Vernon Lee, Lubbock's assumption that such a form identifies a literary genre that allowed Pater to convey the immediacy that characterizes his mode of interpreting the past, but also to reflect about the relation between his historical imagination, the object of his investigation and the effect such a literary form would produce on his readership.<sup>58</sup>

This, in turn, helps shed some light on Lee's distinctive voice, also from a gender point of view. Zorn, for instance, argues that Lee exploits Pater “as methodological reference,” but at the same time she attempts at disentangling her work and perspective from “his exclusive, male-centred design.”<sup>59</sup> From this point of view, Lee was self-assured about the literary strategy she was adopting, which explains why she decided to sign her work under a pen name which hides a female-gendered persona. As she explains in a letter to Henrietta Jenkin, “I don't care that Vernon Lee should be known to be myself or any other young woman, as I am sure that no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt.”<sup>60</sup> She was aware of the fact that aesthetics and history were male-gendered territories, and thus, Zorn suggests, one should seek “underneath a seemingly unmarked text” in order to find the gendered elements that are embedded in her work.<sup>61</sup>

This critical perspective has recently been adopted also in order to study the queer reception of the Italian Renaissance in the nineteenth century, although such analysis has not been applied to Vernon Lee. Ivory, for instance, argues that it is “in the portrait that stylistic connections between the Renaissance and late nineteenth-century sexual

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<sup>58</sup> Jules Lubbock, “Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. The Imaginary Portrait as Cultural History,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 46 (1983), pp. 166-67.

<sup>59</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 40.

<sup>60</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, December 18, 1878, qtd. in Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 58.

dissidence become most legible.”<sup>62</sup> Ivory moves from Denisoff’s claim that, as a result of the development of visual culture in the Victorian Age, portraiture became the object of “broader cultural visualizations of the new sex- and gender-based identities.”<sup>63</sup> In a much similar way, Lacan also posits the central role of the gaze in the formation of the self. He argues that in the so-called mirror stage, the baby learns to distinguish between itself and its mother’s image, and in so doing he becomes aware of sexual difference.<sup>64</sup> Whilst I am not embracing any psychoanalytical approach, I think that the perspective of a gendered or queer gaze, and the idea that the subject of artistic – literary or visual – representation, as well as the gaze which produces it, might combine to produce what is perceived and represented,<sup>65</sup> may help investigate Lee’s Renaissance portraits, beginning from the figure in which she recognizes the very essence of the Renaissance spirit, Euphorion.

### 2.1. Euphorion, the spirit of Renaissance as the offspring of a “mystical marriage”

Interestingly, the title of Vernon Lee’s first collection of essays on the Renaissance is based on an allegorical figure which is the offspring of a mystical marriage. In choosing to title her work *Euphorion*, she draws at once on the ancient Greek tradition, Romantic literature, and the contemporary discourse of history and aesthetics. Lee explains in her Introduction that she has named the book after the “marvellous child born of the mystic marriage of Faust and Helena” (EI, 3). She makes explicit mention of her sources, explaining that she has borrowed this allegory from Symonds, who, in turn, has taken it from Goethe’s *Faustus*. Interestingly, however, there is no mention here – and neither is there in the second volume of Symonds’s study, from which Lee selects and quotes a passage – of the mythical origin of Euphorion, and hence to the way Goethe appropriated and transformed it. According to the myth, Euphorion was the son of Achilles and Helen in the Land of the Blessed, and Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt as he was flying over Milos. In the Second Part of *Faust*, instead, Goethe introduces

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<sup>62</sup> Ivonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Dennis Denisoff, *Sexual Visibility from Literature to Film, 1850-1950* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 2, qtd. in Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style*, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 159.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

Euphorion as the son of Faust and Helena, a beautiful youth who dies during his bold flight, which represents his transgression of parental authority.

The importance of this “citational mode” for Lee to place her work within the context of the established male discourse of history and aesthetics is clear if one considers that her introduction opens with a quote from Symonds’s *The Revival of Learning*. Lee comments on this passage in the following pages, and this allows her to put forth a preliminary definition of her conception of the Renaissance spirit. Symonds had mentioned the legend of Faust in a chapter devoted to the rising of Humanism. Lee deliberately leaves out part of Symonds’s text, but she does not include ellipses marks to indicate the cut she operates. Symonds’s text reads as follows:

Faustus is therefore a parable of the impotent yearnings of the spirit in the Middle Ages – its passionate aspiration, its conscience-stricken desire, its fettered curiosity amid the cramping limits of imperfect knowledge and irrational dogmatism. *That for which Faustus sold his soul, the freedom he acquired by magic, the sense of beauty he gratified through visions, the knowledge he gained by interrogation of demons, was yielded to the world without price at the time of the Renaissance. Homer, no longer by the intervention of a fiend, but by the labour of the scholar, sang to the new age. The pomp of the empires of the old world was restored in the pages of historians. The indestructible beauty of Greek art, whereof Helen was an emblem, became, through the discovery of classic poetry and sculpture, the possession of the modern world. Mediævalism took this Helen to wife, and their offspring, the Euphorion of Goethe’s drama, is the spirit of the modern world. (RI2, 39)*<sup>66</sup>

Lee curiously omits the passage where Symonds explains the sense of Faustus’s “impotent yearnings” and “passionate aspiration.” According to Symonds, spiritual freedom, the sense of beauty and the desire for knowledge were the core elements of the Renaissance, which, by giving them full prominence, eventually realized the aspirations of the Middle Ages.

Lee uses Symonds’s book as a secondary source in which she finds a primary source she exploits for the purposes of her argument. Although at first she does not make any specific remark on Symonds’s use of the figure of Euphorion, she does feel the need to correct the allegorical value of Goethe’s *Faust*. In so doing, however, she also makes an amendment to Symonds’s theorization of the Renaissance and its aftermath.

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<sup>66</sup> I have italicized the passage that Lee omits in the Introduction to *Euphorion*.

According to Goethe, Lee explains, Euphorion is the offspring of Faust and Helena. Like Symonds, Lee sees Faust as “the impersonated Middle Ages,” with their “appetites and curiosities, [and] many and conflicting instincts” (EI, 4). Helen, instead, is defined as an abstracted embodiment of “the spirit of Antiquity.” (EI, 4). According to Lee, however, Goethe had failed to give the offspring of their union its right name, the Renaissance. Goethe, in Lee’s opinion, had conceived Euphorion as the symbol of the Romantic age. Lee does not attribute this fault to Goethe, but to the status of historical scholarship. She claims that the Renaissance – as much historiography would suggest a century later – is in fact a nineteenth-century discovery, a phenomenon that even Gibbon and Roscoe had been unable to grasp properly.

Perhaps influenced by the great amount of the fin-de-siècle work on the Renaissance culture, as well as the changes that have occurred in the discourse of history since the 1970s, recent criticism seems to highlight the Renaissance traits of Goethe’s Euphorion.<sup>67</sup> In any case, this Romantic allegory enables Lee not only to put forth her own conception of the Renaissance, but also to outline the specific features of the Renaissance spirit by comparing it to that of the Middle Ages. In *Euphorion*, as the subtitle of the volume suggests, Lee echoes Burckhardt’s methodological framework and particularly his rejection of the historical perspective, and in so doing she adopts a proto-cultural studies approach, connecting the Renaissance civilization to its individuals and its cultural productions. The subtitle to *Euphorion* reads *Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, which is a testimony to her organic conception of history, but also suggests her idea that the Renaissance developed out of pre-existing cultural conditions without a radical rupture with the past. This belief, it should be added, also suggests that Lee – like Symonds and Pater – is implicitly taking the distance from Ruskin’s idea of the fatal and disastrous end of the Middle Ages.<sup>68</sup>

For Lee, like Symonds and Pater before her, the Renaissance developed and achieved some of the results that the Middle Ages were striving for, as one can understand from her characterization of Faust as the medieval man, “[p]ostponed and repressed [...] from the things of the flesh and the world” and caught in the constant attempt to abstain from “supersensuous desires” (EI, 3-4). Despite being the child of Faust and Helena, Euphorion does not stand for the Renaissance drive which raises to

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<sup>67</sup> T. K. Seung, for instance, explains that “Euphorion is the Faust of the Renaissance, who should be distinguished from the Faust of Arcadia, the paragon of medieval culture.” See T. K. Seung, *Goethe, Nietzsche, and Wagner: their Spinozan Epics of Love and Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 83 ff.

<sup>68</sup> Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 233.



overthrow the medieval order. He is, in fact, the “child of the Middle Ages, taking life and reality from them, but born out of and curiously nurtured by the spirit of Antiquity, to which significant accident has given the name of Renaissance” (*EI*, 7).

Lee conceives the Renaissance not as a historically-defined and well-delimited period in the history of Europe, but rather as a cultural category. From this perspective, I suggest that she is at once following and refuting Pater’s precedent, and his claim that fifteenth-century Italy was more important for its spirit than for what it produced in terms of art or scholarly work:

The Renaissance of the fifteenth-century was, in many things, great rather by what it designed than by what it achieved. Much which it aspired to do, and did but imperfectly or mistakenly, was accomplished in what is called the *éclaircissement* of the eighteenth-century, or in our own generation; and what really belongs to the revival of the fifteenth-century is but *the leading instinct, the curiosity, the initiatory idea*. (*R*, 25; my emphasis)

The idea that the Renaissance was born out of a developmental process begun in the Middle Ages – and not in direct opposition to medieval civilization – blurs distinctions and periodizations. Even Symonds, who has got a far more scholarly approach than Lee and Pater, avoids setting clear temporal boundaries to the Renaissance. In fact, by seeing in the Renaissance the transitional process which brings forth the modern spirit – and this also accounts for his appropriation of Goethe’s allegory – Symonds claims the impossibility of considering such a process as wholly concluded. Especially in the nineteenth century, Symonds argues, the concept has been used as an indication of

the whole transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern World; and though it is possible to assign certain limits to the period during which this transition took place, we cannot fix on any dates so positively as to say – between this year and that the movement was accomplished. To do so would be like trying to name the days on which spring in any particular season began and ended. Yet we speak of spring as different from winter and from summer. The truth is, that in many senses we are still in mid-Renaissance. The evolution has not been completed. (*RII*, 2)

Likewise, the “Two Early French Stories” that Pater places at the beginning of his collection, along with the essay on Winckelmann that closes it, reveal this flexibility and

the uselessness of embracing chronological limits to dovetail what should be conceived as a cultural category rather than as definite historical period. As Pater states towards the end of “Winckelmann,” the approach he endorses refutes discontinuities in order to preserve “the identity of European culture” (R, 180), so much so that, as Carolyn Williams remarks, his definition of the Renaissance is so inclusive that it comes to coincide with Western history as a whole.<sup>69</sup>

This is a point that Lee also makes in the introduction to *Euphorion*, although her focus is restricted to the Italian civilization. Lee, who signs her introduction from Siena,<sup>70</sup> had been living in Italy since 1873. Thus she can claim special acquaintance with “the concrete things, [...] the concrete realities of thought and feeling left behind by the Renaissance” (E1, 16). At the end of the volume, she explains that she has used such concrete realities so as to focus on general “modes of feeling and forms of art” and hence on “abstractions” (E2, 223). This enables her to ponder on what remains of the Renaissance civilization in Italy. Writing after the achievement of the Unitarian State and the proclamation of Rome as the capital city, she notes that the new nation is still half medieval. On the whole, Italy has not been “able to weave for herself a new, a modern civilization” (E1, 16) as have other European nations whose civilizations have taken benefit from the achievements of Renaissance Italy. Thus, like Pater, she rejects discontinuities and adopts a model of enquiry that follows a developmental pattern.

By introducing her study through the my(s)thical figure of Euphorion, Lee is able to point out to her readers the scope of her inquiry, and indirectly acknowledges Pater at both a methodological and a lexical level. As I have argued before, Pater deconstructs conventional patterns in order to unveil the syncretic flux of elements which formed the spirit of the Renaissance. His aim is therefore to unveil, as if he were a chemist, “the active principle” of any form of art – forms which he conceives as “concrete” manifestations of the human thought, as Lee also does – by polishing them off “the commoner elements” (R, xxi) that they are likely to be found in association with.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, also the language that Lee uses in order to explain the aims of her study relies on the discourse of chemistry. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Lee argues,

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<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Transfigured World*, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> The Introduction was written in Siena in September 1882.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Pater was to stress this again in his essay on “Style,” which appeared right before the third edition of *The Renaissance* in 1888. Here, he immediately reminds his readers that “all progress of mind consists for the most part in differentiation, in the resolution of an obscure and complex object into its component aspects.” See Walter Pater, “Style,” 1888, in *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 5.

should not be conceived as the poles of a binary opposition, but rather as two catalysts which

acted and reacted upon each other, united in concord or antagonism; forming, like the gases of the chemist, new things, sometimes like and sometimes unlike themselves and each other; producing now some unknown substance of excellence and utility, at other times some baneful element, known but too well elsewhere, but unexpected here. (EI, 8)

Periods and civilization in history are distinguished by “chemically defined colours” (EI, 9-10). Lee’s metaphorical use of the language of chemistry does not only establish a connection between her work and Pater’s, backing Zorn’s claim that Lee was trying to root it in coeval academic discourse in order to give herself an authoritative tone; it also looks ahead to T.S. Eliot’s theory of poetry as “impersonal,” subjected to the forces of literary tradition and individual genius. A theory which Eliot would illustrate by means of a chemical reaction sparked by the presence of catalysts.<sup>72</sup>

After putting forth a sort of disclaimer, by which she explains that her work should not be received as a scientific study of the Renaissance, Lee adds that such a task would be nonetheless hard because of the impossibility to penetrate the past from the point of view of its historical actors. Her refusal of a neat separation between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance does not lead her farther than attempting to sum up “the history of mediæval romance in Renaissance Italy” (EI, 14). Her interest lies not so much in what the Renaissance represents from an epistemic point of view. In seeking the origin and development of its “harmonies and anomalies” (EI, 7), she purports to find out what the hybrid nature of the Renaissance had produced at the level of civilization and culture. In a way, she is once again echoing Pater’s idea of the Renaissance as “a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination

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<sup>72</sup> In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot argues that poetic maturity is reached when the poet becomes “a finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.” Interestingly, in Eliot’s theory feelings and emotions are kindled as if chemically activated by a catalyst. He argues that when two gases “are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.” T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 7-8.

for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt" (R, 1-2).

According to Lee, the very term Renaissance is not correct, and its usage is the result of an "accident." She stresses the same point elsewhere in her work, as for instance in her essay on "The Outdoor Poetry," where she writes off the Renaissance as a foolish label conveying "a quite incorrect notion of sudden and miraculous birth" (E1, 138). I argue that such a statement has an interesting dual implication. Not only does it demonstrate a romantic, organic approach to history and – as I shall expound in the third chapter – art. By denying the existence of a definite turning point in the cultural history of Europe, to be located at the end of the Middle Ages – and roughly in the fifteenth century – Lee partly embraces Michelet's ambiguities. As we have seen, although he conceived the Renaissance in terms of a clear-cut rupture with the Middle Ages, Michelet nevertheless theorized that the end of the Middle Ages was gradual, with several aspects of the period agonizing and relapsing between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. A conception that for Pater recurs in French scholars, who "have often dwelt on this notion of a Renaissance in the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century" (R, 1), and which he embraces by "healing that rupture between the middle age and the Renaissance which has so often been exaggerated" (R, 2).

In this regard, Lee forestalls much of twentieth-century historiography, from Arnold Toynbee – who spells the noun "renaissance" lower-case in order to suggest that the phenomenon ought to be intended as the result of a plurality of elements, and not as one single, and well-defined phase – to Peter Burke's disavowal of the concept. Embracing Toynbee's ideological claim concerning the "error of seeing a unique occurrence in an event which in reality was no more than one particular instance of a recurrent historical phenomenon," whose "proper label is, not the 'Renaissance,' but the renaissances,"<sup>73</sup> Burke suggests that there were many "renascences" even outside Western Europe – the revival of Antiquity and Hellenism being only one of them. In addition to this, Burke adds that it is impossible to isolate a phase of systematic and self-conscious imitation of antiquity in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy, because in this country, "unlike some other parts of Europe, the classical tradition had never been remote."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Contacts between Civilizations in Time (Renaissances); Law and Freedom in History; The Prospects of the Western Civilization*, vol. 9 of *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 88.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Burke, *The Renaissance* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 3-5, 23.

Lee anticipates such views on historical progression. She argues that the first element that should be borne in mind in order to understand the specificity of the Renaissance spirit is the fact that the Middle Ages did not exist in the same way all over Europe. Medieval Italy, in particular, did not suffer much from the ties of feudalism, and because of the relics of “the old Latin institutions of town and country” (*E1*, 138), it would be incorrect to suppose that the revival of antiquity was a phenomenon limited to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lee equates the Renaissance with Euphorion, and not with Helen, whom she sees as a quasi-embodiment of antiquity. According to Lee, the revival of antiquity represents only one side of the Renaissance, which should be conceived as “a movement” in which antiquity was combined with “mediæval democratic progress” (*E2*, 213). Indeed, in the “Epilogue” to *Euphorion*, after expressing her hope that the reader may have followed her argument throughout the various essays, Lee attempts a definition of the Renaissance as “that portion of the Middle Ages which is mediaeval no longer, but already more than half modern, which began in Italy not with the establishment of despotism and the coming of Greek humanists, but with the independence of the free towns and with the revival of Roman tradition” (*E2*, 228). Although it did not achieve much, the Middle Ages did contain the seed of modernity, the germs of those advancements in the realms of art, thought, feelings and institutions which the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth century were able to realize. Lee’s refusal of a dichotomous approach is even clearer in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. Lee had already defined her object of inquiry in *Euphorion*, and at the beginning of her second volume on the subject she stresses the role of the Franciscan movement in enfranchising man from medieval fetters.

From the very beginning of *Euphorion*, Lee highlights that the Renaissance is the product of an intercourse. Being the offspring of a marriage, its genetic makeup is so mixed up that it becomes impossible to disentangle the specific contribution provided by each of the parents. Lee’s Renaissance studies are marked by a continuous refusal of dichotomies and binary oppositions, and she repeatedly dissects the two poles of the spectrum that stretches between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For instance, in the essay on “The School of Boiardo,” Lee argues that the Middle Ages are not “the companion piece to Antiquity,” and that “no such ideal correspondence exists,” suggesting that the period was instead notable for its chaotic and heterogeneous nature (*E2*, 57). Likewise, the morality – or the lack thereof – of the Renaissance civilization is explained by means of the innocent blindness to evil of its people. Especially in “The

Sacrifice” and “The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists,” Lee’s inquiry – following Jacob Burckhardt and his notion of the state as a work of art, but also responding to Symonds’s *The Age of Despots* – begins by mapping the political situation of Italy in the fifteenth century, with specific focus on the emergence of despotism and tyrannies. The civilization of Renaissance Italy and its art are not interpreted by Lee as the product of loose morality, but rather as resulting from the indifference to evil. Whilst individualism and the drive to success were thriving, the Italians “neither resisted evil nor rebelled against virtue; they were indifferent to both” (E1, 89). Lee shows an evident debt to her predecessors, but she also slightly departs from them in her conclusions. As it trickled down the lowest social strata, evil did not thrive because of self-interest and individualism, but because it produced widespread moral indifference:

The princelets and prelates and mercenary [sic] generals indulged in every sensuality, turned treachery into a science and violence into an instrument; and sometimes let themselves be intoxicated into mad lust and ferocity, as their subjects were occasionally intoxicated with mad austerity and mysticism; but the excesses of mad vice, like the excesses of mad virtue, lasted only a short time, [...]; and the men of the Renaissance speedily regained their level of *indifferent righteousness* and of *indifferent sinfulness*. Righteousness and sinfulness both passive, without power of aggression or resistance, and consequently in strange and dreadful peace with each other. The wicked men did not dislike virtue, nor the good men vice [...]. The prudery of righteousness was as unknown as the cynicism of evil; (E1, 89-90; my emphasis)

According to Lee, this moral atmosphere did not make Renaissance men thirsty for usurpation, violence or revenge. Such circumstances, however, explain their insensitiveness to evil. Because people were unable to perceive it as monstrous or arbitrary, evil became customary, and this also explains why “the great villains of the Renaissance never take up the attitude of fiends.” They were “more or less normal human beings” (E1, 93-4).

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that there is a direct correlation between ideology and the way in which a society organizes its power structures, suggesting that the individual is in fact “fabricated” by the society and its mechanisms of control and punishment. Foucault maintains that a primary need of every society is to establish what represents an offence “according to the means valid for all.” Moreover,

the verification of the crime – which should be followed by punishment – must be subjected to the general criteria for truth that apply to the society in which the crime is committed. It is power, however, that produces reality and creates “domains of objects and rituals of truth.”<sup>75</sup> In a much similar manner, Lee explains that widespread crime and violence during the Renaissance were not the product of a conscious transgression: they were socially acceptable insofar as the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate behaviour were blurred. Thus, whilst Victorian readers would find it hard to sympathize with transgressive behaviour,

traitors and murderers like Lodovico Sforza, incestuous parricides like Gianpaolo Baglioni, committers of every iniquity under heaven like Cesare Borgia – move through the scenery of Renaissance history [...] quietly, serenely, triumphantly; with gracious and magnanimous bearing; applauded, admired, or at least endured. (EI, 91-2)

In “The Love of the Saints,” Lee roots within the Franciscan movement the spiritual revival of the Middle Ages which led to the achievements of the fifteenth century. Before Francis of Assisi, Lee explains, the soul and the heart of man had been jeopardized in an atmosphere of anarchy and promiscuity in which the Church had been unable to cater for his spiritual needs. Once again, the picture she draws is one of confusing values, and her depiction of this portrait of “pessimistic dualism of God and devil” (RFS, 6) relies on the rhetoric strategy of paradox and oxymoron. Because of widespread Manichaeism, she argues that “on all sides everywhere, heresies were teeming, austere and equivocal, pure and unclean [...] but all of them anarchical,” concluding with the Foucauldian remark that such deeds were nonetheless “destructive at a moment when, above all, order and discipline were wanted” (RFS, 6).

Throughout Lee’s work there are many passages that reveal her interest in similar hybrid aspects generated by the duplicity in the Renaissance. Thus, it is interesting that she chooses to define the concept of the artistic and moral dualism of the Renaissance as the offspring of an intercourse. Although Lee specifically refers to Goethe’s character only in the Introduction to *Euphorion*, I argue that this choice reveals more than just a debt to Goethe and Symonds. It suggests that the focus of her interest is in what might be defined as the mixed product of contradictory impulses and forces, and her definition of

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<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 97, 194.

the Renaissance as a portion of the Middle Ages confirms this mindset. This can also be perceived in her ideas of modernity, and in the readjustment she provides to Goethe's and Symonds's allegorical interpretation of Euphorion. In this way, she also highlights the differences between the civilization of the Renaissance and that of the nineteenth century, which is in fact

the complex descendant, strangely featured by atavism from various sides, of many and various civilizations; and the eighteenth century [...] was in itself a curiously varied grandchild or great-grandchild of such a marriage, its every moral feature, its every intellectual movement proclaiming how much of its being was inherited from Antiquity. (E1, 6-7)

Made at the very beginning of *Euphorion*, such a clarification fulfils more than a gender function. Zorn argues that Lee had to find a steady and subtle way to develop a historical voice that could be at once independent and authoritative. To this end, she had to wear "a borrowed garment," that is, the male discourse through which she was trying to find her way, although her acknowledgments at the end of *Euphorion* indicate the extent to which she was aware of the "masquerade" she was enacting.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to this, Lee's appropriation of Euphorion reveals another gendered aspect. Symonds, unlike Lee, seems to confine a good part of the results achieved by the Renaissance to an exclusively male milieu. For, he argues, the Renaissance could achieve what the Middle Ages were only longing for by means of "long and toilsome study, by the accumulation of MSS., by the acquisition of dead languages, by the solitary labour of grammarians, by the lectures of itinerant professors, by the scribe, by the printing press, by the self-devotion of magnificent Italy to erudition" (RI2, 39). Interestingly, whereas in *The Revival of Learning* Symonds identifies Euphorion as the *spirit* of the modern world – which, as such, may be interpreted as a non-human, and therefore genderless entity – in the first part of *Italian Literature*, the offspring of Faustus and Helen finds its human counterpart in the circle of male humanists in Medicean Florence:

This man was found in Angelo Poliziano. He, and only he, was destined, by combining the finish of the classics with the freshness of a language still in use, to inaugurate the golden age of form. Faustus, the genius of the middle ages, had

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<sup>76</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 42. Fraser (*The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, p. 229) suggests that Lee eventually found her own voice in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*.



wedded Helen, the vision of the ancient world. Their son, Euphorion, the inheritor of all their gifts, we hail in Poliziano. (RI4, 401)

By introducing *Euphorion* through such a citational mode, Lee demonstrates to possess the literary and scholarly knowledge that was still a largely male prerogative at the times. In this way, she succeeds in asserting her own viewpoint, and placing her argument within the established discourses of scholarship, literature and aesthetics. The fact that such an interest in hybridity is also stressed, a decade later, in the opening of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, confirms that Lee found her own approach to the history of culture. “The Love of the Saints” begins with the remark that, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the twelfth century, European culture had been significantly shaped by a “mixture of races and civilizations,” although such contacts, she argues, was “less fertile on the whole than poisonous” (RFS, 5).

Although Euphorion is explicitly mentioned as a character only in the first pages of her 1882 collection, I suggest that the values, ideas and evaluation criteria she expresses by embracing and slightly modifying Goethe’s and Symonds’s allegory should be borne in mind in order to read her study of the Italian Renaissance as a whole. Although the name Euphorion does not appear elsewhere in the volume, in the “Epilogue” Lee interestingly returns to the point she had started with. She defines the object of her interest not as a historical, artistic or cultural subject, but as a *dramatis persona*, explaining that her picture of the Renaissance should not be judged as a subject matter, but as a character created by the author. A *dramatis persona* that consists of abstractions which “exist only in my mind and in the minds of those who think like myself” (E2, 223).

This, in a way, suggests that Lee closes her volume of Renaissance studies with an attempt to re-enact the strategy of inclusion of her voice in the dominant male discourse. And this unveils not only the influence of Pater’s critical method, but also the similarities between the two writers. In the Preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater emphasizes the need for the aesthetic critic to focus on his individual response towards the object of inquiry. Yet Pater’s statement, Lee’s definition of the Renaissance, and part of the elements she is interested in, reveal another aspect that may be worth considering from the point of view of gender and sexuality. Ivory argues that, after its extensive codification by nineteenth-century historiography, the Renaissance became the subject of a narrative particularly appealing to newly self-aware queer intellectuals. The reason for this appropriation lies

in the variety of elements which the Renaissance provided them with, such as individualism and the aestheticization of life, the celebration of the body and the tolerance – as we have already seen – of vice, excess and violence, which also included illicit sexual practices.<sup>77</sup>

Although I embrace Ivory's argument, I partly disagree with her use of the word homosexual, which requires some contextualization. I believe she is right in pointing out that at the turn of the century non-heterosexual individuals became aware of their newly-dovetailed status as homosexual. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the contemporary notion of "homosexuality" developed during the nineteenth century, when sexuality was first described in terms of discursive formulations.<sup>78</sup> According to Foucault, the Victorian desire to establish a political economy of the population fostered the emergence of a new discipline, which he calls *scientia sexualis*. The need to safeguard the bourgeois society promoted an "economically useful and politically conservative"<sup>79</sup> defence of heteronormative sexual practices. The insistence on the endogamy of sex and body led to the formulation of clear-cut distinctions between licit and illicit practices, which had its culmination in the 1885 Labouchère amendment.<sup>80</sup> As a result, what was outside the norm was pathologized within the discourse of medicine, and condemned by the law either as a transgression of civic values or as a crime against a politically constructed nature.<sup>81</sup>

Linda Dowling has suggested that, until at least 1877, Victorian Oxford had been an especially alluring place for non-heterosexual intellectuals. The celibacy requirement for fellows, which was abolished that year, had promoted an "ethos of a wholly male

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<sup>77</sup> Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style*, p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. by Richard Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), esp. pp. 187-88. Foucault argues, for instance, that our idea of homosexuality cannot be applied to Ancient Greek sexual practices. In Greek ethics, heterosexual and same-sex desires were not considered as the result of different sexual orientations. For this reason, he also maintains that it would be equally incorrect to categorize those sexual practices according to our conception of "bisexuality."

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Richard Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 37.

<sup>80</sup> Passed in 1885, The Criminal Law Amendment Act strengthened existing regulations against brothels and introduced severe punishment against sexual offences. It also contained the so-called "Labouchère amendment," which condemned "acts of gross indecency" prescribing up to two years in prison, "with or without hard labour." In a much Foucauldian manner, Edsall stresses the importance of this amendment from the point of view of the history of sexuality. Because of its vagueness, but also because it condemned private and public acts altogether, the law was directed not only against "the limited though often ill-defined offenses of sodomy or buggery but homosexuality and homosexual themselves, very much in the modern sense as all-inclusive categories." See *The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885*, with Introduction, Notes and Index by F. Mead, Esq., and A. H. Bodkin, Esq. (London: Shaw & Sons, Fetter Lane and Crane Court, 1885), p. 68, and Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 30 ff.

residential society.”<sup>82</sup> This certainly fostered the emergence of a homosocial community, but it was one which, as Brady remarks, was shaped by an idealistic and non-sexual version of the platonic conception of masculine comradeship.<sup>83</sup> The interest in Plato’s dialogues – especially the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* – was crucial for this community to come to terms with same-sex desire.<sup>84</sup> Along with Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, Symonds was one of the authors of pioneering studies on sexuality in fin-de-siècle England. His apologia of same-sex desire began in the 1880s and led to the publication of two volumes, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), and before his death in 1893 he collaborated with Ellis in writing the treatise *Sexual Inversion*, first published in Germany as *Das konträre Geschlechtsgeföhle* in 1896 and translated into English in April the following year. Symonds, however, had just died, and his family protested against the English publication of the volume. As a result, a second edition was issued in October 1897, in which every reference to Symonds’s name as author or contributor was omitted. His widow and his literary executor, Horatio Forbes Brown, had as many copies of the first edition recalled as possible.<sup>85</sup>

Whilst assuming an organic basis for same-sex desire, Symonds and Carpenter’s work, along with Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), forestalls the separation of sex and gender that would be embraced by queer theorists, for whom gender is not biologically determined but rather performative and defined on a discursive basis.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 80-89, esp. p. 85.

<sup>83</sup> Sean Brady, ed., *John Addington Symonds and Homosexuality. A Critical Edition of Sources* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 15.

<sup>84</sup> Evangelista notes that Symonds’s response to Plato’s dialogues was so enthusiastic that in his *Memoirs* he celebrates such readings in epiphanic terms. See Stefano Evangelista, “‘Lovers and Philosophers at Once’: Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36, No. 2, *Victorian Literature* (2006), p. 232.

<sup>85</sup> The book was also entangled in the 1898 Bedborough Trial, which persecuted the owner of a shop for selling obscene material. On the English editions of *Sexual Inversion* and its judiciary involvements, see Brady, *Symonds and Homosexuality*, p. 1, and Chris White, ed., *Nineteenth-century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 66-7.

<sup>86</sup> In *Sexual Inversion*, Ellis – and presumably Symonds – posits that, in early youth, the sexual instinct “seems to be much less specialized than normally it becomes later. Not only is it, at the outset, less definitely directed to a specific sexual end, but even the sex of its object is sometimes uncertain.” Similarly, in *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter argues that “sexes do not or should not normally form two groups hopelessly isolated in habit and feeling from each other, but that they rather represent the two poles of one [continuous] group.” Queer theories unsettle the balance of normativized gender and sexual categories. By refusing to dovetail sexual identities, they challenge gender identities and roles at an ontological level. In *Gender Trouble*, for instance, Judith Butler argues that gender is produced and enacted through imitation of rituals within a rigid regulatory frame, and hence she defines it as “the repeated stylization of the body.” Thus, queer theories posit the ultimate distinction of sex and gender, which are based on an idea of fixity. Walters, for example, notes that, “[b]eing not gender specific, the term queer dethrones gender as the significant marker of sexual identity and sexual expression.” See Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, volume 2 of *Studies in Sexual Inversion*, 1897 (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1901), p. 44; Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex. A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*, 1908 (New York and London: Mitchell

Such a theoretical premise partly accounts for my disagreeing with Ivory's use of the word homosexual which, I argue, should be carefully contextualized when applying it to the authors I am taking into consideration.<sup>87</sup> Brady points out that notwithstanding his desire for other men, Symonds's later life was marked by a "self-imposed asceticism" which prevented him to fulfil his sexual impulses. Although he had been acquitted the previous year, in 1863 Symonds resigned his fellowship at Magdalen College because he had been accused of corrupting a young chorister, and there is no record of his having homosexual relationship until then.<sup>88</sup> Whilst there is evidence of his relationship with Edward Norman Moor after 1869 – when he was reading Plato, but also when he was already married to his wife Catherine – the two voluntarily abstained from sexual intercourse.<sup>89</sup>

The case of Walter Pater has been a puzzle for many critics for over a century. Until the late 1980s, no evidence seemed to prove his actual involvement in a homoerotic relationship with an undergraduate of Balliol College. The Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* had raised a scandal, and the following year he was forced to resign his fellowship as Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, had come into possession of some letters proving his liaison with William Money Hardinge. The affair is said to have changed Pater profoundly, turning him into an even more secluded man, and he left no account of his having a relation of any sort.<sup>90</sup>

Lee's sexuality is also a quite complex matter. Whilst she may easily be defined as non-heterosexual, she cannot be defined as a lesbian in modern terms. There is no

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Kennerley, 1912), p. 16; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 32 ff, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace", 1996 in *Queer Theory*, ed. Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 13. For an analysis of Ellis's and Carpenter's influence on the sexual politics of Modernism, cf. Marco Canani, "A Tentative Quest for Gender Identity: Elements of Queer Discourse in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and *Between the Acts*," *Textus. English Studies in Italy* 26, No. 2 (2013), pp. 48-49. For a review of queer theories, see also Hall, *Queer Theories*, esp. pp. 51-81, and Jan Campbell, *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer and Postcolonial Theory. A Psychoanalytic Contribution* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000) esp. pp. 147-49.

<sup>87</sup> It should be noted, however, that other authors agree with Ivory in adopting the word "homosexual." See for example Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds., *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1, pp. 262-63, 339-40, 429-30, and Gabriele Griffin, *Who's Who in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 118, 152-53, 194-95.

<sup>88</sup> William F. Shuter, "The 'Outing' of Walter Pater," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48, No. 4 (March 1994), p. 489.

<sup>89</sup> Brady, *Symonds and Homosexuality*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>90</sup> Shuter, "The 'Outing' of Walter Pater," pp. 481-2. The story of Pater's sexual involvement with Hardinge and Jowett's reaction to it has been well documented by Billie Andrew Inman, who reconstructs it through some letters exchanged by some undergraduates – including Arnold Toynbee – who were aware of the matter. Inman's research was published as "Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge," in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1991), pp. 1-20, qtd. in Shuter, who calls into question her reconstruction of the way Jowett should have got into possession of Pater's correspondence with Hardinge.

evidence that she had a sexual liaison with Mary Robinson, although Ellis suggested to Symonds that the two women be considered as a case study for *Sexual Inversion*.<sup>91</sup> Two decades later, the letter she sent Kit Anstruther-Thomson on August 18, 1904, suggests that the two shared some romantic affection along with a professional relationship, but they also reveal her former feelings for Mary Robinson, whom she defines “the first great friendship and love” of her life.<sup>92</sup> Briggs warns against the tendency to adopt a far too narrow gendered reading of Lee’s works. Such obsessive lingering on Lee’s sexuality, in an attempt to “out” any lesbian hints that might be hidden in her writing, Briggs continues, has been detrimental to her reception.<sup>93</sup> I do not intend to impose such a strict gendered, queer interpretation on Lee’s works. Likewise, I am not going to avoid reading her texts from a psychoanalytical perspective, linking them to Lee’s biographical experience.<sup>94</sup> Yet I believe it may be interesting to bear in mind Ivory’s argument regarding the fin-de-siècle appropriation of nineteenth-century Renaissance narratives by non-heterosexual intellectuals like Lee, Symonds and Pater. As Foucault pointed out, the dovetailing of sexual identities and practices at a discursive level fulfils the purpose of enforcing and strengthening social control, but at the same time it also fosters the production of “reverse discourses,” which strategically operate within the society.<sup>95</sup>

Having mapped such a theoretical framework, there is another aspect of Goethe’s *Euphorion* which is worth mentioning. *Euphorion* has often been interpreted as the embodiment of the spirit of modern poetry, which Goethe equates with romantic subjectivism.<sup>96</sup> But contemporary critics also read him as a homage to Byron, whom Goethe had defined “the greatest talent of our century.”<sup>97</sup> Goethe, however, was also aware of Byron’s rebelliousness and aptitude to transgression, which had made him “the

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<sup>91</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 51.

<sup>92</sup> Phyllis F. Mannocchi, “Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson: A Study of Love and Collaboration between Romantic Friends,” *Women’s Studies* 9, No. 2 (1986), p. 132.

<sup>93</sup> Jo Briggs, “Plural Anomalies. Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee,” in Maxwell and Pulham, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>94</sup> This was especially the case with Burdett Gardner, whose PhD dissertation – defended at Harvard in 1954 – was the first thorough study of Lee’s work. Because of its overemphasis on psychoanalytical theory, the fault of such a study lies in my opinion in the fact that Gardner reads Lee’s work only from the point of view of frustrated Lesbian desire. According to Gardner, such a desire – which was to a great extent a consequence of the female model Matilda Paget had provided her with – allegedly made Lee grow a neurotic rejection of her own femininity before puberty. As a result, Lee’s writing would reflect her psychologization of carnal desire, transforming it into a sort of Electra’s complex. See Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, esp. pp. 28, 93-95, 260, 313, 353, 409.

<sup>95</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>96</sup> Jochen Schmidt, *Goethes Faust. Erster und Zweiter Teil. Grundlagen – Werk – Wirkung* (München: Beck, 2001), p. 253.

<sup>97</sup> Andrew Rutherford, ed., *Lord Byron. The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 451.

symbol of the excessive impulse to transgress the limits of customs and law.”<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, in *Faust* Goethe depicts Euphorion as only capable of finding pleasure by demonstrating his strength and exerting his will, and in so doing he “enacts the nexus of violence, art and transience”<sup>99</sup> – elements which Lee recognizes as constituents of the Renaissance spirit. Lee, however, attributes such faults to Faust, who in her theorization embodies the Middle Ages, and not to Euphorion, the child of the Renaissance. In the Introduction to *Euphorion*, Faust is characterized as a man born out of “some evil spell,” “hungry of soul” and driven by “cravings,” “lawless [and] supersensuous desires” as well as “many and conflicting instincts” (*EI*, 3-4). But in Goethe’s drama, Euphorion does not only disobey parental authority in embarking on a deadly, Icarus-like flight. He also needs to vent out his sensuous and violent impulses. He refuses sexual pleasure when it is offered willingly to him, as he can only fulfil his desire by means of violence and assault. His end, which is the result of his transgressive behaviour, is the product of his inability to find a balance between force and ethics.<sup>100</sup>

The fact that Lee makes no explicit mention of this aspects of Euphorion – considering that, although her first source is Symonds’s *The Revival of Learning*, she does make a direct reference to Goethe – but simply attributes them to Faust, may reasonably be interpreted as one of the many aporias that one finds in much of her writing. As I have already argued, though, Lee attributes the crimes and evils of the Renaissance – and the toleration of such crimes – to the general moral indifference, and not to widespread immorality. On the one hand, this may – at least in part – account for the way she polishes “her own” Euphorion off the mischievousness that one finds in Goethe’s drama, blaming her father for it. On the other hand, it must be remembered that for Lee the Renaissance was not a period that developed in direct opposition to the Middle Ages, but an extension or “portion” of them. In any case, the introduction of this character at the very beginning of Lee’s first collection on Renaissance subjects, seems to shed light on many of the aspects that she tackles in the following essays. Euphorion, as Seung remarks, “is the self-asserting individual who shatters the Arcadian bliss. He

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<sup>98</sup> Frank Erik Pointner and Achim Geisenhanslüke, “The Reception of Byron in the German-Speaking Lands,” in *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, ed. Richard A. Cardwell, 2 vols. (London and New York: Continuum: 2004), 2, p. 257.

<sup>99</sup> Elisabeth Krimmer, “‘Schon wieder Krieg! Der Kluge hörts nicht gern’: Goethe, Warfare, and Faust II,” in *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*, ed. Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 137-38.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

stands for the Renaissance individualistic ethos that breaks up the medieval communal dream.”<sup>101</sup>

## 2.2. Gendered embodiments: Abelard, Heloïse and the spirit of the Renaissance

This intertextual reading of Lee’s “Renaissance portraits” also reveals interesting elements from a gender point of view. Whilst Lee’s preference for a thematic categorization over the biographical form reveals the influence of Burckhardt and Symonds, the use of the portrait as a literary device reveals Lee’s debt to Pater. In his case, the portrait becomes an independent, autonomous literary genre. This is evident not only in his *Imaginary Portraits*, but also in *The Renaissance*. Osbourn, for example, maintains that Pater was especially keen on the portrait form in that it provided him with a medium particularly fit to express his appreciation of artworks. By avoiding lyrical description, in his essays he focuses on an individual artist and his works, with specific interest in biographical aspects and historical details.<sup>102</sup>

Whilst Pater’s essays reveal his interest in and attraction for specific Renaissance figures, artists and subject matters, his portrayal of such figures suggests that he was especially drawn to the plasticity of their meaning and the many possibilities of use their ahistorical value offered him. In a way, it seems as if the artists, poets and works around which Pater’s studies develop are not representative in themselves. Rather, they work as examples which he exploits to supply relevant evidence to his abstractions. This also explains Pater’s tendency towards using an alchemic language, which dissolves the essence of the characters he studies, blending and fusing together different images. Thus, Catherine Maxwell has suggested that his historical characters should be viewed as “embodied abstractions,” arguing that Pater is not interested in the specific artists he writes about, but rather in what their works suggest to him. From this perspective, Maxwell continues, his essays about Renaissance personalities should be regarded as paradoxically impersonal.<sup>103</sup> Or, rather, they may be considered personal according to what Pater means to convey through such portraits, and in this sense I suggest that one should bear in mind Lee’s choice to substitute her subject matter with what she labels a

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<sup>101</sup> Seung, *Goethe, Nietzsche, and Wagner*, p. 89.

<sup>102</sup> R. V. Osbourn, *Discovering Walter Pater* (Norwich: Saw Press, 2005), p. 64.

<sup>103</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight. The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 87.

*dramatis persona*. In a way, Lee seems to “remediate” Burckhardt and Pater’s approach.<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, she claims that “[t]he artistic development of a nation has its exact parallel in the artistic development of an individual” (EI, 174). On the other hand, she focuses on specific figures which, like Pater’s, might be regarded as “embodied perspectives.”

A case in point is Pater’s portrayal – in his “Two Early French Stories” – of Abelard and Heloise and Aucassin and Nicolette, two pairs also present in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. These medieval stories help Pater illustrate his idea of the Renaissance. For this reason, he refuses, like Lee, the chronological approach typical of classical historiography. Influenced by Michelet – whom he had read in the 1860s – but also by Hegel, Pater suggests that the spirit of the Renaissance first unfolded in France between the twelfth and the thirteenth century. He believes that the elements that connect the Middle Ages to the Renaissance – legitimizing his conception of a “medieval Renaissance” – can especially be found in the Provençal poetic tradition. It is in the poetry of the troubadours that “earthly passion, with its intimacy, its freedom, its variety – the liberty of the heart – makes itself felt” (R, 3). As such, it is a poetic form “for the few, for the elect and peculiar people of the kingdom of sentiment.” Although it certainly offers examples of a less elevated kind of literature, Pater claims that medieval Provençal poetry is distinguished by “lightness of form and comparative homeliness of interest” (R, 12). Placed at the beginning of his collection, this statement also stresses an interesting element peculiar to Pater. As Donoghue notes, he did not share Symonds’s and Lee’s desire to represent the violent aspects of the Renaissance, and he could not do so because his conception of the Renaissance as an essentially humanistic movement could hardly exist alongside a gallery of treacherous princes and popes.<sup>105</sup>

In “Two Early French Stories,” Pater focuses on the examples of lightness and interest offered by medieval French poetry. He employs these stories to illustrate the antinomianism of the Renaissance and the search for sensuous pleasure in the

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<sup>104</sup> I borrow the concept of “remediation” from media studies. Following Marshall McLuhan’s famous claim that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium,” Bolter and Grusin, have defined remediation – in its general sense – as “the representation of one medium in another.” Although the theory of remediation mostly applies to semiotics and to the study of the interactions between new media, Bolter and Grusin interestingly connect the concept of “refashioning *within* the medium” with literary theory. They argue this is in fact “a special case of remediation, and it proceeds from the same ambiguous motives of homage and rivalry – what Harold Bloom has called the ‘anxiety of influence’ – as do other remediations. Much of what critics have learned about this special kind of refashioning can also help us explore remediation in general. At the very least, their work reminds us that refashioning one’s predecessors is key to understanding representation in earlier media.” See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press: 1999), pp. 45, 49.

<sup>105</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater. Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Knopf, 1995) p. 42.



Renaissance cult for beauty and worship of the body. These elements obviously indicate the Renaissance rejection of the spiritual limitations imposed by Christian dogmas throughout the Middle Ages. In this sense, Pater constructs a discourse of Provençal poetry which is functional to his aim, that is to say, to underscore the blending of the Christian and Pagan elements that would be eventually established during the so-called High Renaissance.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, in his essay on Provençal poetry we read that

under rare and happy conditions, in the doctrines of romantic love, in the poetry of Provence, the rude strength of the middle ages turns to sweetness; and the taste for sweetness generated there becomes the seed of the classical revival in it, prompting it constantly to seek after the springs of perfect sweetness in the Hellenic world. (*R*, 2)

According to Pater, in Provençal medieval poetry one can find the outbreak of the Renaissance spirit in opposition to the dark aspects of the Middle Ages, which had oppressed intellectual and imaginative enjoyment. According to Pater, one of the figures which best embodies such an aspect is Abelard, “the great scholar and the great lover” (*R*, 3).<sup>107</sup> An example of curious and sympathetic intelligence, Abelard represents for Pater the essence of the modern spirit. At once a humanist and a monk – two terms which already enact the synthesis of the Catholic and the profane element – Abelard stands for the modern human mind which “winds for itself a new kingdom of *feeling* and *sensation* and *thought*” (*R*, 5; my emphasis), setting about to try the whole of human experience. The spirit he represents is depicted by Pater in fully sensuous terms, and characterized by “its intimacy, its languid sweetness, its rebellion, its subtle skill in dividing the elements of human passion, its care for physical beauty, its worship of the body, which penetrated the early literature of Italy, and finds an echo even in Dante” (*R*, 4).

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<sup>106</sup> Anne-Florence Gillard Estrada, “Walter Pater’s Representation of ‘The Central Love-Poetry of the Renaissance,’” in *Provence and the British Imagination*, ed. Claire Davison, Béatrice Laurent, Caroline Patey and Nathalie Vanfasse (Milano: Ledizioni, 2013), p. 95. Gillard Estrada notes that Pater’s construction of Provençal Poetry – as it comes out not only in the “Two Early French Stories,” but also in his anonymous review of the *Poems by William Morris* (1868), in which he proposes a taxonomy of Provençal poetic forms, and then in his 1876 essay on “Romanticism” – also enables him to reflect contemporary aesthetic concerns and, in particular, it provides a critical legitimization of Pre-Raphaelite and “Aesthetic” poets and artists, like William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

<sup>107</sup> Pater had read the volume *Petri Abaelardi, ... et Heloisae, conjugis ejus... Opera, nunc primum... in lucem edita, studio ac diligentia Andreae Quercetani... Sermones per annum legendi, ad virgines Paraclitenses* (Paris: N. Buon, 1616), which he borrowed from the Brasenose College Library twice – the first time between late October and early November 1870, and then again from March to July, 1871. Hill also connects Pater’s depiction of Abelard to the description that Michelet provided in the second and the seventh volume of his *Histoire de France*. See Inman, *Pater’s Readings, 1858-1873*, p. 228, and Hill’s notes in *R*, 307.

Indeed, it is Dante that Pater has probably in mind when he points out that, while Abelard was helping Heloïse “to refine a little further on the nature of abstract ideas, ‘Love made himself of the party with them’” (R, 3). This incident bears an interesting resemblance to the story of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, whom Dante places – among those who are guilty for yielding to lust – in the second circle of Hell. For Abelard and Heloïse, as for Paolo and Francesca after them, the desire to transgress is mirrored by their interest in culture, and sparked by the act of reading, which becomes therefore an act of transgression. I believe it is quite significant that Pater defines humanists in general – and hence also Abelard – as “the true child[ren] of light” (R, 6). Interestingly, this definition also applies to the figure of Lucifer, whose name – a compound deriving from the Latin noun *lux* and the verb *ferre* – means “he who brings the light.” In the Book of Isaiah, 14:12, for instance, Lucifer is defined as the “son of the morning” (King James’s Bible). I suggest that this assonance may not be accidental, especially if one thinks that, while Lucifer is considered the son of the morning who brings the light, “The Morning Star” is also an epithet used to refer to the planet Venus. This, I believe, raises an interesting nexus connecting Christian orthodoxy, transgression, Paganism and sensuousness.

Although he does not mention Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, Pater does remark that Abelard’s absence from Dante’s *Comedy* is a singular omission, which presumably testifies to the poet’s desire not to condemn the monk’s behaviour. At the same time, however, Pater’s insistence on the fact that the Renaissance is not opposed to the medieval Christian spirit, but develops independently of and beyond it, reveals his desire to avoid dogmatic diatribes. In addition to this, as Dellamora argues, this also suggests Pater’s idea that culture is independent from the demands of religious orthodoxy, although admitting that the germs of humanism may have been contained within Christianity.<sup>108</sup> Pater, like Lee, rejects the existence of oppositions and fully acknowledges the dualistic aspect of the Renaissance. As he points out towards the end of this first essay, in looking into the Renaissance one is not

beset at every turn by the inflexibilities and antagonisms of some well-recognised controversy, with rigidly defined opposites, exhausting the intelligence and limiting one’s sympathies. The opposition of the professional defenders of a mere system to that more sincere and generous play of the forces of human mind and character,

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<sup>108</sup> Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 165.

## Through the fin-de-siècle glass

which I have noted as the secret of Abelard's struggle, is indeed always powerful. But the incompatibility with one another of souls really "fair" is not essential; and within the enchanted region of the Renaissance, one needs not be for ever on one's guard. Here there are no fixed parties, no exclusions: all breathes of that unity of culture in which "whatsoever things are comely" are reconciled, for the elevation and adorning of our spirits. (*R*, 20-21)

This bond between medieval religious ethics, humanism, Provençal poetry and the sensuous awakening of man's soul is also central to Lee's analysis of the Renaissance spirit. In her essay on "The Love of the Saints," she dedicates ample room to the characters of Abelard and Heloïse. Meaningfully placed at the beginning of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, this essay further expounds the issues that Lee had already touched in "Medieval Love," with which she had concluded *Euphorion* a decade before. In "The Love of the Saints," Lee approaches the story of Abelard and Heloïse not from the perspective of sensuous love, but from the point of view of frustrated passion. She believes that their correspondence unveils two individuals who are not the embodiment of an early Renaissance. Taking the distance from Pater's viewpoint, Lee suggests that their story is rather representative of the early Middle Ages, that is to say, of the spirit which precedes the revolution kindled by the Franciscan movement. In her view, reading Abelard and Heloïse's letters is still relevant to the contemporary audience in that they express a sort of Nietzschean warning against the humiliation of the human soul:

This is a book which each of us should read, in order to learn, with terror and self-gratulation, how the aridity of the world's soul may neutralise the greatest individual powers for happiness and good. These letters are as chains which we should keep in our dwelling-place, to remind us of past servitude, perhaps to warn us against future.

No other two individuals could have been found to illustrate, by the force of contrast, the intellectual and moral aridity of that eleventh century, which yet, in a degree, was itself a beginning of better things. (*RFS*, II-12)

Lee's use of the story of Abelard and Heloïse to illustrate the spiritual and moral features of the early Middle Ages offers interesting clues from the point of view of gender. Whereas in *The Renaissance* Pater considers Abelard as symbolical of the modern spirit,

Heloïse is no more than hinted at. Pater interestingly highlights that, because of the “unrivalled” education Abelard had given her, rumour had it that she was able “to penetrate into the mysteries of the older world, she had become a sorceress, like the Celtic druidesses” (*R*, 3). This representation of Heloïse enables Pater to further stress the empowering function of the revival of humanism, as well as the halo of transgression and dissidence that this act represented within the old dogmatic system of Christian belief and orthodoxy.

The humanist education that Abelard gave Heloïse was mostly a male prerogative at the times. This aspect seems confirmed by Symonds’s characterization of Poliziano as the ‘true’ Euphorion, but also by his tendency to tell history through the story of great men, which he treats as heroes.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, in “Two Early French Stories” Heloïse is almost only characterized in terms of her relationship to Abelard. Lee, on her part, gives ample room to the character of Heloïse, stressing her rebellious and dissident nature. She claims that the nun’s carnal instincts make her no sinner because, in spite of such drive, she is a theologian as learned as Abelard. Lee argues that because of the boldness of her intellect, her brilliant intuition and warmth of heart, the girl eventually questions the ideas and institutions of her time, forestalling Enlightenment female thinkers like Madame Roland<sup>110</sup> and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Directed against the moral sterility of those “frigid monkish days” (*RFS*, 18), Heloïse rebels against the “supposed purity and piety” of her times, “[blazoning] out her wickedness and hypocrisy” (*RFS*, 20). Whereas Pater had acknowledged in the figure of Abelard a conflation of eros and Christianity,<sup>111</sup> Lee describes his nature as consistent with the early medieval ethics of individual degradation. The monk mirrors an unwholesome theological framework, one which, until the advent of St. Francis’s

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<sup>109</sup> According to Fraser, Symonds’s methodology, which equates history to biography, reveals his debt to Burckhardt’s cult of individualism. I suggest that this is also consistent with the Victorian model of biography pursued by Thomas Carlyle, who claims in his essay “On History” (1830) that “Social Life is the aggregate of all the individual men’s Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies.” Carlyle further stresses this aspect in the 1840 lectures that were collected as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic in History* (1841). Here, he states that “[t]he History of the World, I said already, was the Biography of Great Men.” See Thomas Carlyle, “On History,” in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Collected and Republished*, 7 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1869), 2, p. 255, and Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic in History*, ed. Archibald MacMechan (Boston: The Atheneum Press, 1901), p. 15. On Symonds’s debt to Burckhardt, see Fraser, *The Victorians and the Italian Renaissance*, p. 216

<sup>110</sup> The daughter of a Paris engraver, influenced by the ideas of Rousseau and other eighteenth-century philosophers, Jeanne-Marie Roland de la Platière (1754-1793) was the wife of Jean-Marie Roland, who became Minister of the Interior under Louis XVI in March 1792. A Girondin, she was arrested following the outbreak of the March 1793 Jacobin insurrection which led to the expulsion of the Girondins from the Convention. She was guillotined in November the same year. See the entry “Jeanne-Marie Roland,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

<sup>111</sup> Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, p. 165.

teaching, was based on a “sense of intellectual duty [...] applied solely to fantasticating over Scripture and its expositors, and diverting their very expression from its liberal, honest, sane meaning” (*RFS*, 14). Lee may agree with Pater that the man is “one of the most subtle and solvent thinkers of the Middle Ages” (*RFS*, 13), yet his guilt is at once moral and intellectual. Abelard seems to fall prey of an incorrect reading of Augustine’s philosophy, opposing right and good as moral categories and confusing the worship of God with the obedience to ecclesiastical dogmas. His fault, in other words, consists in emptying “right-doing [...] of all rational significance” (*RFS*, 15), and in so doing he endorses a moral conduct which is devoted not to committing *just* deeds, but rather not to transgress moral precepts that seem to have been established arbitrarily. In Lee’s view, chastity is a paramount example of this wrongly constructed ethical system, which reduces such a virtue to the mere “guarding of virginity which, for some occult reasons, is highly praised in Heaven” (*RFS*, 15). Abelard does not regret committing a sin against the will of God; rather, he feels guilty because he has disobeyed moral precepts which he does not want to challenge, and which have been established not by God but by the clergy.

Lee makes a clear distinction between Christianity as an institution, which she condemns, as her portrait of Abelard reveals, and Christianity as a feeling, as her praise of the Franciscan movement suggests. Although she generically refers to the will of “godhead” and does not explicitly mention Jesus, such a criticism suggests the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy, which Lee was more than familiar with. As Pulham notes, Lee’s annotations demonstrate that she had carefully studied *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *Der Fall Wagner* (1888) and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1895), but she also discusses the German philosopher in both *Gospels of Anarchy* and *The Handling of Words*.<sup>112</sup> Lee was not uncritical of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and far from embracing his views on Christianity. In an article entitled “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power,’” she harshly criticizes Nietzsche for being “separate, unmoved, impervious, unaltered, solitary, sterile” (*GA*, 187).<sup>113</sup> She refutes Nietzsche’s substitution of the Will to Existence with the Will to Power because, in so doing, the philosopher mistakenly replaces an abstract instinct existing at a collective level with an individual drive. Nevertheless, her denunciation of the spiritual aridity of Abelard, and her praise of the moral stance of Heloïse, call to mind Nietzsche’s

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<sup>112</sup> Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), p. xxi.

<sup>113</sup> Vernon Lee, “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power,’” in *The North American Review* (December 1904), pp. 842-59, later rpt. in *GA*.

idea of the “transvaluation of values,” a fault which he attributes to Christianity as a moral system rather than as a religion.

As a whole, Lee considers “Nietzsche’s philosophy as the expression of spiritual and bodily unhealthiness” (GA, 161). Her idea of Christianity would unquestionably clash with Nietzsche’s peremptory views on theology as based on the unnatural and categorical reversal of values guided by a nihilistic view to exert power. In *The Anti-Christ* (1895), he interestingly defines the Renaissance as “[T]he transvaluation of Christian values, – an attempt with all available means, all instincts and all the resources of genius to bring about a triumph of the *opposite* values, the more *noble* values”<sup>114</sup> that Christianity had denied. And according to Lee, Abelard’s sin – and the scandal that was raised thereof – is not his seduction of a woman, but the profanation of a nun. Because of the system of false symbolical correspondences to which he obeys, he violates the embodiment of a sanctuary to Virginity (RFS, 16). This is why he feels disgust for having yielded to temptation, and declares in his letters to Heloïse that he is glad he has been able to purge his soul. Lee connects his moral guilt to his intellectual fault and his misunderstanding of Augustine’s teaching. Interestingly, ten years after “The Love of the Saints,” in her essay on Nietzsche Lee would stress that asceticism is not detrimental to the individual’s soul, provided that it is consummated by following Christ’s example:

Take the Imitation of Christ, that almost complete, perhaps because almost posthumous, manifesto of the millenarian and ascetic and self-humiliating sides of Christianity. To us, particularly to us when in health and prosperity, it may have a taste which is mawkish, a taste of physics, if not of poison; but for centuries it was, and in individual cases [...] it still remains a pain-killer, a sleeping-draught which has saved from death or from madness. (GA, 173)

Lee does not posit the incompatibility of the Renaissance spirit and Christian values *tout court*, and in her essay on Nietzsche she admits the existence of some “judicious mixture of Pagan and Christian” elements (GA, 180). Her criticism is directed to a specific type of Christianity, and for this reason she condemns Nietzsche for his generalizations. Lee’s criticism of the rigidity of medieval monastic asceticism should be read by bearing in mind that, although Abelard’s and Nietzsche’s conception of Christianity are clearly antithetical, they make a similar mistake insofar as they both confuse, “quite

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<sup>114</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 64

unwarrantably, the normal satisfaction of appetite with queasy and languid indigestion” (GA, 176).

Back to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee’s depiction of Héloïse seems to engage within the fin-de-siècle discourses of individualism and self-cultivation that were especially appropriate by homosexual intellectuals. The nun disobeys the rules that her religious habit imposes on her, cultivating her own fleshly passions. Such an attitude, Ivory notes, shapes much of the gay discourse of the time, in which the cult of individualism questions “the authority of man-made laws (including laws made by man-made gods)” and endorses crime as a means to fully realize one’s own potential.<sup>115</sup>

Having established her reputation as an essayist in the previous decade, one feels that at the beginning of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* Lee is asserting her independent voice. In “The Love of the Saints,” she refuses to celebrate the modernity of Abelard’s spirit as Pater and Symonds had. Even for Symonds, Abelard represented one of the “premonitory symptoms” of the Renaissance, and an instance of man’s strive “to break loose” from medieval fetters (RII, 9). In *The Age of Despots*, he had placed Abelard alongside Roger Bacon and Joachim Flora, arguing that the three intellectuals were instances of “the future but inevitable emancipation of the reason of mankind” (RII, 9). Although he stresses that the Renaissance is a complex movement that cannot be reduced to the revival of antiquity and humanism, Symonds points out that twelfth-century Provence was able to foster the emancipation of human reason. Promoting a revival of the pagan spirit against the grip of Catholicism,

[t]he premature civilization of that favoured region, so cruelly extinguished by the Church, was itself a reaction of nature against the restrictions imposed by ecclesiastical discipline; while the songs of the wandering students, known under the title of *Carmina Burana*, indicate a revival of Pagan or pre-Christian feeling in the very stronghold of mediæval learning. (RII, 9)

According to Lee, however, Abelard embodies the moral sterility of the early Middle Ages, the spirit of monasticism that confuses ascetic renunciation with the giving up of one’s own feelings in order to appease a naughty and jealous divinity. Lee forestalls the need to find a balance between “the consummation in the spirit” and “the consummation in the flesh” which D. H. Lawrence will muse upon in *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays*

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<sup>115</sup> Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style*, p. 79.

(1916), while her condemnation of Abelard's asceticism reminds one of the unconditional obedience to the whims typical of Pagan divinities. Furthermore, in comparison with Abelard, Heloïse – which is almost absent in Pater and completely overlooked by Symonds – stands out as a “strong warm-hearted moral woman, fit for Browning” (RFS, 18), who does not confuse morality with the crushing out of human feelings.

### 2.3. Gender assertion and parody: Aucassin and Nicolette

“The Love of the Saints,” in which Lee specifically focuses on Abelard and Heloïse, first appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in April 1895. After the third edition of *The Renaissance*, however, Pater included a footnote in “Two Early French Stories,” suggesting his readers consult *Euphorion* because of Lee's abundance of “knowledge and insight” (R, 12)<sup>116</sup> into another Provençal story, that of Aucassin and Nicolette. As in the case of Abelard and Heloïse, in “The Outdoor Poetry,” Lee depicts the love between the noble French boy and the young Saracen maiden as a transgression. Although Aucassin is guilty not of disregarding Christian dogmas but knightly duties, his passion is still characterized as bordering on the illicit, and defined as a malady. In addition to this, Pater particularly delves into the figure of Nicolette. By quoting a long passage he translates directly from the old French *chante-fable*, he draws the portrait of a marginal figure that he qualifies as “beautiful,” “weird” and foreign” (R, 16). The adventures and tests she faces in the story suggest not a stereotypical female beloved, but rather a *picara* who transgresses both religious and gender boundaries, the “heathen foreigner” whose sins would lead her to death at the stake.<sup>117</sup> The description of Nicolette provided by Pater is characterized by the reconciliation of pagan and Christian elements typical of the Renaissance, and brings to mind many of Botticelli's madonnas, and especially his *Primavera* (ca. 1482) and *Birth of Venus* (1486):

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<sup>116</sup> In the same footnote, Pater also makes reference to two contemporary English translations of *Aucassin and Nicolette* published in 1887: F.W. Bourdillon, *Aucassin and Nicolette: A Love Story*, Bilingual Edition (London: Kegan Paul Trench, 1887), and Andrew Lang, *Aucassin and Nicolette* (London: Nutt, 1887). Prior to these, the story had been translated in England twice, in the 1786 anonymous two-volume *Tales of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* and in a three-volume collection of *Fabliaux, or Tales, Abridged from French Manuscripts of the XIIth and XIIIth Centuries* (1800; 1815), translated by Gregory Way. See Olive Classe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation into English*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), I, p. 88.

<sup>117</sup> Lai Sai Acón Chan, “Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Fronterizo Influence in *Aucassin and Nicolette*,” *Revista de Lenguas Modernas* No. 15 (2011), p. 41.



Her hair was yellow in small curls, her smiling eyes blue-green, her face clear and feat, the little lips very red, the teeth small and white; and the daisies which she crushed in passing, holding her skirt high behind and before, looked dark against her feet; the girl was so white! (R, 17).

Pater also draws a clear distinction between form and content, since the prose quality of this Provençal *chante-fable* suggests to him that it developed out of independent songs that were stitched together. In spite of its lumpy style, however, he praises the story of Aucassin and Nicolette as the dawning of a new artistic sense, a sensuous spirit whose “faint air of overwrought delicacy, almost of wantonness” (R, 15) he sees as a characteristic element of Troubadour poetry, and which reminds him of the “languid Eastern deliciousness” (R, 16) of the *Arabian Nights*. In his view, such a quality justifies the revival of antiquarianism, which should not be based on the gathering of specimen of antique art, but of artworks endowed with an artistic charm that makes them relevant to the present.

Lee discusses the story of Aucassin and Nicolette in *Euphorion*. Pater had dwelled on the sensuous quality of its narrative. By indulging in an equally sensuous description of the young maiden that hints at a Botticellian type of beauty, however, Lee seems to resort to this story for quite different purposes. I suggest that its inclusion still fulfils a gender purpose in that, once again, it enables Lee to re-enact that citational mode which – and here I agree with Zorn’s claims – helps her assert her voice within the male-gendered terrain of literature and aesthetics.

Not unlike Pater, in her essay on “The Outdoor Poetry,” Lee also makes a distinction between form and content, arguing that the latter element tended to be neglected in the Middle Ages. She laments that the main fault of medieval poetry is its lack of variety, even though she reckons it is praiseworthy from a technical point of view. Although well orchestrated in terms of rhythm, meter and rhyme, medieval poetry seems to Lee to abstain from including and conveying emotions, and as such she considers it rather tame and trivial. In addition to this, I believe that one should bear in mind that her essay on “Ruskinism” had appeared in *Belcaro* only one year before the publication of *Euphorion*. Thus, even though the focus of her analysis is poetry and not architecture, much of her criticism seems to overthrow Ruskin’s chief argument when he praises the superiority of Gothic architecture and expresses his distaste of Renaissance buildings. One may object that Lee’s criticism of an early medieval art form like

troubadour poetry relies on purely artistic elements, since she stresses its monothematic settings and poetic conventions. In Ruskin, such criticism was always linked to a moral aspect and, as I have discussed in chapter 1, in *The Stones of Venice* he had blamed the conditions in which stonemasons were forced to work for the lack of variety in Renaissance architecture and especially the decoration of its buildings. Such a moral attack is absent from *Euphorion*, but I suggest that this element equally contributes to Lee's attempt at establishing her own voice in the contemporary discourse of aesthetics, especially if one considers that in her essay on "Ruskinism" she had rejected his theory of the moral as an expression of the beautiful. Retrospectively, Lee would reconsider the role that Christianity had in Ruskin's aesthetic system. In her "Postscript on Ruskin," she would praise his pantheistic views and socialist sympathies, but also endorse his "virtuous circle of virtuous efficacy," contained in the idea that aesthetic and intellectual interests may ennoble the individual by suppressing "the pursuit, often unjust, and always selfish, of superfluous materialism and wasteful vanities" (GA, 309). In the 1880s, however, she still believed that "the greater number of Ruskin's errors" were due to his "constant moralising" (B, 226).

Medieval poetry, Lee claims, offers a number of interesting recurrent themes, like the forest and the spring. Their potential, however, is not accurately explored. Unlike the bucolic landscapes in classical literature, the forests recurring in medieval romance are monotonous, melancholic and eerie. Lee draws many instances of the fascination of the Middle Ages with this setting, beginning from the *Nibelungenlied*. Albeit included as if by accident at first, she also cites the example of Nicolette. Her description of the girl and the pastimes in which she engages to celebrate her passion certainly reveal a sensuous quality. According to Lee, not only does the forest lull her desire for Aucassin, it also brings to the fore the candour of her body:

Further, and most lovely of all [among these examples], the forest in which Nicolette makes herself a hut of branches, bracken, and flowers, through which the stars peep down on her whiteness as she dreams of her Lord Aucassin. (E1, 123)

The description that Lee provides, however, seems more reminiscent of the magic environment hosting Puck and his fairies than of the *Arabian Nights*. Lee qualifies Nicolette's forest as "a sort of fairy land of trees and flowers" (E1, 133). Later in this essay, even Aucassin's and Nicolette's bodies lose their sensuality to recall the innocent and

pure feelings of the sentimental education of novels like Longus's *Daphni and Chloe*. As Lee notes, the two lovers constantly wander through the forest, and while they "tear their delicate skin, and catch their hair in brambles and briars, we have the sense of the daisies bending beneath their tread, of the green leaves rustling aside from their heads covered with hair – blond et menu crespelé" (EI, 133-34).

Interestingly, Lee claims that the medieval indifference towards nature is not the result of that strict asceticism she had condemned in Abelard. Asceticism and sensuousness are in fact not at odds in Lee's theorization. Hoberman suggests reading in her writing a Paterian "aesthetic asceticism," which posits that aesthetic experience takes place in the human mind, stimulated by the individual responses to recollections of beauty which the subject does not physically possess.<sup>118</sup> Thus, although Lee suggests that "the Middle Ages could not bequeath to the sixteenth century no ideal of peaceful outdoor enjoyment" (EI, 125), she also argues that

the predominance of aestheticism has been grossly exaggerated. It was a moral tension which could not exist uninterruptedly, and could exist only in the classes for whom poetry was not written. The mischief done by asceticism was the warping of the moral nature of men, not of their æsthetic feelings; it had no influence upon the vast numbers, the men and the women who relish the profane and obscene fleshliness and buffoonery of stage plays and fabliaux, and those who favoured the delicate and exquisite immorality of Courtly poetry. (EI, 127-8)

Lee further stresses the continuity between the long medieval period and the Renaissance, believing that the Middle Ages "were both as gross and as æsthetic in sensualism as antiquity had been before them" (EI, 128). And, like Burckhardt, she connects medieval poetry to its superstructure. She blames feudalism for men's apathy during the Middle Ages, whose ethics of sufferance had reduced them to a "lump of earth detached from the field" (EI, 129).

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<sup>118</sup> Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble. Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 39. Lee herself recognizes this element of aesthetic asceticism in Pater. This aspect can especially be seen in the "Valedictory" at the end of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. It should be added that in discussing the aesthetic experience and the asceticism of Marius the Epicurean in "The Use of Beauty," she points out that no writer on art, "from Plato to Ruskin, [...] has expressed as clearly as Mr. Pater [that] in all true aesthetic training there must needs enter an ethical element, almost an ascetic one." See Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis. Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp. 17-18. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to LN.

Even though she highlights the sensuous aspects implicit in medieval civilization, Lee's appropriation of Aucassin and Nicolette does not linger on the sensuality of their passion or bodies. The gendered implication of Lee's intertextual rhetorical strategy comes in as she makes an explicit amendment to Pater's argument about the same story. She points out that the lack of emotion typical of the poetry of the Middle Ages, sparked by the medieval belittling of man, results in our complete ignorance of man's way of life, which can only be inferred from legal chronicles. The story of Aucassin and Nicolette, however, stands out in that it includes an instance of crude realism which one can find in no other piece in the literature of the period, and which is unique in portraying the life of serfs.

Lee amends Pater's text, noting that he had "deliberately omitted" (EI, 133) the episode she focuses on. Like Pater, she translates this incident into English from old French, opposing Aucassin's insignificant tragedies to the daily hardship of the unnamed serf he encounters as he wanders about the forest.<sup>119</sup> Curiously, she seems to remediate the very pictorial language that Pater had used. Whereas Pater's portrait of Nicolette reminds one of an ekphrastic description of the female type recurring in much Renaissance painting, Lee's verbal characterization of the man calls to mind the realism of Northern European painting, as for instance Van Gogh's 1885 *The Potato Eaters*:

He was tall, ugly; nay, hideous quite marvellously. His face was blacker than smoked meat, and so wide, that there was a good palm's distance between his eyes; his cheeks were huge, his nostrils also, with a very big flat nose; thick lips as red as embers, and long teeth yellow and smoke colour. He wore leather shoes and gaiters, kept up with string at the knees; on his back was a parti-coloured coat. (EI, 134)

I suggest that the brief, scattered and almost accidental inclusion of these insights into the original text of *Aucassin and Nicolette* fulfils another subtle critique of gender. According to Karen J. Taylor, the medieval *chantefable* underpins the de-sexualization of gender roles in that it is a parody of conventional medieval representations of both marital and chivalric duties. Presented in masculine guise, Nicolette stands out as the true heroine of this romance. She repeatedly proves to be able to master "normatively

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<sup>119</sup> As Aucassin wanders through the forest, weeping for losing his beloved leveret, encounters an unnamed serf. Upon hearing about the trivial reason for Aucassin's despair, the man tells him his story. He used to work as a peasant for a rich landowner, but has been forced to hide after losing one of the bullocks he was using to plough the land. Unable to pay for compensation, and afraid for his old mum, the man curses Aucassin for despairing over his little trifles. See EI, 133-37

masculine functions,” as for instance when she breaks out of the tower like Lancelot and rescues Aucassin.<sup>120</sup> In “Two French Early Stories,” Pater had recorded that, once she gets to Aucassin’s prison, the maiden “pressed herself against one of the pillars, wrapped herself closely in her mantle, and putting her face to a chink of the tower, which was old and ruined, she heard Aucassin crying bitterly within, and when she had listened awhile she began to speak” (R, 17).

According to Singer, the story of *Aucassin and Nicolette* stands out within the context of romance poetry, which usually develops a male-gaze perspective.<sup>121</sup> Passages like the one Pater quoted in *The Renaissance* humorously reverse sexual stereotypes. Nicolette is portrayed as a knight-at-arm who risks her life to save her beloved who, in turn, is depicted as a “damsel in distress” who passively accepts “protection and deference as his prerogatives.”<sup>122</sup> Taylor notes that this element is curiously stressed throughout the *chanteuble*. When they need to find some rest at the end of their peregrinations, it is Nicolette, and not Aucassin, who builds a nest from boughs and flowers.<sup>123</sup> Lee highlights this point twice in the text. She points out Nicolette’s ability to cater for herself rather than for both, representing her as a “New Woman” who is able to perform stereotypical male functions.<sup>124</sup> In addition to this, in the episode of crude realism she quotes, Aucassin wanders through the forest, weeping over a trifle. His characterization seems more akin to that of a princess rather than that of a knight who should engage in a battle to defend his homeland.

Elsewhere in this chapter I noted that in Lee’s writing one often encounters contradictions which are hard to explain. In “The Outdoor Poetry,” she criticizes romance poetry for its limited variety of themes and setting, arguing that the major changes were to take place in the fifteenth century with Matteo Maria Boiardo and especially Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici and his masterpiece *Nencia da Barberino*. In this context, Lee argues that *Aucassin and Nicolette* contains, albeit almost accidentally, an episode of crude realism. She sympathizes more with the serf than with Aucassin, and aside from the gender implications of that incident, it is singular that she should praise its realist vein. The notion of sympathy must certainly be borne in mind as it is central to

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<sup>120</sup> Karen J. Taylor, “Desexualizing the Stereotypes: Techniques of Gender Reversal in Chrétien’s *Chevalier au lion* and *Chevalier a la charrete*”, in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature*, ed. Karen J. Taylor (New York and London: Garland, 1998), p. 184.

<sup>121</sup> Julie Singer, *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), p. 47.

<sup>122</sup> Taylor, “Desexualizing the Stereotypes,” pp. 183-84.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>124</sup> In “The Outdoor Poetry,” Lee points out twice that Nicolette “makes herself a hut of branches, bracken, and flowers.” See *EI*, 123, 134.

Lee's writing. In her 1885 "Dialogue on Novels," however, she was to criticize the work of George Eliot and Balzac arguing that, in portraying fictional characters, a writer can only approximate reality.<sup>125</sup> Curiously, her idea that one can only have partial access to the inner life of others, translates elsewhere into a "resistance" to the convention of the realist novel – an attitude that one can especially sense in *Louis Norbert* (1914).<sup>126</sup>

#### 2.4. Saint Francis of Assisi: the spiritual embodiment of Renaissance love

According to Pater, the Renaissance spirit is deeply shaped by the fruitful and only seemingly incompatible blend of Christian and Pagan elements. In his view, the antinomianism of the Renaissance does not do supersede the Christian ideal but develops across and beyond it. As Pater puts it, this made possible "the return of that Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises" (R, 19).

This second coming of paganism is a necessary element to the outbreak of the Renaissance. Pater borrows from Heinrich Heine the theory that pagan gods were not dead but had simply been exiled, and their survival within a Christian environment helps him explain the birth of the Renaissance spirit. Pater, Donoghue suggests, believes that strong institutions, like the Church, should in fact "admit dissent even to the degree of heresy and [...] be liberal on principle."<sup>127</sup>

I argue that the concept of antinomianism may be profitably applied to Lee's writings as well. The definition of the Renaissance as the offspring of the spirits of antiquity and the Middle Ages, allegorically embodied in the mythical figure of Euphorion, reveals her idea that the Renaissance was marked by an element of dualism. A decade after the publication of *Euphorion*, Lee still exploits the allegory of marriage at the beginning of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, suggesting that the Renaissance is the product of the "abstract idealising religious thought and the earthly affections of lovers and parents" (RFS, 4).

The essays from *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* and *Gospels of Anarchy* suggest that Lee does not reject Christianity, nor does she condemn religion for suffocating human

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<sup>125</sup> Vernon Lee, "A Dialogue on Novels," *Contemporary Review* 48 (September 1885), pp. 378-401, later republished in *Baldwin* as "On Novels."

<sup>126</sup> Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy. Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 59-60.

<sup>127</sup> Denis Donoghue, "The Antinomian Pater, 1894-1994," *Comparative Criticism* 17 (1995), pp. 3-4.

instincts. Instead, I suggest she embraces a kind of religious spirituality which she believes can foster man's enfranchisement. Her criticism is directed towards the early Middle Ages, and especially to the orthodoxy sustained and proclaimed by the religious institutions. It is not surprising that at the beginning of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* she claims that medieval religious hymns – just like the Cosmati mosaics which Lee had probably seen in Rome and read about in Cavalcaselle<sup>128</sup> – already contain the germs of the Renaissance spirit as it will come out in the works of Giotto and Dante: “they are all signs, poor primitive rhymes and primitive figures, that the world is teeming again, and will bear, for centuries to come, new spiritual wonders” (*RFS*, 3).

The teachings of St. Francis of Assisi mark the change from the ethics of renunciation and suffering praised by medieval Christianity to a religion of joy and love. Following the invasions and contaminations between peoples and races that had been taking place since the fall of the Roman Empire, and the collapse of the feudal system in Northern Europe, the Church had no longer been able to take care of the “spiritual hearts of the people,” whose souls it had “sorely troubled and jeopardized” (*RFS*, 5-6). On the other hand, the Franciscan Revival, begun with the Feast of the Most Holy Sacrament in 1263,<sup>129</sup> testifies to “the introduction into religious matters of passionate human emotion” and “the return from exile of the long-persecuted instincts of mankind” (*RFS*, 5, 8).

Curiously, Lee does not locate the first artistic examples of this new feeling in Italy, but rather in the “religious erotics” of the Northern European Minnesänger. Her knowledge of contemporary scholarship can be seen in her implicit distance from Arnold and Pater when she points out that the love that inspired their songs was essentially un-Hebrew. At the same time, however, their ardour is not a disturbing, transient phenomenon like “the lover described by Sappho or Plato” (*RFS*, 8-9). In any case, Lee's antinomian conception of the Franciscan Revival is such that she defines it as “the triumph of profane feeling in the garb of religious: the sanctification, however much disguised, of all forms of human love” (*RFS*, 22).

Earlier in this study I suggested that one should be careful in applying

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<sup>128</sup> The Cosmatis were a family of mosaicists whose work dates to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Their geometrical inlaid mosaics can be seen upon the pillars in the cloister of San Giovanni in Laterano and in the pulpit of the church of Santa Maria in Araceli in Rome. The Cosmati especially worked with natural stone and marble, and their decorations were so popular that art historians often speak of a “Cosmatesque style.” Cf. Richard Glazier, *A Manual of Historic Ornament* (Newton Abbot: Devon & Charles, 2002), p. 105; Gordon Campbell, ed., *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts*, 2 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2, p. 126.

<sup>129</sup> Lee refers to the Miracle of Bolsena. Today, this is usually remembered with the Feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrates the presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist.

contemporary notions of homosexuality to Vernon Lee. In discussing Lee's reputation as an intellectual and perhaps "the cleverest woman in Europe," Gillian Beer has argued that "[h]er frank lesbianism, or, in the language of the time, her 'inversion,' opened the door between male and female intellectuals dangerously wide."<sup>130</sup> If one agrees with Beer's claim, Lee's praise of Franciscanism for its inclusion of profane feelings and legitimization of love, opens up interesting considerations from the point of view of gender and sexuality. Lee seems to have been aware of this possibility. Cautiously, her claim is followed by the caveat that "one is fully aware of the moral dangers attendant upon every such equivocation," but she also adds that "the great saints [...] were probably, for all their personal extravagances, most fully prepared for any sort of unwholesome folly among their disciples" (*RFS*, 22). Whereas in *Euphorion* she had legitimized unwholesome behaviour by explaining that the Renaissance civilization had developed a certain tolerance to evil, in "The Love of the Saints" she argues that such a conduct is necessary for the wholesome moral development of man:

Yet it seems to me certain that this enthroning of human love in matters spiritual was an enormous, indispensable improvement, which, whatever detriment it may have brought in individual and, so to say, professionally religious cases, nay, perhaps to all religion as a whole, became perfectly wholesome and incalculably beneficent in the enormous mass of right-minded laity.

For human emotion, although so often run to waste, had been elicited, and, once elicited, could find, in nine cases out of ten, its true and beneficent channel; (*RFS*, 22-23).

Lee's stress of the necessary "unwholesome folly" kindled by the Franciscan movement and its legitimization of human love in all forms should be read along with her critique of the oppression of the Church. Abelard, as we have seen, encapsulates a religious orthodoxy whose guilt lies in its failure to nurture not only the saintly soul, but also the lay one. The end of the dark Middle Ages comes with Saint Francis and the monastic order he established, which, instead of "crush[ing] out all human feeling [...] fertilized the religious ideal with the simplest and sweetest instincts of mankind" (*RFS*, 23-24). Interestingly, although Lee was sceptical about Nietzsche's philosophy, she discusses this moral change in terms that remind one of his "transvaluation of values," anticipating

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<sup>130</sup> Gillian Beer, "The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: *Satan the Waster* and the Will to Believe," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 110.



what she would discuss in *Gospels of Anarchy*. The “great enthroning of love” that took place in the thirteenth century consisted in “replacing the terror of a divinity, who was little better than a metaphysical Moloch [...] by the idolatry of an all-gracious Virgin, of an all-compassionate and sympathizing Christ” (*RFS*, 25).

Lee’s argument reconciles the pagan, profane aspect with the Christian element. The conception of spirituality she develops has positive effects on civilization, because it does not reduce men to secluded hermits who reject the earthly elements in life. Taken alongside Beer’s statement on Lee’s “frank” lesbianism, this passage from “The Love of the Saints” leaves one wondering to which extent it is possible to read in the text any hints which may legitimize or at least refer to non-normativized forms of human love. As I suggested in the previous paragraphs, such an attempt implies adopting – at least in part – a biographical approach to Lee’s writing. I believe, however, that in discussing the biographical elements of a writer which might help shed light on his or her *Weltanschauung* and works, one should be careful enough to avoid speculations which may lead us astray, slipping from literary analysis to gossiping.

Writing about Lee’s “intimate friendships” with Mary Robinson and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, Sally Newman points out two provisos that I suggest are worth bearing in mind. On the one hand, she reflects on the specificity of female as opposed to male homosexuality, agreeing with the lesbian theorist Jagose that “there is a ‘persistent configuration of the lesbian as an epistemological opacity.’” On the other hand, when purporting to find textual evidence of homosexual desire, the scholar and the biographer should avoid applying backwards categories that are culturally and historically determined.<sup>131</sup> For this reason, I have spoken of “non-heterosexual” identities with specific reference to Lee and Symonds. The label should not be intended as an excess of Victorianesque prudery, but rather as an attempt not to consider their sexuality from a standpoint that is largely indebted to the 1970s and 1980s.

Newman’s discussion takes the distance from Gardner’s idea that many if not all of Lee’s works are the Freudian result of frustrated lesbian desire. Thus, in *As Time Went On...* (1936), Gardner reads in Ethel Smyth’s account of a vacation at Frimhurst hints of Lee’s failed attempt at seducing a new admirer. Smyth notes that Lee tended to be strongly opinionated about writers and artists, who “caused her hackles to rise.” Mary Robinson was an exception since, Smyth writes, “love had been more powerful than the

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<sup>131</sup> Sally Newman, “The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee’s Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, Nos. 1-2 (January-April, 2005), pp. 53-54.

strongest glue to keep those hackles down and for myself I can only say that she was if anything too appreciative, telling me more than once that I was the only woman she had ever met who, etc., etc.”<sup>132</sup> In *What Happened Next* (1940), Smyth maintains that Lee – to speak in contemporary terms – never came out to herself, so that many of her issues seem to be the result of her being “closeted.”<sup>133</sup> Likewise, Gardner discusses Lee’s incapability to come to terms with her sexuality, believing that such difficulty is proved by her uneasiness about the physical, carnal aspects of desire. To this end, he quotes a piece of a conversation with Lee’s literary executor Irene Cooper Willis, who admitted that

Vernon was homosexual, but she never faced up to sexual facts. She was perfectly pure. I think it would have been better if she had acknowledged it to herself. She had a whole series of passions for women, but they were all perfectly correct. Physical contact she shunned. She was absolutely frustrated. Kit [Thomson] used to say in her letters, “I blow you a kiss,” but there was nothing the least sensual about her relationship with Kit. It was almost horrible to live in the same house with Vernon. I have never known anyone who had lived on the continent so much to be so prudish.<sup>134</sup>

Even Colby labels Lee’s lesbianism as “failed.” She does not share Gardner’s obsession with psychoanalytic theory, yet she argues that her sublimation of frustrated desire resulted in unparalleled literary and critical production.<sup>135</sup>

I agree with Newman in that this conceptualization of Lee’s “failed lesbianism” is as much a discursive production as any other categorization of sexual identities. The idea that her desire must have been a source of frustration because it may not have been physically fulfilled reveals – if not a heteronormatively-biased standard of proof, as Newman suggests – at least a late twentieth-century approach. This discussion of Lee’s sexuality does not intend to question the same-sex nature of her desire. Instead, it is intended to contextualize her sexuality, in order to ascertain whether and how such

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<sup>132</sup> Ethel Smyth, *As Time Went On...* (London, New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), p. 241.

<sup>133</sup> Smyth maintains that Vernon Lee “loved [...] humanly and with passion; but being the stateliest, chastest of beings she refused to face the fact, or indulge in the most innocent demonstrations of affection, preferring to create a fiction that these friends were merely *intellectual* necessities.” Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next*, (London: Longmans, Green, 1940), p. 28, qtd. in Newman, “The Archival Traces of Desire,” p. 55.

<sup>134</sup> Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, p. 85. For a different interpretation of Lee’s “romantic friendship” with Anstruther-Thomson cf. Mannocchi, “Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson.”

<sup>135</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 2.

insights help her shape her own literary positions.

Reading Lee's interest in the Renaissance suggests two different conclusions. On the one hand, her idea that the eliciting of human emotions was to find "its true and beneficent channel" may be read by connecting Lee's discussion of the legitimization of the various forms of human love with the effect that this produced on art. In *The Fine Arts*, Symonds recognizes that "S. Francis bequeathed a legend of singular suavity and beauty, overflowing with the milk of charity and mildness" (RI3, 135). According to Lee, the love he taught and the emotionalism that he encouraged were wholesome and fruitful also at an artistic level. Lee stresses the shift from the orthodoxy of the older monastic orders, marking the difference between the teachings of St. Francis and the cardinal and theological virtues. She maintains that "none of these great messages to men necessarily produce that special response which we call art," unlike "the message of loving joyfulness, of happiness in the world and the world's creatures" (RFS, 30).

On the other hand, I embrace Ivory's claim that, because of the association of same-sex desire with criminality and aberration, homosexual intellectuals were especially prone to turning to "alternative discourses for reassurance that [their] desires were noble, were respectable, were above board. Interest in Hellenism, [and] participation in the Renaissance revival, [...] were just some of the redemptive strategies open to the invert" who was looking for intellectual and historical legitimization of same-sex desire.<sup>136</sup> From the point of view of gender, it is interesting that, in discussing the effects of Franciscanism on painting, Lee focuses on the visual representations of the Madonna. This ideal of tender and loving womanhood could find an artistic expression only after the "second coming" of Christ, since, Lee claims, there had been "neither tenderness nor reverence in the Gospels for the mother of the Lord" apart from "some rather rough words on her motherhood." The Middle Ages, anyway, had produced some conventional portraits of the Madonna, "the Mother in adoration, the crowned, enthroned Virgin, the Mater Gloriosa; the broken-hearted Mother, Mater Dolorosa, as found at the foot of the cross or fainting at the deposition therefrom." These portraits raise Lee's attention because of the womanly types they express, which she considers "more complete and more immortal than that of any Greek divinity" (RFS, 53). Such a comment reminds one of Pater's praise of Botticelli's visionary and poetic paintings. Botticelli's classical subjects – especially *The Birth of Venus* – provided for Pater "a more direct inlet into the Greek temper than the works of the Greek themselves" (R, 45-6). This

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<sup>136</sup> Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style*, pp. 57-58.

quality is not the result of Botticelli's knowledge of antiquity, but of "the peculiar sentiment with which he infuses his profane and sacred persons, [...] men and women, in their mixed and uncertain conditions" (R, 43). Developing an argument akin to Lee's, Pater suggests that Botticelli's "peevisish-looking" madonnas especially stand out because their human qualities make them almost irreligious, conforming "to no acknowledged or obvious type of beauty" (R, 44).

It is significant that Lee should compare the femininity of post-Franciscan madonnas to that of Greek divinities, or rather their visual representations. The aesthetic ideal of Hellenism, as we have seen, had provided fin-de-siècle Oxford with a historical and intellectual legitimization of same-sex desire. In the second discourse in Plato's *Symposium*, Pausanias traces a difference between the two different myths of Aphrodite, and hence two different kinds of love. According to Hesiod, Aphrodite was born from Uranus after he had been emasculated by Cronus, whereas in the fifth book of *The Iliad* the goddess of love is said to be the child of Zeus and Dione. Pausanias names the former Aphrodite the "Heavenly," and the latter the "Common," explaining that each of them inspires a different kind of love. Those whose love is inspired by Aphrodite the Heavenly are subject to homoerotic desire. Symonds had been one of the first to endorse what Dowling considers a homosocial culture.<sup>137</sup> This can be seen in his interest in "sexual inversion" and Greek *paideros*, but also in his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873-76). The two volumes contain several descriptions and ekphrasis of male bodies which reveal his attraction for a type of beauty which is epitomized by the classical male athlete.<sup>138</sup>

Likewise, the first "Renaissance" study that Pater published in 1867 is the one on Winckelmann. The essay can be considered the manifesto of Pater's aesthetic theory. It develops a hermeneutic paradigm in which Hellenism is presented not as the relic of antiquity, but as a cultural category which significantly steers the present, from the homoeroticism of fin-de-siècle Oxford to the establishment of Victorian liberalism. In its blend of cultural and queer studies, Pater's essay on Winckelmann, as Evangelista remarks, is a pioneering study on the influence of sexuality at an aesthetic and intellectual level.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Dellamora suggests that Pater may have conceived this essay as a response to "Pagan and Mediæval Religious Sentiment" (1864), which he reads as Arnold's attempt to re-address his students at Oxford to respecting the laws of

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<sup>137</sup> Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, esp. pp. 80-81, 88-89.

<sup>138</sup> Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece. Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 130-31.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 24-25, 35.

morality.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, Pater acknowledges a certain sexual tension in Winckelmann's writing, which provided him with an intellectual legitimization of his own aesthetic theories and homoerotic desire. Winckelmann's enthusiasm, Pater argues,

has a power of reinforcing the purer emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement. That his affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men. He has known, he says, many young men more beautiful than Guido's archangel. These friendships, bringing him into contact with the pride of human form, and staining the thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture. (*R*, 152)

Since the 1990s, much of Pater's scholarship has considered essays like "Winckelmann" and "Poems by William Morris" (1868) as late Victorian examples of gay discourse. Dowling highlights, not unlike Dellamora, that Pater's desire to avoid open conflicts may have led him to developing a code that was likely to be shared by his addressees.<sup>141</sup> According to Brake, Pater's development of an "objective scientific discourse for otherwise illicit sexual material" kindled very different reactions, which reveal his reception within the "homophobic and homosocial reading communities."<sup>142</sup>

If one considers that Lee was more than familiar with the works of Pater and Symonds, and also of the scandals they were involved with,<sup>143</sup> she may have been aware of the associations that her definition of the beauty expressed by post-Franciscan paintings of the Virgin Mary as superior to Greek goddesses may have established. The Greek youth had provided male homosexual intellectuals with an ideal prototype of beauty, and the type of womanhood Lee exalts in her analysis in the visual representations of the Madonna may fulfil a similar function. The kind of love these figures represent and express are clearly non-sexual from a male or heterosexual standpoint, but again, Newman describes women's friendships like Lee's in terms akin to the so-called Boston Marriages. Citing Lillian Faderman's work, she points out that "these romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the

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<sup>140</sup> Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, pp. 102-3, 111.

<sup>141</sup> Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, p. 92. Similarly, Leighton suggests that in reading Pater's work, one should consider the wealth of meanings that each word might convey. See Angela Leighton, "Aesthetic Conditions," in Brake, Higgins and Williams, *Transparencies of Desire*, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> Laurel Brake, *Walter Pater* (Plymouth: Northcote House and the British Council, 1994), pp. 50-51.

<sup>143</sup> On Pater's withdrawal from applying to the Oxford Professorship left vacant by Ruskin, see Lee's aforementioned letter to Matilda Paget (July 16, 1885). *VLA* #218.

genital.”<sup>144</sup>

In addition to this, the fin-de-siècle interest in the sexually deviant and illicit aspects of the Renaissance blends with a celebration of a loving and tender element of womanhood. Along with the representations of the Madonna, Lee’s attention is directed to Mary Magdalen, reassessing her reputation. Lee’s criticism reveals her belief in the conception of the Sister Arts, believing that literature forestalls the visual arts. Moreover, in discussing the representations of the Magdalen, she also discusses about the role of the narrative or dramatic element in art. As far as the visual arts are concerned, she argues that “all that could be done was done, only repetitions ensuing, [...] by the Pisans, Giotto and Giotto’s followers.” But the Pisans, she adds, “have their counterparts, their precursors, in the writers and reciters of devotional romances” (*RFS*, 54). Thus her focus is on the “Life of the Magdalen included in Fra Domenico Cavalca’s translations of St. Jerome’s *Lives of the Saints*, which she considers a masterpiece of the times like *Aucassin and Nicolette*. She notes, however, a certain degree of liberty in St. Jerome’s narrative. Interestingly, she amends the moral stance of Magdalen. “If she took to scandalous course,” Lee points out, “it was only from despair at being forsaken by her bridegroom who left her on the wedding-day to follow Christ to the desert, and who was no other than the Evangelist John” (*RFS*, 56).

According to Lee, Magdalen’s sins are but a trifle. It is the story of Passion week, however, which is most interesting from the point of view of gender. Like in the iconic representations of the fifteenth-century, the artist’s emotional interest is not in Jesus or the Apostles, but in the two female figures that face “each other as in some fresco of Perugino” (*RFS*, 56). The two women, however, are only seemingly opposed, as they both stand out as examples of pure love, be it passionate or maternal. Thus, it seems plausible to read them as the embodiment of two complementary aspects of the kind of womanhood which Lee seems to praise. From this point of view, I agree with and extend to her non fictional works Martha Vicinus’s idea that Lee’s writing reveal her struggle “to express in accessible language an ideal of spiritualized homoerotic love.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1981), p. 16, qtd. in Newman, “The Archival Traces of Desire,” p. 58.

<sup>145</sup> Martha Vicinus, “‘A Legion of Ghosts.’ Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and the Art of Nostalgia,” *GLQ* 10, No. 14 (2004), p. 602.

## Chapter III

### Renaissance tracks.

### The “genius loci” and the environments of culture

In the span of forty years, from the 1880s till her death in 1935, Vernon Lee published more than forty volumes, experimenting with almost every literary genre except poetry. Although this study is specifically concerned with her work as an aesthetic critic, and it focuses on her reception to the Italian Renaissance, supernatural fiction and travel writings are the two genres she most frequently turned to throughout her career. So much so that Colby suggests that Lee’s ghost stories should be read alongside her travel writings, as geographical settings and landscapes are prominent features in both of them. Colby’s starting point for linking Lee’s concept of the “genius loci” to her “culture ghosts” is a letter by Lee’s long-time friend, John Singer Sargent. The painter wrote her in 1881, praising the pictorial quality of her supernatural tale “A Culture Ghost; or Winthrop’s Adventure.” Aside from the suspense generated by the narrative, Sargent tells Lee,

I like its Italian colour very much and the delicate observation throughout, so much so indeed that the local atmosphere, so to speak, strikes me as the real *raison d’être* of the thing, and the ghost story a pretext, but this is prying behind the scenes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), p. xxxvii, qtd. in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 244. Lee first published this story in *Fraser’s Magazine* in January 1881. A revised version, “A Wicked Voice,” was later included in *Hauntings*, and finally republished as “Winthrop’s Adventure” in *For Maurice*. Lee’s inspiration for the protagonist of the story, the castrato Zaffirino, was the portrait of the eighteenth-century castrato Carlo Brioschi – known as “Farinelli” – which she had seen in 1872 while visiting the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna with Sargent. On this point, cf. Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 61, and Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, p. 11.

Lee's ability in portraying places was well known among her friends, and remained a distinguishing feature even of her later production. Talking about *Ariadne in Mantua: a Romance in Five Acts* (1903), Edith Wharton confessed to Lee that, although the play seemed to her to lack dramatic effect, "no one has your gift of suggesting in a few touches an Italian landscape or picture."<sup>2</sup> Taking Sargent's and Wharton's remarks as a starting point, this chapter investigates Lee's interest in landscapes and places, with specific focus on her descriptions of Renaissance remnants.

Beginning with *Limbo and Other Essays* in 1897, Lee published seven collections of travel essays in her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> In the second one, *Genius Loci, Notes on Places* (1899), she first offered a theoretical definition of the "spirit of place" which, manifesting itself through the landscape, mixes up with the viewer's own perceptions, memories and experience. Because of this blend of an objective visual stimulant and a subjective output, her travel writings are not to be considered as truthful, geographical representation of places, but rather as "a ramble among her visual impressions."<sup>4</sup>

The gender implications underlying such writings should not be overlooked. Late nineteenth-century travel writing was not a male-dominated genre like aesthetics, as W. H. Davenport Adams's pioneering collection of essays *Celebrated Women Travellers of the Nineteenth Century* (1882) suggests. As Megan A. Norcia points out, women writers had become a professional class with the emergence of the British Empire in the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Norcia also remarks that "women simply have not been written into the history of geographic travel, and when they do appear, it is as genteel travellers,"<sup>5</sup> as if they were the more sentimental counterpart of male writers. Thus, I suggest that some of the gender aspects I have discussed in the previous chapter should also be borne in mind in investigating Lee's portraits of places.

On the whole, Lee's reception has been quite unfavourable, like the fate of the women writers that Norcia takes into consideration. Her travel writings, however, cannot be considered as proper instances of odeporic literature. The next paragraphs take into

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<sup>2</sup> Edith Wharton to Vernon Lee, April 7, 1903, qtd. in Hilda M. Fife, "Letters from Edith Wharton to Vernon Lee," *Colby Library Quarterly* 3, No. 9 (February 1953), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> *Limbo and Other Essays* (1897) was followed by *Genius Loci, Notes on Places* (1899); *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (1905); *The Spirit of Rome, Leaves From a Diary* (1906); *The Sentimental Traveller, Notes on Places* (1908); *The Tower of the Mirrors, and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places* (1914) and *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925). In addition to the seven collections mentioned here, Lee also wrote an unpublished sequel to *Genius Loci* in the 1920s, which survives as a holographic manuscript at the VLA.

<sup>4</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 247.

<sup>5</sup> Megan A. Norcia, *X Marks the Spot: Women Writers Map the Empire for British Children, 1790-1895* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 14.



preliminary consideration some features of Lee's travel writings that show her debt to the Romantic tradition. In these descriptions of places, visual perception melts with and is steered by imagination and memory, and writing seems triggered by a process akin to Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." More accurate stylistic and theoretical considerations will be drawn in the fourth chapter. For the time being, however, it should be noted that such a subjective and romantic aspect nails down a constant element of Lee's style. Thus, whilst I agree with Colby that Lee's travel writings and supernatural tales ought to be considered together, I suggest that these collections should also be considered alongside her work in aesthetic criticism. After all, while discussing Lee's travel writing, Colby does remark that, as an experienced traveller, Lee was aware that there were no objective criteria to record one's own responses and impressions to places.<sup>6</sup> Although in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* Lee gives proof of her knowledge of art, history, contemporary scholarship and criticism, she defines her observations as scattered fragments. These essays express her subjective response, and are often kindled by casual readings, excursions or visits. The same procedure shapes her travelogues. Indeed, words like "fragments" or "fancies" do not disappear from Lee's titles: they are simply replaced by others, like "notes," in the case of *Genius Loci*, or other subjective and intimate definitions like "Leaves from a Diary" in *The Spirit of Rome*.

This investigation into Lee's interest in places, landscapes and gardens, needs to take into account the response of other writers, such as Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, especially if one considers that it is in the Victorian Age that landscape is re-discovered as cultural concept, and eventually becomes worth studying and investigating.<sup>7</sup> In his essays on Renaissance subjects, Pater showed a similar interest in natural elements and landscapes. Indeed, *The Renaissance* offers so many descriptions of "flowers, gardens, vast panoramas or 'morsels' of landscape" that Barolsky defines it as "a sustained pastoral," oscillating between literature and the visual arts.<sup>8</sup> Symonds's primary interest in Greek and Roman antiquity, instead, also steered his essays on Italian and Greek places. Some of these were first published in the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Cornhill Magazine* in the 1870s, and were later included, among others, in the collections *Sketches in Italy and Greece* (1874), *Sketches and Studies in Italy* (1879) and *Italian Byways*

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<sup>6</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> Francesca Orestano, "Rinascimento, pittoresco e cultura del paesaggio: *Italian Villas and Their Gardens e Italian Backgrounds* di Edith Wharton," *Il bianco e il nero* 12 (2010), p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Barolsky, *Walter Pater's Renaissance* (University Park, PA, and London: Penn State University Press, 1987), p. 59.

(1883). After Symonds's death, part of these essays was republished in the abridged edition titled *Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece* in 1898. In the preface to this posthumous collection, the editor of the volume – Symonds's literary executor, Horatio Forbes Brown – explains that “nothing has been changed except the order of the Essays. For the convenience of travellers a topographical arrangement has been adopted.”<sup>9</sup> Lee's and Symonds's travel writings, however, can hardly be considered as instances of the travel book genre in the fashion of John Murray's, Karl Baedeker's, or Thomas Cook's guides. In his analysis of Byron's wanderings and the frenzy of Continental tourism in Post-Napoleonic England, Buzard notes that Murray's handbook epitomizes the Victorian “exhaustive rational planning” endorsed by the emerging tourist business. In 1843, however, Murray's guidebook was sold together with a pocket edition of *Lord Byron's Poetry*, in an attempt to catch every “special province of the touristic mind.”<sup>10</sup>

Lee's and Symonds' travelogues share the same approach, and may be defined as a sort of synthesis of Murray's commercial strategy when he decided to distribute his guidebook along with Byron's travel poems. In addition to this, the tables of contents in their volumes reveal the same organization. Each essay stands alone and can be read singularly, and the description of places and sights mingles with the author's personal impressions and response to the landscape. Lee knew Murray's work, which she had consulted at least once while traveling across Southern Germany, Austria, and Northern and Central Italy in August 1874. As she writes to Henrietta Jenkin, that summer she and her mother had “been continually on the move, to Munich, Innsbruck, Recoaro, Vicenza, Padua & Bologna, reading only Murray and the handbook of Italian painting on the road.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, her travel writings do not attempt to replicate the style of nineteenth-century travel books. I suggest they should rather be approached as a literary genre oscillating among the travelogue, fiction and the critical essay. I also believe it is worth analysing her travel writing along with the works of contemporaries like Edith Wharton and D. H. Lawrence.

Despite her experimentation with genres, Lee's essays concerned with geographical settings, landscapes, sights and monuments reveal an element of continuity in her literary production. In addition to this, the subjective element embedded in these works does not mar her achievement. On the contrary, it suggests that Lee's work

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<sup>9</sup> Horatio F. Brown, Prefatory Note to John Addington Symonds, *Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1898).

<sup>10</sup> James Buzard, “The Uses of Romanticism: Byron and the Victorian Continental Tour,” *Victorian Studies* 35, No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Vernon Lee to Henrietta Jenkin, August 22, 1874. *VLA* #44.

stretches between the two centuries she lived across, making it particularly relevant to the contemporary debate. The relationship between humans and nature is certainly a traditional *topos*, and its roots are to be found in classical literature. Over the past few decades, however, landscape has become the object of cross-disciplinary interest. Back in the late 1970s, Tuan was one of the first scholars to propose a clear-cut distinction between the notions of space and place. Whereas the former concept is defined by means of “an abstract and objective frame of thought,” place, Tuan argues, “is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it also has a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

The notion of place is central to a humanist conception of geography. Unlike space, it is a personal construction. Moving from the domain of geography to the discourse of archaeology, anthropology and cultural studies, Cunliffe proposes a similar distinction between environment and landscape, defining the first concept as a natural entity and the second as a cultural artefact. “In short,” Cunliffe argues in the Linacre Lecture he delivered at Oxford in 1997, “the physical environment (that is measurable and absolute) is a blotting paper into which the cultural images of landscape are absorbed.”<sup>13</sup> He argues that it pertains to the anthropologist and the archaeologist to analyse such images, which are the product of civilization. Later in his essay, however, Cunliffe dwells on Younger Pliny’s description of his country villa, arguing that such literary endeavours also represent an attempt “to enter into a dialogue with environment by creating landscape.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, I suggest that the work of writers like Lee should be taken into due consideration alongside the work of anthropologists, archaeologists and humanist geographers, for their ability to reflect on and to create landscape. For “the perception and the observation of natural space as such, and its representation in literature and art” – as one reads in the introduction to a recent collection of essays on landscape and literature – “give origin to landscape itself: without a subject and a point of view, there can be no landscape.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, in this chapter I intend to demonstrate that Lee’s romantic reveries about places and landscapes should be considered not only as a relic of eighteenth-century Romanticism, but also in the light

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<sup>12</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” in *Philosophy in Geography*, ed. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), p. 387.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Cunliffe, “Landscapes with People,” in *Culture, Landscape and the Environment. The Linacre Lectures 1997*, ed. Kate Flint and Howard Morphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>15</sup> Michele Bottalico, Maria Teresa Chialant, Eleonora Rao, Introduction to *Literary Landscapes, Landscape in Literature*, ed. Michele Bottalico, Maria Teresa Chialant and Eleonora Rao (Roma: Carocci, 2007), pp. 10-11.

the late twentieth-century debate on humanist geography, which considers place “as a ‘culturalization’ of space.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1. Towards the “genius loci”: landscape as a plastic concept

Lee’s first travelogue, *Limbo and Other Essays*, was published in 1897. However, instances of her interest in places, landscapes, and the cultural remnants they offer can already be found in her earlier works and letters. In all her writings, Lee seems to respond to the external world in a way which she had avowedly borrowed from Ruskin. In her 1903 “Postscript on Ruskin,” for instance, Lee declares that her “habits of thought and feeling” (GA, 301) are to a great extent shaped by the works of the “Oxford Graduate.” Such a debt can be perceived in Lee’s aesthetic indulging in the contemplation of landscape, but also in the “imaginative enjoyment” (GA, 302) she experiences in such an activity, and which she had recognized as one of the distinctive features of Ruskinism. In addition to this, Lee argues that for Ruskin, both the human being and the universe were sacred. As a result, his aesthetic system acknowledges the need for the human being to be spiritually connected not only to his fellow beings, but also to the universe. For this reason, Ruskin’s moral aesthetics was directed to the enjoyment – rather than the study – of places, with which he seemed to be connected by means of sympathetic feelings:

Ruskin gave us one of the greatest pleasures (gave it consciously and as an artistic factor in life) – topography; teaching us to feel the countries growing, forming, as we move through them; teaching us to evoke the haunting presence of scenery, on dreary days or evenings, over maps, the very names of stations growing delightful, and a talk about miles and levels and surveyors’ details becoming fraught with delight, a poem. (GA, 307)

Lee especially stresses the sympathetic aspect of Ruskin’s aesthetics, which is physically entangled with places of nature and beauty. In her mind, not only had Ruskin been able to experience such communion with places, but his writings could also educate his readers towards similar perceptions. Ruskin had been able to do so because of his ability of extracting and representing the imaginative essence of things. His tendency to recombining the mysterious associations kindled in his mind by the act of contemplation

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<sup>16</sup> Fred R. Myers, “Ways of Placemaking,” in Flint and Morphy, *Culture, Landscape and the Environment*, p. 75.

reveals Ruskin's debt to the aesthetic and poetics of the Romantic Age. According to Lee, this ability is a distinguishing feature of Ruskin's aesthetics as a whole, since it shapes his writings on both topography and art. It is this element that had "enabled him also to point out the literary quality which great paintings [...] got by mere selection of visible items" (GA, 307).

Ruskin's ability to give visual substance to his descriptions of places and artworks is not only a crucial feature of his prose. As Lee points out, "in order to get Ruskin's full meaning, we must never separate his writings from those wonderful illustrations which tell us all the things words can never say" (GA, 306). It is through such illustrations – more than through words – that Lee sees Ruskin at his best when he tries to prove the merits and quality of medieval architecture, or to highlight "the æsthetic loveliness, but also the imaginative fascination" (GA, 306) of Venice, Verona, and the Alps.

According to Lee, Ruskin's prose possesses such a powerful visual quality not only because of his style, but also because of the sketches and illustrations he often adds to his descriptions, which are especially abundant in his diaries and letters. Such images also back Lee's remarks on the educational aspect of Ruskin's writings. In their romantic sublimity, sketches are incomplete. They suggest and provide hints rather than full detailed representations, and as such they give room to the observer's sentiments and psychological associations. In a similar way, Lee's correspondence reveals a Ruskinian lingering on topographical details. Like Ruskin, she often accompanies her descriptions with sketches meant to sustain words when she feels they may be lacking in visual power. For example, in July 1882 – a few years before *Limbo*, while she was cultivating her aesthetic interest in the Italian Renaissance – Lee writes a letter that forestalls what she would theorize in her "Postscript on Ruskin." That summer, Lee and Mary Robinson stayed at a friend's – Mrs Pullen – in Fittleworth, Sussex. Although she immediately writes off the place as "ordinary," she is nevertheless attentive to minor topographical details. She captures the vibrancy and complex contrasts of the place, which she reproduces with romantic accuracy in so far as the natural and the human element are concerned:

Fittleworth is a pretty old village of red tiled cottages with such sweet flowers all about them, lying in a dip between the low hills, all mapped out in green, yellow & grey fields, with a small slow river, the Arun, twisting through the meadows. This, so far is very pretty, but ordinary. The road from Fittleworth rises gradually, and on the

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brow of the hill, just off the high road, is our tiny cottage, which is hideous in front, but very pretty behind.<sup>17</sup>

Because she is not describing a space in objective, neutral terms, but she is trying to represent a place – a concept in which topographical details and personal impressions mingle and overlap – Lee doubts whether she can only rely on words. For this reason, at the end of this first paragraph she jots down a little sketch which is meant to reinforce what she is trying to convey verbally. This little ink drawing is clearly not meant to capture and represent the colours of the hills and fields, yet it allows her to express the ideas of rhythm and movement she perceives.



Fig. 1 – Vernon Lee's sketch of Fittleworth, Sussex, in the letter she addressed to her mother on July 13, 1882. VLA #106.

<sup>17</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 13, 1882. VLA #106.

In the core part of this letter, Lee's attention to topographical details blends with the effect of the human presence within the environment. What she portrays is therefore a place rather than a space, in that she replaces the description of the natural environment with her subjective interpretation of and response to what she perceives:

Behind stretches a long ribbon of oak woods, of which Mr Pullen is the keeper. Everything here belongs to Lord Leconfield, which accounts for the great amount of gorse, heather & wood. There is no other house for a long way. In front the broad lines of the South Down hills, with fields, meadows and great patches of larch & pine wood between; it takes a wonderfully solemn look towards sunset; it is always blowing hard against us, & the air is so fresh, I feel quite another creature.<sup>18</sup>

This letter dates to July 1882, the period during which Lee was publishing working her first Renaissance essays she in English reviews. Indeed, her interest in landscapes also considerably shapes her work in aesthetic criticism, where I suggest it works at a dual level. Not only are the essays in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* rich with descriptions, observations and comments about real and literary places and landscapes. Interestingly, her topographical curiosity also affects the method of description and analysis that Lee follows in these two collections. Although Lee considers the subject of *Euphorion* a "dramatis persona," in the introduction she defines the object of her analysis as "a more or less extended real landscape" (EI, 9). This metaphor suggests that Lee conceives of landscape in a way that forestalls nineteenth-century human geography, but it also enables her to pinpoint the subjective, impressionist – in a word, the Paterian – quality of her style. Because,

like a real landscape, [the past] may also be seen from different points of view, and under different lights; then, according as you stand, the features of the scene will group themselves – this ridge will disappear behind that, this valley will open out before you, that other will be closed. Similarly, according to the light wherein the landscape is seen, the relative scale of colours and tints of objects, due to pervading light and to distances – what painters call the values – will alter: the scene will possess one or two predominant effects, it will produce also one or, at most, two or three (in which case co-ordinated) impressions. (EI, 10).

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Lee uses landscape as an extended metaphor, which she exploits to speculate on different fields of criticism, from history to literature and the arts. In the Introduction to *Euphorion*, for example, she moves from history to painting, trying to reassess the merits of Impressionism. Lee is aware of the ill reputation of impressionist painting, whose reception – following the scandal provoked by Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in 1862 – was mostly “subject to the reproach of charlatanry.” Yet she praises it as the “the only true realistic art” (E1, 10), suggesting the need to embrace an individual perspective in matters of history and criticism.

Landscape is a crucial concept in Lee's work, where it emerges both in its real and its metaphorical implications. This is clear in her essay on “The Outdoor Poetry,” where she outlines a definition of landscape in its artistic and cultural implications. Lee argues that both representations and perceptions of landscapes do not exist outside culture. In this essay, Lee criticizes medieval poetry for its lack of variety, especially as far as settings are concerned, and briefly examines the representation and function of the country in bucolic poetry and medieval romance. Although classical poetry compares more favourably, Lee pinpoints that landscape is a product of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with form and colour:

Landscape, in the sense of our artists of to-day, is a very recent thing; so recent that even in the works of Turner, who was perhaps the earliest landscape painter in the modern sense, we are forced to separate from the real rendering of real effects, a great deal in which the tints of sky and sea are arranged and distributed as a mere vast conventional piece of decoration. (E1, 118)

On the one hand, such a definition of landscape is consistent with Lee's praise of impressionist painting. The fault she finds in Turner's painting is not his lack of realism, but the fact that he often overlooks some details which he treats as conventionally decorative. On the other hand, however, she explains that landscape could become a proper artistic and literary subject only after superseding the mere interest in action, which, in painting, corresponds to the anatomical attention to the body. Thus, in both poetry and painting, “landscape could become a separate and substantive art only when the interest in the mere ins and outs of human adventure, in the mere structure and movement of human limbs, had considerably diminished.” (E1, 118)

Lee's conception of landscape has interesting metaliterary implications. By



shifting the focus from action to landscape, she admits to the development of a new independent genre not only in painting, but also in literature. A genre she would pursue extensively beginning with *Euphorion*. It is indeed in her *Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* that Lee first outlines the idea of a “Genius Loci.” She defines her critical work in terms of scattered, fragmented impressions which, by living in Italy, she can gather from her direct knowledge of places, artworks and other remnants. According to Lee, such “rags [...] make the study of the Renaissance an almost involuntary habit” (E1, 18-20) in Italy. In towns like Perugia, Orvieto, S. Gimignano, Florence, Venice, Verona, and Siena,

we are subjected to receive impressions of the past so startlingly lifelike as to get quite interwoven with our impressions of the present; and from that moment the past must share, in a measure, some of the everyday thoughts which we give to the present. [...] It is the sudden bringing us face to face with the real life of the Renaissance. (E1, 20)

This passage reveals that Lee was already developing what she would later define as the “Genius Loci.” Such a power emanates from the remnants of places, where it survives, mingling with history and civilization, and giving one the impression of being able to penetrate the past. At this stage, however, her theorization of the “Genius Loci” was still in an embryonic form, and Lee is sceptical about the possibility to establish a fully sympathetic relationship with the past. Thus, in the Introduction to *Euphorion*, she considers these influences surfacing from places as “dioramas”<sup>19</sup> or deceitful simulacra.

Despite Lee’s point, I suggest that it is Lee’s portraits of places – rather than the “Genius Loci” – which should be regarded as a simulacrum from a post-modernist standpoint. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard maintains that simulacra operate by generating models of reality that have in fact no origin or reality. He defines such models as “hyperreal,” in that they challenge binaries like true/false, or real/imaginary. Interestingly, Baudrillard introduces his argument in spatial terms, claiming that simulation disposes of “the coextensivity of map and territory,” re-producing – rather than replicating – reality “from miniaturized cells, matrices, and

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<sup>19</sup> A diorama is a three-dimensional, often full-size replica of a landscape. Invented in France in 1821 by Louis Daguerre and Charles Marie Bouton, the original diorama consisted of a translucent cloth painted on both sides and showing different scenes – or different aspects of the same scene – depending on which side of the cloth was lit. The first diorama theatre opened in Paris in 1822, and the first English one was opened at Regent’s Park the following year. For a brief history of dioramas, see Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), pp. 155-57.

memory banks.”<sup>20</sup> Whereas representation is “the visible and intelligible mediation of the Real,” simulacra do not represent reality, but replace it by obliterating existing relationships between signs and references.<sup>21</sup>

Lee’s descriptions of places and landscapes, and her observations on the sites and remnants she visits seem consistent with Baudrillard’s theory on simulation. Historical validity, as we have seen, is not central to Lee’s argument on Renaissance Italy and its culture. Likewise, I argue that her portraits of places represent a reality which is true to the writer, rather than topographically accurate. Indeed, in the essay on “The Outdoor Poetry,” Lee would seem to contradict what she had previously maintained about the possibility of accessing the past through the effluences emanating from places. This essay includes a very interesting passage in which the “Genius Loci” comes out as a force that enables Lee to connect nineteenth-century Tuscany to its Renaissance past, and it also offers some interesting considerations from the point of view of gender.

In “The Outdoor Poetry,” Lee discusses the artistic merits of the man whom she believes best embodies the Italian Renaissance and its spirit, Lorenzo de Medici. She especially praises one of Lorenzo’s juvenilia, his idyll *Nencia da Barberino*. Written in eleven-syllable octaves, the poem follows the pattern of chivalric love poetry. A young and well-off farmer, named Vallera, declares his love to Nencia, the young daughter of a peasant from a Tuscan village, Barberino. According to Lee, *Nencia da Barberino* is an instance of modern art, rather than a classical pastoral, nor does it appear as artificially constructed. Interestingly, considering what Lee had already put forth concerning art and landscape in the previous essay in *Euphorion*, her appreciation of the realism of Lorenzo’s poetry coincides with a praise of Impressionism. *Nencia da Barberino* is in fact “a perfect piece of impressionist art, marred only in rare places by an attempt (inevitable in those days) to force the drawing and colour into caricature” (*EI*, 156).

Nevertheless, Lee acknowledges the centrality of the pastoral element, maintaining that the poem is born out of the reality of peasant life during the Renaissance. Following the tradition of classical bucolic poetry, the beauty of the young Nencia is depicted by comparing the maiden to the produce of the land. In noting that Nencia “is more delectable than are the young figs to the earwigs, more beautiful than the turnip flower, sweeter than honey” (*EI*, 158), Lee is paraphrasing Stanza XXVIII of Lorenzo’s poem, when Vallera sings to Nencia:

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Harbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Piacimi più ch'a le mosche la sapa,  
E più ch' e' fichi fiori alla forfecchia;  
Tu se' più bella che 'i fior della rapa,  
E se' più dolce che 'i mei della pecchia

Lorenzo de Medici's pastoral idyll provides Lee with a stimulus to musing upon the Tuscan landscape. She provides an accurate description, noting that very little has changed

in the long farms of Southern Tuscany, with double row of blackened balcony all tapestried with heavy ingots of Indian corn, and spread out among the olives of the hillside, up which twists the rough bullock road protected by its vine trellis; and in the little farms, with queer hood-shaped double roofs (as if to pull over the face of the house when it blows hard), and pigeon towers which show that some day they must have been fortified, all about Florence; farms which I pass every day, with their sere trees all round, their rough gardens of bright dahlias and chrysanthemums dragged by the autumn rains [...]. (EI, 160)

The accurate description of the Tuscan farms that Lee provides in *Euphorion* bears a quite interesting similarity to the letter that Lee had written to her mother from Sussex in the summer of 1882. However, I suggest that this description is not only functional to mixing presence and past, and thus to reflect on what remains of the Renaissance at the fin-de-siècle. Lee's impressions on the Tuscan landscape also enable her to reflect on the human presence. In so doing, not only does she connect contemporary Tuscany to its Renaissance heritage, but she also highlights the pagan element inscribed in it. Because of Lorenzo's ability of describing the natural environment, she places *Nencia da Barberino* alongside his *Ambra*. In this Ovidian poem, Il Magnifico celebrates the founding myth of his villa in Poggio a Caiano,<sup>22</sup> dwelling on a description of the Tuscan landscape which is at once detailed and impressionistic:

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<sup>22</sup> Thiem suggests that *Ambra* should be considered as an Ovidian poem, especially for its allusion to the Arethusa episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Just like Arethusa was transformed into a river to escape from Alpheus, in Lorenzo's poem, *Ambra* is a wood nymph who is transformed into a rocky eminence to escape from the God and river Ombrone. The place where this metamorphosis took place was to become the site of the Villa de Medici at Poggio a Caiano. See Jon Thiem, *Lorenzo de' Medici: Selected Poems and Prose* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 138.

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full of infinitely delicate minute detail: of the *plants* which have kept their *foliage* while the others are bare – the prickly juniper, the myrtle and bay; of the flocks of cranes printing the sky with their queer shapes, of the fish under the ice, and the eagle circling slowly round the ponds – *little things which affect us mixed up as they are with all manner of stiff classic allusions* [...]. From these rather finikin details, Lorenzo passes, however, to details which are a good deal more than details, things little noticed until almost recently: the varying effect of the olives on the hillside – a grey, green mass, a silver ripple, according as the wind stirs them; the golden appearance of the serene summer air, and so forth; details no longer, in short, but essentially, however minute, effects. (EI, 163; my emphasis)

Lee's discussion of *Nencia da Barberino* and its mélange of different traditions translates into interesting considerations about gender and female beauty. From this perspective, landscape becomes a stimulant akin to artworks. In the later essay on "The Love of the Saints," as we have discussed in the previous chapter, her remarks on the half-pagan, half-Christian aura of the portraits of the Madonna will kindle similar speculations. Here, Lee notes that in the Tuscan farms she passes by every day

there are, do not doubt it, still Nencias: magnificent creatures, fit models for Amazons, only just a trifle too full-blown and matronly; but with real Amazonian limbs, firm and delicate, under their red and purple striped print frocks; creatures with heads set on necks like towers or columns, necks firm in broad, well-fleshed chest as branches in a tree's trunk; great penthouses of reddish yellow or lustreless black crimped hair over the forehead; the forehead, like the cheeks, furrowed a good deal [...]. (EI, 160)

Whereas Vallera had stressed the delicate frailty of Nencia's beauty by comparing her to fruits and honey, Lee recognizes an element of androgyny in her contemporary counterparts. These Tuscan peasant girls have rough, almost manly features, and the delicacy of the flower is replaced by the coarseness of the tree trunks. Perhaps even more interestingly, Lee's characterization of these girls bears resemblance to her portrait of Medea de Carpi, whose engagement in stereotypical manly occupations blurs conventional gender roles. In "Amour Dure," Medea leaves the convent and finds a job as a mason, and in the Tuscan countryside Lee recollects coming across "women whom you see shovelling bread into the heated ovens, or plashing in winter with bare arms in

half-frozen streams, or digging up a turnip field in the drizzle” (EI, 160). Likewise, their lackadaisical attitude and weird smiles immediately bring to mind not only Medea’s portrait, but also her ancestral prototype, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*. For, in their spare time, these modern Nencias can be found

standing listless by their door, surrounded by rolling and squalling brats, and who, when they slowly look up at the passer-by, show us, on those monumental faces of theirs, a strange smile, a light of bright eyes and white teeth; a smile which to us sophisticated townspeople is as puzzling as certain sudden looks in some comely animal, but which yet makes us understand instinctively that we have before us a Nencia; (EI, 160-61)

In passages like these, Lee bounces back and forth from the past to the present. Her inquiry into the Renaissance leaves the realm of history, and in so doing she forestalls the basic assumptions of what would become cultural analysis. Bal defines this discipline as a critical practice marked by an ambiguous – although inherent – relation to history. And indeed, as Bal suggests, cultural analysis relies on an investigation of the past which refuses both objectivist reconstructions and fallacious attempts at pursuing forms of “a deceptive synchronism.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, by juxtaposing the Medicean countryside and the contemporary Tuscan landscape, Lee can compare diachronic visions of femininity. Lorenzo’s Nencia is clearly the object of an artistic representation, yet the weird, puzzling smile of the nineteenth-century peasants enshrines its cultural legacy in paying homage to the smile of the *Mona Lisa*. And curiously, as Salomon remarks in her study of the femininity of Vermeer’s girl, such perpetual oscillation lies at the core of cultural analysis, which becomes “like a game of volleyball, where information and knowledge move back and forth between the courts of ‘then’ and ‘now.’”<sup>24</sup>

Renaissance and contemporary Italy, paganism and Christianity, and a hint of subversion also mingle in the description of the background against which Domenico Neroni meets his fate in “A Seeker of Pagan Perfection.” This “imaginary portrait” springs from the same emanations of places that Lee had defined as her primary source of inspiration in *Euphorion*. At the end of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, she confesses that the story of this “pictor sacrilegus” had been lurking in her mind for a while before

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<sup>23</sup> Mieke Bal, Introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, ed. Mieke Bal and Bryan Gonzales (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Nanette Salomon, “Vermeer’s Women: Shifting Paradigms in Midcareer,” in Bal and Gonzales, *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*, p. 59.

revealing itself as she was wandering around the areas of Rome that “bear witness to the strange meeting of centuries, where the Middle Ages have altered to their purposes, or filled with their significance, the ruined remains of Antiquity” (*RFS*, 165). As in “The Outdoor Poetry,” contemporary landscape serves as a stimulant, which kindles Lee’s reflections on the Renaissance, its absorption of antiquity, and its present legacy.

Filarete’s first attempt at reviving the ancient gods takes place in a subterranean chamber in the south of Rome. The humanist takes Neroni to a tomb of the Flavian family, which he mistakenly believes to be a temple to the Eleusinian Bacchus because of its decorations, representing Dionysian revels. Hiding in this secret chamber, Filarete tries to evoke the god by sacrificing a lamb. What is striking is Lee’s visually powerful description of the tomb, which I would define as quasi cinematic. She introduces this allegedly pagan temple through a tracking shot. The horizontal perspective and the use of a paratactic structure enable the reader to share Neroni’s point of view:

[a]s the light of the torches moved slowly along the vaulted and stuccoed ceilings, it showed the delicate lines of a profusion of little reliefs and ornaments, fresh as if cast and coloured yesterday. Slender garlands of leaves, and long knotted ribbons and veils in lowest relief partitioned the space; and framed by them, now round, now oval, now oblong, were medallions of naked gods banqueting and playing games, of satyrs and nymphs dancing, nereids swinging on the backs of hippocamps, tritons curling their tails and blowing their horns, Cupids fluttering among griffins and chimæras; a life of laughter and love, which mocked the eye, starting into vividness in one place, dying away in a mere film where the torchlight pressed on too closely in others. (*RFS*, 217)

At the end of the rite, while Neroni and Filarete are coming out of the tomb, Lee follows their movement and depicts an almost “unreal city,” paying attention to the colours of the dawn and rendering with an impressionistic touch the blue, grey and green hues of the sky and water before them.

The rite is unsuccessful, and Neroni and Filarete decide to offer a consecrated wafer to Apollo, Bacchus and Jove on the day of Corpus Christi. The site for this final sacrilege is a former convent and its adjacent church of SS. Jervasius and Protasius on the Aventine, a hill that “has retained in Christian times a look of its sinister fame in Pagan ones” (*RFS*, 221). In a passage that reminds one of her search for contemporary Nencias in fin-de-siècle Tuscany, Lee introduces the site of Neroni’s final sacrifice by

stressing that the place has remained unchanged since the late fifteenth century. Switching from the past to present tense, she temporarily breaks the narrative rhythm in order to provide a glimpse of the contemporary Roman landscape:

[a]mong the cypresses, which seem to wander up the hillside, rises the square belfry, among whose brickwork, flushed in the sunset, are inlaid discs of porphyry torn from some temple pavement, and plates of green majolica brought from the East, it is said, by pilgrims or Crusaders. The arum-fringed lane widens before the outer wall of the church, overtopped by its triangular gable. Behind this wall is a yard or atrium, the pavement grass-grown, the walls stained with great patches of mildew, and showing here and there in their dilapidation the shaft and capital of a bricked-up Ionic pillar. (*RFS*, 221)

On the one hand, this description enables Lee to highlight an element of continuity between Renaissance and fin-de-siècle Rome. On the other hand, however, Lee uses the setting as a means to introduce an element of sexual deviance. According to Evangelista, the very aesthetic obsession of Neroni seems to entail homoerotic desire or a longing for homosociality, bringing back to mind Pater and Symonds's Greek idealism. Lee's description of Neroni's perversion as a "quest of the unattainable" (*RFS*, 187), in particular, suggests Symonds's idea of the "amour de l'impossible" as a blend of aesthetic and homoerotic elements, which she had already sensed in his appreciation of Marlowe's drama.<sup>25</sup>

In "The Outdoor Poetry," the allusion to the Amazons resulted in the androgynous depiction of the Tuscan peasants, while in "Pictor Sacrilegus" the morbidity of the place that Neroni and Filarete have chosen raises a suspect of pederasty.

The site, which used to be a Cistercian monastery during Innocent VIII's papacy, has to be restored by Neroni. Cardinal Ascanio Capranica has recently commissioned this work to make atonement for his dissolute lifestyle. Capranica was in fact "famous for his struggle in magnificence and sinfulness with the magnificent and sinful young nephews of Pope Sixtus" (*RFS*, 222). Né Francesco della Rovere, Pope Sixtus IV is known for embracing nepotism, as celebrated by Melozzo da Forlì's 1477 fresco *Sixtus IV Appointing Platina as Prefect of the Vatican Library*.<sup>26</sup> Such nepotistic policy presumably

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<sup>25</sup> Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, pp. 91, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Melozzo da Forlì's fresco, originally painted on a wall of the Vatican Library, is now at the Pinacoteca Vaticana in Rome. It represents Sixtus's appointment of the humanist Bartolomeo Platina as Prefect of the

helped the Pope maintain the temporal rather than spiritual power, and during his papacy Sixtus IV ordained six of his nephews cardinals. The most notable, Giuliano della Rovere, served as Pope between 1503 and 1513. In his *Diarium Urbis Romae*, the humanist Stefano Infessura, however, argues that Sixtus's predilection for his nephews – like his attraction for young men – did not depend on a carefully calculated political strategy, but on his pederastic desire:

As people report and experience showed, he was a lover of young boys and a sodomite; experience actually teaches what he did for the boys who served him in the bedroom; he donated them not only an income of many million ducats, but he also dared to grant them cardinalship and a great episcopate. Was it actually because of other reasons, as some say, if he liked Count Jerome, and his brother Peter, [first] his brother and then the Cardinal of Saint Sixtus, if not because of sodomy? What may be said of the barber's child? That child, who was not even twelve, was always with him, and honoured him with so much and great wealth, so good an income and, as it is said, a great episcopate; whom, as it is said, he wanted to ordain him a cardinal [...] even though he was just a boy;<sup>27</sup>

The Renaissance landscape that Lee depicts in order to tell the story of Neroni's fall introduces an element of homoeroticism and homosociality. Unlike Symonds and Pater, she only slightly hints at this element of sexual radicalism. Nevertheless, I suggest that this element should not be overlooked, especially if one considers that she makes explicit reference to Infessura's chronicles at the end of "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection," citing his *Diario* as the source allegedly used to recount Neroni and Filarete's final execution. Besides, there is enough textual evidence to prove that Lee was especially familiar with Infessura's history of Rome. When she discusses the widespread indifference to evil and sinfulness typical of Renaissance Italy in "The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists," for instance, Lee acknowledges Infessura's chronicles as one of the works showing "the real

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Vatican Library, which Pope della Rovere had established in 1475. Melozzo painted the Pope alongside his nephews Giuliano della Rovere and Raffaele Riario, both of whom he had ordained cardinals.

<sup>27</sup> Stefano Infessura, *Diario della città di Roma*, Nuova edizione a cura di Oreste Tommasini (Roma: Forzani e C. Tipografie del Senato, 1890), pp. 155-56, my translation. The original text reads as follows: "Hic, ut fertur vulgo, et experientia demonstravit, puerorum amator et sodomita fuit; nam quid fecerit pro pueris qui serviebant ei in cubiculo experientia docet; quibus non solum multorum millium ducatorum redditus donavit, verum cardinalatum et magnos episcopatus largiri ausus est. nam, cum non propter aliud, ut dicunt quidam, dilexisse comitem Hieronimum, et fratrem Petrum, eius germanum ac post cardinalem Sancti Sixti, nisi propter sodomiam? quid dicam de filio tonsoris? qui puer nondum duodecim annorum continuo cum eo erat, et tot et tantis divitiis, bonis fructibus, et, ut dicitur, magno episcopatu decoravit; quem, ut fertur, volebat ipsum ad cardinalatum [...] etiam in pueritia promovere."



existence of immorality far more universal and abominable than our dramatists venture to show” (EI, 90). In addition to this, Maxwell and Pulham note that the episode of Maddalena’s hair before the burial in Lee’s story “A Wedding Chest” (1904) might have been inspired by an incident recorded in Infessura’s *Diary* and quoted by Symonds in *The Age of Despots*.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, the place that Neroni chooses for the rite that should bestow upon him the secret of antiquity was being built in an attempt to counteract divine punishment for the pederastic practices of Cardinal Capranica. Neroni and Filarete’s transgression seems therefore dual, as paganism mixes with sexual deviance. This episode, I believe, confirms that Lee conceived of sexual radicalism as a semi-religious value. As Evangelista notes, her continuous stress of the combination of Christian and pagan elements in Renaissance art and culture downplays the influence of antiquity that had been welcomed as an element of cultural palingenesis by Pater and Symonds. Neroni’s fall, after all, suggests the fallacy of the aesthetic life inspired by the values of antiquity and, as Lee points out, “[i]n those last years of the fifteenth century, Rome was a city of the Middle Ages” (RFS, 228). Yet she does not refuse “the progressive energy” inscribed in the sexual critique endorsed and promoted by fin-de-siècle Hellenism.<sup>29</sup>

The ending of “A Seeker of Pagan Perfection,” however, suggests that in 1895 also Lee’s emphatic relationship with places proved to be fallacious as a means to penetrate and investigate the past. Although in her Renaissance essays Lee repeatedly pinpoints that landscapes often trigger her observations on Renaissance art and culture, at the end of her imaginary portrait she also expresses a feeling of frustration. The contemplation of landscape, with its remnants and relics, might provide a vague flavour of the past, but not a complete vision. She admits to a “feeling of impotence” (RFS, 230) that confirms the

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<sup>28</sup> Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 238. In “A Wedding Chest,” the nobleman Troilo Baglioni commissions the sculptor Desiderio of Castiglione del Lago to carve a *cassone* with scenes from Petrarca’s *Triumph of Love*. Baglioni later kidnaps and kills the sculptor’s fiancée, Monna Maddalena, and sends him her dead body in the same cassone, along with the corpse of an infant. Before the burial, Desiderio adorns Maddalena’s hair with a wreath of roses, “so that she looked like [...] the damsel Julia, daughter of the Emperor Augustus Cæsar, who was discovered buried on the Appian Way, and incontinently fell into dust.” Pulham and Maxwell note that the most famous version of this story is the one told by Infessura and quoted by Symonds, who writes that in 1485 a sarcophagus with the inscription “Julia, Daughter of Claudius,” had been found in the Appian Way. Preserved from the corruption of time, the beauty of the body became the object of a cult until Pope Innocent VIII had it buried to prevent deviation from Christianity. Although Lee had read both Infessura and Symonds, in “A Wedding Chest” she writes that Julia is Augustus’s – and not Claudius’s – daughter, as recorded by the Roman historian Suetonius in his *Life of Augustus*, §63.

<sup>29</sup> Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, p. 71.

idea she had put forth in *Euphorion*, where she had described the effluences emanating from landscapes as mere simulacra of the past.

At the same time, both *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* give proof of Lee's initial theorization of the "Genius Loci" as a spatial entity endowed with epistemological significance. I suggest that her sense of frustration lies in the strategy she deploys in dealing with landscape in these collections, as well as in the kind of relationship with the past that this strategy establishes. As she finishes narrating the story of Neroni, Lee concludes that "[o]f this Rome there remains nowadays nothing, or next to nothing" (*RFS*, 229). Lee's relationship with places is an effective means to investigate the past only insofar as it moves from the past to the present. In *Genius Loci*, instead, such a relationship will follow an opposite direction: her contact with the landscape activates an epiphanic process which connects her from the present to the past.

### 3.2. The "genius loci" or "spirit of place" in Vernon Lee's Italian travel writings

*Genius Loci. Notes on Places* was published in 1898. However, I argue that the collection should be read by bearing in mind what Lee had already discussed in 1884 in *Euphorion*, since in the introduction to *Genius Loci* she points out that

To certain among us, undeniably, places, localities (I can find no reverent and tender enough expression for them in our practical, personal language) become objects of intense and most intimate feeling. Quite irrespective of their inhabitants, and virtually of their written history, they can touch us like living creatures; and one can have with them friendship of the deepest and most satisfying sort.<sup>30</sup>

According to Lee, such intimate feelings might arise regardless of what "official" history records. This, however, does not mean that the history and the civilization of a place do not contribute to establishing a sympathetic relationship between places and human beings. Consequently, I suggest that Lee's comment should be read by remembering that such a relationship is for Lee closely intimate and personal.

In addition, I argue that Lee's essay on "The Lie of the Land. Notes about Landscapes," published in *Limbo and Other Essays* in 1897, should be taken as a necessary

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<sup>30</sup> Vernon Lee, *Genius Loci. Notes on Places* (London: Grant Richards, 1899), pp. 3-4. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *GL*.

premise to *Genius Loci*. This essay fulfils an introductory function, and might be considered the manifesto of Lee's ideas on landscape in that it introduces theoretical aspects concerned with the enjoyment of the landscape and the constraints that restrict its artistic representations. The idea of a "Spirit of Place" is subsumed here under the rubric "the lie of the land," which enables Lee to distinguish between an objective, purely physical landscape – that is to say, what humanistic geography has now labelled *environment* – and its subjective counterpart. Being dependent on the individual and its perception, Lee argues that landscape challenges verbal representation inasmuch as "[w]ords can just barely indicate the charm of this *other place other time* enriching of the present impression. Words cannot in the least, I think, render that other suggestion contained in *The Lie of the Land*."<sup>31</sup> In spite of this difficulty, Lee acknowledges all individual interpretation of landscape as real. Moreover, she adds that such subjective relationship to landscape is pre-cultural, and describes it in terms which interestingly forestall D. H. Lawrence's notion of a blood-consciousness. Because, Lee writes, "we actually *live* in the indescribable thing which I must call the *lie of the land*," which is one of "the obscure things inherited with our blood, and making up the stuff of our souls" (*L*, 47). Whereas elsewhere in her writing Lee had often resorted to literature as a means to delve into and comment on the visual arts, here Lee exploits painting in order to provide a visual counterpart to her experience of landscape. Quite significantly, she articulates her recollections of past walks and hikes through what seems a brief survey of Renaissance painting and the landscapes it offers:

[w]hat walks have we not taken, leaving sacred personages and profane, not to speak of allegoric ones, far behind in the backgrounds of the old Tuscans, Umbrians, and Venetians! Up Benozzo's hillside woods of cypress and pine, smelling of myrrh and sweet-briar, over Perugino's green rising grounds, towards those slender, scant-leaved trees, straight-stemmed acacias and elms, by the water in the cool, blue evening valley. Best of all, have not Giorgione and Titian, Palma and Bonifazio, and the dear imitative people labelled *Venetian school*, led us between the hedges russet already with the ripening of the season and hour into those fields where the sheep are nibbling, under the twilight of the big brown trees, to where some pale blue alp closes in the slopes and the valleys? (*L*, 49)

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<sup>31</sup> Vernon Lee, *Limbo and Other Essays* (London: Grant Richards, 1897), p. 49. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *L*.

Back to *Genius Loci*, one should point out that Italy is not the only subject of the various essays that form this travelogue. Indeed, the volume also includes Lee's impressions following her journeys to France and Germany. It is Italy, however, that sparks her first reflection about the spirit of place.<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of the volume, as she recollects a rainy afternoon in Verona, she defines the "Genius Loci" as

[a] divinity, certainly, great or small as the case may be, and deserving of some silent worship. But, for mercy's sake, not a personification; not a man or woman with mural crown and attributes, and detestable definite history, like the dreadful ladies who sit round the Place de la Concorde. To think of a place or a country in human shape is, for all the practice of rhetoricians, not to think of it at all. No, no. The Genius Loci, like all worthy divinities, is of the substance of our heart and mind, a spiritual reality. And as for visible embodiment, why that is the place itself, or the country; (*GL*, 5)

Lee's "Genius Loci" should not be viewed in anthropomorphic terms. It is not a personification, and as such it cannot be given any human attribute. It is an exclusively spiritual entity, one that the writer feels in organic communion with. The individual establishes a personal relationship with this divinity, and Lee adds that its presence is felt most intensely next to particular landscapes or monuments. "The genius of places lurks there; or, more strictly, *he is it*" (*GL*, 6). The intensity of such a feeling, however, depends on what a specific landscape or monument conveys to the individual who establishes a connection with those cultural relics.

For this reason, although Lee acknowledges that this spirit is "immanent very often and subduing our hearts most deeply" (*GL*, 6), I argue that her idea of the "Genius Loci" should be defined as existing within, and not without the individual. Her sketches of places should be read bearing in mind Martin Heidegger's conceptualization of "the uncanny" (in German, *das Unheimliche*, which literally means "unhomely") and "Being-in-the-world" (*Dasein*). In *Being and Time* (1927), the German philosopher argues that the feeling of un-homeliness produced by the uncanny constantly pursues *Dasein*, so that "Being-in-the-world becomes a 'not at home.'"<sup>33</sup> Because for Heidegger the essence of Being-in-the world lies in its existence," Tally concludes that, in spatial terms, *Dasein*

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<sup>32</sup> However, even though Lee explicitly acknowledges Italy as "the country of my adoption" (*GL*, 43), it is in her notes on Northern European places that she articulates in more general, almost theoretical terms, her response to the "Genius Loci."

<sup>33</sup> Eric Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), p. 86.

requires that the individual shape the world in which he exists in a way that is meaningful to himself.<sup>34</sup>

The origin of the spirit of place goes back to ancient Roman religion, which worshipped specific *genii loci* alongside the household gods, the *Lares* and the *Penati*. Prudentius, for example, recorded ironically that in Rome all places – from gates to stables and baths – had their own guardian spirit.<sup>35</sup> Although Lee’s theorization of the “Genius Loci” appropriates a Latin term, I suggest that her relationship to places is founded on three Greek words, which unveil the subjective nature of this relationship: *synesthesia*, *empathy*, and *epiphany*. As for the first point, her works offer several descriptions that are based on sensations perceived through senses other than sight. In Bavaria, for example, Lee recalls “meeting in these gabled Augsburg streets the indefinable smell of the arcades and terraces of Thun” (*GL*, 15). The charm of Touraine is described in terms of “quite a special flavour” (*GL*, 31), in Cologne she finds herself “involuntarily registering smells like Coleridge” (*GL*, 131), and in Mantua she notes that the Ducal Palace was “filled with the sickly smell of the silkworm, which seemed, by coincidence, to express its saecular decay” (*GL*, 165). Everywhere in *Genius Loci*, this synesthetic approach to landscape activates a chain of mnemonic associations which depend on Lee’s ability to establish an empathic relationship with place. Again, Lee had already discussed this aspect in theoretical terms in *Limbo*, arguing that it is one’s own mental associations that enable one

to carry about, like a verse or a tune, whole mountain ranges, valleys, rivers and lakes, things in appearance the least easy to remove from their place. As some persons are never unattended by a melody; so others, and among them your humble servant, have always for their thoughts and feelings, an additional background besides the one which happens to be visible behind their head and shoulders. By this means I am usually in two places at a time, sometimes in several very distant ones within a few seconds.

It is extraordinary [...] how much of one’s past life, sensations, hopes, wishes, words, has got entangled in the little familiar sprigs, grasses and moss. The order of time and space is sometimes utterly subverted; (*L*, 60-61)

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<sup>34</sup> Robert J. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 65, 67.

<sup>35</sup> John Bodel, “Genius Loci e i mercati di Roma,” in *Epigrafia 2006. Atti della XIVe Rencontre sur l’Épigraphie in onore di Silvio Panciera con altri contributi di colleghi, allievi e collaboratori*, ed. Maria Letizia Caldelli, Gian Luca Gregori e Silvio Orlandi (Roma: Edizioni Quasar, 2008), p. 209.

Whilst confirming her earlier remark on the spirit of place as a simulacrum, this strategy also suggests that, towards the turn of the century, she had found a way to come to terms with its epistemological implications. Again, Lee curiously forestalls Baudrillard's theory of simulacra: according to the French philosopher, one should "stockpile" the past in order to preserve culture, which develops through a linear and accumulative process.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Lee concludes her reflections on the Ducal Palace remarking that, in spite of its sickly smell, "little by little, as you tramp through what seem miles of solemn emptiness, you find that more than any similar place it has gone to your brain" (*GL*, 166).

As for the emphatic aspect of Vernon Lee's relationship to places, critics usually reckon that Lee first introduced the word "empathy" into English by appropriating the German word *Einfühlung* in *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912). I suggest that, in this context, empathy should be understood as Lee's ability to respond to what is outside, to what is other than herself. Any form of art might provide such an external stimulus, as she suggests at the beginning of *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (1909), where she registers her reactions upon hearing music. Whatever the object of perception, the result is that

[i]n the moments of such emotional perception, our soul also, ourselves, become in a higher degree organic, alive, receiving and giving out the life of the universe; come to be woven into the patterns of harmonies, made of the stuff of reality, homogeneous with themselves, consubstantial with the universe, like the living plant, the flowing stream, the flying cloud, the great picture or statue. (*LN*, 108)

Such considerations confirm Lee's debt to Pater's praise of sensuous ecstasy and subjective response in criticism, but they also suggest the influence of Theodor Lipps's idea that the very act of perception implies that the subject attributes life to objects as well as – I would add – landscapes and places.<sup>37</sup>

Lee's empathic relationship to places is dependent on and channelled by memory, and the chain of subjective associations that memory calls to mind by means of an epiphanic process. When she sees an inscription in Augsburg, she writes that "[o]ff went my memory, and speedily returned with associations innumerable, which settled down like rooks" (*GL*, 81-2). This is also why she often leaves out clear spatial coordinates,

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<sup>36</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> See Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy*, pp. 46-50.

stating that she had rather not reveal “to the ignorant” reader where a specific place lies, “for it lies in a very happy province of my memory” (*GL*, 80).<sup>38</sup>

Lee significantly titled one of her travelogues *The Sentimental Traveller* (1908), which Virginia Woolf judged as lacking clearness of sight. In a review published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on January 9, 1908, Woolf harshly criticized Lee and the way she “boasts the utmost familiarity” with the “Genius Loci.” Albeit Woolf – as it is known – believed that the mind was constantly subject to “a myriad impressions,” she nonetheless disapproved of Lee’s style for being too impressionistic:

[h]er method [...] so far as the portrait of the place is concerned, is purely impressionist, for if she were to concentrate her mind upon the task of seeing any object as exact as it can be seen there would be no time for these egotistical diversions. [...] Vernon Lee, with much of the curiosity, the candour, and the sensitiveness to trifle of the true essayist, lacks the exquisite taste and penetrating clearness of sight, which makes some essays concentrated epitomes of precious things!<sup>39</sup>

Woolf’s observation, however, seem to be perfectly fit to Lee’s work, especially if one considers that in “The Lie of the Land” she had stated that “a correct notion” of the relationship between landscape and sentiments was crucial in order find “the best manner of *representing landscape with words*” (*L*, 62).

Indeed, Woolf’s disparaging criticism is directed at Lee’s subjective vision, which establishes an interesting point of contact between her work in aesthetics and her travel writing. From this point of view, I argue that Lee’s concept of the “Genius Loci” – especially with reference to Renaissance and contemporary Italy – might profitably be

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<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in her impressions on Touraine, Lee writes that “[t]he name of St. Avry is not the real one; I have very ingeniously manufactured it on purpose, because if other persons should have different impressions of the place I do not wish to hear about them” (*GL*, 33).

<sup>39</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Sentimental Traveller,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 6 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 1, pp. 157-58. Curiously, in “Modern Novels” – which was published on *Times Literary Supplement* on April 10, 1919 – Woolf seems closer to Lee’s impressionistic style than in the revised version of the essay, which was included as “Modern Fiction” in *The Common Reader* (1925). In “Modern Novels,” Woolf writes that “[t]he mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible?” See Virginia Woolf, “Modern Novels,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 6 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986-2011) 3, p. 33; “Modern Fiction,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 4, p. 160.

taken into consideration alongside D. H. Lawrence's Italian writings. Both Lee's *Genius Loci* and Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy* seem to me to perfectly exemplify the work of those writers who – as Colby puts it – exploit travel writing as a means to indulge their aesthetic interest in nature, art, and human culture.<sup>40</sup> Besides, the very concept of a “Spirit of Place” immediately brings to mind *Studies in Classic American Literature*, where Lawrence claims that

[e]very continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.<sup>41</sup>

Travel literature is a genre that Lawrence explored extensively like Lee. From *Twilight in Italy* to the unfinished and posthumously published *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1932), all of Lawrence's books that are somehow linked with his travels reveal his continuous stylistic experimentation with this genre and his search for an ideal place for palingenesis.<sup>42</sup> Scholarship has devoted a lot of attention to these writings, yet no attempt has been made at looking into Lawrence's Italian writings alongside those by Vernon Lee.<sup>43</sup>

Lawrence had moved to Tuscany in 1926, and there is evidence suggesting that he and Lee knew each other's work. Aldous Huxley records Lee's opinion of Lawrence in *The Olive Tree and Other Essays* (1936). Moreover, his praise of Lawrence's empathic response to nature suggests a point of contact with Lee's work. According to Huxley, Lawrence “seemed to know, by personal experience, what it was like to be a tree or a daisy or a breaking wave or even the mysterious moon itself. [...] ‘He sees,’ Vernon Lee once said to me, ‘more than a human being ought to see. Perhaps,’ she added, ‘that’s why he hates humanity so much.’”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 250.

<sup>41</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Stefania Michelucci, “L’Espace Perdu: D. H. Lawrence's Travel Writings,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 8, No. 1 (2005), p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> To my knowledge, the only example so far is Martin's *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy*, which examines the ideas of sympathy in the writings of Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. Martin, however, mostly focuses on their fiction.

<sup>44</sup> Aldous Huxley, “D. H. Lawrence,” in *The Olive Tree and Other Essays*, 1936 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 233.



I believe it is significant that Huxley quotes Lee's words while discussing the visual quality of Lawrence's writing as well as his interest in nature and landscape. One should also note that, while he was in Montici, Huxley had written to Lee to express his appreciation of her last travelogue, *The Golden Keys* (1925). In this letter, he explicitly connects her work with Lawrence's. "How much I like," Huxley writes in a letter dated May 26, 1925,

your generalizations about the Genius Loci! One may be born a worshipper of more spectacular deities – from Jehovah to D. H. Lawrence's Dark God, from Dionysus to the object of Boehme's ecstasies – one may be born but it is useless to try to make oneself, consciously, a worshipper at such shrines.<sup>45</sup>

I argue that Huxley's remarks suggest the profitability of a conjoined look into the work of two writers who both found a second home in Italy, and who both believed in the existence of a "Spirit of Place." Because their production is so extensive, I am going to compare some "portraits of places" from *Genius Loci* and *Twilight in Italy* – the collection in which, as Neil Roberts notes, travel becomes integral to Lawrence's work.<sup>46</sup>

Following a path that relies more on psychology and anthropology than on existentialism and the intertextual relics of aesthetic criticism, Michelucci has argued that also Lawrence's writings trace an interesting division between space and place, emphasizing the epistemological function of the latter.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the beginning of *Twilight in Italy* reveals an epiphanic experience sparked by the contemplation of the landscape which is akin to Lee's. In the almost Gothic-titled chapter "The Spinner and the Monks," for instance, Lawrence describes his visit to the Church of San Tommaso in a way that mingles his epiphanic realization of the church "being-in-the-world" with an empathic connection with the building. From this point of view, Lawrence's description of the Church of Gargnano recalls many of Lee's sketches. He confesses having seen it

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<sup>45</sup> The letter is qtd. in Richard Cary, "Aldous Huxley, Vernon Lee and the Genius Loci," *Colby Quarterly* 5, No. 6 (June 1960), pp. 129-30. The only mention of Lee's name that one finds in Lawrence's letters is not as positive. Writing to Martin Secker from Scandicci in 1927, he refers to the success of the English translation of Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *Jud Süß* (1925) pointing out that "[e]ven here people think it so good. Only old Vernon Lee has no use for it – bottle-washing!" See *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, gen. ed. James T. Boulton, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979-2001), 6, p. 46. The comment sounds a bit sarcastic, but it seems to me to be just another instance of Lee's difficulty at maintaining relaxed and fruitful relationship with the English literary establishment.

<sup>46</sup> Neil Roberts, *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> See Stefania Michelucci, *Space and Place in the Works of D. H. Lawrence*, trans. Jill Franks (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2002), esp. pp. 1-6.

many times, but he had never realized its existence until touched by the chiming of the bells:

I saw it often, and yet for a long time it never occurred to me that it actually existed. It was like a vision, a thing one does not expect to come close to. [...] For a long time I knew how the day went, by the imperious clangour of midday and evening bells striking down upon the houses and the edge of the lake. Yet it did not occur to me to ask where these bells rang. Till at last my everyday trance was broken in upon, and I knew the ringing of the Church of San Tommaso. The church became a living connexion with me.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to this, I suggest that *Genius Loci* and *Twilight in Italy* bring up another interesting aspect linked with the ontological – rather than epistemological – element embedded in Lee and Lawrence’s sympathetic relationship to landscapes and places. As he observes an old Italian spinner, whose dialect he can barely understand, Lawrence is overwhelmed by a disturbing sense of inexistence. His description of the lady relies on a series of comparisons which underline her empathic relationship with the surroundings:

She was like a fragment of earth, she was a living stone of the terrace, sun-bleached. [...] She stood back under the sun-bleached solid wall, like a stone rolled down and stayed in a crevice. [...] She was grey, and her apron, and her dress, and her kerchief, and her hands and her face were all sun-bleached and sun-stained, greyey, bluey, brownly, like stones and half-coloured leaves, sunny in their colourlessness. (*TI*, 105-6)

One finds similar remarks elsewhere in *Twilight in Italy*, whenever Lawrence focuses on human portraits. During his stay in Gargnano, he meets Faustino, a former emigrant who had made a fortune in a flag factory in America before returning to his hometown. The man, who is known in town as “Il Duro,” puzzles Lawrence for categorical rejection of marriage, and he immediately characterizes him as “inscrutable” (*TI*, 174). When he sees “Il Duro,” working in the vines, Lawrence defines him not as a worker, but as “a

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<sup>48</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays*, ed. Paul Eggert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 103. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *TI*. Likewise, when he first encounters Giovanni, a man who had emigrated to America and then fought in the Italo-Turkish war, Lawrence admits to a slight sense of repulsion. Later on, however, he reckons that the man – whom he nicknames “John” – is far more sensitive than his fellow citizens because of his enriching experience as an expatriate, which had allowed him to sympathetically “come more into contact with his new surroundings” (*TI*, 184).

creature in intimate communion with the sensible world, knowing purely by touch the limey mess he mixed amongst, knowing as if by relation between that soft matter and the matter of himself" (*TI*, 177).

Lawrence, however, seems unable to experience an empathic response towards the people he encounters. He cannot understand the old spinner, and neither does she understand him. Yet his characterization of the old woman seems to confirm Neil Roberts's remark that Lawrence's response to the places he explores and the people he meets are "often mutually entangled, and this may detract from a fully human response to the people he encounters."<sup>49</sup> Likewise, although "Il Duro" seems to him to be as simple as a crystal, Lawrence admits that it was impossible for the two of them "to understand each other, or for me to understand him" (*TI*, 176). Empathy, however, does not coincide with sympathy, and Lawrence is attracted to "Il Duro" notwithstanding such difficulty. Interestingly, Lawrence expresses his fascination by pointing out an element of paganism in Faustino. "He was very handsome, beautiful rather, a man of thirty-two or three, with a clear golden skin and perfectly turned face, something godlike" (*TI*, 173). After this almost statuesque description, Lawrence's sympathy is kindled by an epiphanic realization that the man was a quasi embodiment of the god Pan:

Watching him, watching him absorbed, bestial, and yet godlike crouching before the plant, as if he were the god of lower life, I somehow understood his isolation, why he did not marry. Pan and the ministers of Pan do not marry, the sylvan gods. They are sylvan and isolated in their being. (*TI*, 177)

Jill Franks suggests that Lawrence's deification of "Il Duro" might be a compensation strategy to channel his aversion for the man. He sublimates his loathing into admiration, while highlighting the libertinism of a man whose sexual past is often alluded to. Only a few years earlier, however, the Victorian revival had also associated the myth of Pan with same-sex desire. From this standpoint, Lawrence's deification of "Il Duro" might also suggest some repressed homoerotic tension.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Roberts, *D.H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference*, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> See Jill Franks, *Revisionist Resurrection Mythologies: A Study of D. H. Lawrence's Italian Works* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), esp. pp. 60-61, 69. On the revival of the myth of Pan, and its homosexual connotation in Victorian England, see Francesca Orestano, "The Renaissance and Its Rebirths: the Lesson of Jacob Burckhardt," in *Proceedings of the International Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Conference on Literature and Cultural Memory. New Europe College, Bucharest, 22-24 November, 2012*, ed. Mihaela Irimia (Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming).

### 3.3. The space of the Renaissance: North and South

For both Lee and Lawrence, the geographic and ethnographic element is often functional to kindling philosophical speculations. Lawrence explicitly pointed out this aspect of *Twilight in Italy* in a letter dated September 5, 1915, in which he informed Lady Cynthia Asquith that he was “writing a book of sketches, or preparing a book of sketches, about the nations, Italian German and English, full of philosophising and struggling to show things real.”<sup>51</sup>

In *Twilight in Italy*, Lawrence’s most articulate reflection concerns the need for a balance between the consummation in the spirit and the consummation in the flesh. This polarization is embodied in the divide that separates the North from the South, a theme that had already found its way in *Genius Loci*. Lee defines Touraine a sort of “mitigated and rational south,” but she also underlines that along the Loire she finds “none of the real south’s subtle appeals and imperious fascination” (*GL*, 31). And again, talking about the Château de Blois and Catherine de Medici’s “Secret Chamber,” she notes that the wickedness of Valois France “was never purged away, like that of Italy, by open air and sunshine, by the great gales of human energy and the beneficent heat of genius” (*GL*, 45).

Although they focus on contemporary Italy, these sketches offer interesting considerations also at a diachronic level in that they connect contemporary Italy to its past, and especially to the Renaissance. In the late 1870s, as we have seen, Lee had confessed to Mrs. Jenkins that nothing from the Renaissance could ever seem “depressing” to her; in *Genius Loci*, the Italian Renaissance is the cornerstone she repeatedly exploits to provide a visual representation of the places she sees and the feelings that these places arouse. I argue that this is possible because in this travelogue – like in Lee’s essays as an aesthetic critic – the Renaissance is used as a polysemic category endowed with a flexible, almost plastic, meaning. Lee declares herself deeply moved upon hearing that a copy of Paul Jovius’s *Lives of the Great Captains* – presumably an inaccurate translation of the *Illustrium virorum vitae* (1549) – had been found in a ditch surrounding a prison in Touraine. The book, she thinks, must have been the only source of entertainment for some tortured captive, and it appears to her as a relic of “that brilliant, evil, yet sensitive and human Italian Renaissance” (*GL*, 43).

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<sup>51</sup> *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 2, p. 386.

On the other hand, Lee's frequent references to Renaissance artworks reveal her interest in pictorial details and establish a connection between her travelogues and her writings as an essayist. As she wanders around Florence, for instance, the fuel-shops appear to her like "black caverns," decorated with "a bundle of oak staves, like those which Titian placed behind his Duke of Urbino of the family of Quercus Robur" (*GL*, 119). Lee is evidently referring to Titian's portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere (ca 1536-38), one of Sixtus IV's grandnephews. Titian placed behind the Duke two staves – one decorated with the emblems of the Pontifical State, the other celebrating the Florentine Republic – separated by a branch of oak, alluding to the Duke's family name. Similarly, in Piedmont, although the landscape is visibly impoverished because of the draught, "morning and evening – nay, more or less all day – there pervades everything, under the pale blue misty sky, a sort of Pier della Francesca grace of delicate dove-coloured tints and delicate, undulating, saw-edged lines" (*GL*, 143).

While they pinpoint the constitutive elements of this polarization between the North and the South of Europe, and Northern and Southern races, both Lee and Lawrence meditate on the ontological implications embedded in their conceptualization of the Italian Renaissance. Lawrence ponders about this aspect extensively in "The Lemon Gardens," bearing a debt to William Blake not only in his celebration of the tiger as the sublime, "supreme manifestation of the senses made absolute" (*TI*, 117). The need to find a balance between the consummation in the spirit and the consummation in the flesh shows the influence of Blake's gnoseological theory as grounded on the experience of opposite states.<sup>52</sup>

According to Lawrence, man continually oscillates between two selves, attracted to either pole of Arnold's dichotomy of Hellenism and Hebraism. Pondering about human life and religious obedience, he remarks that "[h]aving arrived at the one extreme of mechanical selflessness, we immediately embrace the other extreme of the transcendent Self. But we try to be both at once. We do not cease to be the one before we become the other" (*TI*, 122). This struggle opposes paganism and Christianity as two complementary modes of consciousness, defining them respectively as the quest for the

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<sup>52</sup> Such a conception is clearly outlined at the end of "The Argument" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), where Blake claims that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason[,] Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell." William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, with a foreword and commentary by Harold Bloom (Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2008), p. 34.

fulfilment in the other versus the quest for fulfilment in the self.<sup>53</sup> Such a distinction is also crucial to *Genius Loci*. It especially shapes Lee's reflections in the last chapter of the collection, which she tellingly titles "The South."

Recalling her voyage back from England to Italy, after passing through France, Lee writes that "[t]he sense of being in the real South is made up of many and various impressions, and leads to many more" (*GL*, 195). Among her several remarks, Lee highlights the aesthetic achievement of ancient Mediterranean civilizations like Greece, Syria and Italy, embracing a climatic hypothesis for their artistic flourishing. Towards the end of this chapter – which closes the collection – Lee admits that whilst walking around Genoa and its surroundings "one feels sometimes a dreadful spasm of almost pagan superstition [...]. At other moments, and they should be cultivated for the more permanent, the feeling is pagan, indeed, but of a nobler paganism" (*GL*, 198). I believe it is significant that Lee still acknowledges such a deep presence in fin-de-siècle Italy, which one would more likely associate with its great Catholic tradition. The "nobler paganism" she feels inspired by, however, is not the Renaissance esotericism of Domenico Neroni in "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection." Instead, it sparks an articulate philosophical speculation on the meaning of life as opposed to existence, praising the "moral wholesomeness" (*GL*, 199) of the South. Hiking around the Tuscan Apennine, Lee had already wondered in synesthetic terms, "how much of our life is real living; and how much, alas! mere grazing with nose on the ground" (*GL*, 127). And here on the coast of Genoa,

the sea and the sky and Hesperides' vegetation take no notice, go on living and praising the goodness of life; and would it be not wise if we too, having bowed our head for a minute at the passage of Death, should recognise also that Death – others, or ours – passes indeed every minute, but passes only, while life abides and is eternal? (*GL*, 198)

Lee's reflections on the *Genius Loci* move from the verbal representation of the Italian landscape to a philosophical reflection on the Italian civilization of the twentieth century, which she connects to its cultural heritage. A few years later, they will find an interesting echo in *Twilight in Italy*, where Lawrence puts forth similar considerations by connecting contemporary Italy to the Renaissance. The country might be in an endangered state, threatened by the advance of the mechanization from which he was trying to escape; yet

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<sup>53</sup> Franks, *Revisionist Resurrection Mythologies*, p. 59.

Lawrence sees in Italy an instance of the celebration of God in the Flesh and the blood-consciousness. He maintains that “[t]his is the soul of the Italian since the Renaissance” (TI, 116). Like Pater and Lee, he considers the Renaissance a moment of high development in the Italian civilization, although it is one which was followed by a standstill. Again, like his late Victorian predecessors, he does not conceive the Renaissance as a radical rupture with the Christian Middle Ages, but rather as its later stage, moulded by that re-awakening of the humankind’s earthly instincts which still shapes Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Here in the South, “The flesh, the senses, are now self-conscious. They know their aim. Their aim is in supreme sensation” (TI, 117).

Lawrence’s conception of the Renaissance, however, slightly departs from Pater’s, Symonds’s and Lee’s. The period was for him one of evident development in the history of humankind, yet it was not unproblematic. Lawrence believes that the Renaissance was responsible for the gap that separates the spirit and the flesh. According to his religious system, the bond between the brain and the blood, as Traficante notes, had eventually dissolved during the Renaissance, when man tried to nullify “the increasing abstraction of the spirit of Christ at the cost of the body (or flesh).”<sup>54</sup> Yet in *Movements in European History* (1921), he would reckon that the splendour of fifteenth-century Italy was the result of the cultural and commercial changes that had begun two hundred years before, which led to that re-awakening of those earthly instincts that still pervade contemporary Italy. Whereas in the Middle Ages “man was alive, but blind and voracious,” during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries “he awoke. The human spirit was then like a butterfly which bursts from the chrysalis into the air. [...] The narrow, devouring little world of the caterpillar has disappeared, all heaven and all earth flash around.”<sup>55</sup>

Lawrence formally opposes the Renaissance spirit of contemporary Italians and other Southern countries to the “Hebrewness” of Northern countries. His conceptualization of the Renaissance, however, seems to endorse Arnold’s dichotomy. Indeed, when he reflects on the state of the modern Italian character while watching a performance of *Hamlet* in “The Theatre,” he compares the Prince of Denmark to Orestes before concluding that “[t]he whole Greek life was based on the idea of the supremacy of the self” (TI, 144). Although his vision is strictly gendered, he is also close to Lee’s vision

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<sup>54</sup> Antonio Traficante, *D. H. Lawrence’s Italian Travel Literature and Translations of Giovanni Verga: a Bakhtinian Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 7, 15.

<sup>55</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Movements in European History*, ed. Philip Crumpton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 166.

of the Renaissance, which not only characterizes her artistic and historical speculations, but also steers her reflections on the contemporary Italian landscape. Thinking about the “Holy Week in Tuscany,” for example, Lee had described the sepulchral gardens outside a church in Arezzo as

[l]ittle gardens of Adonis, historically considered, handed over to Christianity by Paganism, and hence down the pious centuries; lights and sepulchres and mustard-and-cress, and pots of sprouting wheat; but none the less pious, rather the contrary, for tracing their origin to long-forgotten forms of piety. (*GL*, 21-22)

In a similar way, Lawrence reflects on the blending of Christian and sensuous, pagan elements of Renaissance Italy. In “The Love of the Saint,” Lee had stressed the role of St. Francis’s religion of love in breaking free from the grips of medieval barren asceticism. Interestingly, Lawrence highlights the distance that separates Franciscanism from the Catholic orthodoxy in “The Lemon Gardens.” While he visits a *limonaia*, his Italian teacher informs him that the church of Gargnano was dedicated to St. Francis, who had apparently introduced the lemons into the town. As he sympathetically approaches the church, Lawrence visually imagines the friar, but he eventually comes to the remark that “Bacchus had been before him in the drink trade” (*TI*, 130). In addition to this, he finds a visual embodiment of such a dichotomy in Botticelli’s paintings. “Already Botticelli painted Aphrodite, queen of the senses,” Lawrence writes, “supreme along with Mary, Queen of Heaven” (*TI*, 116). He presumably refers to the variety of themes and subjects recurring in Botticelli’s pictures. On the other hand, however, I argue that his comment might as well be intended as Lawrence’s intention to stress the mix mash of pagan and Christian elements in works like *The Birth of Venus*. From such a perspective, he would seem to forestall contemporary readings of Botticelli’s canvas. Art historians Charles R. Mack, for instance, interestingly argues not only that the sea gives an earthly birth to Venus like the Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ, but he also points out that this pagan *topos* finds a Christian echo in Mary’s epithet *stella maris*, “Our Lady, Star of the Sea.” This is at once an allusion to the Virgin’s name, and to Venus the celestial body.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, if one compares the face of Botticelli’s Venus with the faces of many of his madonnas, one has a visually powerful proof of this *mélange*. I suggest that Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487) is a case in point, and not only from a visual standpoint.

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<sup>56</sup> Charles R. Mack, “Botticelli’s Venus: Antique Allusions and Medicean Propaganda,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 28, 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 225-26.



The pomegranate introduces an element of paganism in this Renaissance Christian representation by establishing a connection to the myth of Persephone, who had eaten the fruit in Hades. Furthermore, the pomegranate – which is often considered a symbol of fertility – suggests interesting aspects from the point of view of sexuality and gender. The Greek word used in the myth of Persephone to designate its seeds, *kokkos*, means both seed and testicles, whilst the round, bulbous and pulpy fruit is itself indicative of the womanly womb. Thus, Persephone’s consumption of the fruit in Hades suggests the fruitful union of opposites, which also blurs gender distinction. As Agha-Jaffar notes, such a synthesis of opposites guarantees fertility and new life.<sup>57</sup>

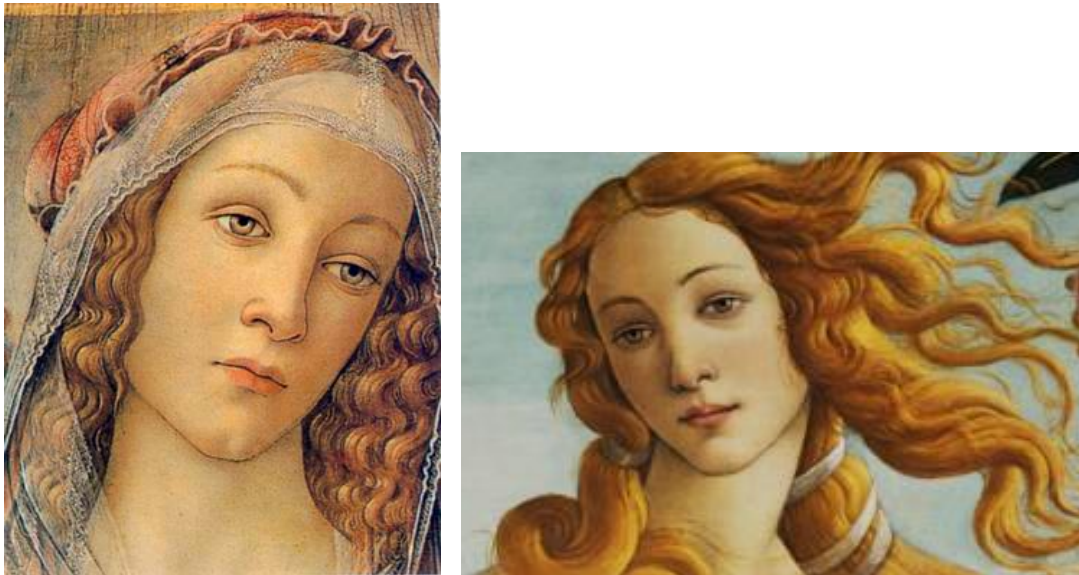


Fig. 2 Details of Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (left) and *The Birth of Venus* (right).

Moving from the world of pagan myths to contemporary Italy, the same mixture of apparently contrasting elements is embodied in Paolo and Maria Fiori, the couple that Lawrence encounters in San Gaudenzio. His characterization of their opposite spirit is portrayed in terms which, I suggest, rely on those contrasts he assigns to the Northern and Southern type. Lawrence defines Paolo and Maria as “the opposite sides of the universe, the light and the dark” (*TI*, 157). The man shows

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<sup>57</sup> Tamara Agha-Jaffar, *Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2002), p. 68.

## Renaissance tracks

the dignity of a religious conception. Paolo regarded us as belonging to the Signoria, those who are elect, near God. And this was part of his religious service. His life was a ritual. [...] Maria was nearer to the actual truth when she said that money was the only distinction. But Paolo had hold of an eternal truth, where hers was temporal. Only Paolo misapplied this eternal truth. (*TI*, 160)

This provides another interesting point of contact between Lee and Lawrence's reflections on the cultural and ontological relevance of the Renaissance. Paolo and Maria Fiori are antithetical in that each of them embodies a different attitude to life. I suggest the couple should be read in terms of the same opposition between the values conveyed by the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Paolo's conduct seems to conform to a kind of medieval Christianity, although Lawrence explains that his dignified religious attitude should not be taken as mere servitude. His wife Maria, on the other hand, might be seen as the embodiment of the Renaissance drive, with its focus on individuality and the earthly dimension of life. The woman,

in her soul, jeered at the Church and at religion. She wanted the human society as the absolute, without religious abstractions. So Paolo's oaths enraged her, because of their profanity, she said. But it was really because of their subscribing to another superhuman order. She jeered at the clerical people. (*TI*, 161)

As Frank points out, the dissonance between Paolo and Maria Fiori's values accounts for the woman's lack of physical and spiritual satisfaction. She disagrees with her husband insofar as she judges as unnatural his strong belief in and respect for the hierarchies of the Church and society.<sup>58</sup> Such an opposition of values closely resembles the one that Lee had deployed in "The Love of the Saints," where she had juxtaposed the frigidity of Abelard's medieval asceticism to Heloïse's dual love for God and men. Like Héloïse, Marie seems to refuse the authority of the clerical superstructure rather than her spirituality and religious beliefs. Indeed, she is quite sensitive to her husband's habit of swearing, which she finds annoying.

Because of Paolo's and Maria's antithetical natures, their relationship is possible only insofar as each of them annihilates his individual self. Yet Lawrence acknowledges that in the Fioris' eldest son, Giovanni, "the fusion of the parents was perfect, he was a perfect spark from the flint and steel" (*TI*, 157). This is so because the child, as Lawrence

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<sup>58</sup> Franks, *Revisionist Resurrection Mythologies*, p. 61.

argues in several passages in *Twilight in Italy*, is a perfect synthesis of the mind and the senses, embodying an almost pantheistic oneness that reconciles the spirit and the flesh. As he maintains in “Italians in Exile,” the child is a powerful symbol of the triumph of man. It is “the triumph of eternal life in procreation” (*TI*, 200). Interestingly, Lee had similarly resorted to the metaphor of the child in order to explain the perfect synthesis of the Christian obedience and the individualist drive of earthly existence. According to Lee, Euphorion embodies the spirit of the Renaissance in that he reconciles the pagan spirit of antiquity with the Middle Ages. And in the introduction to *Euphorion*, she had noted that no modern civilization had been able to develop in Italy after the Renaissance. As a result, ever since the fifteenth century, Italy had had

to go through life in the old garments, still half mediæval in shape, which had been fashioned for her during the Renaissance [...] and with these rags of Renaissance civilization, Italy may still be seen to drape herself. Not perhaps in the great centres, where the garments of modern civilization, economical, unpicturesque, intended to be worn but a short time, have been imported from other countries; but yet in many places. (*E1*, 16-17)

A passage like this, taken from *Euphorion*, cannot be overlooked in order to discuss the cultural analysis embedded in *Genius Loci*, whose inclusion in the genre of travel literature should not be taken at face value. In fact, Lee’s reflections in *Genius Loci* – and to some extent also Lawrence’s – ought to be looked into by taking into account what scholarship has recently defined as “cultural memory.” In Lee’s recollections memory has a pivotal function in that it mediates between her personal identity and cultural history. According to Assmann, cultural memory works by interconnecting time, identity and memory from a personal, social and cultural dimension. As a result, it does not preserve an objective view of the past. Instead, cultural memory is the product of a past crystallized in cultural formations which meaningfully illuminate the present as a consequence of a metonymical relationship linking a “reminding object” with “a reminding mind.”<sup>59</sup> In Lee’s critical essays as well as in her travelogues, landscapes, monuments and the other scattered antiquities that she comes across operate as a springboard enabling her to switch between the past and present. Although her sympathetic and synesthetic attitude to the places she visits allows her to weave a

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<sup>59</sup> Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 110-13.

dialogue with the past, which is crystallized in the “Genius Loci,” such a relationship can only function in the “mode of actuality.” This is indeed a key element of cultural memory, through which, as Assmann remarks, “each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.”<sup>60</sup>

### 3.4. Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, and garden aesthetics

Lee’s interest in Italian landscapes, the Italian Renaissance, and its art, also finds expression in her fascination with gardens. Although it was forgotten in the twentieth century, this aspect of Lee’s production was well known among her contemporaries. When she published her study of *Italian Villas and their Gardens* in 1904, Edith Wharton dedicated the volume to her friend “Vernon Lee, who, better than any one else, has understood and interpreted the garden-magic of Italy.”<sup>61</sup> Vernon Lee and Edith Wharton certainly had much in common. Both had cosmopolitan backgrounds and spent their childhood travelling across Europe and, perhaps more important, both of them were trying to affirm their voice in a masculine intellectual field like aesthetics. Although she had not yet established herself as the Pulitzer winner novelist she would be after *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton had already published *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), a manual of interior design she had co-authored with the famous New England architect Ogden Codman, Jr.

Edith Wharton first met Vernon Lee in Florence in 1894 through the French essayist Paul Bourget. When she is in Florence, it is Lee that introduces her to Bernard Berenson and several owners of old villas, many of which they are to visit together. Lee was the first female intellectual with whom Wharton was to develop a close connection. So much so that in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton admits that Lee had been “the first highly cultivated and brilliant woman” she had known,<sup>62</sup> and she had also acted as the guide that the American writer needed when she toured Italy visiting old villas. In addition, a good ten years before meeting Lee Wharton had enjoyed reading *Belcaro* and *Euphorion*, and she had been especially impressed by her *Studies of*

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<sup>60</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, No. 65 (Spring-Summer, 1995), p. 131.

<sup>61</sup> Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, illustrated with pictures by Maxfield Parrish and by photographs (New York: The Century Co., 1905). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *IVG*.

<sup>62</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York and London: Appleton, 1934), p. 132.

*the Eighteenth Century in Italy*. Those essays in Italian literature and music, as she would later confess in a letter to Lee, “were letting me into that wonder world of Italy which I had loved since my childhood without having the key to it.”<sup>63</sup>

As Hermione Lee notes, through her works and her friendship “Vernon Lee gave Wharton a model for a way of invoking the past, an authoritative woman’s voice confidently taking on the male terrain of travel and aesthetics, and a deep knowledge of and passion for Italy.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, Lee provided Wharton with an example of an inspiring female intellectual. From the point of view of aesthetics, Orestano suggests that Wharton’s work put an end to the late Romantic fascination with the English natural garden as well as to the picturesque design of parks, cemeteries, fairs and expositions.<sup>65</sup> To this regard, I would argue that the predecessor of Wharton’s interest in Italian landscape – which led to *Italian Villas and their Gardens* in 1904 and *Italian Backgrounds* the following year – is Lee’s 1898 collection *Limbo*, which, along with the essay on “The Lie of the Land” I introduced earlier in this chapter as an embryonic form of Lee’s theorization of the “Genius Loci,” includes another essay devoted to the “Old Italian Gardens.”<sup>66</sup> In particular, I would suggest that these texts be read bearing in mind Lee’s notion of landscape and cultural remnants, and the function they have in their writing. As Lee maintains while discussing the charm of old houses in another essay in *Limbo*, “*the action of time makes man’s works into natural objects*” (L, 22), and this statement holds true for her relationship with gardens and, more in general, the representation of the past which characterizes all of her production.

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<sup>63</sup> Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007), p. 98; see also Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 130, where Wharton defines Lee’s *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, *Belcaro*, and *Euphorion* “three of my best-loved companions of the road.”

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1; On Lee’s friendship with and influence on Wharton, cf. also R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 72 ff.; Gianfranca Balestra, “Vernon Lee e Edith Wharton: viaggiatrici nel tempo e nello spazio,” in *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant’anni dopo. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze 26-27-28 maggio 2005*, ed. Serena Cenni and Elisa Bizzotto (Firenze: Gabinetto scientifico letterario G.P. Vieuusseux, Università degli studi di Trento and The British Institute of Florence, 2005), pp. 209-18. Balestra notes that Wharton was surprisingly undisturbed by Lee’s unconventional sexuality, whereas in Paris she would be rather unsympathetic towards the intellectual circle of lesbian women led by the American writer Natalie Barney. I would also suggest that at a time when criticism had not yet reassessed Lee’s writings, most Wharton scholars overlooked possible contaminations from Lee’s supernatural tales in Wharton’s ghost stories, as for instance the homosexual theme in “The Eyes” or the structure of the “Pomegranate Seed” (1931), whose protagonist is haunted by the spectre of his dead wife. Cf. R. W. B. Lewis, “A Writer of Short Stories,” in *Edith Wharton*, ed. and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 9-28, and Allan Gardner Smith, “Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story,” *ibid.*, pp. 89-98.

<sup>65</sup> Orestano, “Rinascimento, pittoresco e cultura del paesaggio,” p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> “Old Italian Gardens” was later republished in the multi-volume collection *The Bibelot: A Reprint of Poetry and Prose for Book Lovers, Chosen in Part from Scarce Editions and Sources Not Generally Known*, vols. 6 (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1902-12), pp. 371-96 and in Vernon Lee and Others, *In Praise of Old Gardens* (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1912), pp. 29-60, which also includes Swinburne’s poem “A Forsaken Garden” (1876).

In “Old Italian Gardens,” Lee traces the evolution of Italian gardens and acknowledges to the Renaissance a central moment in their history. Unlike her notes on the *Genius Loci*, in this essay Lee’s remarks follow a different pattern. Whereas the contemplation of contemporary landscapes triggers her speculations and reflections on Renaissance Italy, “Old Italian Gardens” relies thoroughly on fanciful speculations and literary sources. Lee – as Wharton will do less than a decade later – begins her analysis by pointing out that floriculture does not make or define a garden, and in so doing she implicitly criticizes of modern garden techniques. For both writers, although flowers add an obviously delightful touch, they are not a necessary complement to the organization of the Italian garden. In the introduction to *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* – titled “Italian Garden Magic” – Wharton similarly pinpoints that garden-craft is independent from floriculture, highlighting that the “Italian garden does not exist for its flowers; its flowers exist for it” (IVG 5). The idea that flowers should be considered as an added value, rather than a necessary element, was already present in *Limbo*. Here, Lee stresses that gardens are a work of art, assembled by man and made perfect by the dual action of time and fancy, both contributing to the establishment of memory at an individual and cultural level.

As she begins to sketch out a fanciful, rather than accurate, history, Lee tacitly underlines the centrality of Renaissance aesthetics before articulating her speculation on earlier gardens, those that set the fashion “before the magnificence of Roman Cæsars had reappeared, with their rapacity and pride, in the cardinals and princes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (L, III). She dates this aesthetic shift to the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries – i.e., the High Renaissance and baroque periods – when, to borrow Hinojosa’s words, “‘culture’ itself was born” and modern society was beginning to be shaped.<sup>67</sup>

Lee argues that until the late Renaissance – which she roughly identifies with the times of Popes Julius II and Leo X – the Italian garden, still based on a medieval conception, had been “a thing more for utility than pleasure, and not at all for ostentation” (L, III). Enclosed within the castle walls instead of being annexed to luxurious villas, gardens were mostly exploited for produce. Revealing the influence of Jacob Burckhardt’s *Querdurchschnitte*, Lee’s analysis intertwines culture and politics. Because of the widespread political instability of the time, hay, corn, roots, and fruits that can sustain the population plentifully replaced lilies and gillyflowers. Structured as an

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<sup>67</sup> Hinojosa, *The Renaissance*, p. 5.

enclosure in the midst of the fields, the Italian garden of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance was not meant as a source of pleasure, but merely as a source of nutrition. It was, in short, a “rural place of business, whence to check factors and peasants, where to store wine and oil; and from whose garden, barely enclosed from the fields, to obtain the fruit and flowers for their table” (L, 112). In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt had similarly stressed that although “Italy claims to be the first creator of botanical gardens, [...] they may have served a chiefly practical end” until at least the foundation of fifteenth-century villas, where botanical gardens and kitchen gardens began to coexist.<sup>68</sup>

Aside from Burckhardt’s *Civilization*, the primary sources that Lee draws on for her analysis are mostly literary. Pondering about medieval Provençal poetry, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, but also Boiardo’s, Ariosto’s and Tasso’s romances, she notes that well until the fifteenth century gardens were mostly conceived as an orchard. Boasting her philological accuracy, she points out that the Italian word that recurs in the literary texts of the times is in fact *orto*. Deriving from the Latin *hortus* – from which the words *garden* and *yard* would follow – the noun had by then “lost its Latin signification” to become a place “planted with fruit trees and with pot-herbs” (L, 113).

The “kitchen-gardens” that Lee has in mind are those that recur in Boccaccio’s *novellas*, from Lisabetta da Messina’s to Madonna Dianora’s.<sup>69</sup> Such a clarification also enables Lee to move from the field of historical aesthetics and Italian literature to contemporary art history, discussing the Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Her remarks specifically concern an unmentioned

friend of mine [who] has painted a picture of another of Boccaccio’s ladies, Madonna Dianora, visiting the garden, which [...] the enamoured Ansaldo has made to bloom in January by magic arts; a little picture full of the quaint lovely details of Dello’s wedding chests, the charm of the roses and the lilies, the plashing fountains and birds singing against a background of wintry trees and snow-shrouded fields, the

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<sup>68</sup> Burckhardt, *Civilization*, p. 150.

<sup>69</sup> The story of Lisabetta is told in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, IV, 5. After her brothers slay her lover, Lisabetta sees Lorenzo in a dream and tells her where she is buried. She will unearth his head and plant it in a pot of basil, on which she can mourn him daily. This novella is also the core of John Keats’s 1818 poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*. The story of Madonna Dianora is told in *Decameron*, X, 5. Dianora is a married woman who is wooed by Messer Ansaldo, whom she tries to refuse by telling him she would yield to his courtship only if he could provide her with a garden who is as beautiful in January as in May. Ansaldo succeeds with the help of a necromancer, but eventually gives up his reward when he finds out that Dianora’s husband told her that, notwithstanding his sorrow, she ought to keep her word.

dainty youths and damsels treading their way among the flowers, looking like tulips  
and ranunculus themselves in their fur and brocade. (*L*, 113)

Lee makes no explicit reference to the author of this painting, whom I would identify as the Anglo-Greek Marie Spartali, the second wife of the American painter and diplomat William James Stillman. Mrs. Stillman was one of the leading female artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and their close friendship is documented by their correspondence. In 1882 or 1883, for instance, Marie writes to Lee to inform her that she and her family intended to be in Florence for a while. “I feel so glad that we are returning,” Stillmann adds, “& one reason is that I am so very happy to live near you for I love you very much dear Vernon.”<sup>70</sup> Their bond became tighter after the couple settled in Italy in 1878.<sup>71</sup>

One of Mrs. Stillman’s most notable paintings was *Messer Ansaldo Showing Madonna Dianora His Enchanted Garden*, which she also exhibited at the Liverpool New Gallery in 1898.<sup>72</sup> Lee does not criticize the pictorial quality of her friend’s canvas which, although Burne-Jonesian, Pieri defines as exemplary of a phase in Spartali Stillman’s art which pays homage to much Renaissance painting, bearing a specific debt to the works of Fra

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<sup>70</sup> Marie Stillman to Vernon Lee, September 6 1882 or 1883, *VLP* XIII.

<sup>71</sup> Mrs. Stillman’s obituary in *Times*, March 8, 1927, celebrates her as “the last of a generation. She was the single survivor since the death of Lady Burne-Jones seven years ago of a group of women remarkable alike for beauty and ability, for gifts and character. They belonged to that circle of artists in which Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Morris were the most distinguished names, and had no little share in creating the influence which, half a century ago, the circle exercised over the whole art and life of the age. With the great triad of those early and now remote days, Mrs Rossetti, Lady Burne-Jones, and Mrs Morris, she was almost a fourth, and of the two latter was a lifelong friend.” In 1882, it is Stillman who introduces Vernon Lee to Pre-Raphaelites artists like William Morris, while the following year Lee dedicates to the Stillmans’ daughters, Bella and Effie, her comedy of masks *The Prince of the Hundred Soups: A Puppet-Show in Narrative*. In 1884, however, Marie Stillman was among the people who felt lampooned by Lee’s novel *Miss Brown*, although such incident did not put an end to their friendship. Mrs. Stillman was indeed among the people that Lee visited in September 1887, when she travelled to Rome in an attempt to soothe her nerves, much shaken upon receiving the news of Mary Robinson’s engagement to James Darmsteter, Professor of Jewish at the Collège de France. In an article on Mrs. Stillman’s Italian years and the influence the Italian Masters had on her paintings, Marsh also offers a quite detailed account of her friendship with Lee in the 1880s. See Jan Marsh, “‘The Old Tuscan Rupture’: the Response to Italy and Its Art in the work of Marie Spartali Stillman,” in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, ed. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.159-82; on Marie Spartali Stillman and her friendship with Vernon Lee, cf. Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in Fin-de-Siècle Italy*, pp. 64-65; Stephen L. Dyson, *The Last Amateur. The Life of William J. Stillman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 234.

<sup>72</sup> In his study of William James and Marie Spartali Stillman, Elliott dates *Messer Ansaldo Showing Madonna Dianora His Enchanted Garden* to 1898. Because of Lee’s reference to this painting in *Limbo*, I would suggest that Spartali Stillman must have painted it at least one year before, in or slightly before 1897. To my knowledge, the painting is currently unlocated. Cf. David B. Elliott, *A Pre-Raphaelite Marriage: The Lives and Works of Marie Spartali Stillman and William James Stillman* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 2006), p. 206.



Angelico, Ghirlandaio and Botticelli.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Spartali Stillman had been familiar with Boccaccio's work for at least a good twenty years, most probably thanks to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translations from the *Early Italian Poets* (1861). Boccaccio's sonnets had already been her source of inspiration for two paintings, *The Last Sight of Fiammetta* (circa 1876) and *Fiammetta Singing* (circa 1879), which according to Marsh stands out as "a pastoral group with a distinctly Giorgionesque aspect."<sup>74</sup> In fact, Lee exploits Spartali Stillman's painting as a springboard to discuss and illustrate the structure of pre-Renaissance gardens in Italy:

But although in this story Boccaccio employs the word *giardino* instead of *orto*, I think we must imagine the magic flower garden rather as a corner – they still exist on every hillside – or orchard connected with the fields of wheat and olives below by the long tunnels of vine trellis, and dying away into them with great tufts of lavender and rosemary and fennel on the grassy bank under the cherry trees. (*L*, 113-14)



Fig. 3 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Messer Ansaldo Showing Madonna Dianora His Enchanted Garden*

<sup>73</sup> Pieri, *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in Fin-de-Siècle Italy*, p. 66.

<sup>74</sup> Marsh, "The Old Tuscan Rupture," p. 162.

According to Lee, an early literary instance of this transition from the “hortus” to the Renaissance garden is to be witnessed in Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an allegorical novel –published in Venice in 1499, and not “about 1480” (L, 115), as Lee notes – describing the dream adventures and battles of Poliphilo in his quest for his beloved Polia. Lee writes Colonna’s work off as quite uninteresting, yet it is significant as it marks the advent of the architectural gardens typical of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italy. In Colonna’s text, but also in the woodcut illustrations that accompany the novel, one finds many examples of

trees and hedges treated as brick and stone work; walls, niches, colonnades, cut out of ilex and laurel; statues, vases, peacocks, clipped in box and yew; moreover antiquities, busts, inscriptions, broken altars and triumphal arches, temples to the graces and Venus, stuck about the place (L, 115).

Lee, however, doubts that Colonna’s descriptions might be taken at a face value. She does not consider them as faithful representations of the typical fifteenth-century Italian garden. In fact, she suggests viewing them as a fanciful anticipation of the late Renaissance antiquity frenzy that introduced statues and architectural ornaments into the Italian garden, which – due to the hot climate of the country – can only moderately exploit the decorative function guaranteed by flowers, and therefore exploits greenery and water effects. Nor can one make the mistake of considering the gardens of the Signori – like the ones of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Caterina Cornaro, the Gonzagas or the Estensi – as highly significant of a historically established aesthetic practice. However, as works of art designed and built to celebrate the dynasties that owned them, they do not offer a realistic representation of the early Renaissance garden.

In Lee’s analysis, it is in the development of the Tuscan villa that one can trace the transition from the medieval orchard and the architectural garden surrounding later Roman villas. Although still modest in comparison with the gardens that would develop a few decades later in Rome, Tuscan gardens were already devised as a place of delight, meant as a complement to

the long, flat Tuscan house, with its tower or pillared loggia under the roof to take the air and dry linen; a few quaintly cut trees set here and there, along with the twisted mulberry tree where the family drank its wine and ate its fruit of an evening; a little grove of illexes to the back, in whose shade you could sleep while the cicadas

## Renaissance tracks

buzzed at noon; some cypresses gathered together into a screen, just to separate the garden from the olive yard above; [...] and if you had it, some antique statue not good enough for the courtyard of the town house [...]. A very modest place, but differing essentially from the orchard and kitchen garden of the mediæval burgher; and out of which came something immense and unique – the classic Roman villa. (*L*, 119-20)

A few years later, Wharton will reveal Lee's influence in her belief that gardens "must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape" (*IVG*, 6), whose function is not simply to house them. In fact, as she will point out in a note to her description of the Pucci's Villa Campi in Florence, "*Villa*, in Italian, signifies not the house alone, but the house and pleasure grounds" (*IVG*, 54). Further in the introduction to *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, Wharton notes the same shift in Italian gardens which Lee had dated back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries:

[t]he Italian country house, especially in the centre and south of Italy, was almost always built on a hillside, and one day the architect looked forth from the terrace [...] and saw that [...] the enclosing landscape was naturally included: the two formed a part of the same composition. The recognition of this fact was the first step in the development of the great garden-art of the Renaissance: the next was the architect's discovery of the means by which nature and art might be fused in this picture. (*IVG*, 7)

In a discussion that struggles towards its main argument, Lee outlines a genealogy of the Italian garden style, connecting the birth of the modern Italian garden to the birth of the villa. In her analysis, Tuscan villas are the forefathers of those built in Rome, so that a major aesthetic shift occurred once the key elements of the Tuscan garden were exported to Rome, marking the beginning of the modern Italian garden. Its pivotal elements are, Lee maintains, "perspective, architecture, decoration." The trees are "used as building material, the lie of the land" – or, in its later formulation, the "Genius Loci" – is used "as theatre arrangements, [and] the water as the most docile and multiform stage property" (*L*, 120).

The city of Rome and its suburbs were the cradle of this new gardening fashion. Through a policy of expropriation, the Popes and their nephews and protégés acquired wide plots of land in the Roman suburbs, often surrounded by ruins which supplied a

natural “element of architectural ground-plan and decoration” that was easy to complete, with “the terraces of quincunxes, the symmetrical groves, the long flights of steps, the triumphal arches, the big ponds [...] obeying the order of what is below” (*L*, 121). In addition, she believes that antique statues and modern sculptures provide the ideal complement to such a natural background. The Villa Medici and those of the Farnesi, Aldobrandini, Ludovisi, Borghese, and Pamphili families – most of which Wharton will also discuss – provide an example of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century antiquity frenzy, but they are also a testimony of the raise of a new taste in sculpture, which becomes functional to the architecture and organization of the garden space.<sup>75</sup>

According to such aesthetic principles, old and new marble forms are fused into trees and water, generating an illusory effect of continuity between the natural and the artificial element. In claiming that in these Roman gardens sculpture harmonically complements the lines and general structure designed by the environment, Lee also reassesses the aesthetic value of Baroque art. In particular, she defines the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his followers the embodiment of “the last spontaneous outcome of the art of the Renaissance” (*L*, 124), which confirms that for Lee the Renaissance is a plastic concept, a rather ample category in the history of Western culture rather than a definite period in history and art. In addition, she considers this late Renaissance sculpture, based on stone and water, particularly fit for outdoor rather than indoor settings, and hence as an exquisite complement to the garden, which exalts at once its massive lines and its details. Switching once more from the realm of personal, fanciful speculation to art history, Lee supports her view by providing what would seem a catalogue of stereotypical features of Baroque sculpture:

[t]hey are comic of course looked at in all the details, those angels who smirk and gesticulate with the emblems of the passion, those popes and saints who stick out colossal toes and print on the sky gigantic hands, on the parapets of bridges and the gables of churches; [...] gallant theatrical creatures swaggering among the clouds, pieces of wind-torn cloud, petrified for the occasion, themselves! (*L*, 124-25).

Lee opposes such majestic, impressive figures to the effect that classic Roman sculptures would create in similar open-air contexts. On the contrary, the art of Bernini’s school

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<sup>75</sup> In this case, Lee provides as evidence not a literary but a “secondary” source: Giovanni Battista Falda’s series of engravings, *Li giardini di Roma, con le loro piante, alzate e vedute in prospettiva* (1680), which Wharton will also cite in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.

would result in a slightly comic effect when placed indoors, giving one the impression of representing “tin soldiers” instead of mythical celestial figures.

I suggest that such a passage should not be merely viewed as an abstract analysis of Baroque motifs; instead, it allows Lee to set the tone for a praise of Bernini sculptural work with reference to late Renaissance gardens. Her description of smirking angels, mingling with popes and saints and distinguished by massive anatomical details is in fact a direct reference to Ponte Sant’Angelo, which the Emperor Hadrian had built across the Tiber in order to connect the city centre to his mausoleum. Ponte Sant’Angelo had been the only bridge to connect the Vatican with the Rest of Rome, until Sixtus IV ordered the construction of Ponte Sisto before the 1475 Jubilee.<sup>76</sup> Pursuing his policy of restoring Rome to its ancient grandeur and splendour, in 1667 Pope Clemens IX commissioned its renovation to Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was already working on the colonnade surrounding St. Peter’s square. The Neapolitan architect and sculptor originally opted for adorning each side of the bridge with ten massive marble angels holding the different instruments of Christ’s Passion. Judging them too beautiful, Clemens IX eventually decided to keep the two statues that Bernini carved in 1668-69, the *Angel with Superscription* and the *Angel with the Crown of Thorns*, in a church close to Pistoia.<sup>77</sup> This incident also explains Lee’s disagreement in “Old Italian Gardens” with Baroque sculpture kept indoors, a condemnation she reiterates by further praising Bernini’s grandeur, this time providing his *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25) as a summa of the Italian garden style which is unfortunately kept inside the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

After dwelling on the achievement of Baroque sculpture, Lee further stresses the features of the Italian garden as it developed between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. She points out that its fountains are the hallmark of Bernini’s school, which made it “the sculpture born of gardens” (*L*, 125). Unlike the sculptural fountains of the early Renaissance, they reveal a perfect harmony between stone and water. In Lee’s view, the aesthetics of Baroque fountains are based not on the mimesis of nature, but rather on an illusory effect that re-creates nature. As a result, the viewer is

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<sup>76</sup> For the early history of Ponte Sant’Angelo, see Charles L. Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*, 1985 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1998), p. 32. Stinger records that Ponte Sisto was constructed to provide alternative access to the Vatican after an accident occurred in 1450, when about a hundred pilgrims died on the jammed bridge blocked by a mule.

<sup>77</sup> Bernini eventually donated those two statues to Sant’Andrea delle Fratte in Rome, where they are currently housed, and two copies were commissioned to Giulio Cartari and Paolo Naldini. On Ponte Sant’Angelo and Bernini’s overhaul, see Mark Weil, *The History and Decoration of the Ponte S. Angelo* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), and Claude Douglas Dickerson, Anthony Sigel, Ian Wardropper, *Bernini: Sculpting in Clay* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 285-341.

apt to take them as a matter of course, as if the horses had reared between the spurts from below and the gushes and trickles above; as if the Triton had been draped with the overflowing of his horn; as if the Moor with his turban, the Asiatic with his veiled fall, the solemn Egyptian river god, had basked and started back with the lion and the seahorse among the small cataracts breaking into foam in the pond, the sheets of water dropping, prefiguring icicles, lazily over the rocks, all stained black by the north winds and yellow by the lichen, all always, always, in those Roman gardens and squares, from the beginning of time, natural objects, perfect and not more to be wondered at than the water-encircled rocks of the mountains and seashores. (*L*, 126-27)

The artist, becoming a Keatsian “chameleon sculptor,” rejects cupids and other ornaments usually associated with the excesses of Baroque sculpture so as operate with water in its natural context, submitting yet modelling the liquid element to nature. According to Lee, the relationship linking Bernini’s fountains to garden art is so close that one cannot appreciate them except in connection with water and the effects it creates. The result of this interaction between the villas, their gardens and fountains, is an expression of the “magnificent harmony of nature and art – nature tutored by art, art fostered by nature” (*L*, 128), epitomized in the villas that thrived in the Roman “campagna,” especially on the Alban and Sabine hills.

Much of the spirit that informs Lee’s reflections on Italian villas and gardens influenced Edith Wharton’s writings on the same subject. The essay “Old Italian Gardens,” however, is offered as a short divagation based on Lee’s broader interests. As such, it shares many features of her writings on similar subjects, like *Euphorion* and *Genus Loci*. Such is for instance Lee’s belief in the impossibility of accurately representing landscape by means of language. The majestic effects of the Italian water fountains, one reads towards the end of “Old Italian Gardens,” “cannot be done justice with the pen,” and the element of Ruskinism embedded in Lee’s prose tells the reader that “diagrams would be necessary, showing how in every case the lines of the sculpture harmonise subtly, or clash to be more subtly harmonised, with the movement, the immensely varied, absolutely spontaneous movement of the water” (*L*, 127). *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, on the other hand, is a detailed study conceived for a specific readership, and a specific market. In *A Backward Glance*, she will define the book “a working manual for architectural students and landscape gardeners”;<sup>78</sup> indeed, Wharton’s background

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<sup>78</sup> Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 139.

appears far more scientific than literary: along with Falda's engravings, Wharton consults Giuseppe Zocchi's *Vedute delle ville e d'altri luoghi della Toscana* (1744), Giovanni Francesco Costa's series of etchings on *Le delizie del fiume Brenta* (1750), as well as Michel de Montaigne's *Journal du Voyage en Italie par la Suisse et l'Allemagne en 1580 et 1581* before beginning her work.

That Vernon Lee represented for Wharton a model for looking into the past is also evident if one considers the elements that Wharton focuses on: on the one hand, the effects created by marble, water, perennial verdure, and the simple "combination of clipped green and stone-work" (IVG, 6); on the other hand, she doubts that a handful of antiquities, marble benches and sundials may be enough to make a garden *all'italiana*. Notwithstanding such British and American vogue, Wharton believes in the untranslatability of garden aesthetics, claiming that the gardens of the Italian Renaissance "cannot be adequately rendered in another landscape and another age" (IVG, 12). In addition, Wharton argues that the "inherent beauty of the garden lies in the grouping of its parts – in the converging lines of its long ilex-walks, the alternation of sunny open spaces with cool woodland shade, the proportion between terrace and bowling-green, or between the height of a wall and the width of a path" (IVG, 8). Such details reveal for Wharton the essence of Renaissance garden aesthetics, so much so that the Renaissance architects never neglected them. On the one hand, her insights into the gardens and villas of Tuscany, Lazio, Lombardy and Veneto are meant to scoop out places like Villa Boboli in Florence, whose general design is fully Renaissance, purified from those traces – and here Wharton departs from Lee – "of the heavy and fantastic *barrochismo* [sic] which half a century later, began to disfigure such compositions in the villas near Rome" (IVG, 29).

Wharton's analysis is not limited to Rome or Tuscany, which she could easily access thanks to the help Lee, Berenson and their mutual acquaintances. Clearly, Lee is not Wharton's only model. Her work reveals a general attempt at inquiring into the cultural history of the Renaissance, and as such it is inscribed in the more general late Victorian revival of the Italian Renaissance which was sparked by Jacob Burckhardt. Like Lee, however, Wharton purports to follow the tracks of the Renaissance in a period of intellectual history which had released itself from Ruskin's distaste of the age, notwithstanding his residual influence. Wharton's Italian tour sets on the traces of gardens and cultural remnants that had been forgotten by the Victorians. She moves from Florence to Siena, from Rome to its suburbs, and then back northwards: Genoa,

Lakes Maggiore and Como, Villa Cicogna near Varese, and finally Padua and Venice. Often masking veiled attacks against Ruskin's firm condemnation of the period, Wharton's study, as Orestano points out, purports to retrace the cultural origin and essence of the Renaissance.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, it shares the same purpose and efforts that Lee deployed throughout her prose writings in the 1890s.

### 3.4. The spirit of Renaissance Rome, and the preservation of the "genius loci" as an act of cultural democracy

Included in her 1897 collection *Limbo and Other Essay*, Lee's essay on "Old Italian Gardens" intertwines her fanciful speculations on landscape, mostly based on her direct knowledge of Italian places and antiquities, with her ideas on contemporary art history. In so doing, she is also able to bounce back and forth in time – as she does in *Genius Loci* – comparing the art and the culture of the Renaissance to the present.

*Limbo* confirms that Lee's model of cultural inquiry is imbibed with the tradition inaugurated by Jacob Burckhardt, and reveals echoes and distances from John Ruskin and Walter Pater, who equally influenced her work. In her direct and implicit responses to the work of their predecessors, her writings reveal a gendered aspect in that they establish an intertextual network with Victorian criticism, while asserting her own position. In addition, one should note that as a half-French expatriate who lived in Italy, Lee's status as a cultural outcast further strengthens her distinctive voice.

Lee's knowledge of Italy and her work in aesthetics and cultural history offered a pattern of enquiry of which, in turn, one finds echoes in other writers of the time who had read her works, like Edith Wharton and D. H. Lawrence. Scholarship, unfortunately, seems to have often overlooked such points of contact. However, the idea of a "Genius Loci" enabling the individual to connect sympathetically with the landscape and penetrate its history, seems a specific palimpsest of Lee's prose works. Although *Limbo* was actually published a year before *Genius Loci*, the idea of the spirit of place as an entity endowed with epistemic significance pervades the textual fabric of the collection. In the essay that she writes "In Praise of Old Houses," for instance, Lee admits that by walking daily through some only seemingly known streets, one is able to feel "in contact with a whole living, breathing thing, full of habits of life, of suppressed words; a sort of odd,

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<sup>79</sup> Orestano, "Rinascimento, pittoresco e cultura del paesaggio," p. 55.



mysterious, mythical, but very real creature.” Although it is still unmentioned, she significantly characterizes the “Genius Loci” as a rarefied entity, a hybrid and queer presence which is “absolutely unidentifiable in shape and kind” (*L*, 31).

At times, the “Genius Loci” turns into a narrative device that operates by suspending the historical accuracy of her discussion. Towards the end of the first half of her essay on the “Old Italian Gardens,” for instance, Lee develops her argument concerning the aesthetic change that the establishment of Roman villas imposed on garden aesthetics due to the Renaissance lore of antiquity, statues and classic remnants. After providing several examples of the key features of the Renaissance architectural garden, the essay turns into a *récit* as Lee imagines the life of the hermes, the little classical busts that were often employed as decoration in Renaissance gardens. In her *récit*, the statues cease to be mere pieces of cold marble, and become living inhabitants of the gardens who, “after a thousand years’ sleep, pierce through the earth into new gardens, of crimson cardinals and purple princes, each fattened on his predecessors’ spoils – Medici, Farnesi, Peretti, Aldobrandini, Ludovisi, Rospigliosi, Borghese, Pamphili” (*L*, 122). Their story, based on Lee’s imagination, summarizes and reconstructs the history of the Western civilization:

[t]here they stand, squeezing from out their triangular sheath the stout pectorals veined with rust, scarred with corrosions [...]. Have they been busts of Cæsars, hastily ordered on the accession of some Tiberius or Nero, hastily sent to alter into Caligula or Galba, or chucked into the Tiber on to the top of the monster Emperor’s body after that had been properly hauled through the streets? Or are they philosophers, at your choice, Plato or Aristotle or Zeno or Epicurus, once presiding over the rolls of poetry and science in some noble’s or some rhetor’s library? Or is it possible that this featureless block, smiling foolishly with its orbless eye-sockets and worn-out mouth, may have had, once upon a time, a nose from Phidias’s hand, a pair of Cupid lips carved by Praxiteles? (*L*, 122-23)

As a narrative device, the “Genius Loci” reveals Lee’s contribution to the building of cultural memory, with its mediation between the present and the past, and it also surfaces stylistic peculiarity of Lee’s prose. To this regard, one should bear in mind that her first successful publication was the short story “Les aventures d’une pièce de monnaie,” which appeared serially in the Swiss magazine *La famille* between May and July 1870, when Lee was fourteen. The story is narrated by the Roman coin mentioned in

the title: engraved with the effigy of the Emperor Hadrian, la “monnaie” recalls its adventures as it passes from the hands of an owner to another, until it comes into the possession of a nineteenth-century numismatist. The history of this little coin, however, is a pretext for Lee to dwell at large on art and cultural history, especially when it is acquired by Guido Reni during the Renaissance. Indeed, in spite of the cuts and changes that were imposed by the editors of *La famille*, Colby notes that the story is not only a remarkable example of a well constructed narrative, but also “a work of diligent scholarship supported with footnotes on Roman history and customs and relieved with lively imaginative detail.”<sup>80</sup>

In a much similar manner, the end of “Old Italian Gardens” offers no bottom line on garden aesthetic principles. In fact, Lee’s concluding remarks gives full relevance to the spirit of place, which is most forcefully perceived at night. Once gardens are devoid of human presence, the “Genius Loci” can manifest itself through the stars, scents, nightingales and fireflies, and even more so in those gardens which, locked by a gate and neglected, seem to have “ceased to exist” (*L*, 131). Such considerations are all the more important for at least two reasons: on the one hand, they suggest that the city of Rome holds a central place in Lee’s concept of the “Genius Loci” and her effort to preserve cultural memory. Indeed, in 1906 she collected in *The Spirit of Rome: Leaves from a Diary*<sup>81</sup> the scattered impressions she had recorded in a number of visits, between 1888 and 1905, to the city she had lived in for five years before moving to Florence. On the other hand, they open up to the democratic vein that characterizes Lee’s reflections in the 1890s.

Another crucial writing from this period is the unpublished essay “Ville Romane: in Memoriam,” which survives as a holographic manuscript at Colby College.<sup>82</sup> An annotation on the first page, most probably added after the manuscript was written, says that the text is dated “circa 1890,” followed by a question mark which questions its authenticity. The manuscript, in fact, seems hard to date with due accuracy for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the address written on the top left section of the page

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<sup>80</sup> Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 11. Interestingly, Lee highlights the epistemological function of coins also in *Limbo*, positing that they subsume history in their matter. In “In Praise of Old Houses,” while packing some old coins for a friend, Lee argues that they had “concentrated in their interesting verdigrised, brass-smelling smallness something, to me, of the glory and wonder of Rome” (*L*, 26).

<sup>81</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Spirit of Rome: Leaves from a Diary* (London: John Lane, Bodley Head, 1906).

<sup>82</sup> Lee dedicates this essay to Dora Melegari (1849-1924), an Italian writer who had sympathized with the libertarian ideals of the Italian Risorgimento, and was the editor of the *Lettres intimes de Joseph Mazzini, publiées avec une introduction et des notes par Dora Melegari* (Paris: Perrin, 1895). In her lifetime, she wrote novels both in Italian and French, and she was also a regular contributor to the *Revue Internationale*. Lee most likely met Melegari through their mutual friend Carlo Placci. Unfortunately, Gunn’s and Colby’s biographies offer no evidence of Lee’s friendship with Melegari, which would be precious in trying to establish the date of this manuscript more accurately.

suggests that Lee wrote while she was living at Via Garibaldi 5, Florence. If she did, then she must have composed it before 1889, when she moved to Il Palmerino. On the other hand, the argument it claims is fully hinged in the development of Lee's aesthetic system as it matured in the 1890s, sharing the same views on art that one encounters in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* and forestalling her following interest in psychological aesthetics. In addition, the text of "Ville Romane," which is written in Italian, partakes the polemics against the careless cultural politics of post-Unitarian Italy which would result in Lee's petition "In difesa di Firenze vecchia" in 1898-1899. Since the mid 1890s, the administration of Florence had carried out a plan, called *Risanamento*, in order to renovate the area surrounding the Mercato Vecchio, in the Jewish Ghetto, and create the new Piazza della Repubblica. Lee had been an active member of the Associazione per la Difesa di Firenze Antica, collecting signatures, alerting the public opinion both in Italy and abroad, and writing a long letter published in *The Times* on December 15, 1898. The member of the association feared – as the English novelist Ouida pointed out – that *Risanamento* meant "rendere Firenze la Bella una servile imitazione di una città yankee di terz'ordine."<sup>83</sup>

The community of Anglo-American expatriates who thrived in fin-de-siècle Florence had acquired many Renaissance and Baroque villas on the Tuscan hills. The preservation of such remnants often relied on interventions made to preserve what was perceived as their original architectural style. A conflated style which, as Lamberini highlights, often resulted in a curious *mélange* of fifteenth-century Purism, High Renaissance and late Mannerism, a sort of "long Renaissance" which stretches from the Quattrocento to eighteenth-century, and comes to an abrupt end with the beginning of the Gothic revival.<sup>84</sup> In a similar way, the core argument of Lee's "Ville Romane: in Memoriam" is the necessity to preserve cultural remnants in order to establish cultural memory. Lee condemns the destruction of the Roman villas and their garden, and a brief mention of the areas surrounding the Porta Pia and the Porta Salaria suggests that she might have feared the effects of the urban planning strategy that affected Rome towards the end of the nineteenth century. Aside from its aesthetic implications, Lee judges the

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<sup>83</sup> "Turn Fair Florence into a servile imitation of a third-rate yankee city," qtd. in Daniela Lamberini, "The divine country: Vernon Lee in difesa di Firenze antica", in Cenni and Bizzotto, *Vernon Lee e Firenze settant'anni dopo*, p. 43. Ouida was the penname of Marie Louise Ramé (1839-1908), a Florentine-based English novelist. On the efforts made by the Anglo-American community living in Florence at the fin-de-siècle in an attempt to preserve the old city, cf. also Maurizio Naldini, "Vernon Lee negli archivi de 'La Nazione'", *ibid.*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>84</sup> Lamberini, "The divine country", pp. 44-45.

destruction of the Roman villas as a crime insofar as it wipes out those hints which provide a grasp of the past. Those

dilettevoli case distrutte. alla fantasia lasciavano qualcosa, in quei nomi sparsi per tutte le città un poco vecchie, <sup>e</sup> che rammentano che una volta ~~li c'era~~ lì c'entrava la natura [...] Dell'erba, degli alberi fruttiferi, un po' di grano verde macchiato di papaveri scarlatti; un cantuccio di giardino chiuso tra le mura: memorie che erano care ai nostri padri, anche quando le case da gran tempo non esistevano più. Così biancheggia nella fantasia, colla visione diafana, inverosimile dei suoi fiori di neve, quel mandorlo che una volta [dovette] esistere accanto alla casa di Andrea del Sarto, ultimo superstite, amato dai bambini e dalle donnicciuole, di qualche orto suburbano. Così sorge pure in quella ~~buia~~ strada buia di palazzini del cinquecento illuminandone l'umida penombra, coi frutti d'oro e colle associazioni fiabesche, quel melarancio da gran tempo scomparso.<sup>85</sup>

In other words, destroying cultural remnants equals killing the spirit of place. Lee further stresses the epistemological function of the "Genius Loci" by counterpoising it to the cultural politics of the Victorian Age, based on a sterile, systematic approach to facts. The "dilettevoli studi di cronologia, biografia e geografia" that Lee ironically refers to, and which thrived as a result of such a pragmatic and factual view of history, extend from the religious medieval literature of Fra Domenico Cavalca, Fra Jacopo Passavanti and Bartolomeo da Concordio to the history of Yokohama, which had been a port of profitable commercial relations between England and Japan after the Anglo-Japanese War in 1862. The fault of such studies, however, lies in their lack of interest in the cultural heritage. More to the point, in Rome,

nel luogo di questi eleganti quartieri [...] c'era una volta prati dove la salvia e le margherite facevano come un broccato medievale, viali profondissimi dove cantavano usignoli e merli, nicchie d'allori dalle statue di fauni, fontane dove l'acqua usciva dalle conche dei tritoni verdognoli. [...] [N]on credete mica che lo facciamo sapere ai posteri. Ai posteri bisogna fare la tanto necessaria lezione su Yeddo e Yokohama, su Cavalca e Passavanti.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Vernon Lee, "Ville Romane: in Memoriam," undated holograph manuscript, circa 1890, VLA.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

In this essay, Lee develops her argument in a scattered and fragmented way that is consistent with the subtitle she chose for her homage to Roman villas, a piece “unpublished and only for curiosity.”<sup>87</sup> The urge to preserve our past induces her to complain about the vulgarity of present taste and the transformation of artworks into mass-produced objects. In the “bassissima passione delle cose a buon mercato, del godimento immediato, del comodo apparente”<sup>88</sup> that corrupts the modern individual, she recognizes a potential reason for the barbarous urbanization policies of Rome.

The intimate tone of a text conceived not for publication, but as a kind of intimate message to a friend, dissolves when Lee condemns the blind politics of late nineteenth-century Rome. From this point of view, Lee argues that Rome awaits the same destiny of London and Paris, which had been profoundly transformed by George-Eugène Haussmann’s renovation plan between 1853 and 1870. Unlike her published works, in “Ville Romane” Lee welds together landscape and environment, space and place, denouncing a crime with relevant cultural, economic and social consequences. In fin-de-siècle Rome, Lee claims,

ci fa comodo avere una massa ben compatta di strade e di piazza; e ci dimentichiamo che [...] di qui a cent’anni vi sarà un bisogno urgente, urgentissimo, morale quanto fisico, di diradare questo mucchio d’abitazioni, di ottenere spazi liberi e verdi in mezzo all’immensità, implacabile di una città moderna.<sup>89</sup>

In such distaste for the modernist development of urban geographies, one feels a change in Lee’s writing, which becomes closer to the later Ruskin and forestalls issues that will be most urgently debated in the early decades of the twentieth century. The heritage of Renaissance Italy should be preserved for economic as well as cultural needs. In Lee’s predictions, the irresponsible urbanization policies of Rome are doomed to failure, and will end up in costly replicas of the older villas to satisfy the population’s need for quiet areas to escape urban drudgery:

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<sup>87</sup> The subtitle appears on the first page of the manuscript, and it is written with the same ink type as the indication of its probable composition date. In addition, the handwriting seems to me not to be the same as that of the title of the essay. Thus, either Lee added the date and subtitle a few years after writing the text, or such information might have been indicated by a curator or Lee’s testamentary executioner, Irene Cooper Willis.

<sup>88</sup> Lee, “Ville Romane,” *VLA*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

[s]i spenderanno milioni ~~per~~ nella costruzione di giardinetti ~~pianati da~~ ombreggiati [...]; e si metteranno delle lapidi per insegnare al popolo riconoscente, che in quei luoghi una volta c' esistevano la Villa Ludovisi, la villa Massimo, la villa Albani, la Villa Borghese... sicuro anche la villa Borghese.<sup>90</sup>

Cultural memory, as we have seen, operates by merging past and present, and in Lee's manuscript such a procedure also shows an effort towards the democratization of culture. Lee scorns what she writes off as the age of "sedicente democrazia"; in so doing, she would seem to drift away – at least in part – from the focus on individuality that had moulded her inquiry into the Renaissance civilization in *Euphorion* almost a decade earlier.

In a long passage that bears interesting similarities to Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between community and society,<sup>91</sup> Lee defines the "demos" not as a multitude of individuals, but as a universal class which should be carefully looked so as to define its needs. Due to the development of social and statistical sciences, late nineteenth-century studies and politics focus on classes of individuals, failing to realize that those classes might identify a population, but not the people. From this perspective, the destruction of the Roman villas in order to rebuild them offers a poignant paradox. Like in "Old Italian Gardens," Lee stresses that the Renaissance villas were conceived and built as a source of delight for the individuals and the families who had owned them. Having become part of the historical heritage, "proprietà di ciò che ho chiamato popolo,"<sup>92</sup> they are no longer the object of individual or class interests, and as such are neglected.

Insofar as Renaissance villas allow the individual to connect with the spirit of place, Lee defines them as a museum available for the mass that had been excluded from elitist practices of art consumption. Like other institutions meant for the community, and as a hybrid "tra la chiesa ed il teatro,"<sup>93</sup> Renaissance villas are culturally relevant in that they provide

una massa enorme di impressioni, di bellezza e di poesia accessibili a coloro pei quali gli studi di pittura e le raccolte di versi sono cose speciali intelligibili ai soli specialisti. [...]

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* had been published in Germany in 1887, cf. *infra*, §1.3.

<sup>92</sup> Lee, "Ville Romane," *VLA*.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Sono, codeste ville Romane qualcosa tra la chiesa ed il teatro: [...] ognuno ci trova quel genere di poesia o di dramma che meglio si confa [sic], perché se lo fabbrica, aiutato da quell'ozio divino, da sé. [...] [A] tutti coloro si è fatto e si farà una durissima ingiustizia distruggendo quelle ville Romane le quali, [...] appartengono come prestito prezioso, da conservare e da goderne, a tutti gli uomini ed a tutti i tempi.<sup>94</sup>

In Lee's sympathy with democratic theories of art one finds another evidence of the citational strategy that grounds her work amidst Ruskin's criticism and aestheticism. In the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin had praised Gothic ornament in that it allowed the workers to express their freedom and creativity, and in 1871 he began to address a series of "letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain" – later collected in *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884) – in order to communicate his social and moral standpoints. The influence of Ruskin can also be perceived in the Kyrle Society, which was co-founded in 1877 by Ruskin's former copyist Octavia Hill with the aim of improving the living conditions of the working class. The same year, Hill also published an essay, titled the "Open Spaces," in which she denounced "the want of space and the want of beauty" as "the two great wants in the life of the poor of our large towns."<sup>95</sup>

Inspired by Ruskin's "aesthetic philanthropy," the Kyrle Society was concerned with improving the housing of the working class, developing a program of "aesthetic regeneration" meant to promote beauty and reduce noise disturbance in the urban environment. Interestingly, Eastham notes that in spite of their different views in matters of aesthetic and culture, Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* shares Hill's "utopian concerns for the aesthetics of space."<sup>96</sup> Indeed, aestheticism was preoccupied with similar issues regarding urban planning and the preservation of antiquities. The same year Hill established the Kyrle Society, William Morris and other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, better known as SPAB. The manifesto of the society clearly outlines its aims, claiming that "[a] society coming before the public with such a name [...] must needs explain how, and why, it

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Octavia Hill, "Open Spaces," in *Our Common Land (and Other Short Essays)* (London: Macmillan, 1877), qtd. in Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives. Irony, Literary Modernity and the Ends of Beauty* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives*, p. 20.

proposes to protect those ancient buildings which, to most people doubtless, seem to have so many and such excellent protectors.”<sup>97</sup>

In “Ville Romane,” oscillates between these two poles, revealing the influence of both Ruskin and aestheticism, although she does not fully adhere to either. Sharing the principles that had inspired both the Kyrle Society and the SPAB, she posits the need to preserve the Roman villas both as cultural relics, but also believing that the quiet spaces and pure air they guarantee are as important for the population as education and labour. Almost two decades later, Lee would dedicate a chapter of *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913) to “The Aims of Art,” arguing that along with responding to the “aesthetic imperative” of producing shapes that are pleasant to contemplate, art is also subject to “non aesthetic aims,” which she classifies as

(A) the making of useful objects ranging from clothes to weapons and from a pitcher to a temple; (B) the registering or transmitting of facts and their visualising, as in portraits, historical pictures or literature, and book illustration; and (C) the awakening, intensifying or maintaining of definite emotional states, as especially by music and literature, but also by painting and architecture when employed as “aids to devotion.”<sup>98</sup>

Albeit critical of Ruskin’s moral views, Lee’s democratic ideas on art are consistent with her belief that art consumption and its appreciation is an individual and subjective act. Indeed, she brushes off those putative “scientific” approaches that purport to study art with the same objectivity with which the naturalist dissects corpses and the botanist classifies the dried specimens of plants collected in a “hortus siccus.” In the Valedictory to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* – which was published about five years after the assumed date of composition of “Ville Romane” – Lee expounds this aspect in detail as she highlights the need for a psychological study of art. Although the scientific study of art is useful in that it sheds light on technical qualities whose perception produces delights in the individual, Lee denies that art may be treated as a passive object of inquiry. Having perhaps in mind Bernard Berenson, in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*

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<sup>97</sup> Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, <http://www.spab.org.uk> (last accessed: January 16, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p. 99-100. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *BE*.



Lee blames “the scientific methods applied to art” for ignoring that art is also “an active, positive, special factor of pleasure” (*RFS*, 242) for the individual.

The centrality of the individual’s response towards the object of contemplation in Lee’s aesthetic system is such that it departs from her studies in cultural history and travelogue to affect her developing interest in the physiological responses of the human body when perceiving beauty. Throughout the 1890s, Lee and her companion Clementine Anstruther-Thomson – whom she had met in 1887 – devoted much of their energy to the study of aesthetics as a psychological phenomenon, determined by neurological and bodily reactions taking place within the individual. Lee’s attentive study of late nineteenth-century psychologists and scientists – from William James and Grant Allen to Theodor Lipps and Karl Groos – was balanced by experimental visits to museums and art galleries, after which she would record Anstruther-Thomson’s muscular spasms and alterations in the cardiac-respiratory functions upon contemplating artworks.<sup>99</sup> The result of their efforts was the essay “Beauty and Ugliness,” which was to profoundly enrage Bernard Berenson.

According to Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s collaborative research in the 1890s, the perception of beauty is a subjective act taking place within the individual – and specifically at a neurological level – as a result of what Lee defines “empathy” by introducing into English a calque from the German word “Einfühlung.” Sparked by the contemplation of art, bodily reactions and changes cause sensations determining our aesthetic response. The first edition of “Beauty and Ugliness” appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in 1897, yet I would suggest that its germs can be fully traced in “Roman Villas.” Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s theory of empathy allowed Lee to justify the democratic aspects of art consumption. As Burdette notes, in her refusal to endorse “a hedonistic, self-pleasuring individualism or else a creed of self-denying altruism,” empathy and its bodily implications enabled Lee to come to terms with the necessity of the aesthetic experience for the human being.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, in the conclusion to *The Beautiful*, Lee would define the beautiful as a source of satisfaction for the individual, one which guarantees “happiness” and “spiritual refreshment.” In this regard, art has

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<sup>99</sup> On Lee’s relationship and collaboration with Clementine Anstruther-Thomson, cf. Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 147 ff; Mannocchi, “Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson,” esp. 134-38; Colby, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 145-47; Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy*, pp. 66-73. Burdett also provides interesting insights into the genealogy of Lee’s theory of psychological aesthetics, with specific focus on the German theories that influenced the two editions of *Beauty and Ugliness*. See Carolyn Burdett, “The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside us,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 12 (2011), accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/610/712>.

<sup>100</sup> Burdett, “The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside us.”

therefore a socially useful function, in that it “tends to inhibit most of the instincts whose superabundance can jeopardise individual and social existence” (*BE*, 155).

Consistently, Lee’s theory posits the need for such aesthetic experience to be unmediated. In “Ville Romane” not only does she doubt that modern museums may guarantee such subjective enjoyment of art, but she also mistrusts the idea that such a kind of experience might be taught or induced in the population at large. As she comes towards her conclusions, Lee interestingly supports her argument with a summary of the Victorian responses to the Renaissance. Once again, she implicitly takes her distance from Ruskin, but she also articulates a mistrust of later developments in art scholarship which, after Berenson, would be based on the importance of attribution:

I ministri dei dilette artistici del popolo in genere di pittura poi, dico i professori di storia artistica e d’archeologia medievale, facilitano l’emozione del bello nei loro scolari facendo conoscere ad essi che le opere di Michelangelo sono esteticamente corrotte e quelle di Tiziano esteticamente sane, o vice versa; che, del resto, del Giorgione non esiste che un solo quadro genuino, e di Lionardo da Vinci soltanto l’affresco di Milano, rimpasticciato però in modo da non conoscersi più, e che le opere finora attribuiti [*sic*] a quei sommi sono roba di bottega, o spacciate imitazioni prodotte nel seicento.<sup>101</sup>

Notwithstanding the difficulty in precisely dating the manuscript, Lee composed “Ville Romane: in Memoriam” halfway between *Euphorion* (1884) and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), and in the same years in which her interest in landscape and cultural remnants steers her extensive travel writing production. Merging the motives of aesthetic criticism and travelogues, the textual fabric of this unpublished essay suggests that for Lee the individual’s relationship with the “Genius Loci” equates the Paterian idea of art appreciation as a subjective act. Thus, in removing the statues of faun and nymphs that used to stand out among the laurels, in cutting secular ilexes, or dismantling the fountains, society destroys not a single work of art, but “un quadro inestimabile, una poesia sublime: un quadro in cui uno può addentrarsi e passeggiare; una poesia che non si legge, ma si vive.”<sup>102</sup> And in such aesthetic system, the Renaissance proves once more to be the cornerstone against which to measure the development of

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<sup>101</sup> Lee, “Ville Romane,” *VLA*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

## Renaissance tracks

Western culture and civilization, providing “a historical model for how true culture might be reborn.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Hinojosa, *The Renaissance*, p. 4.

## Chapter IV

### From gender to genre:

### Trans-genre Renaissance

Although Vernon Lee never really gained popularity as a writer, her work did win her a reputation among her contemporaries, who thought considered her a remarkably clever and witty woman. Unlike her unsuccessful attempts as a novelist, short prose forms provided her with an ideal literary space that she could mould in her experimentations with various literary genres. Lee's extensive production includes a number of supernatural tales, travelogues, critical essays, and a *pièce*, all of which are remarkable for ability to evoke and recreate the past and its atmospheres. Her knowledge and interest in the art and culture of Renaissance Italy trickles into each of these writings, with *Euphorion*, *Hauntings*, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, *Limbo* and *Genius Loci* being paramount instances of this. In addition, the subtle construction of gender that Lee deploys in her literary portraits of fictional and historical Renaissance characters, and her fascination with landscapes as cultural heritage, constantly recur in texts that belong to different literary genres.

The contaminations and points of contacts that one easily detects in Vernon Lee's critical essays, travel sketches and short stories, challenge the effectiveness of rigid genre distinctions. Her plastic conception of literary genres reveals that Lee identified the Renaissance with a cultural phenomenon that is worth exploring from what one might provocatively label a trans-genre approach. In a chapter of her study on nineteenth-century women writers – aptly titled *The Singular Anomaly* (1970) – Vineta Colby noted

that Lee's writings are marked by a series of contradictions which, however, she masterly weaves into a pattern of consistencies. Indeed, Lee's views on aesthetics in general, and on the Italian Renaissance in particular, are the result of a personal synthesis of the works of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, none of whom, however, she completely agree with. At a textual level, Colby argues that although Lee's works reveal "a writer more intellectual than imaginative," they all rely on fiction, which she conceives not as a genre but as a literary device. In other words, fiction is a literary technique that Lee repeatedly resorted to, and which made her works about art, aesthetics and cultural history more accessible to the contemporary readership.<sup>1</sup>

The essay is the literary genre that Lee found most congenial to her writing. However, in labelling her collections of essays as *Studies*, *Fancies*, *Notes*, *Dialogues*, and even "samples, fragments" (*EI*, 16) and "direct personal impressions" (*RFS*, ix) fit for developing a wide range of *Sundry* issues, she often challenged the expectations and mindset of her readers. Thus, the same difficulty in establishing clear-cut categories that might be applied to Lee's textual construction of gender, and to her plastic conception of the Renaissance, also occurs in investigating her relationship with literary genres. Zorn argues that the extensive forewords and epilogues that Lee devised to introduce or comment on many of her volumes suggest that she was aware that her works challenged nineteenth-century conventional literary categories.<sup>2</sup> Forms, contents and styles curiously mingle and overlap in the essays in aesthetic criticism, travelogues and supernatural tales in which Lee's multifaceted fascination with the Italian Renaissance penetrates.

Gender and genre share such similar complexities in Lee's writing that both should be taken into due consideration when discussing her work. Stemming from her belief that a woman would hardly have been granted due consideration in male-dominated areas such as aesthetics, Violet Paget's decision of adopting the male pen name "Vernon Lee" reveals her fear of biased reception, but also her desire to address a specific – most likely, albeit not exclusively, male-gendered – readership. Her identity, however, was not unknown to the Victorian *litterati* and reading public alike, nor did she feel unease about the public awareness of her real persona. One should bear in mind that in the same years, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper were far more determined to hide the identity of Michael Field. In 1884, Bradley wrote a letter to Robert Browning,

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<sup>1</sup> Vineta Colby, *The Singular Anomaly. Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 235-36.

<sup>2</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 62.

begging him

to set the critics on a wrong track. We each know that you mean good to us: and are persuaded you thought that by “our secret” we meant the dual authorship. The revelation of that would indeed be utter ruin to us; but the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn. [...] And we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips.<sup>3</sup>

Bradley and Cooper’s pen name meant to guarantee the platonic union of their spirits that lay at the very essence of their collaborative poetry, believing that they made “a veritable Michael.” But, like Lee, they also believed their pseudonym would allow them to overcome gender bias that would hinder the reception of their work. Bradley was to stress this point in another letter she addressed to Browning two days after her previous message, pointing out that she had not meant

[to] speak of combating “social conventions”. It is not in our power or desire to treat irreverently customs that have been, or are, sacred to men. We hold ourselves bound in life and in literature to reveal – as far as may be – the beauty of the high feminine standard of the *ought to be*. What I wrote was, “we cannot be stifled in drawing-room conventionalities.” By that I meant we could not be scared away, as ladies, from the tragic elements of life.<sup>4</sup>

Lee was personally acquainted with Bradley and Cooper, having first heard about their work and alleged literary identity while staying at the Paters’ in June 1884.<sup>5</sup> Writing to Lee in 1890 to express their praise of Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s *Imaginary Sonnets* (1888), and inquire about his delicate health, the two poets also highlight that they and Vernon Lee share a similarly ambiguous position in the literary scenario of the English fin-de-siècle. “We wait for the introduction given by man,” Michael Field writes, without disclosing the identity of the person writing the letter, “while the spirit, if we will but listen to its intimations, is providing for our most delicate & varied affinities.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, they wrap up their letter with a post-script, pointing out that

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<sup>3</sup> *Works and Days. From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 6. Bradley’s letter is dated November 23, 1884.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> In the closing part of a letter to her mother, written in June 1884, Lee briefly tells her that “The rising poet” they must have already talked about “is a Michael Field, supposed to be a woman, who has written a very remarkable play called Callirrhoe.” See Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, June 18, 1884. *VLA* #182.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Field to Vernon Lee, January 19, 1890. Unnumbered letter, *VLA*.

[i]t cannot be too frequently repeated that belief in the unity of M. F. is absolutely necessary. Alike for the advancement of his glory. & attaining of his favour. He is in literature one.

Where the secret of his chance dualism is not known, the wise & kind preserve it; & every public reference to him ~~must~~ should be masculine.

But I need scarcely warn Vernon Lee on this point?<sup>7</sup>

Lee might have shared Bradley and Cooper's concern regarding the stifling "drawing-room conventionalities" of late Victorian England, but not their preoccupation with keeping the secret on her literary alter ego. A few days later, she forwards Michael Field's letter to her mother. She is sceptical not only of their comments on Eugene's letters, but also of their obsession with "inculcating the mysteriousness of their dualism," which she discards as "a pathetic instance of the selfimportance [*sic*] of the literary worm, which always imagines the eyes of the world fixed upon its precious wriggings."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Violet Paget's acceptance of the public notion that Vernon Lee was a male pseudonym for a mannish woman – as one can see her in her portrait by John Singer Sargent, currently at the Tate Gallery – adds some ambiguity to her persona. An ambiguity which, in turn, also affects her writing.

As Walters points out, by challenging fixed and unchangeable conceptions, the critical framework provided by queer theory might lead to "substantive notions of multiplicity and intersectionality" beyond gender and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> At a textual level, I would suggest that Lee's writings on the Renaissance should be queered so as to bring to the fore their specificity. On this point, I agree with Fraser, who considers Lee as an "interstitial identity," one that speaks from the viewpoint of difference, aware of her cultural hybridity both as a woman and an intellectual. *Limbo*, Fraser aptly adds, should not be intended only as the title that Lee chose for her 1897 collection of fragmentary essays on landscapes and aesthetics, but also as a trope recurring in her writings. Along with her interests in tangled and hybrid cultural phenomena as the Renaissance, Lee's "occupation of in-between cultural and sexual territories, inflect her ways of seeing and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, February 4, 1890. *VLA* #490. In 1901, Bradley and Cooper visited Lee and Clementine Anstruther-Thomas at Il Palmerino. In their diary, they recorded not only that "Vernon was very stupid in what she said about art," but also that her "tiny house has no charm; it is too crowded and awkwardly disposed, and, like its mistress, has no central unity of purpose." See *Works and Days*, p. 264.

<sup>9</sup> Walters, "From Here to Queer," p. 11.

her writing about history, art, and place in fundamental and defining ways.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as the faux biographer of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) notes while recollecting Orlando’s attempts at resuming “The Oak Tree” during the Victorian Age, “it would seem [...] that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver.”<sup>11</sup>

Lee’s writings about the Renaissance reveal a subversive vein in the way they challenge crystallized literary forms. This aspect is all the more interesting if one considers that she mostly composed such works during the Victorian Age, a period which posited a neat, gendered separation of genres. Woolf was to depart from the Victorian conventions regulating biography in *Orlando*, which is in fact a pastiche of various literary genres. A decade earlier, however, she had criticized Vernon Lee for her often insufficiently controlled prose. In her diary entry for April 20, 1919, Woolf jots down her impressions on the importance of keeping a diary so as to hone one’s own style. Looseness and fluidity should be carefully weighed, since

looseness quickly becomes slovenly. A little effort is needed to face a character or an incident which needs to be recorded. Nor can one let the pen write without guidance; for fear of becoming slack and untidy like Vernon Lee. Her ligaments are too loose for my taste.<sup>12</sup>

According to Woolf, Lee’s fault lies in the loose “ligaments” that should keep together her writings. From this standpoint, her statement echoes Nencioni’s comments on *Euphorion*, a work he believed was marred by an overall degree of verbosity, which considerably affected Lee’s otherwise brilliant argumentations. In breaking the connecting tissues that should sustain the textual fabric, Lee’s interstitial position unveils interesting aesthetic and gnoseological implications, revealing her search for a suitable medium to organize, represent, and communicate knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hilary Fraser, “Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between”, in *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930*, ed. Marysa Demoor (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. 118, 122.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, volume 1, 1915-1915 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 266. The entry is dated Easter Sunday, April 20, 1919.

<sup>13</sup> See Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 62.



#### 4.1. A catalytic force

Lee's essays on the civilization of Renaissance Italy, and the construction of the Renaissance as the cultural category that they engender, rely on a wide framework that reveals the influence of Jacob Burckhardt and Walter Pater, but also of John Addington Symonds, who never forgave her for not taking his *Renaissance in Italy* into due consideration. Consistently with the model of *Querdurchschnitte* she found in Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and the rejection of the chronological approach that Pater had embraced in his *Studies in Art and Poetry*, Lee tackles subjects as diverse as politics, folklore, literature and art. In her analysis, she interrelates such aspects inasmuch as they spring from the same fertile ground, yet she also questions "the theories which arbitrarily assume that art is the immediate and exact expression of contemporary spiritual aspirations and troubles" (RFS, 35). In an undated note – which she marked only with the indication "unused Keep!" and currently at the Vernon Lee Archive – Lee further stresses this point, writing off merely historicist approaches to art as "superstitions" marred by "sentimental and imaginative and [...] scientific drawbacks." The origins and development of art, instead, are dependent on "[art's] own inherent psychological necessities."<sup>14</sup> However, in her attraction to "the strange ebullition of the Renaissance, seething with good and evil," Lee manages to textually recreate the complexity of a slice of Italian culture, which she investigates as an "enigmatic picture" (E1, 29).

Art is not the only subject that Lee sets to investigate in her essays as an aesthetic critic. Nevertheless, it is art that offers a *fil rouge* through a substantial part of her literary production. It surfaces in all of her writings that are concerned with the Renaissance, regardless of the genre they belong to. For the male protagonists of "Amour Dure" and "Dionea" – the scholar Spiridion Trepka, and the sculptor Waldemar – art is at once an obsession and a source of pain: it is art that leads both men to their downfall. Considered from a biographical perspective, much of Lee's knowledge of Italian art is due to her frequent visits to museums and galleries, so that her aesthetic judgment is founded not only on theories and assumptions that she worked out through her avid reading, but also on the direct observation of artworks and the informal conversations she had with friends and artists on such topics. From this point of view, Lee's early Roman years significantly shaped her taste, especially under the guidance of Mary Singer, John Singer

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<sup>14</sup> Vernon Lee, "Miscellaneous notes on ethics, art etc...", envelope 1. VLA.

Sargent's mother. In the "V. Part of the autobiography of a writer on art," a section of the unpublished holograph manuscript "Aesthetics, My Confession" that she began to write in 1902, Lee considers retrospectively the influences that shaped her artist taste and aesthetic judgment. "I seem to recollect," Lee writes in her confession,

that my preference always had, or often had, a [illegible word] parti pris, that I liked or thought I liked, for some reason independent of instructive choice. [...] and I am certain that the suggestion of others (including the inverted, contradictory suggestions) played an immense part in my "liking." [...] I am sure I always "liked." Whatever John Sargent (himself I think much in the same stem) liked, or his mother liked, let alone what books, and later on Flasch, told me to like. There was a very categorical imperative about it;<sup>15</sup>

Discussing the central place that art holds in Vernon Lee's prose, and her unresolved relationship with aestheticism, Colby suggests that her reflections should be read in terms of "puritan aesthetics." Lee was not uncritical of the "art for art's sake" mantra, but having been raised in important European art centres, she was also free from the philistinism typical of a substantial part of Victorian culture.<sup>16</sup> In *Belcaro*, Lee had discarded Ruskin's rigorous partition of "the world of the physically beautiful [...] isolated from the world of the morally excellent" (B, 207), and although in *Gospels of Anarchy* she would pay homage to the Oxford Graduate, she would also claim that "we shall attempt to show that art, like science itself, philosophy, like every great healthy human activity, has a right to live and a duty to fulfil, quite apart from any help it may contribute to the enforcement of a moralist's teaching" (GA, 140-41). In between, she had absorbed aestheticism and praised the wholesomeness of Pater's refined aesthetic doctrine, grounded as it was on the supreme search for harmony.

In the first essay of *Euphorion*, "The Portrait Art," Lee claims that the object of art is the beautiful, while in the Valedictory to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* she still posits a neat separation between art and morality, thus relieving the aesthetic cult of beauty of

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<sup>15</sup> Vernon Lee, "Aesthetics, My confession," unpublished holograph manuscript, begun 1902. *VLA*. In this manuscript, as well as in some letters, Lee refers to a certain "dr. Flasch," and the Vernon Lee Archive includes a letter from a certain A. Flasch written in 1875. In their biographies, neither Gunn nor Colby make references of this person, and the influence he might have had on Lee. In this retrospective analysis, Lee writes that it was Flasch who had lent her "Burckhardt's Cicerone [...] with a view to conversion." Thus, I believe that in the 1870s Lee must have been in close contact with the German classicist and archaeologist Adam Flasch (1844-1902), author of a study *Zum Parthenon-Fries* (1877) and editor of the volume *Die archaische Kunst* (1897) published in the German series *Griechische Kunstgeschichte*.

<sup>16</sup> Colby, *The Singular Anomaly*, p. 238.

any responsibility. Significantly, in the collection of essays she published in 1895 – a year after Walter Pater’s death, and the very same year Oscar Wilde was tried for “gross indecency” – Lee defends

beauty and art in any case; for though beauty may be adulterated, and art enslaved to something not itself, be sure that the element of beauty, the activity of art, so far as they are themselves specific, are far above suspicion even in the most suspicious company. For even if beauty is united to perverse fashions, and art (as with Baudelaire and the decadents) employed to adorn the sentiments of maniacs and gaol-birds, the beauty and the art remain sound. (*RFS*, 251)

Such aesthetic considerations also contribute to our understanding of Lee’s attitude towards the Renaissance. She did not excuse the moral want of its civilization, yet she accepted it as a necessary stage in the development of Italy and the Western civilization as a whole. There can be “no plea for the immorality of the Renaissance,” Lee writes in *Euphorion*, “evil is none the less evil for being inevitable and necessary; but it is nevertheless well that we should understand its necessity [...] for producing good” (*EI*, 52). Yet in her concluding remarks to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* – a work in which she would further stress “the apparent anomaly in the Renaissance, [its] coincidence of contrary movements” (*RFS*, 252) – Lee also challenges “the inappropriate name of ‘art for art’s sake,’” suggesting that Pater’s “conception of art, being the outcome of his whole personal mode of existence, was inevitably one of art, not for art’s sake, but of art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence” (*RFS*, 258-59). Colby interestingly relates Lee’s conception of art to her early rejection of orthodox Christianity. In other words, she suggests that Lee substituted what she conceived as a sterile form of religion with a form of humanism grounded on art as the supreme creation of man.<sup>17</sup>

Although she only briefly dwells on Lee’s Renaissance works, Colby’s argument provides an interesting starting point to explore not only her aesthetic ideals, but also her ideas on the art of Renaissance Italy. In Lee’s views, the germs of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance are not to be found in the barren monastic-driven Humanism of Abelard, but rather in the “*humanizing* movement” sparked by Francis of Assisi (*RFS*, 22; my emphasis). By reconciling the religious ideals with the simplest human instincts, and substituting a strict, at times vindictive divinity with the motherly

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

tenderness of the Virgin Mary and the brotherly sympathy of Christ, Franciscanism had provided the thirteenth century with such happiness, hope and faith as are necessary not only to the spiritual well-being of mankind, but also to “art, poetry, freedom, all the things which form the *Viaticum* on mankind’s journey through the dreary ages” (*RFS*, 25). Lee explains the genealogy of art – and especially its rebirth in the early Renaissance phase brought about by St. Francis – in religious terms, expounding the effects that the pursuit of cardinal and theological virtues have on society. Justice, charity, purity, and fortitude – which had been pivotal elements in the teachings of the Old and New Testament – might in fact be detrimental to “that special response which we call Art” (*RFS*, 30).<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Lee claims that Franciscanism promoted a significant change in spiritual matters which also trickled down in art. Writing towards the end of the Victorian Age, when, due to the estrangement of word and image, “[t]he sister arts could no longer sound in unison,”<sup>19</sup> Lee’s investigation into the civilization of Renaissance Italy deploys a comparative vision between literature and art in which the former often works as a means to illustrate and visually explain the latter. The relationship between the two is so close in Lee’s essays – which wear the garb of the aesthetic critic – we might profitably conceive the different forms of art she takes into account almost as kinds of genres. Indeed, considered from this perspective Lee’s Renaissance studies reveal once again her “trans-genre” approach. In *Euphorion*, Lee introduces an aspect she would repeatedly tackle in her following works, the relationship between the written word and the visual arts, and the impossibility for literature to provide a truthful verbal representation of landscape. After admitting that pictorial attention to details, movement, and chromatic effects in the reproduction of landscape were only eventually introduced by

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<sup>18</sup> In spite of their different views, Lee seems close to the late Ruskin. A significant example is Ruskin’s “Conversion” to Giotto. In the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), he had made a distinction between decorative and expressive language in painting, maintaining that “the early efforts of Cimabue and Giotto are the burning messages of prophecy, delivered by the stammering lips of infants.” However, he had also added that rudimental mastery of technical quality does not imply a less artistic result, since the task of “the judicious critic [is] carefully to distinguish what is language, and what is thought, and to rank and praise pictures chiefly for the latter, considering the former as a totally inferior excellence.” In the second of his *Mornings in Florence* (1875-77), however, he would praise Giotto for his insights into human nature, arguing that he “saw with his simple eyes a lowlier worth. And he painted – the Madonna, and St. Joseph, and the Christ, – yes, by all means if you choose to call them so, but essentially, – Mamma, Papa, and the Baby. And all Italy threw up its cap, – ‘Ora ha Giotto il grido.’ For he defines, explains, and exalts, every sweet incident of human nature; and makes dear to daily life every mystic imagination of natures greater than our own. He reconciles, while he intensifies, every virtue of domestic and monastic thought. He makes the simplest household duties sacred, and the highest religious passions serviceable and just.” See Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, pp. 9-10; Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence*, p. 333.

<sup>19</sup> Francesca Orestano, Introduction to *Strange Sisters. Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Francesca Orestano and Francesca Frigerio (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 2.

Impressionist painting, Lee asserts that on a historical basis painting tends to anticipate poetry in its response to the changing sensibility.

Curiously, Lee's ideas on the development and progress of the various forms seem to appropriate the myth of the nine muses. In Ancient Greece, the muses – daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the Titaness of Memory – were presiding over literature, science and the arts, and were responsible for circulating knowledge by inspiring poets, dancers and astronomers. According to Porter, however, the muses performed their duty both individually and jointly, and their number suggests that art was considered not as an umbrella term including various representational forms, but rather as a synesthetic and intrinsically plural concept.<sup>20</sup> In a way, the different art forms seem to alternate in Lee's aesthetic theory according to which muse is more apt to respond to the changing sensibility. In general, she believes that painters are indeed “the men who see more keenly and who study what they have seen,” and as such, they “naturally come first; nor does the poet usually describe what his contemporary painter attempts not to paint.” A poet like Dante certainly captured “many things quite left untouched by Giotto, and even by Raphael” (*E1*, 115), but this can be explained more in terms of individual sensibility than as a result of the literary scenario of the time considered as a whole.

Lee was to return on this point two decades after *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. In an unpublished manuscript, titled “Literature, Criticism” and dated February 1817, she stresses the need “to renew and replenish & keep up any emotional state by communication to others”<sup>21</sup> as a universal impulse. Indeed, poetry is itself a powerful means to communicate and convey such emotional states. In the essay in *Euphorion* she had devoted to “The School of Boiardo,” Lee had admitted the impossibility of identifying canonical works or dominant poetic genres before “Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, handed down from generation to generation” a tradition of excellence (*E2*, 60). In *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, however, Lee considerably amends this theory, suggesting that “literature always precedes its more heavily cumbered fellow-servant art” (*RFS*, 40). Following her first encounter with Clementine “Kit” Anstruther-Thomas in 1887, Lee's aesthetic theory was to undergo profound changes as her subsequent interest in psychological aesthetics show. René Wellek suggests that the germs of this shift can already be found in *Juvenilia* (1887), although in *Art and Man* (1924) she would explicitly

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<sup>20</sup> James I. Porter, “Why Are There Nine Muses?,” in *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Shane Butler and Alex Purves (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Vernon Lee, “Literature, Criticism,” unpublished holograph manuscript, 1817. *VLA*.

define her encounter with “Kit” in as an epiphanic turn in her interest in aesthetics. Here, Lee curiously describes the influence that Kit had on her ideas by juxtaposing painting and literature. Before her “experimental” visits at galleries and museums with Anstruther-Thomas, Lee writes in the Introduction to *Art and Man*, “I really knew of works of art only that much which can be translated into literature.”<sup>22</sup> As far as her Renaissance writings are concerned, however, Lee does not posit that poetry occupies a subaltern, lower position in comparison with painting. In fact, she often resorts to Renaissance painting as a means to introduce, expound and comment on literature. Thus, although on a theoretical basis she maintains that painting tends to be the first form of art to respond to the changing sensitivity, she calls on high Renaissance art to comment on earlier literary works.

Lee finds in Francis of Assisi a catalytic force that can scarcely be ignored, and in “The Love of the Saints,” she finds in the poetry of Jacopone of Todi an early example of the artistic effects of the spiritual change that will lead to the Renaissance. Although less refined and learned in comparison with the Italian Stilnovisti, Jacopone indicates the end of medieval terror, and the dawn of a new kind of emotionalism which she qualifies as desirable and wholesome at once. In his religious lyrics, Jacopone appears to Lee as “languishing, consumed” by the experience of his love for the Saviour, an abandonment that he depicts with “liveliness, amplifications” and “erotic hyperboles” (*RFS*, 32). Lee describes the consummation of Christian love in carnal terms, reconciling the consummation in the spirit and the flesh that will crucial to D. H. Lawrence’s philosophy. Twentieth-century criticism would back Lee’s intuition, recognizing that it is through the élan of his passion that Fra’ Jacopone of Todi could reach his mystical union with Jesus. In fact, his religious ardour left him with a heartbreak that enabled him to await his reconciliation with God.<sup>23</sup>

From an artistic point of view, Lee points out that the boundaries between the sacred and profane are slick, and Jacopone, “in his ecstasies over Jesus, intones a song which might be that of those passionate *farandoles* of angels who dance and carol in Botticelli’s most rapturous pictures” (*RFS*, 33). Interestingly, in the following essay in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, devoted to “The Imaginative Art of the Renaissance,” Lee defines Botticelli as the great “lyrist” of the fifteenth century, whose painting offers a

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<sup>22</sup> René Wellek, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 166-67.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Thode, *Francesco d’Assisi e le origini dell’arte del Rinascimento in Italia* (Roma: Donzelli, 1993), pp. 346-47.

source of delight for the observers which is akin to the effect provided by imaginative poetry, and especially that of nineteenth-century poets who, like John Keats, Heinrich Heine, and Charles Baudelaire, were praised by the votaries of *l'art pour l'art*.

Commenting on *Danza d'amore*, Lee stresses the visual quality of Jacopone's lines as she imagines the faithful celebrating the Nativity at Bethlem in a way which forestalls Renaissance paintings by "Lippo or Ghirlandaio, nay, by Correggio and Titian," and describes the ecstasy of the carollers as one of "the sweetest inventions of Italian art, from Luca della Robbia to Raphael" (*RFS*, 35). Thus, I would suggest that Lee's discussion of Renaissance art at the fin-de-siècle seems to rely on a theory of sister arts which she would expound in more theoretical terms at the beginning of the following century.

In *The Handling of Words* – a treaty of psychological literary criticism, published in 1923 and considered pioneering in laying the basis of reading-response criticism<sup>24</sup> – Lee discusses the position of literature within the aesthetic system and its specific features. She does not question the merits of literature, yet she maintains that literature should be seen as less aesthetic – albeit not less artistic – than the visual arts because of its imperfection, vagueness and superficiality. However, precisely because literature seems to be less concerned with providing the reader with an aesthetic experience, it is also "more closely connected with life, more universal and more permeating" than other art forms.<sup>25</sup> And although only in an embryo form, the germs of such a theory are to be found in Lee's reflections on Renaissance Italy:

there is no need for wondering, as people occasionally wonder, how the solemn terror, the sweetness, pathos, or serenity of men like Signorelli, Botticelli, or Perugino, nay Michelangelo, Raphael, or Giorgione, could have originated among Malatestas, Borgias, Poggios, or Aretines. It did not. And, therefore, since literature always precedes its more heavily cumbered fellow-servant art, we must look for the literary counterpart of the painters of the Renaissance among the writers who preceded them by many generations, men more obviously in touch with the great mediæval revival: Dante, Boccaccio, the compilers of the "Fioretti di San Francesco," and, as we have just seen, Fra Jacopone da Todi. (*RFS*, 40)

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<sup>24</sup> On this point, see Benjamin Morgan, "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies* 55, No. 1 (Autumn 2012), pp. 31-56.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 79.

Art unquestionably holds a central place in Lee's works on the Italian Renaissance, and she repeatedly deals with the characteristics and merits of Renaissance art throughout her career as a writer. However, she is always careful to weigh out the visual arts in comparison with literature. Thus, her aesthetic system seems to rely on a revisited conception of the Nine Muses, in which each form of artistic expression might prevail, depending on its ability to respond to the historical and social contingency. In a manuscript she marked as "Unused and to be kept," and included in the "Miscellaneous notes on ethics, arts etc." at the Vernon Lee Archive, Lee refashions her ideas on art in a way which mingles sociology with an organic conception that reminds one of T. S. Eliot's ideas on tradition and the individual talent. This manuscript is undated. Because of its references to twentieth-century sociological theories, however, I suggest they were undoubtedly written during Lee's mature years. As a matter of fact, Lee starts her considerations by quoting Franklin Henry Gidding's idea that

All arts [...] are phases of the social mind. We are so much in the habit of thinking of them in terms of art-products that we forget that the arts themselves are groups of ideas and acquisitions of skill that exist only in the minds, muscles, and nerves of living men. The continuity of an art depends on its being transmitted from mind to mind, and from hand to hand.<sup>26</sup>

Lee's position is still somewhat ambiguous. Whilst she is not an unresolved votary of these sociological theories of art, as an early reader of Burckhardt she does believe that art is to a great extent a product of the society that nurtures it. Indeed, she believes that the work of the individual artist cannot be considered in itself, but only within the broader artistic tradition in which it develops. Art is in fact the product of an individual "temperament" and "impact," which the single artist applies "to something which he has got not from his personal creative fund, but from a long existing and ever exercised and ever ~~elari~~ enriched and purified ~~fund~~ of common fund of form ~~and~~ or idea."<sup>27</sup> In his 1919 essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot had similarly defined the work of the poets as single contribution to tradition, which exists as an organic entity in which the single artist annihilates itself as the Keatsian "chameleon poet." Consistently with Eliot's theory, Lee maintains that

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<sup>26</sup> Vernon Lee, "Miscellaneous notes on ethics, art etc.," envelope 3. *VLA*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



## Trans-genre Renaissance

the temperament of the individual artist gives how he thinks and works, but his civilization, and all civilization leading ~~up~~ thereunto, gives ~~what~~ what he thinks and what, ~~in his~~ working, he transforms. [...] Whatever a philosopher thinks is conditioned by ~~all~~ what previous philosophy, ~~may~~, all philosophising mankind, nay all thinking and speaking mankind, has, throughout the ages, found worth while [sic] to think. Similarly with artistic form: symmetry, rhythm and all its less commonly inventoried but not less important elements mean not merely that the individual artist brain has a body and brain which insist upon their preference, [...] but also that he has received art from the hands of previous artists similarly constituted in body and brain and having similarly insisted on symmetry, rhythm and the rest. The greatest artistic individuality would probably be as incapable of ~~inventing shapes establishing~~ inventing artistic shapes, of establishing symmetry, rhythm [...].<sup>28</sup>

These notes are undated, and such discrepancies in comparison with her published work might reasonably be the result of fluctuating opinions typical of a writer like Lee, whose production extends over such a long period of time, beginning in the High Victorian Age and continuing through the beginning of the following century. In these scattered fragments, Lee does not mention the source of her quotation from Giddings, which is in fact a passage from his *Civilization and Society: An Account of the Development and Behavior of Human Society*. As Wellek aptly highlighted in reviewing Lee's lifelong commitment to aesthetics, the stages and the accurate chronology of Lee's ideas on this topic might only be worked out tentatively.<sup>29</sup> If one considers that Giddings' work was only published posthumously in 1932, however, these notes are likely to be the most indicative of Lee's mature positions in the field of aesthetic criticism.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. In another of her miscellaneous notes, which she titled "Amused & exciting Notes on Archeology Re – Apotheosis of Roman Art," Lee similarly stresses the importance of cross-fertilization in the development of art forms. Resorting once again to the metaphor of marriage, as she had done in explaining the birth of the Renaissance spirit in *Euphorion*, Lee describes the birth of Byzantine art in terms of the offspring of sexual union, the result of a marriage between ~~the~~ Greek art in its hellenistic stage with ~~the or~~ eastern art, the art of expression of Sarsanian [sic] Persia, and it a marriage taking place in Syria, the sufilamia [sic] of Asia minor." See Vernon Lee, "Miscellaneous notes on ethics, art etc...," envelope 2. VLA.

<sup>29</sup> Wellek, *Discriminations*, p. 168.

#### 4.2. An imaginary portrait: Domenico Neroni, “pictor sacrilegus”

In the second chapter of this study I examined Lee’s textual representation of medieval and Renaissance figures, with specific focus on the construction of gender. In order to investigate the extent to which Lee’s interest in the Italian Renaissance might be defined as “trans-genre,” I intend to offer some considerations on the literary portraits in which Lee does not represent historical people or characters belonging to popular tradition. Her writings also include some interesting “imaginary portraits.”

Lee’s first collection of supernatural tales, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), and “A Seeker of Pagan Perfection: Being the Life of Domenico Neroni, Pictor Sacrilegus” – included *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* – confirm her interest in the Renaissance as a means to take part in the fin-de-siècle discourse of aesthetic criticism. Bini notes that Lee’s supernatural stories evidently reveal “the indelible trace left by her reading of [Walter Pater’s] *Imaginary Portraits*,”<sup>30</sup> but the same can be argued about her story of the fictional High Renaissance painter Domenico Neroni. Lee had explicitly conceived this piece – which first appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in August 1891 – in the fashion of Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*. In April 1888, she had written a letter to the editor of the *Contemporary Review*, William Bunting, informing him of her project:

I want to do something for you: but a dialogue so soon would fatigue yr readers, and an historical essay would fatigue me. I am contemplating some things in the style of Mr Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* – essays concentrated round an imaginary representative figure. The one I propose doing for you is the *Imaginary Portrait* of an artist of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, bent upon obtaining, like Mantegna, the *Proportions of the Animate* – *Symmetria Prisca* – and aligning Christianity with Paganism with this in view.<sup>31</sup>

The title of this short story - included in a collection of essays – clearly pays homage to Pater’s work. According to Bizzotto, the Italian setting, the choice of a painter as the main character, and the attempt at reviving the pagan gods especially connect Lee’s portrait of Neroni to Pater’s “A Prince of Court Painters” (1885), whose protagonist is Jean-Antoine

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<sup>30</sup> Benedetta Bini, “‘The sterile ascetic of beauty’: Pater and the Italian fin de siècle,” in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. Stephen Bann (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Vernon Lee to William Percy Bunting, April 11, 1888. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago [Box 4, Folder 23].

Watteau.<sup>32</sup>

From a narrative point of view, I suggest that this piece should be read in connection with Lee's supernatural tales insofar. As a matter of fact, "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" is modelled on the narrative structure typical of much Gothic literature, and especially the author's construction of a seemingly reliable framing. The painter is thus introduced through his family and historical background, and in an attempt to invoke the reader's "suspension of disbelief," Lee cites a possible reference to Neroni in Vasari's *Lives*:

Domenico, the son of Luca Neroni, painter, sculptor, goldsmith, and engraver, about whom, owing either to the scarcity of his works or the scandal of his end, Vasari has but a few words in another man's biography, must have been born shortly before or shortly after the year 1450, a contemporary of Perugino, of Ghirlandaio, of Filippino Lippi, and of Signorelli, by all of whom he was influenced at various moments, and whom he influenced by turns. (*RFS*, 166-67)

As in Gothic tales, the reader and the author are left wondering about the truthfulness of the story. Besides, "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" shares with the stories from *Hauntings* another element that suggests Lee's debt to Pater – the idea of the pagan gods living exiled in the present. Victorian authors like Pater and Matthew Arnold had become interested in this theory after reading Heinrich Heine's "Die Götter im Exil" (1853). In Lee's case, Heine's theory is always linked to a sense of trespassing illicit borders.

After his early apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Volterra, Domenico Neroni moves to Florence, where he works with several late fifteenth-century painters, such as "the Pollaiolos, Verrocchio, Nanni di Banco, and even with Filippino and Botticelli" (*RFS*, 172). Neroni, however, soon becomes obsessed with his desire to find the secret to representing human form in its full perfection. A major turning point is his Roman experience, where he probably assisted Botticelli and Ghirlandaio in their work for the Sistine Chapel. In this regard, I suggest that Lee's characterization of Neroni painter seems based on the portrait of Winckelmann at the end of Pater's *Renaissance*. Like Winckelmann, Lee's "pictor sacrilegus" disavows the achievements of painting and acknowledges instead the superiority of ancient sculpture. According to Neroni, the greatest achievement of classical art is its rejection of colour, which is detrimental to the precise and perfect representation of form. Hence his interest in the nude body, which

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<sup>32</sup> Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima. Il ritratto immaginario fin de siècle* (Milano: Cisalpino, 2001), p. 98.

results in artworks that were often looked down upon for being “more suited for Pagan than to Christian countries” (*RFS*, 175).

In spite of his feverish anatomical interest, and his dissection of corpses, Neroni’s representation of the nude body is still imperfect. As Lee observes in one of the many passages in which she breaks the narrative structure, although Verrocchio, the Pollaiolos and Michelangelo had probably dissected dead bodies for the sake of anatomical perfection, fifteenth-century painting could not take advantage of the studies of Vesalius, Fallopius and Cesalpinus. In Neroni’s obsession with the nude body, one finds another element that suggests reading this imaginary portrait bearing in mind Pater’s *Renaissance*. In his essay on Winckelmann, Pater had quoted a letter that the art historian had sent to his younger friend Friedrich von Berg. In this textual fragment, the discourses of aesthetics, art appreciation and same-sex desire interestingly converge and dissolve:

As it is confessedly the beauty of man which is to be conceived under one general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female. But the beauty of art demands a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature [...]. (*R*, 153)

Lee carefully maintains a certain balance between what is stated and what may only be inferred. In this imaginary portrait – like in the other essays in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* – the author and the narrating persona coincide. As she narrates a story whose authenticity she doubts ever since the beginning, in discussing the painter’s interest in the nude body she comments: “[m]en and women, said Neroni; and he should have added men and women nude” (*RFS*, 174). Yet it is the male body – rather than the *human* body – that catches Neroni’s attention. A few pages later, one reads that the painting that “afforded Domenico the most unmingled satisfaction was Pollaiolo’s tiny panel of “Hercules and Hydra” (*RFS*, 178). This little painting represents the second of Hercules’s twelve labours, the killing of the monster that Hera had sent over to slay him. Pollaiolo depicts the demigod as he leans forward, facing the nine-headed serpent, with his right arm lifted above his head, his hand holding a cudgel. Capturing the tension of the battle, Pollaiolo highlights the vigour of Hercules’s body, showing, in Lee’s words, “the most beautiful muscles that were ever seen” (*RFS*, 178).



Fig. 4 – Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Hercules and the Hydra*. Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi

Rome and its pagan remnants represent a turning point in Neroni's life as they had in Winckelmann's. The painter's desire to master the "symmetria prisca" soon turns into an obsessive longing for the unattainable, "the mystery of proportion and beauty which was hidden, more subtly and hopelessly, in the broken marbles of the Pagans" (RFS, 194). Lee had dwelt upon the concept of the "symmetria prisca" – the antique symmetry – in her homonymous essay in *Euphorion*, which opens with Platino Piatto's epitaph to Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>33</sup> Aside from this alleged quote, Leonardo's interest in the exact proportions of the human body is documented by his pen and ink drawing "The Vitruvian Man," which he had accompanied by numerical indications based on Vitruvius's *Ten Books of Architecture*. Taken altogether, Leonardo, Lee's Neroni, and Pater's Winckelmann all sum up the essence of the Renaissance spirit and embody the desire to penetrate the secrets

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<sup>33</sup> In "Symmetria Prisca," Lee argues that whereas Giottesque painting was merely interested in representing figures in order to display an action, Renaissance artists had treated the human figure as a living organism. Influenced by sculpture, fifteenth-century painting eventually achieved what had simply been suggested in the fourteenth. Divided between antiquity and nature, Renaissance artists were "vigorous lovers of nature" and "heroic searchers after truth" (E1, 177).

of antiquity, which, because of its harmony, they consider “a period of permanent miracle” (*RFS*, 201).<sup>34</sup>

Neroni’s new obsession is sparked by his contemplation of another artwork, two marble figures representing Bacchus and a Faun, which were supposedly found among the relics of Tiberius’s palace. The incident reminds one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni* (1860), the novel that Lee had been “perpetually reading” while in Rome in 1868.<sup>35</sup> The description of the statue she provides in “Pictor Sacrilegus” recalls Michelangelo’s homonymous marble piece: in both cases, the two figures are organized in the same fashion, with Bacchus “walking with leisurely but vigorous steps, supporting himself upon the shoulder of the little satyr” (*RFS*, 199). What is most interesting, though, is Lee’s stress on the ephebic beauty of the young god, which, again, defies neat gender categorizations. The classical harmony that Neroni was striving for would seem to lie in the reconciliation of gender aspects, since the masculinity of the athlete-like body of Bacchus is complemented, and not contradicted, by the feminine beauty of his facial features. When looking at this young Bacchus, “all impressions were merged in a sense of ease, of suavity, of full-blown harmony,” revealing “a beauty that seemed to multiply itself, existing in all manners” (*RFS*, 200). Even though this statue is introduced in order to account for Neroni’s growing obsession with antiquity, there is no extradiegetic, omniscient narrator whose intervention might be taken as representative of the painter’s impressions. Because the author and the narrator coincide, it seems impossible to distance Lee’s own impressions and comments from those of her fictional character.

Obsessed with finding the secret to classical perfection, Neroni consults Filarete – a character who, Bizzotto warns, should not be confused with his historical counterpart<sup>36</sup> – to perform a mysterious pagan ritual in a desecrated temple to the Eleusinian Bacchus. Like Heine and Pater, the painter believes that the pagan gods have lived through

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<sup>34</sup> Østermark-Johansen notes that the Renaissance obsession with the exact proportions of the human body is also to be found in “Apollo in Picardy,” where the narrator wonders: “[a]nd is not the human body, too, a building, with architectural laws, a structure, tending by the very forces which primarily held it together to drop asunder in time?”. See Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014), p. 281, n. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 44. In the manuscript “Aesthetics, My Confession,” written after 1902, Lee would stress the influence that Hawthorne’s novel had in shaping her artistic taste as a young girl: “(like Hawthorne in *Transformation*) I don’t think I made any distinction between an antique & the works of [contemporary artists].” See Vernon Lee, “Aesthetics, My Confession,” unpublished holograph manuscript. VLA.

<sup>36</sup> Elisa Bizzotto, “I discepoli pateriani: i portraits storico-mitologici di Vernon Lee e Oscar Wilde,” accessed October 8, 2014, [http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Appendix/Library/Bizzotto\\_1.htm](http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Appendix/Library/Bizzotto_1.htm). This is a revised essay of the homonymous chapter in Bizzotto, *La mano e l’anima*.

Christianity by hiding someplace suspended between past and present. Thus, like Pater's Pico della Mirandola, Domenico struggles to reconcile two opposite *Weltanschauungen*.<sup>37</sup> However, when he and Filarete leave the tomb, disappointed at the end of their unsuccessful ritual, they are met by the officers of the Podestà and a crowd of priests and monks bent on defending the orthodox religious order.

Neroni and Filarete pay their transgression with life, a fate which Winckelmann had also met. And curiously, before recounting Neroni's arrest and punishment, Lee breaks the narration once again, inserting a "Valedictory," not to Pater but to Winckelmann, whose insights impressed a new course on the study and interpretation of antiquity. Again, the homoerotic aspects embedded in Pater's portrayal of Winckelmann cannot be elided.

#### 4.3. Renaissance *femmes fatales*: Medea de Carpi and Dionea

Problematic gender categorization, sexual impulse, death and the blending of pagan and Christian aspects are crucial elements also in Lee's ghost stories. This literary genre was especially popular among women writers at the fin-de-siècle, and much feminist criticism connects the development of the early women's emancipation movement with the coeval interest in the occult and paranormal.<sup>38</sup> Lee's ghost stories are an especially interesting case. Although they are indebted to "the well-documented nineteenth-century tradition of the femme fatale,"<sup>39</sup> Lee's ghostly heroines are pagan women who live in the present. Once again, this aspect reminds one of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, but it must be added that Lee's ghostly presences tend to be either the product or the object of repressed male sexual desire.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima*, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> For instance, in a late-1990s study on women's Victorian ghost fiction that leaves out of the canon Lee's writings, Dickerson argues that the "ghost stories written after the 1850s, but especially in the last decades of the century, would be written in a climate of change and reform marked by such developments as the agitation for women's rights to education, employment, and suffrage; the passage of the married women's property bills; and the rise of the New Woman." See Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> A poignant example of a nineteenth-century version of a mythological character is "Lady Tal," published in the 1892 collection *Vanitas: Polite Stories*. By alluding to and parodizing the Greek myth of Atalanta in this depiction of a mannish-looking "New Woman," Lee exposes traditional gender roles, enacting a series of reversals which suggest that gender and sexuality are discursively constructed. Cf. Catherine Delyfer, "Rewriting the Myth of Atalanta: Sex and Style in Vernon Lee's 'Lady Tal,'" *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 2, No. 2 (Summer 2006), accessed December 22, 2014, <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue22/delyfer.htm>.

All the stories from *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* reveal Lee's fascination with the feminine, the maternal, and sexual desire, questioning the ways in which male gaze constructs the female identity.<sup>41</sup> The first novella, "Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka," tells the story of a Renaissance temptress, the Duchess Medea de Carpi. Lee had originally conceived this story as a novel. Her correspondence suggests that she had begun working on it while composing the Renaissance essays that would be collected as *Euphorion*. However, her concerns about its reception, and perhaps the influence the story may have exerted on her work on aesthetics, seem to have delayed its completion. In a letter dated July 24, 1882, she confesses to her mother that she hopes her work on aesthetics might result in a publication whose

scientific heaviness would certainly counterbalance any bad effect produced by the publication of the Renaissance novel. By the way, I told Pater the idea (not the plot) and he thought it very good; and he himself seems to be writing something very similar in the way of a novel about the time of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>42</sup>

*Hauntings*, however, turned out to be successful. The first edition was published simultaneously in London and New York, and subsequent editions appeared in 1906 and 1971. A French translation was published in 1894, and between 1899 and 1900 Winnaretta Singer, Princess of Polignac, declared her interest in translating some of the stories in French.<sup>43</sup>

Set in 1885, "Amour Dure" is told through the diary of Spiridion Trepka, a Pole-German historian who is in a small village on the Italian Apennines, Urbania, for research purposes. The scholar, however, soon finds himself unable to work. His mind is continuously haunted by the story of the irresistible Medea de Carpi, whose magnetic

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories. Gender, History and the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, July 24, 1882. *VLA* #III. There is archival evidence that Lee planned the story of Medea de Carpi as a novel at least until 1885, and the re-shaping of the text into the short-story form may have been due to publishing difficulty. Writing to her mother from Epsom, in August 1885, Lee still "feel[s] inclined to try the 15<sup>th</sup> century novel next spring." At the end of the same month, she adds that she has at least talked about it to Alfred Austin, who was at the time co-editor of the *National Review* with William Courthope: "I think Austin has a vague hankering after passing my Renaissance novel thro' the National. He is at present hesitating over a novel of Mallock's." Vernon Lee to Matilda Paget, August 10 and August 27, 1885. *VLA* #229, #244.

<sup>43</sup> In July 1899 or 1900, Angelica Rasponi wrote to Lee to inform her of the proposal: "Vernon cara – non sapendo dove tu sia prego Maria di dirigerti questa – Carlo Placci mi scrive, e io copio: 'La Principessa di Polignac credendomi sempre intimissimo di Miss Paget, sceglie me come intermediario, e mi scrive pregandomi di chiederle se 'Hauntings' è in parte o tutto intero tradotto in francese, perché essa chiederebbe da lei il permesso di fare la traduzione di una o due di codeste novelle.'" Angelica Rasponi to Vernon Lee, July 6-28, 1899 or 1900. *VLP*, Box II.



gaze had subjugated and led to death a number of men in the sixteenth century. Her brother-in-law, the Duke Robert II, eventually had her strangled by two women who had already committed infanticide. Trepka's obsession over this woman – whose history and characters, he notes, “remind one of that of Bianca Cappello, and at the same time Lucrezia Borgia”<sup>44</sup> – will lead him to the same fate.

As her name reveals, Lee's *femme fatale* is a Renaissance embodiment of the myth of Medea, who had killed Jason out of jealousy after helping him conquer the Golden Fleece. On the other hand, the dualistic aspect of the Renaissance, with its blend of Christian and pagan elements, also emerges in the characterization of Robert II. After getting possession of the usurped dukedom and ordering Medea to be slain, the former Cardinal has a silver statuette of his familiar genius placed inside an equestrian statue of himself. Through an anonymous manuscript, Trepka discovers that the duke had concocted this gimmick to keep his soul on earth until the general Resurrection, in an attempt to avoid encountering Medea's soul after death. Such a pagan belief, though, leaves the Pole scholar bewildered and wondering in his journal:

how could the soul of Duke Robert await the general Resurrection, when, as a Catholic, he ought to have believed that it must, as soon as separated from his body, go to Purgatory? Or is there some semi-pagan superstition of the Renaissance (most strange, certainly, in a man who had been a Cardinal) connecting the soul with a guardian genius, who could be compelled, by magic rites (“ab astrologis sacrato,” the MS. says of the little idol), to remain fixed to earth, so that the soul should sleep in the body until the Day of Judgment? (*H*, 19)

When Medea appears to Trepka, she promises to love him. In return, however, he must break the statue of Robert II on Christmas Night, and destroy the silver statuette that guards his soul. The test that Trepka has to face, as Zorn notes, brings another element of “pagan otherness” into the Christian environment of Urbania. The nativity of Christ is transformed into the revelation of a *femme fatale* which, by reversing the very meaning of Christmas, can only take place after committing a murder.<sup>45</sup> I would also add that the rite Trepka must perform replicates Medea's murder of her younger brother, Absyrtis. According to the myth, Medea scattered his dismembered body in an attempt to protect

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<sup>44</sup> Vernon Lee, *Hauntings: Fantastic Tales* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company, 1906), pp. 8-9. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, abbreviated to *H*.

<sup>45</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 161-62.

Jason against the fury of her father, King Aeetes of Colchis.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, in spite of their cruelty, both actions are the result of a love test.

Like Lee, who was attracted to the portrait as a literary device, Trepka's morbid obsession for Medea develops from her portraits. Through a miniature and a marble bust he reconstructs the appearance of the fearful lady, whose beauty, Trepka concludes, is the type that was most admired by late Renaissance painters:

The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls, like a fleece, of bright auburn hair; the nose a trifle over-aquiline, and the cheek-bones a trifle too low; the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness; they seem to take, but not to give. The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech. The complexion is dazzlingly fair, the perfect transparent rosette lily of a red-haired beauty; the head, with hair elaborately curled and plaited close to it, and adorned with pearls, sits like that of the antique Arethusa on a long, supple, swan-like neck. A curious, at first rather conventional, artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold, which, the more it is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind. (H, 17-18)

A number of critics have noted that Lee's portrayal of Medea is to a considerable extent moulded on Pater's description of the *Mona Lisa*. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Pater writes that the portrait of La Gioconda condenses "the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the returns of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias" (R, 98-99). Indeed, Medea is not only like a "vampire" who "has been dead many times," but she has also been "sweeping together ten thousands experiences" (R, 99). Zorn, however, suggests that whereas Pater's enigmatic *Mona Lisa* resolves the antinomies that shape his views on history, "Lee reverses the mythmaking process and lets us see the mind behind it."<sup>47</sup> In other words, while Pater's description of Leonardo's masterpiece should be viewed as the projection

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<sup>46</sup> This "post-murder" ritual appears in many versions of the myth as well as in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 movie *Medea*. On this point see Robert Tyminski, *The Psychology of Theft and Loss: Stolen and Fleeced* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 29, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 158.

of his own interpretation of history, Medea's portraits expose the gendered construction of history through the male gaze.

More in general, I argue that Medea's beauty calls to mind the mysterious and enigmatical beauty not only of the *Mona Lisa*, but of Leonardo's paintings *tout court*, sifted through Pater's criticism. The beauty that characterizes Leonardo's paintings, Pater writes in *The Renaissance*, is in fact more fascinating than delightful, reflecting "ideas and views and some scheme of the world within" (R, 78-79). Like Pater's Leonardo, Trepka is a "lover of strange souls" (R, 79), and his Medea exists as a product of his inner self, or rather his mental hysteria. As Wallace argues, through Trepka's resurrection of Medea, Lee exposes the ways in which male authorship replaces objective reality with its own anxiety and desires. Trepka's construction of Medea's femininity results in his creation of something which he desires and fears at once. Likewise, Kane suggests that the scholar's empathic and obsessive relationship with Medea and her portraits reveals more about himself than the illusive object of his gendered gaze. A point which is akin to Smith's, who suggests that the gendering of art and history offered by "Amor Dure" stages an argument which precisely concerns the politics of representation of gender and sexuality.<sup>48</sup>

The male traits of Medea de Carpi and other heroines that one encounters in Lee's short stories have stimulated a lot of interest among feminist critics. Basham, for instance, sees Medea as a "menstrual presence" and a fictional counterpart of Matilda Paget, who was a "cumbersome" mother figure at best.<sup>49</sup> Gardner, on his part, uses the story to insist on Lee's failed lesbianism. Like Lee, Trepka would give up sexual pleasure, or at least sublimate it, by devoting himself to a feverish, romantic and non-scientific study of the "Past" which he capitalizes in his diary. Thus, after pointing out that the description of Medea recalls the mannish sketch of Vernon Lee which John Singer Sargent had drawn in 1889, Gardner argues that Medea is a "semivir idol" that unveils Lee's incapability of coming to terms with her sexuality. Almost in the fashion of Salomé,

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<sup>48</sup> See Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories*, p. 108; Mary Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 23; Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920. A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman. Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 176. Basham's argument is centred on the description of Matilda Paget provided by Vernon Lee in *The Handling of Words* (1923) and echoed by Gunn, who speaks of a "tyrannical" woman, "callous of wounding others" and "all spirit and decision." It seems to me, however, that Basham partly overlooks the fact that Gunn rather highlights Mrs. Paget's contradictory nature, which Violet partly inherited. See Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, pp. 17-18.

both Medea and Lee would seem to be able to respond to passionate love only by seeking the death of their lover.<sup>50</sup>

Lee's Renaissance temptress seems to defy conventional gender roles. Medea's main strength is her power of seduction, but her actions, along with her upbringing, introduce an androgynous element. Medea may be "a woman of superlative beauty," but she is also "of the highest courage and calmness, a woman of many resources, of genius, brought up [...] upon Tacitus and Sallust, and the tales of the great Malatestas, of Caesar Borgia and such-like! – a woman whose one passion is conquest and empire" (*H*, 23). As far as gender roles are concerned, the most interesting aspect of "Amour Dure" is not Lee's depiction of Medea as a "semivir," but her identification with the male scholar who narrates the story. Many elements suggest that Trepka might be a textual projection of Lee, the female historian and critic who takes up a male pseudonym to find her way into a male-dominated field of scholarly discourse. When Trepka defines himself a scholar "grown into the semblance of a German pedant, doctor of philosophy, professor even, author of a prize essay on the despots of the fifteenth century" (*H*, 4), one is tempted to think that Lee might be exposing Symonds. Yet in the first page of his diary he also calls himself a product of "modern, northern civilization" (*H*, 3), and one can but think about Lee, a British expatriate born in Northern France who had lived in Switzerland before settling in Italy. In addition to this, both claim their fascination with the past, which they pursue for epistemic and ontological reasons at once.

Lee explains the meaning of her sympathetic rather than scientific attitude towards the past in the Preface to *Hauntings*. Here, she states that our individual and collective identity is the product not only of present experience, but of "the more or less remote Past [...]. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of the modern times, on the borderland of the Past" (*H*, x). A few pages later, this claim is backed by Trepka's confession that he is "wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia, Vittoria Accoramboni, or that Medea de Carpi" (*H*, 21). Moreover, his devotion to the past and his obsession over Medea develop around his interest in art, from the bust and portraits of the Duchess to the many references to Renaissance paintings – by Signorelli, Francia, Raphael and Perugino among others – which he resorts to in order to visually interpret whatever he comes across in fin-de-siècle Urbana. As Smith puts it, through

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<sup>50</sup> Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, pp. 325, 338.

the pages of Trepka's diary, Lee emphasizes "an engagement with history in which art functions as the crucial intermediary between the past and the present."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, there is another element suggesting that the character of Trepka may be considered a textual projection of Lee's writing persona. Lee conceived "Amour Dure" at the same time as she was working on her Renaissance essays, and Trepka shares the views on sexuality and morality that one finds in *Euphorion*. The scholar does not condemn Medea's murders and treacherous attitude, but the sexual politics of Renaissance Urbania, which had obliged her to be the faithful and serving mistress of older men. He justifies Medea's sins because of the violence that the patriarchal system of Urbania exerts on her, so that to suppose her "a cruel woman is as grotesque as to call her an immoral woman" (*H*, 25). Death is therefore the price that men like Pico have to pay in exchange for Medea's love, and according to the Pole scholar, their fate is not unjust. A similar ending, however, awaits him, preventing him from fulfilling his erotic desire for Medea.

Pulham argues that all of Lee's ghosts seem to have a mythical nature, suggesting that their counterpart should be found in pagan figures such as Athena and Venus.<sup>52</sup> The gendered embodiment of pagan myths in contemporary Italy is also crucial to understanding the second tale from *Hauntings*, "Dionea." The story is set in Montemiro Ligure in the 1870s and 1880s, and is told through the letters of Alessandro De Rosis, a physician with writing ambitions and interested in Heine's theory of the pagan gods exiled after the triumph of Christianity. Both the title and the narrative structure of Lee's "Dionea" reminds one of Pater's "Denys L'Auxerrois." In a later essay on "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills" (1921), Lee would define Pater's story a piece of "Morris-embroidery," noting that

of all gods Dionysus is the one fittest for such sinister exile. Even on the heyday of Paganism gruesome mysteriousness was half of his stake: a wandering, persecuted divinity, [...] grown to be the symbol of moods which seek deliverance from reality in horror as well as excessive rapture, what Nietzsche has taught us to distinguish as the Dionysiac, as opposed to the Apolline side of art.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920*, p. 76.

<sup>52</sup> Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, p. xix.

<sup>53</sup> Vernon Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills, Walter Pater in Memoriam," *Contemporary Review* 120 (September 1921), p. 348.

The protagonist of “Dionea” is a foundling who landed ashore the Gulf of Spezia after a storm. De Rosis becomes her guardian, and raises her thanks to the funding of the Princess of Sabina, Lady Evelyn Savelli. The story of this girl reminds one of the myth of Aphrodite – who was born out of the sea foam – and the only object the child was found with seems to confirm her pagan origins: “[p]inned to her clothes – striped Eastern things, and that kind of crinkled silk stuff they weave in Crete and Cyprus – was a piece of parchment, a scapular we thought at first, but which was found to contain only the name *Dionea*” (*H*, 65).

As the Catholic community of Montemiro reckons, “the name is derived from Dione, one of the loves of the Father Zeus, and mother of no less a lady than the goddess Venus” (*H*, 65). Interestingly, however, Lee conflates the two different versions of the myth of Aphrodite that I have introduced in discussing the sexual implication of the fin-de-siècle discourses of the Renaissance. Whereas for Hesiod Aphrodite rose out of the sea after Cronus emasculated Uranus, for Homer she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione. And, in their search for intellectual legitimization of non-heteronormative sexual desires if not sexual practices, Pater, Symonds and presumably Lee were aware of Pausania’s distinction of the two kinds of love that the two versions of Aphrodite inspire. Lee, however, conflates the two versions of the myth, creating a character whose hybrid aspects are especially interesting from the point of view of sexuality. The incident she narrates takes place in the surroundings of Porto Venere, a town whose name seems linked to an ancient temple sacred to the Roman equivalent of the goddess, Venus. Such a temple was built for the cult of Venus Erycina, worshipped in Sicily and Rome. In his study of sexual practices in Ancient Rome, McGinn pinpoints that even though they were usually forbidden access to the temples, prostitutes celebrated the cult of Venus Erycina outside Porta Collina, at the north end of the Servian Wall. The following cult of Venus Verticordia is likely to have been established in an attempt to summon citizens to a more strict respect of morality.<sup>54</sup>

As De Rosis puts it in his letters to Lady Savelli, little Dionea is soon distinguished by her “baleful beauty” (*H*, 81), but also for her lack of skills. Interestingly, her refusal of the education she is taught at the convent reveals her rejection of stereotypical gender functions. De Rosis complains that Dionea’s “character is not so satisfactory,” and this is because “she hates learning, sewing, washing up the dishes, all equally” (*H*, 67). When

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 25

the ecclesiastical council gathers at the convent to discuss a punishment for Dionea, who has dared purloin the Madonna's gala frock and precious veil, the girl's indifference suggests once more the troubled beauty of the *Mona Lisa*. Sitting in the convent parlour, "Dionea appeared, rather out of place, an amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci's women" (*H*, 73). When the teenage girl leaves the convent, her beauty becomes frightening, and Lee depicts her in terms which defy conventional gender roles. She is a breadwinner who performs, like other women in town, physically tiring jobs usually associated with the male gender. Such tasks, however, do not suppress the sensuality of her body:

She [...] is at present gaining her bread working with the masons at our notary's new house at Lerici: the work is hard, but our women often do it, and it is magnificent to see Dionea, in her short white skirt and tight white bodice, mixing the smoking lime with her beautiful strong arms; or, an empty sack drawn over her head and shoulders, walking majestically up the cliff, up the scaffoldings with her load of bricks... (*H*, 79-80)

I suggest that this characterization is a subtle allusion to the gender implications conveyed in the representations of the myth of Dionysus, which Lee reverses by shifting the relations of the masculine and the feminine. For, Lee would note in her essay on "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills,"

if, as is said by Euripides's unbelieving Pentheus, Dionysus is a seducer of women, though little more than a woman himself, his effeminacy is like that of those beautiful languid Arabs one has seen lolling under awnings, and who strike one as women in disguise, the beard against their jasmine cheeks seeming some kind of ritual half-mask.<sup>55</sup>

The boys of Montemirto and San Massimo, however, look at Dionea "with an expression rather of fear than of love," whilst the women "make horns with their fingers as she passes" (*H*, 73-74). Dionea is soon feared for her power to make people fall in love, which confirms her association with Aphrodite. The passions she arouses, however, are always illicit. A young nun, sister Giuliana, is reported to have eloped with a fisherman, whilst

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<sup>55</sup> Vernon Lee, "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," p. 349.

Father Domenico – the confessor of the convent that Dionea studied at – dies of apoplexy because of his inability to repress carnal instincts. When Dionea finds out about the priest's death, her funeral gift is a twig of myrtle, a flowering plant which, according to the myth, was sacred to the goddess of love. Earlier in the story, De Rosis had suspected the heathen origins of the girl, who had been found without any "little crosses or scapulars on, like proper Christian children" (*H*, 62). Having left the convent and her previous occupation, Dionea will become a sorceress dreaded by the villagers because of her filters and love potions.

As Maxwell notes, several elements of Lee's "Dionea" reveal the influence of Pater.<sup>56</sup> The clearest textual evidence of this is Doctor De Rosis's interest in the theory of the pagan gods in exile. Within the broader context of Lee's aesthetics, it should be noted that the physician explicitly stresses the Renaissance combination of pagan and Christian elements, as Lee does in her essays. Although De Rosis wonders whether pagan gods are still alive in late nineteenth-century Italy, he is sure that they "lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes in their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints" (*H*, 83). This is a point that, as we have seen, Lee also makes in "The Love of the Saints."<sup>57</sup> Thus, whereas Smith argues that "[a]esthetics, history, gender and the function of art tend to become elided"<sup>58</sup> in Lee's tales, I suggest that "Amour Dure" and "Dionea" prove the opposite. Aesthetics, history, gender and the role of art seem rather to conflate throughout Lee's experimentation with literary genres.

#### 4.2. Across genres: *Genius Loci*, unpublished series, 1920-1928

In *Les Genres du Discours* (1978), Todorov writes that persistent attention to literary genres in a historical moment in which disregarding their conventions is considered a sign of artistic modernity "may seem to be a vain if not anachronistic pastime."<sup>59</sup> Lee's travelogues, however, seem to offer interesting considerations as far as genre theory is concerned, but also with reference to the ways Renaissance art and culture haunt the

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<sup>56</sup> See Catherine Maxwell, "From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's Portraits," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 13, No. 3 (1997), esp. pp. 258-59.

<sup>57</sup> See § 2.4.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920*, p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 13.



narrative that such texts provide.

In the previous chapter, I intended to offer an overview of Lee's fascination with the real and fictional Italian landscape. In both the essays in aesthetic criticism that Lee published from the early 1880s to the mid 1890s, and in the miscellaneous sketches of Italian places and remnants she collected from the late 1890s, the Renaissance is not only one of the subjects of her prose, but also a heuristic tool she applies to the investigation of the present. The pages she devotes to Northern European places are particularly relevant from this point of view. Lee interprets and expounds the opposition between the North and the South of the continent – and between the different civilizations that inhabit these countries – by connecting them to their medieval or Renaissance legacy. Indeed, in her literary portraits of places disprove Bakhtin's theory of the interconnectedness of place and time. Insofar as she bounces back and forth in time – juxtaposing the present to the past and participating in the construction of cultural memory – place and time are united only if time is considered in a diachronic perspective. Thus, in Southern Europe, she perceives “a dreadful spasm of pagan superstition” which does not undermine its “moral wholesomeness” at the turn of the century (*GL*, 198, 199).

In *Genius Loci*, the Renaissance is not only a historical presence. It also works as a narrative device that enables Lee to provide her memories with a visual power. In several passages, she cuts short her descriptions by comparing people, signs and places to unspecified paintings by Piero della Francesca, Perugino, Mantegna, and Giorgione. Elsewhere, she dwells on accurate geographical details, artworks, and buildings, mingling objective facts with her opinions, and at times with her fancies. In “The Lakes of Mantua,” she offers a survey of the city of the Gonzagas and its topography before focusing on its sights. When she describes her visit to Palazzo Te, she discards the work of Giulio Romano with a series of noun clauses based on accumulative style that convey her disapproval of the frescoes:

Inconceivable frescoes, colossal, sprawling gods and goddesses, all chalk and brick dust, enough to make Rafael, who was responsible for them through his abominable pupils, turn for ever in his coffin. Damp-stained stuccoes and grass-grown courtyards, and no sound save the noisy cicalas sawing on the plane-trees. How utterly forsaken of gods and men is all this Gonzaga splendour! (*GL*, 169).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, after the publication of *Genius Loci. Notes on Places*, Lee was to explore the genre of the travelogue extensively. Between 1905 and 1925 she published five volumes in which the Italian Renaissance finds some room only marginally. In the 1920's, however, she wrote a series of travel essays for which she adopted the title she had chosen for her first collection in this genre: *Genius Loci and Literary Sincerity*. These essays, unpublished, survive as a holograph manuscript at the Vernon Lee Archive, and were composed between 1920 and 1928. At that time, Lee's interest in the Italian Renaissance had been temporarily quenched as a result of her commitment to psychological aesthetics, physiological response to the observation of artworks, and literary criticism. In the dedication to Mona Taylor, however, one can feel both Lee's new interest in reader-response theory and her former concerns on the representational limits of the written word. These are manifest in her claim that one "can't convey images of places as such, at least not much, as words awaken only images already stored in the Reader's mind."<sup>60</sup>

In this unpublished series of *Genius Loci*, Lee seems to obtain an interesting synthesis of various literary genres. In the preface, which she wrote returning to Florence from Aulla, in April 1927, Lee provides an explanation for her notion of "literary sincerity." "[T]he only safety for a writer," Lee maintains, "lies in refusing to write except ..... well! when he has something to say."<sup>61</sup> One would expect here a stylistic change following Virginia Woolf's 1908 scathing review of *The Sentimental Traveller*, where she had harshly criticized her "egotistical diversion" and subjectivism. Lee, however, emphasizes the intimate quality of her prose. The only safety for a writer lies in fact in "never wanting to write for the sake of writing, but only write for the sake of keeping transmitting not so much to others as to one's future self."<sup>62</sup> The essays included in this collection, however, disprove this point. Unlike her previous travelogues, the chapters Lee planned in this unpublished sequel are a hybrid genre that mingles features typically associated with the critical essay, the travelogue, and fiction.

A case in point is the second essay included in this series, titled "Cortona & the Muse," and written in late October 1923 at the end of Lee's short visit to the small town in the Val di Chiana. The opening section introduces the landscape surrounding Cortona, and is based on a bird's eye view focusing on the effects of the fading sunlight on this

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<sup>60</sup> Vernon Lee, "Genius Loci and Literary Sincerity," unpublished series, holograph manuscripts, 1920-1928. VLA.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

early twentieth-century village, ensconced among its multi-coloured hills. After such a cinematic overture, the closing paragraph includes a warning to the reader, which smirks at the opening line of Keats's "To Autumn," but also reminds one of the literary conventions of supernatural tales she had explored since the 1890s: "These country forts of the Umbrian apennines [*sic*] take a savage land dangerous air: put not your faith in its sunshine and mellow fruitfulness!"<sup>63</sup>

Such an admonition enables Lee to re-enact the time-shift narrative device through which she investigates the spirit of Cortona, its history and its heritage, highlighting the changes that the village has undergone since the Middle Ages. The reference to the recent refurbishing of the basilica of Santa Margherita da Cortona establishes a direct connection with *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* and introduces an interesting aspect in terms of gender. Although living in the thirteenth century, the Saint, who instituted the congregation of "le poverelle," is a female embodiment of the Renaissance spirit introduced by Francis of Assisi, who inspired her religious conversion after the master she used to live with was assassinated in the woods around Montepulciano. Besides, although Lee accurately acknowledges the Etruscan origin of Cortona, she also characterizes the town as the result of cross-fertilization, which brings to mind her definition of the Renaissance as Euphorion. Historically, Cortona and its valleys had in fact provided the ground "against which all southern civilization, medieval, antique and pre-historic, had to assert itself."<sup>64</sup>

From the point of view of genre theory, Todorov argues that "a description of a state of affairs" such as Lee provides at the beginning of "Cortona & the Muse," "does not suffice for narrative."<sup>65</sup> For a text to be considered as narrative, Todorov adds, description must be accompanied by actions and transformations. The central section of the essay blends these elements insofar as it disguises, through a visit to the Museum of Cortona, a critical assessment of Renaissance painting. These observations are embedded in a narrative frame which is more akin to Lee's supernatural tales than to her essays on art or her travelogues. Lee describes her visit at the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della Città di Cortona under the guidance of a "custode-crone who conducts you [and] unlocks what looks like an old fashioned writing-table, the lid of which, dropping down as [those] of *écritoires* should, discloses one of the loveliest young girls,

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<sup>63</sup> Vernon Lee, "Cortona & the Muse," holograph unpublished manuscript. *VLA*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, p. 28.

head & shoulder, you can possibly see outside a Giorgione.”<sup>66</sup>

In the core part of her notes on Cortona, Lee constructs a personal appreciation of the painting she sees in the Tuscan town, alternating ekphrastic passages to a comparative analysis in an attempt to establish the date of the painting. The work is the anonymous *Musa Polimnia*, an encaustic painting on slate representing the muse of sacred poetry, and donated to the Museo dell’Accademia Etrusca e della Città di Cortona in 1851. The *Musa* was considered for a long time to be an original Roman painting dating to the first century AD. Recent criticism, however, claims it an early eighteenth-century copy, most probably realized by a circle of Neapolitan artists close to the antiquarian Marcello Venuti.<sup>67</sup>

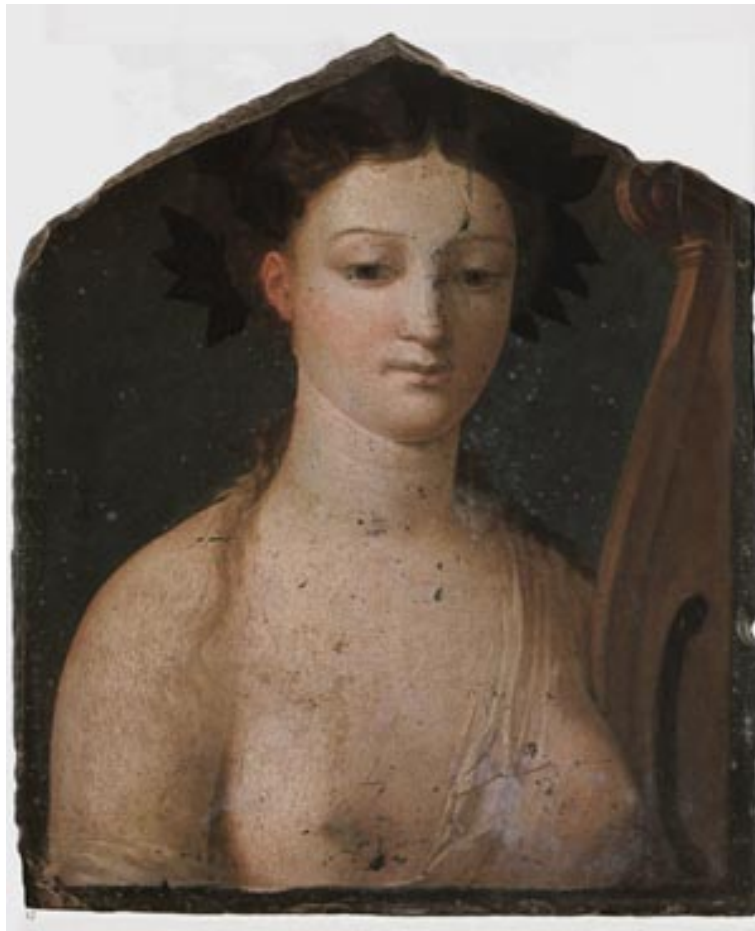


Fig. 5 – *Musa Polimnia*, ca. 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>66</sup> Vernon Lee, “Cortona & the Muse,” holograph unpublished manuscript. VLA.

<sup>67</sup> See Giulia Fusconi, *La fortuna delle “Nozze Aldobrandini”: dall’Esquilino alla Biblioteca Vaticana* (Roma: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1994), p. 140.

Lee immediately establishes a comparison between the *Musa Polimnia* and Renaissance painting, and in so doing the narrative spaces offered by the travelogue and the essay mingle and overlap. Like the literary portraits of Renaissance women she had constructed in *Euphorion* and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, and the heroines of her supernatural tales, also this comparison relies on the annihilation of gender difference. Lee compares this representation of the muse of sacred poetry to the “Hampton Court Shepherd.” This is the *Shepherd with a Flute*, a painting which Lee attributes to Giorgione, but which current criticism considers a possible work by Titian.

Indeed [Polimnia] is curiously akin to [Giorgione’s] wide-, smooth-faced madonnas and youths, with the extraordinary quiet, absent minded look as if, like the Hampton Court Shepherd, concentrated on music of [her] own if invisible [...]. Like him also dark haired, with smooth warm white skin amazingly transparent with a life steady and pensive as a white heifer’s of this country’s, Val di Chiana, breed. Like a Giorgione in every way but without the yellow of oils and age and varnish: clean in the deep water purity of encaustic; and but for modern dust, fresh as when she was painted.<sup>68</sup>

Attempting to recreate an accurate verbal representation of the picture, Lee does not characterize this thoughtful, bare breasted female figure as androgynous. Instead, she highlights the femininity of the young shepherd, as typical of many Renaissance pagan subjects.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Lee’s appreciation of the Muse lies in her femininity, consistently with her celebration of the motherly vein of the visual representations of the Virgin Mary and the Magdalen she had discussed in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*. Like Botticelli’s madonnas, the *Musa* conflates a pagan subject with a Christian tenderness:

The Muse – for so they have called her, might indeed have been a “pious image” despite her very lovely barer breasts, onto which a straggling curl is thinned out into golden silk; she is grave and devout enough in truth for any altar. And no one would be much the wiser for her thin crown of bay leaves, nor for the long curved handle of some instrument of the like tribe than of the lyre, which overtops one shoulder [...].<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Vernon Lee, “Cortona & the Muse,” holograph unpublished manuscript. *VLA*.

<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the oval face of the shepherd, his expression, his parted hair, and hand bear striking similarities to another painting by Giorgione, *David with the Head of Goliath* (1510).

<sup>70</sup> Vernon Lee, “Cortona & the Muse,” holograph unpublished manuscript. *VLA*.



Fig. 6 – Giorgione, *Shepherd with Flute*, ca. 1508-1510. Hampton Court Palace, London

Lee is not attracted to the pagan element embedded in a Christian representation – it is rather the opposite. The austere and devout attitude of the muse compensates for the nudity of her breasts, which is hardly perceived. Lee’s appreciation of the eighteenth-century painting is consistent with her changing preferences in subjects. In her unpublished manuscript “Aesthetics: My Confession,” Lee maintains that

Nowadays I do not see half as much “healthy Greek” – in Signorelli or “morbid affectation” in Botticelli; indeed, relooking better, & quite apart from each painter’s abstract [perceived ?] quality, I recognise that Signorelli’s people are by no means very like “Greek.” Nor Botticelli’s people so very “morbid” – or “affected”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lee, “Aesthetics, My confession,” unpublished holograph manuscript. VLA.

In this aesthetic autobiography – which Lee began writing at the turn of the century, while she was touring art galleries with Clementine Anstruther-Thomson in an attempt to verify their theory on bodily response to artworks – Lee concludes that “I think that writing about art long had the effect of diverting my attention away from the visible object, while giving me a sense of superficial familiarity.”<sup>72</sup> In this final attempt at portraying the “Genius Loci,” however, Lee finds a way to visually concentrate on the visible object, smirking at the self-assured connoisseurs, and their attempts at dating the painting, recently donated to the museum. Lee almost argues that *Musa Polimnia* might be an eighteenth-century fake, yet this does not exclude the painting may as well be the imitation of a Renaissance original.

It must be remembered that Lee turned to travelogue in the late 1890s, soon after the publication of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, but also after Walter Pater’s death, in whose name she proudly concluded her second – and last – collection of essays as an aesthetic critic. Significantly, in 1896 she disparagingly stated that she “loathed art, abhorred aesthetics and that the only thing she really cared about was sociology and economics.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, as Wellek noted, Vernon Lee “started as a historian and an aesthete; she then wanted to become a scientist, an empirical psychologist [...].”<sup>74</sup> Lee’s choice of titling her last travelogue after the first one she had written, however, does not only suggest her desire to return not only to a specific narrative genre she had repeatedly explored years earlier. It also seems indicative of her willingness to resume a discourse she had abandoned for almost two decades. Although the find-de-siècle frenzy was over, the Renaissance had not stopped to fascinate – perhaps haunt – Violet Paget.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Bernard Berenson to Mary Berenson, January 1, 1896, in *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson*, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> Wellek, *Discriminations*, p. 184.

## Conclusion

“No, the book  
Which noticed how the wall-growths wave,” said she,  
“Was not by Ruskin.”  
I said, “Vernon Lee?”  
Robert Browning, *Asolando: Facts and Fancies* (1889)

Violet Paget died at Il Palmerino, aged 78, on February 13, 1935. On the following day, the obituaries published in English and Italian newspapers alike defined her death as a twofold loss. Italy had lost one of its most passionate lovers, Europe would mourn one of its most brilliant intellectuals. Writing in the *Times* on February 15, 1935, Lee’s friend Maurice Baring declared that “The death of ‘Vernon Lee’” would “make a gap in the world of European culture” and in the soul of Italy. Our nation had hardly ever had

a more understanding and more subtly local lover and interpreter [...] She knew not only the [Italian] highways, but the byways; not only the hidden objects of historic and artistic interest, but the mind of the people. [...] Clever is a stupid word; but nobody was more it than “Vernon Lee.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Baring, “‘Vernon Lee’: An Appreciation,” *Times* (London), February 15, 1935, p. 19. *VLA*.



## Conclusion

The day before Baring's *in memoriam*, the *Times* had featured another – longer, although less personal – obituary. The anonymous writer provides a brief but detailed overview of Lee's life and prolific career. From her debut, marked by the solipsistic tone of the essayist concerned with music and art, she had progressed to a number of successful gothic short stories and travelogues, and had eventually pledged herself a passionate advocate of pacifism.<sup>2</sup>

This anonymous obituary celebrates the multifaceted achievement of Vernon Lee. Its title, however, is especially significant: “Vernon Lee’: The Renaissance in Italy.” Not unlike the final summing up suggested by the anonymous contributor, I have also decided to dwell on the relevance of the Renaissance in Lee's life and work. From the mid 1870s, and throughout Lee's two decades, the Renaissance is central to her thought, and only fades away at the beginning of the new century. It will surface again in Lee's later life.

Lee's fascination with the Renaissance is indeed only one of her several interests. In 1887, she had dedicated a collection of essays to her friend Carlo Placci, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (1887). The title indicates a new horizon in Lee's thought and literary career, and in her dedication to Placci she denies having come to the conclusion that

æsthetical questions are fit only for immature young people – forgive what seems a personal reflection – nearer twenty than thirty. I meant that, in many cases, in my own case certainly, and in yours I suspect, they are, up to a certain age, the only, or very nearly the only, questions which seem thoroughly engrossing. Later we care for them still, and perhaps fully as much; but we care for other questions also.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Lee's commitment to art and aesthetic was lifelong, although it mingled with other issues she was to tackle in other works and essays. Recognizing that the “comparative Elysium” of art and aesthetics “was never a reality, but only a phantom place of our own fantastic building,”<sup>4</sup> Lee was to temporarily abandon the solipsism typical of aestheticism she had never completely endorsed. And, in a way, she was to build her own “Leaning Tower.”

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<sup>2</sup> “Vernon Lee.’ The Renaissance in Italy,” *Times* (London), February 14, 1935, n. p. VLA

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

## Conclusion

Lee's identity, it should be remembered, was not exactly British, French or Italian. She had been raised in a cosmopolitan European background. In the 1910s, she would be an advocate of pacifism as the Great War was about to transform the historical and social geography of the continent she had travelled extensively. As her obituary records, her fierce opposition against the Italian-Turkish war resulted in her sympathy with the enemies, whilst the folly of the Great War was the subject of the pageant *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915). Meanwhile, although the gender issue was still unresolved, she had published in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908) an essay on "The Economic Parasitism of Women" which, although not a feminist text as feminism would be conceived half a century later, is an interesting step towards the twentieth-century development of gender awareness. Moving from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898) – of which she was not uncritical – she offers a bridge towards Adrienne Rich's 1980 "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

Such a plurality of themes, often leading to contradictory arguments and assumptions, is to a considerable extent due to Lee's life, which saw the transition between an old order to the unstable climate of the First World War and the advent of Fascism in Italy, but also the advancement of the so-called social sciences, whose influence can be felt in her aesthetic theorizations. In addition to this, Lee was aware of Freud's theorizations, and read the major philosophers, such as William James and Theodor Lipp. The Renaissance, however, is a *leitmotiv* in her writing production, and as such it requires further research. The state of the art of existing scholarship tends to read her interest in the But her sharp focus on – I should say her obsession with – the Renaissance, and on the Italian Renaissance, permeates a substantial part of her life and thought.

The study of her travelogues and short stories along her essays in cultural history is particularly relevant. Such a critical comparison proves, I believe, that the Renaissance was for Lee not only a malleable cultural category endowed with a cluster of meanings. Even when her focus shifted from the realm of fiction to an interest in the dynamics of the aesthetic response to art, the Renaissance would still be central to her efforts in devising – albeit tentatively – a theory about the kinds of response elicited by art in the spectator and/or the reader.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In a passage dated 1817 from her manuscript on "Literature and Criticism," for instance, Lee moves from Freud's ideas on humour – which had resulted in his study *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) – to remark that "Psychologists are apt to treat as intrinsic to any given state or process what is often a

## Conclusion

The study of the unpublished writings kept at the Vernon Lee Archive at Colby College, which also includes her manuscripts and notes, has proved crucial in my research. The Italian Renaissance still permeates her later writings. It is embedded in the fabric of Lee's aesthetic autobiography, where she reconsiders her earlier positions and arguments retrospectively, as well as in the unpublished manuscript of the last series devoted to the *Genius Loci*. These documents provide full evidence that the culture and art of the Italian Renaissance function not only as a decoration supporting her enjoyment of landscape as the expression of the spirit of the place. They also become the subject matter of the theory she intends to expound and the bridge towards a vision that disposes of stiff genre classification. Although Lee's work does not open up towards Bakhtin's carnivalesque, cathartic subversion of genres, it nonetheless results in a valuable hybridity, which has its sources in her ideas on the Renaissance – turning to advantage grey areas, intersections, unconventional admixtures and overlappings.

Such wealth of seemingly discordant elements prevents to build a set of features that might identify and describe Lee's "poetics" of the Renaissance. Rather, in Lee's writings the Renaissance works as a heuristic tool, one which is flexible enough not only to fit to Lee's analysis of the art and culture of the past. "The past," Lee noted in *Euphorion*, "can give us, and should give us, not merely ideas" (EI, 12). And the Renaissance is also subsumed into her *Weltanschauung*, and as such it becomes at once the key and the symbol of the hermeneutic paradigm she applies to the investigation of the present.

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matter of interference by other states or processes." Vernon Lee, "Literature and Criticism," unpublished holograph manuscript. *VLA*.

# Bibliography

*The bibliography is divided into thirteen thematic sections, as follows:*

**A – ARCHIVAL SOURCES**

**B – WORKS BY VERNON LEE**

**C – OTHER PRIMARY TEXTS**

**D – LETTERS AND DIARIES**

**E – CRITICAL STUDIES ON VERNON LEE**

**F – CRITICAL STUDIES ON VERNON LEE'S SUPERNATURAL TALES AND FIN-DE-SIÈCLE FEMALE GOTHIC WRITING**

**G – THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

**H – FIN-DE-SIÈCLE LITERATURE**

**I – ART AND AESTHETICS**

**J – GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

**K – CULTURAL HISTORY, CULTURAL MEMORY, CULTURAL IDENTITY**

**L – SPACE, PLACE, AND TRAVEL WRITING**

**M – OTHER WORKS CITED**

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