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MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES

Bartolo Anglani*

Gli occhi di Beatrice. Le parole e lo sguardo nei *Notebooks* di Nathaniel Hawthorne

Abstract: By focusing on the passage describing Nathaniel Hawthorne's encounter with the portrait of Beatrice Cenci at the Barberini Gallery, long mistakenly attributed to Guido Reni, the essay proposes a reading of the *Notebooks* that goes well beyond their status as *travelogue*, and rather envisages them as a privileged space for the reflection on the relationship between the individual and the world. Instead of highlighting what the author has experienced and 'seen', the *Notebooks* reflect on the possibilities and modalities of 'seeing', which, in the case of Beatrice's portrait, fascinatingly echo the 'mysteries' that have always surrounded it.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Notebooks*. Beatrice Cenci. Gaze.

> A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in a historical picture. In Rome, people with fine sympathetic natures stand up and weep in front of the celebrated "Beatrice Cenci the Day before her Execution". It shows what a label can do. If they did not know the picture, they would inspect it unmoved, and say, "Young girl with hay fever; young girl with her head in a bag".
>
> M. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

Il 15 maggio del 1859 Nathaniel Hawthorne, accompagnato dalla moglie e dai figli, si reca per l'ultima volta alla galleria Barberini per dare "a farewell look" a Beatrice Cenci (*FIN*, p. 520),[1] ossia al famoso ritratto che egli ha visitato due volte dacché è tornato da Firenze dopo averlo già guardato e studiato durante il soggiorno precedente. La prima volta che l'aveva visto, il 20 febbraio dell'anno precedente, si era accorto di non poter dire nulla sul dipinto, "for its spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else I have known":

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[1] Queste sono le sigle utilizzate per le opere di Hawthorne citate nel presente contributo: *AN*: *The American Notebooks*, ed. C.M. Simpson, Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 1972 (*Centenary Edition*, Vol. VIII); *FIN*: *The French and Italian Notebooks*, ed. T. Woodson, Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 1980 (*Centenary Edition*, Vol. XIV); *CN*: *Collected Novels*, ed. M. Bell, New York, The Library of America, 1983 (riproduce e migliora il testo della *Centenary Edition*); *L.*: *The Letters, 1813-1843*, eds T. Woodson et al., Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 1984 (*Centenary Edition*, Vol. XV); *TS*: *Tales and Sketches*, ed. R.H. Pearce, New York, The Library of America, 1982 (riproduce il testo della *Centenary Edition*).

It is a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, with white drapery all around it, and quite enveloping the form. One or two locks of auburn hair stray out. The eyes are large and brown, and meet those of the spectator; and there is, I think, a little red about the eyelids, but it is very slightly indicated. The whole face is perfectly quiet; no distortion nor disturbance of any single feature; nor can I see why it should not be cheerful, nor why an imperceptible touch of the painter's brush should not suffice to brighten it into joyousness. Yet it is the very saddest picture that ever was painted, or conceived; there is an unfathomable depth and sorrow in the eyes; the sense of it comes to you by a sort of intuition. It is a sorrow that removes her out of the sphere of humanity; and yet she looks so innocent, that you feel as if it were only this sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon the earth and brings her within our reach at all. She is like a fallen angel, fallen, without sin. It is infinitely pitiful to meet her eyes, and feel that nothing can be done to help or comfort her; not that she appeals to you for help and comfort, but is more conscious than we can be that there is none in reserve for her. It is the most profoundly wrought picture in the world; no artist did it, nor could do it, again. Guido may have held the brush, but he painted better than he knew. I wish, however, it were possible for some spectator, of deep sensibility, to see the picture without knowing anything of its subject or history; for no doubt we bring all our knowledge of the Cenci tragedy to the interpretation of the picture. (FIN, pp. 92-93)

Nel pubblicare anni dopo la scelta dei diari, Mrs Hawthorne non solo ridusse in poche righe il passo, ma lasciò incompiuta la frase "Close beside Beatrice Cenci hangs the Fornarina" e sostituì con dei puntini la frase che segue:[2]

a brunette, with a deep, bright glow in her face, naked below the navel, and well pleased to be so for the sake of your admiration – ready for any extent of nudity, for love of money, – the brazen trollop that she is. Raphael must have been capable of great sensuality, to have painted this picture of his own accord and lovingly. (*FIN*, p. 93)

Il brano tagliato illustra "a key principle" degli incontri di Hawthorne con le nudità dell'arte, ossia il modo in cui lo scrittore "emphasizes the subject-object relationship created by the male gaze and the way he speculates on the gaze reversing", immaginando l'oggetto femminile "matching his own desire to look with a desire to be looked at".[3] Di fronte alla "puttana sfacciata", alla brunetta "nuda fino all'ombelico", dipinta da Raffaello con "grande sensualità", la lingua e la penna (e l'attenzione) di Hawthorne non rimangono paralizzate e anzi trovano parole non solo per descriverla nella sua realtà fisica, ma anche per registrare le proprie impressioni in termini tanto precisi da spingere la solerte consorte a espungerli dai *Passages*. A prima vista può parere bizzarro che Hawthorne usi più parole per motivare il suo imbarazzo e il suo silenzio di fronte a Beatrice che per esprimere le impressioni suscitate dalla Fornarina, ossia che egli enunci e motivi l'impossibilità di descrivere il dipinto con tanti particolari del dipinto stesso. La rinuncia alla 'penetrazione' del significato non comporta dunque la rinuncia all'uso delle parole e anzi ne provoca la proliferazione, quasi che l'oggetto reale del discorso sia non la descrizione o la comprensione del dipinto, bensì la rappresentazione dell'impaccio dell'osservatore che accumula det-

[2] N. HAWTHORNE, *Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Boston, James R. Osgod and C., (1871) 1876, Vol. I, p. 82.

[3] L.S. PERSON, "Sophia Hawthorne, Henry James, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Curious Aversion' to Nudity in Art", *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 41 (2), 2015, p. 4.

tagli su dettagli senza mai afferrare la chiave unitaria dell'opera. Solo chi ignora la parte sulla Fornarina può qualificare come integralmente 'puritana' la reazione dello scrittore, trascurandone la natura essenzialmente estetica.[4]

Le descrizioni di opere d'arte e di panorami fatte da Hawthorne nei *Notebooks* non rientrano nella problematica classica dell'*ekphrasis* perché non solo non si propongono di fornire al lettore un analogo verbale degli oggetti visti, ma soprattutto perché in esse il destinatario coincide con l'autore. I diari sono prevalentemente (anche se non totalmente) esercizi di conoscenza, il cui narratore a proprio uso esclusivo si dedica a una pratica di "sightseeing" che non ha "il carattere di passatempo", ma implica "un grande investimento di risorse intellettuali e psicologiche".[5] È legittimo ritenere che l'idea della diffusione postuma di tali scritti non abbia inciso più di tanto sulla loro natura, che è principalmente quella della riflessione sulle possibilità da parte della parola scritta di conoscere e rappresentare la realtà, non ricopiandola ma 'ricreandola' esteticamente. I problemi dello "*status* of the writer in the American society" degli anni Trenta/Quaranta e delle "instabilities and uncertainties of the writer/public relationship", con le annesse questioni relative all'anonimità e alla riconoscibilità dell'autore[6] che attraversano l'opera hawthorniana, mancano del tutto dai *Notebooks*, che prescindono dalla destinazione pubblica della scrittura e rientrano solo obliquamente nella letteratura dell'esplorazione dell'Italia da parte di scrittori americani.[7] Il progetto di ricavare un libro dal quale acquisire "an (undoubtedly) immense literary reputation", come egli scrisse a Franklin Pierce nell'estate del 1832 in una lettera spesso citata dagli studiosi come prova della volontà di scrivere libri di viaggi, risale al periodo delle prime gite nel New England e nell'America del Nord e, come tante altre dichiarazioni, è carica di ironia.[8]

[4] Non si può negare, tuttavia, che in altre occasioni la reazione di Hawthorne di fronte alle nudità riveli venature di carattere puritano: come quando a Firenze (21 giugno 1858) lo scrittore osserva la *Maddalena penitente* di Tiziano, "the one with the golden hair clustering round her naked body", e commenta che la Maddalena "is very coarse and sensual, with only an impudent assumption of penitence and religious sentiment, scarcely so deep as the eyelids", benché non possa non riconoscere che essa è "a splendid picture, nevertheless, with those naked, lifelike arms, and the hands that press the rich locks about her, and so carefully let those two voluptuous breasts be seen. She's penitent!" (*FIN*, pp. 333-34).

[5] A. De Biasio, *Romanzi e musei. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James e il rapporto con l'arte*, Venezia, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti, 2006, p. 74. Impossibile dar conto qui dell'estesa letteratura critica relativa al rapporto di Hawthorne con le arti visuali: si veda, per esempio, K. Mukai, *Hawthorne's Visual Artists and the Pursuit of a Transatlantic Aesthetics*, New York, Peter Lang, 2008, e altri contributi citati più avanti.

[6] A. Lounsbery, *Thin Culture, High Art: Gogol, Hawthorne, and Authorship in Nineteenth-Century Russia and America*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 2007, p. 79.

[7] E infatti Leonardo Buonomo, nel suo lavoro sugli scrittori americani in Italia, ha "deliberately selected only works that were intended for the public" perché si sentiva "particularly interested in the question of authorial responsibility that such destination inevitably comports" (L. Buonomo, *Backward Glances: Exploring Italy, Reinterpreting America (1831-1866)*, Cranbury, Associated U.P., 1996, p. 12).

[8] Il primo pezzo 'turistico' pubblicato dallo scrittore, "My Visit to Niagara" (1835), è una gustosa parodia delle descrizioni paesaggistiche già in voga nell'epoca del turismo nascente (cfr. D. Brown [ed.], *A Tourist's New England: Travel Fiction, 1820-1920*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1999), in cui il viaggiatore si domanda se davvero ha *visto* le cascate, come il quasi coetaneo Fabrizio del Dongo si chiedeva se aveva visto una battaglia ("Were my long desires fulfilled? And had I seen Niagara?"), e annota che "very trifling causes would draw my eyes and thoughts from the cataract" (*TS*, pp. 246-47). Nel più celebre pezzo "Sketches from Memory" (1835), il narratore si vergogna immediatamente di aver descritto "the Nocht of the White Hills" in modi stereotipati con "so mean an image" e preferisce soffermarsi, sempre con intenti ironici se non apertamente caricaturali, sul "picturesque group" di turisti al quale si accompagna (*TS*, pp. 338, 340).

I temi dello sguardo, della vista, della riflessione, del rapporto tra immagini e parole, che nei romanzi e nei racconti (nonché nei paratesti che li accompagnano) convivono e si intrecciano con altre tematiche di 'contenuto', si accampano nei *Notebooks* in una relativa purezza. E infatti il titolo dato all'antologia di passi tratti dai *Notebooks*, *The Business of Reflection*,[9] si fonda sulla convinzione che i diari non abbiano nulla a che fare con il 'genere' del diario e siano piuttosto una lunga esercitazione attorno alla natura e alle potenzialità della parola di *dire* il mondo, quel mondo con il quale lo scrittore nella prefazione ai *Twice-Told Tales* aveva dichiarato di aver fatto dei tentativi, "very imperfectly successful ones", di aprire un "intercourse", persuaso già allora dell'inutilità di riempire pagine di "talks of a secluded man" capace di esprimere solo "his own mind and heart" (*TS*, p. 1150). I curatori dell'antologia, pur riconoscendo i richiami tematici che intercorrono tra i *Notebooks* e le opere narrative, osservano che già nei diari del periodo americano "the realist and the allegorist" convivono fianco a fianco "in ways that almost defy literary and psychological understanding". Essi trovano "surprising", per chi tenga presenti i temi tipicamente hawthorniani "of sin and guilt", l'evidente "*normality*" delle sezioni descrittive nelle quali lo scrittore si mostra "open, inquisitive, ready to take people as he finds them, sociable", senza concedere troppo spazio alle "obscure guilts" e alla "quasi-theological contextualization of human frailty" dei racconti e dei romanzi. Il narratore dei diari sembra "secular, tolerant, oriented to the present and immediate" nonché "rarely introspective", e capace di muoversi "easily in the world", di stabilire rapporti con le persone e di osservarle "with a shrewdness that belies contemporary critics". I diari europei in particolare, nati durante un'esperienza che costringe Hawthorne "to sophisticate himself", sono opera "of a riper and more capacious man", non di un uomo *del* mondo ma di un uomo "*coming* into the world and fronting a complexity of culture and history at once exhilarating and overwhelming". I curatori giungono ad affermare che i diari possono risultare "surprisingly irreverent and nichilistic", che un pensiero che è "subversive" nei diari "is transformed into a conventional one in the fiction", e che nulla di ciò che Hawthorne scrive in essi "can be lifted from the context and taken as final", così come nulla, per quanto discordante rispetto alle opere di finzione, possa essere "lightly dismissed".[10] L'autore dei *Notebooks* è un "other Hawthorne" al quale già negli anni Trenta "the sprawling, unkempt nation seems itself a carnival", una festa perpetua "wilder and more Bakhtinian in its social heterogeneity than anything Hawthorne permitted himself to describe in", un mondo assai simile a quello di Chaucer, Cervantes, Brueghel, Hogarth, la cui "robust physical life" ha poco a che fare con "the disembodied ideas for stories sometimes inscribed on

[9] Cfr. R. MILDER and R. FULLER (eds), *The Business of Reflection: Hawthorne in His Notebooks*, Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 2009. Il titolo è estrapolato dal racconto 'autobiografico' "Monsieur du Miroir", apparso in rivista nel 1837 e poi raccolto in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846): "Farewell, Monsieur du Miroir! of you, perhaps, as of many men, it may be doubted whether you are the wiser, though your whole business is REFLECTION" (*Centenary Edition*, Vol. X, p. 171).

[10] R. MILDER and R. FULLER, "Introduction", in *The Business of Reflection*, pp. 2, 4-5.

the same day as colorfully descriptive passages",[11] con l'ignoranza programmatica della "everyday reality" che caratterizza i racconti e i romanzi.[12]

Le differenze di stile e di voce tra i *Notebooks* e le opere narrative dipendono dal fatto che lo scopo principale dei primi è non tanto quello di registrare gli eventi della vita quotidiana o gli spunti narrativi da utilizzare nella futura creazione letteraria, quanto di scavare nel rapporto tra il soggetto e il mondo e di esplorare le possibilità della parola di esprimerlo. E così essi, malgrado le tante descrizioni di paesi e di opere d'arte, non rientrano nel genere della letteratura di viaggio, in quanto accumulano riflessioni sulla possibilità e sulle modalità di 'vedere' più che trascrizioni del 'visto', o meglio rappresentazioni del 'visto' fatte per sperimentare la possibilità e i modi del 'vedere'. Per Hawthorne "il gusto del viaggio sembra risiedere piuttosto nella fruizione e costruzione artistica e letteraria, che sovrappone l'immaginazione sulla documentazione".[13] Lo scrittore non vive in una dimensione immaginaria, sa che il mondo esiste e che l'Io che l'osserva esiste anch'esso: ma sa pure che il rapporto tra le due entità si trova mediato sia dallo 'sguardo' dell'osservatore, sia dalle 'parole' utilizzate per esprimerlo. Questa condizione contraddittoria, che nelle opere letterarie traspare in filigrana nella costruzione d'intrecci e di situazioni e nell'esistenza di personaggi, nei diari si presenta in tutta la sua purezza problematica. Nei romanzi e nei racconti lo 'sguardo' è oggettivato e diviso negli sguardi del narratore e dei personaggi, mentre nei diari appare come quello di Nathaniel Hawthorne 'autore', il quale senza altre mediazioni si assume la responsabilità piena della conoscenza o del fallimento della conoscenza.[14]

È per tale insieme di ragioni, qui esposte in forma necessariamente sintetica, che questo saggio esamina le annotazioni del diario su Beatrice senza confrontarle sistematicamente con le pagine del fin troppo noto *Marble Faun*. Tale scelta potrebbe apparire una forzatura, che però risponde alla forzatura uguale e contraria di chi vede nei *Notebooks* solo o prevalentemente un testo funzionale alle opere narrative.[15] Tale

[11] R. MILDER, "The Other Hawthorne", *The New England Quarterly*, 81 (4), 2008, pp. 559, 563-64. Avendo limitato la specificità e l'originalità dei diari al periodo giovanile carnevalesco e picaresco, il critico ritiene che l''alterità' della scrittura cessi con gli anni americani e che il periodo italiano segni un'involuzione moralistica e un ritorno ai tempi di Salem, meritando dunque una lettura ideologica nella chiave del Puritanesimo (*ibidem*, p. 591). Ben altra continuità si rivela però a chi metta a fuoco l'ossessione del 'vedere' e del 'riflettere' sull'atto e sui risultati del vedere, con lo scetticismo crescente verso le possibilità della parola di rappresentare il mondo reale.

[12] R. ASSELINEAU, "Hawthorne Abroad", in R. HARVEY PEARCE (ed.), *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*, Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 1964, p. 368.

[13] B. BERRI, *Nathaniel Hawthorne. Dal subliminale al trascendentale*, Milano, Arcipelago Edizioni, 2005, p. 27.

[14] Il racconto "Rappaccini's Daughter" (prima versione 1844), il primo testo in cui compare l'immagine di una Beatrice innocente e colpevole, avvelenatrice e vittima, è presentato come traduzione del racconto "Beatrice; ou la Belle Empoisonneuse" di M. d'Aubépine, *alter ego* di Hawthorne e afflitto dai suoi stessi difetti, tra i quali spicca "an inveterate love of allegory" (*TS*, p. 974). Qui lo scrittore "si rivolge direttamente ai lettori" e, "con il gesto supremamente ambivalente che è davvero la sua enigmatica cifra", "moltiplica i veli e le maschere dietro i quali l'autore si nasconde" e traccia "un autoritratto ironico, consapevolmente giocato in chiave di *divertissement* e di straniamento" celato dietro "il velo cautelante dell'ironia" che è "la forma esatta di una esatta autorivelazione" (V. AMORUSO, "Introduzione", in N. HAWTHORNE, *Opere scelte*, Milano, Mondadori, 1994, pp. XI-XII).

[15] Secondo Valerio Massimo De Angelis, per esempio, "*The Marble Faun* si basa estensivamente sul diario", secondo "un'abitudine seguita dallo scrittore lungo tutta la sua carriera ma mai in misura così sistematica", inteso come "un materiale narrativo grezzo e un complesso di riferimenti simbolici" riportati "direttamente nel *romance*" (V.M. DE ANGELIS, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: il romanzo e la storia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2004, pp. 324-25). Il solo elenco dei

sorte è stata in parte determinata dalla vicenda editoriale dei *Notebooks* stessi, letti per più di un secolo nella versione curata da Mrs Hawthorne finché la *Centenary Edition* ha imposto la necessità di considerarli come un'opera la cui funzione specifica è soprattutto quella di riflettere sulla 'riflessione'. Per quante frasi siano riprese quasi letteralmente dai diari in *The Marble Faun*, il 'narratore' dei *Notebooks* è senza dubbio quel Nathaniel Hawthorne che, sia pure sotto l'ombra incombente della consorte più di lui esperta di arte, 'riflette' sulle possibilità e sulle modalità del rapporto tra parole e immagini; mentre il 'narratore' delle opere letterarie è una funzione retorica che, per quanto si alimenti di esperienze e di osservazioni proprie dell'autore, fa ciò che il narratore dei diari non si proponeva di fare, ovvero 'descrivere' per altri le opere d'arte osservate, partecipando così a quella grande operazione, praticata soprattutto dagli scrittori dell'Ottocento, impegnata ad aggiungere "a new dimension of richness and complexity" all'opera narrativa "by extending the potentialities of fiction to include the representational characteristic of the visual arts": come avverrà appunto in *The Marble Faun*, il cui autore sarà il primo scrittore di lingua inglese a usare le analogie estetiche tra romanzo e arti visive, benché il suo approccio rimanga "rather naïve".[16]

La scelta di svincolare, sia pure provvisoriamente, il tema 'Beatrice' dall'ultimo romanzo di Hawthorne implica dunque l'inserimento dei *Notebooks* in una 'serie', che parte da molto lontano e si spinge fino agli ultimi lavori dello scrittore, le cui fasi sono collegate non tanto da ragioni di 'contenuto' quanto piuttosto da problematiche conoscitive e formali. Mutano gli oggetti e i luoghi e i contenuti, ma intensa rimane la volontà di riflettere sulla 'riflessione'. Benché tendano non a edificare un'estetica generale, bensì a dare basi conoscitive all'arte narrativa, tali riflessioni non solo non risultano immediatamente funzionali alla composizione dei romanzi e dei racconti, ma talora conducono a esiti non sempre coincidenti con quelli dei testi narrativi. Inserire le pagine su Beatrice e, in generale, sul soggiorno romano nella 'serie' romanzesca implica, invece, il sovradimensionamento dei problemi di carattere religioso e ideologico, con il risultato (come segnalano i curatori dell'antologia citata) di esaurire il mondo hawthorniano nel cupo motivo del peccato e della colpa legato ossessivamente al passato storico del New England e del 'mito' dell'America.[17] Non s'intende certo negare il rapporto che nel mondo di Hawthorne lega le questioni di 'forma' alle questioni di 'contenuto', le riflessioni sul vedere e sul conoscere e la formazione puritana e la propensione 'vittoriana': e, tuttavia, potrà risultare utile riconoscere che nei *Notebooks* a occupare il primo piano sono i problemi della conoscenza e del rapporto tra le cose e le parole, e che l'istanza ideologica e

contributi che leggono le pagine del diario come premesse al romanzo occuperebbe troppo spazio, anche trascurando quelli scritti prima dell'edizione critica. I saggi raccolti in R.K. MARTIN and L.S. PERSON (eds), *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, Iowa City, Iowa U.P., 2002, sono organizzati attorno al "prominent place" del romanzo, che addirittura fu usato da molti viaggiatori americani "as a guide-book" ("Introduction", pp. 2-3), e alla "culture of leisure" da esso rappresentata (R.H. MILLINGTON, "Where is Hawthorne's Rome? *The Marble Faun* and the Cultural Space of Middle-Class Leisure", *ibidem*, p. 17 e *passim*).

[16] J. MEYERS, *Painting and the Novel*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1975, pp. 1-2. Secondo il critico, in questo lavoro Hawthorne "lacks […] aesthetic taste and sophistication" (*ibidem*, p. 6).

[17] I curatori, che si riferiscono al volume di M.J. COLACURCIO, *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne's Early Tales*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1984, osservano che il diario degli anni Trenta, a differenza dei primi racconti, "contains only infrequent and usually slight entries on the New England past" (R. MILDER and R. FULLER, "Introduction", p. 6).

i temi del peccato e della colpa non hanno in essi un peso paragonabile a quello tenuto nei romanzi e nei racconti. La storia della 'sfortuna' dei *Notebooks* inizia con la recensione dedicata al volume franco-italiano dei *Passages*, nella quale Henry James rappresentò Hawthorne come un "genius" nativo e spontaneo privo di "any real critical rigor", "superficial, uninformed, incurious, inappreciative", attaccato all'osservazione minuta di oggetti senza importanza, capace di "serene, detached contemplation" ma straniero alle cose per eccesso di "simplicity" e per incapacità di decifrare la complessità del mondo, sempre intento a far scorrere "a puzzled, ineffective gaze at things, full of a mild, genial desire to apprehend and penetrate, but the light winds of his fancy just touching the surface of the massive consistency of fact about him".[18]

Sarebbe lungo, ora, enumerare le tante interpretazioni che, sulla scorta delle pagine di James, hanno privilegiato la componente ideologica nell'opera hawthorniana, e in particolare nei *Notebooks*, a scapito delle altre tensioni e pulsioni che fin dall'origine entrano in conflitto con essa e la problematizzano e la trasformano radicalmente in principio di creazione estetica. Tra questi duole vedere il nome del grande Mario Praz, il quale aveva visto le pagine sull'Italia, e su Roma in particolare, oppresse dal peso di quella "tradizione puritana" che toglieva agli osservatori di educazione protestante "la capacità di giudicare gli stranieri" e li faceva sentire "a disagio" in Italia, e aveva sostenuto che lo scrittore, prigioniero di quell'immagine di un'"Italia da melodramma" scoperta dai drammaturghi elisabettiani "a sollazzo e raccapriccio delle folle protestanti", fra le tante opere d'arte era stato attratto soprattutto dallo "pseudo-ritratto della pseudo-martire Beatrice Cenci".[19] E comunque, le osservazioni che potevano essere giustificabili sulla base dei *Passages* (che in effetti favoriscono questo tipo di analisi) perdono o dovrebbero aver perduto ogni fondamento dopo la pubblicazione dell'edizione critica che documenta, fin dalla prima notazione (15 giugno 1835), un'attenzione per l'osservazione e per la descrizione degli oggetti e della natura che non coincide con le osservazioni e le descrizioni praticate negli scritti narrativi già composti. Nei romanzi e nei racconti la rappresentazione del mondo esterno è sempre mediata dagli sguardi dei personaggi, che interferiscono con quello del narratore e quasi sempre producono una conoscenza problematica e contraddittoria, mentre nei diari il titolare unico dello sguardo è l'autore, con la sua cultura, con la sua sensibilità, con progetti ampi e complessi che non sempre corrispondono alle opere realmente composte.[20] Sarebbe sufficiente la descrizione della città di Boston "mirrored in

[18] H. JAMES, "Review of *Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne*", *Nation*, 14 March 1872. Queste annotazioni furono sviluppate nel volume *Hawthorne* (1879). L'intento ben poco mimetizzato di James è di negare a Hawthorne le qualità di artista e di teorico della visione, allo scopo di fare di se stesso il primo artista moderno ad aver impostato in termini consapevoli il problema della vastità e della complessità di tali questioni. Su questo aspetto dell'arte e della poetica jamesiane si veda A. SQUEO, *Orizzonti del visibile. Pratiche discorsive tra scienza e letteratura in Henry James*, Lecce, Multimedia, 2009.

[19] M. PRAZ, "Impressioni italiane di Americani nell'Ottocento", *Studi americani*, 4, 1958, pp. 87-88, 92, 105-106.

[20] Mi permetto di rinviare, a questo proposito, a due saggi nei quali ho tentato di avviare l'analisi dell'opera hawthorniana nella logica dello 'sguardo': "Lo sguardo crudele dei puritani. *The Gentle Boy* di Nathaniel Hawthorne", in G. DAMMACCO e S. PETRILLI (a cura di), *Fedi, credenze, fanatismo*, Milano, Mimesis, 2016 e "Lo sguardo invisibile. Tragicommedia e degradazione del sacro in *The Minister's Black Veil* di Hawthorne", *Incroci*, 22 (43), 2021, pp. 40-60. Sul tema dello sguardo nell'opera di Hawthorne, cfr. J. DOLIS, *The Style of Hawthorne's Gaze: Regarding Subjectivity*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama U.P., 1993.

the water" (7 settembre 1835; *AN*, p. 12), in cui alle sensazioni visive suscitate dalla città rispecchiata nell'acqua del North River si uniscono le percezioni uditive delle ruote dei carri e delle voci umane dall'altra parte del fiume, per intendere la vastità e la profondità di una riflessione sulla conoscenza estetica che non nasce certamente all'epoca dei viaggi oltreoceano e per influsso dell'arte europea, ma si inserisce nel progetto originario "to make one's own reflection in a mirror the subject of a story" (17 ottobre 1835: *AN*, p. 15), in un contesto teorico-ideologico dal quale è assente ogni riferimento ai temi della colpa, del peccato, dell'incesto e della 'leggenda' americana.

La continuità dell'interesse non significa che le modalità della riflessione non subiscano mutamenti nel tempo. Se nel periodo americano l'oggetto con il quale lo sguardo hawthorniano si misura è quello della natura e della realtà umana, nel periodo europeo l'oggetto delle annotazioni diventa quello del rapporto tra lo sguardo e le opere d'arte che, per la prima volta, l'occhio dello straniero contempla in abbondanza e in originale.[21] E tuttavia, pur nello spostamento dell'oggetto e dell'ampliamento progressivo delle tematiche, ciò che accomuna la grande maggioranza degli appunti presi da Hawthorne nel corso della sua vita è il problema della conoscenza e del linguaggio con cui lo scrittore può esprimere tale conoscenza. Dando alla prima edizione dei *Notebooks* (nel 1868) il titolo di *Passages*, Mrs Hawthorne ne dichiarò pubblicamente la natura di passi scelti e non di versioni integrali, anche se non ammise di averli modificati, emendati, censurati.[22] Benché in tempi più recenti alcuni studiosi abbiano messo in discussione l'immagine di Sophia Peabody come "merely a copyist, rightly forgotten as a minimally talented lady-painter, or unhappily remembered as the prudish bowdlerizer of her husband's notebooks", per valutarla come "the first professional woman artist in America to earn income from original oil paintings, illustrations, and decorative arts, as well as from her copies",[23] e attraverso la lettura dei suoi diari abbiano accertato che quando scriveva per suo conto era molto meno 'vittoriana' di come volle apparire al pubblico (tanto da non disdegnare nel suo "Honeymoon Journal" certe allusioni erotiche con "responses to nature in terms suggestive of sexual experience"),[24] non si può negare che i suoi interventi abbiano condizionato lungamente la conoscenza dei ricordi

[21] È pur vero che Hawthorne non giunse in Europa come un "innocent abroad", giacché durante il periodo americano egli era già "familiar with both museums and pictures" e aveva studiato le opere di Winckelmann, Ruskin e altri studiosi dell'arte europea (J. KAUFMAN BUDZ, "Cherubs and Humblebees: Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Visual Arts", *Criticism*, 17 [2], 1975, p. 168), benché per tanti aspetti in quanto turista fosse "closer to Mark Twain than a cultivated European who might have crossed the Alps for his *Italienische Reise*" e rimanesse "painfully conscious oh his provinciality" (H. LEVIN, "Statues from Italy: *The Marble Faun*", in R.H. PEARCE [ed.], *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*, p. 123).

[22] Si salvarono cinque dei sette quaderni 'americani', poi usati da Randall Stewart per un'edizione più completa, ferita tuttavia dalla mancanza dei due quaderni relativi agli anni 1835-1841. Cfr. *The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Based upon the Original Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, ed. R. STEWART, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1932. La *Centenary Edition* (Vol. VIII, 1972) si limitò a riprodurre l'edizione di Stewart migliorandola qua e là, ma, per quanto riguardava i due quaderni perduti, dovette riprodurre il testo dato a suo tempo da Mrs Hawthorne (R. MILDER and R. FULLER, "Introduction", p. 7).

[23] P. DUNLAVY VALENTI, "Sophia Peabody Hawthorne and 'The-What?': Creative Copies in Art and Literature", *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 37 (2), 2011, p. 48.

[24] P. DUNLAVY VALENTI, "Sophia Peabody Hawthorne's *American Notebooks*", *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1996, p. 116.

e delle osservazioni di Nathaniel Hawthorne. Nella logica della lettura che tento di fare, gli aspetti più significativi rivelati dai testi inediti sembrano quelli che autorizzano l'idea di un Hawthorne non coincidente con quel "complete 'recluse' he described himself as being" durante "the years between college and marriage", ma piuttosto di "a detached, uninvolved, cold observer",[25] di un essere "twofold" caratterizzato da "the detached objectivity of his often minutely detailed descriptions of his walks and trips", che nei *Notebooks* si rivela "too much concerned with externals to be, as a creative writer, the kind of symbolic 'romancer' he already was and would continue to be".[26]

Che cosa ha *visto* dunque Hawthorne nel supposto ritratto di Beatrice Cenci? Egli descrive l'opera in tutti i dettagli ma, proprio mentre la descrive, ammette di non saperla comprendere in quanto oggetto estetico e dunque di non trovare le parole adatte a comunicarla. L'abbondanza di dettagli non produce la conoscenza, ma un'ammissione d'impotenza conoscitiva. Non è un caso che l'attenzione dell'osservatore sia attratta non dal dipinto nella sua interezza ma da dettagli separati, e soprattutto dagli occhi e dalle palpebre lievemente macchiate di rosso: da occhi che "incontrano" gli occhi dello spettatore, occhi di un "angelo caduto, caduto senza peccato", che è "infinitamente penoso" incontrare perché si comprende che "nulla può essere fatto per aiutarla o per confortarla".[27] Da notare la ricorrenza del verbo 'to meet', dell'immagine dell'incontro, che sembra considerare gli occhi di Beatrice come occhi di una persona viva. Gli occhi del soggetto dipinto si muovono e "incontrano" gli occhi dell'osservatore. Ma non si può intendere l'incomprensione di Beatrice se non in rapporto alla percezione della Fornarina che le sta accanto: l'una che esibisce sfacciatamente la sua sensualità (e quella del pittore), e l'altra che cela la sua corporeità sotto il "bianco drappeggio" che ne avvolge "la forma". Il silenzio, o meglio la coscienza di non poter penetrare nel significato dell'opera, equivale quasi all'accettazione interiore di una censura, ben più severa di quella che Mrs Hawthorne eserciterà *post mortem* con la rimozione dei dettagli osceni. È evidente, infatti, che lo scrittore usa parametri opposti a quelli della sua consorte: della sensualità gioiosamente esibita della Fornarina si può e si deve parlare senza giri di parole, mentre di quella di Beatrice, tutta raccolta e annidata in qualche ricciolo, nelle palpebre, nello sguardo, nel panneggio, si deve tacere, o meglio si può discorrere proclamando l'impossibilità di parlarne. Purtroppo la censura operata da Mrs Hawthorne ai danni del dipinto di Raffaello ha impedito per decenni la comprensione della doppia visione dello scrittore, che si sente turbato più dall'erotismo occulto e 'innocente' di colei che egli ritiene Beatrice che dalla carnalità esplicita dell'amante di Raffaello.

Eppure la reazione dello scrittore alla vista del dipinto non può essere liquidata come mera manifestazione di mentalità puritana e sessuofobica. L'imbarazzo e il turbamento non sono di natura esclusivamente morale. L'insistenza esclusiva sugli aspetti etici e religiosi della pagina del diario impedisce di cogliere in queste osservazioni

[25] Cfr. H.H. WAGGONER, "A Hawthorne Discovery: The Lost Notebook, 1835-1841", *The New England Quarterly*, 49 (4), 1976, pp. 625-26.

[26] H.H. WAGGONER, "The New Hawthorne Notebook: Further Reflections on the Life and Work", *Novel*, 11 (3), 1978, pp. 218-19.

[27] N. HAWTHORNE, *Diario (1835-1862)*, a cura di A. LOMBARDO, Venezia, Neri Pozza, 1959, pp. 379-80.

gli aspetti connessi al tema del 'vedere' e al rapporto tra le immagini e le parole.[28] È innegabile che le reazioni di Hawthorne al dipinto siano state condizionate dalle "riletture sentimentali che a metà Ottocento enfatizzavano l'innocenza di Beatrice, a cominciare dal popolare romanzo storico di Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi", *Beatrice Cenci* (1854), "tradotto in inglese per ben tre volte solo nel 1858".[29] Si deve poi tener conto del fatto che Hawthorne, dopo il lungo *tour* in Inghilterra e in Francia nel corso del quale aveva già fatto una grande abbuffata di opere d'arte, a Roma "saturated himself as never before visiting museums, churches, and palaces, calling on artists in their studios, and simply wandering through the streets". Ma ben presto si rese conto dei suoi "limits as tourist and connoisseur" per ogni tipo di "aesthetic experience" e, dopo aver trascorso un mese nella città, si rassegnò alla sua "inadequacy" misurando i limiti della sua capacità di comprensione dell'arte in un perpetuo confronto con quella della consorte, che invece pareva sempre "limitless and fresh". Non mi pare però che l'imbarazzo conoscitivo provato dallo scrittore dinanzi al ritratto di Beatrice Cenci nasca da una specie di complesso d'inferiorità da rozzo *yankee* incapace di assorbire nella patria dell'arte "certain universal aesthetic rules".[30] E infatti, per rimuovere il sospetto che l'inquietudine provata dinanzi al dipinto derivi dal soggetto, e soprattutto dall'alone di violenza e di incesto che lo circonda, l'osservatore si augura che uno spettatore dotato di grande sensibilità sia capace di guardare il ritratto e di interpretarlo astraendo dalla cupa tragedia di cui Beatrice è stata protagonista. Con il senno del poi, chi oggi sa

[28] Secondo Robert Milder, la "juxtaposition" dei due ritratti esalta "the extremes within the natural", "the one rising almost to the heavenly, the other barely escaping the bestial". La differenza tra di essi rimane "only a matter of degree", e la descrizione che lo scrittore fa della *Maddalena* di Tiziano (*FIN*, p. 333) è "a classic exemple of the repressed Puritan's lust affair with the erotic" (R. MILDER, *Hawthorne's Habitations: A Literary Life*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 233). Caterina Ricciardi osserva che il ritratto di Beatrice provoca nello scrittore, come in tutti i "protestanti americani", domande "di natura più teologica che storica" suscitate da "un'ossessione puritana" (C. RICCIARDI, "Il puritanesimo di Hawthorne alla prova di Roma", *Il Manifesto-Alias Domenica*, 31 agosto 2014). Per Rita K. Gollin, il fascino subìto da Hawthorne dinanzi al ritratto di Beatrice Cenci è "typically Victorian" (R.K. GOLLIN, "Hawthorne and the Visual Arts", in L.J. REYNOLDS [ed.], *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Oxford, OUP, 2001, p. 127). Altri pareri si potrebbero aggiungere a questi citati senza modificare il quadro della critica 'ideologica'. È pur vero che lo stesso scrittore, ripubblicando nei *Twice-Told Tales* i racconti apparsi anonimi sulle riviste, "made numerous changes which reveal his sensitivity to current, often prudish, standards of taste", dimostrando che "even before Sophia had any influence on him, his acute sense of the limitations of his readers made him unwilling to risk printing in acknowledged tales some words and attitudes he had felt free to publish anonimously" (J.D. CROWLEY, "Historical Commentary", in *Twice-Told Tales*, Columbus, Ohio State U.P., 1974, pp. 503-504). Tuttavia, queste informazioni non fanno che confermare l'ipotesi che l'autocensura riguardasse i testi destinati al consumo pubblico e non avesse alcun peso nei testi scritti ad uso privato.

[29] A. DE BIASIO, *Le implacabili. Violenze al femminile nella letteratura americana tra Otto e Novecento*, Roma, Donzelli, 2016, p. 63.

[30] R.K. GOLLIN and J.L. IDOL JR, with the assistance of S.K. EISIMINGER, *Prophetic Pictures: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Knowledge and Uses of the Visual Arts*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1991, pp. 86-88, 100. L'espressione "innocente all'estero" richiama il libro *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869), in cui il giovane Mark Twain raccolse (prima della pubblicazione dei *Passages*) gli articoli inviati ad alcuni giornali americani durante il viaggio in Europa compiuto due anni prima, con il proposito di contrapporre all'atteggiamento subalterno di tanti viaggiatori americani nei confronti della civiltà europea "l'anima del pioniere, dell'uomo costantemente sospinto verso nuove scoperte, nuovi orizzonti, nuove frontiere", con l'uso della tecnica del "rovesciamento del punto di vista, dello straniamento" comico che sarà "uno degli elementi essenziali" del suo procedimento letterario (S. PICCINATO, "Nathaniel Hawthorne e Mark Twain. Fascino peccato e paradosso", *Studi Romani*, 33 [3], 1985, p. 238).

che il dipinto non è opera di Guido Reni e che la fanciulla ritratta non è Beatrice Cenci ma, verosimilmente, una Sibilla colta in una tipica movenza manieristica, si trova nella condizione migliore per esprimere le sue reazioni in termini svincolati da quelle suggestioni allotrie di cui lo scrittore cerca di liberarsi tentando un'astrazione, a quel tempo impraticabile, dal soggetto.[31] La domanda che oggi ci si può porre è dunque: fino a che punto si può essere sicuri che Hawthorne avrebbe provato tutto quel turbamento e sarebbe caduto in una specie di afasia se non fosse partito dalla convinzione di trovarsi di fronte al vero ritratto della celebre Beatrice Cenci, stuprata dal padre e condannata a morte per parricidio? Si sarebbe spinto oltre le "surfaces" di quelle opere "to search out [the] moral identity" del personaggio rappresentato? Avrebbe "'read' the character of Beatrice Cenci" nel "visage" del dipinto?[32]

Nelle *Notes in England and Italy* (originate dal diario 'parallelo' tenuto durante i viaggi europei), Sophia Peabody Hawthorne descrisse minutamente il ritratto di Beatrice che finalmente ella poteva vedere dal vero "after so many years' hoping and wishing", un "masterpiece" che confondeva le parole e faceva comprendere che "no copy, engraved or in oils, gives the remotest idea of it", giacché nell'originale "the infinite desolation, the unfathomable grief, are made evident through features of perfect beauty, without one line of care, or one shadow of experience,– translucent and pure as marble", e danno l'immagine di una "extremest youth, with youth's virgin innocence and ignorance of all crime", un'espressione "in the eyes as if they asked, 'Oh, what is it – what has happened – how am I involved?'". Mrs Hawthorne non solo non faceva alcuno sforzo per 'dimenticare' l'identità anagrafica del soggetto, ma accumulava particolari per penetrare meglio in essa, annotando che "the lovely eyes, with no red nor swollen lids, seem yet to have shed rivers of crystal tears that have left no stain – no more than a deluge of rain stains the adamantine arch of heaven". Gli occhi di Beatrice non racchiudevano alcun segreto, e anzi lasciavano vedere assai bene che in essi "Night is gathering", e che "the perfect face is turning to stone with this weight of voiceless agony", benché "her gaze into the eyes of all human kind, as she passes to her doom", fosse "pathetic beyond any possibility of describing". Ma intanto l'osservatrice descriveva puntualmente questi dettagli e tanti altri che per brevità non riferisco, concludendo che, se il dipinto era il ritratto di Beatrice, la fanciulla doveva essere "free from crime". Per l'opera di Tiziano riprese le parole usate dal marito – "close beside the Beatrice hangs Raphael's Fornarina" – continuando a tacere il séguito, e descrisse

[31] L'autrice del dipinto potrebbe essere la pittrice bolognese Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), il cui padre Giovanni Andrea era stato assistente di Guido Reni. La questione complessa della paternità (o meglio maternità) del dipinto esula dai limiti di questo saggio, nella cui logica è sufficiente rilevare come tutti gli artisti e gli scrittori che ne hanno parlato fossero convinti che l'autore fosse Guido Reni e che esso rappresentasse Beatrice Cenci ritratta prima di andare al patibolo. In realtà, quando si accerta che la figura è quella di "a hermitage posed as Sibyl, based on a tradition of turbaned sibyls derived from Guido and his studio", si può concludere che "Shelley's claim of a truthful representation of Beatrice thus was undermined from the start by his own misrecognition, although his was the prevailing assumption at his time" (Y. AN, "Beatrice's Gaze Revisited: Anatomizing *The Cenci*", *Criticism*, 38 [1], 1996, p. 30). Anche chi evita di formulare congetture autoriali ritiene che il dipinto "can be dated to at least half of the 17th century" (P. POLLÁKOVÁ, "The Case of Beatrice Cenci. From Guido Reni to David Lynch", *Umeni/Art*, 59, 2011, p. 380).

[32] R.K. GOLLIN and J.L. IDOL JR, *Prophetic Pictures*, p. 105.

la donna "sitting with uncovered neck and arms, holding up transparent drapery with one hand, while the other lies upon her lap, across a red mantle", come "the darkest brunette, with deep, rich color, black eyes and hair, and a turban, threaded with gold, upon her head and a bracelet upon her left arm", sottolineando che era sì molto bella ma "with the world and its wiles thoroughly mingled in her mortal mixture of very earth's mould". I suoi occhi erano "laughing", ma la fresca giovinezza, l'innocenza inconsapevole, la purezza degna di un giglio, erano "departed" da lei, che era "a gem, but a carbuncle rather than a pearl or a diamond".[33] Mrs Hawthorne dette prova, qui come in altri passi del suo libro di viaggi, di quella competenza di osservatrice e di 'copista' che la teneva al riparo dai dubbi gnoseologici patiti dal marito, ma dimostrò anche di essere rimasta subalterna a una leggenda che le impediva di *vedere* nella sua natura l'oggetto in questione e addirittura la spingeva a sostenere l'innocenza di Beatrice invece di concludere che quel dipinto, date le caratteristiche da lei stessa rilevate, non poteva aver a che fare con il personaggio nominato in quello che, per l'irriverente Mark Twain, era il "good legible label" apposto all'opera.[34] Fiduciosa com'era, fin dalla giovinezza, che un ritratto fosse dotato di "almost magical properties", sapesse "convey something beyond" l'oggetto rappresentato e avesse "the almost magical ability" di "capture a person's essential character" e di trasmetterla "immutably through time",[35] ella era andata al di là di ogni suggestione e nel quadro, che pure stava descrivendo così dettagliatamente, aveva visto o sentito 'qualcosa' che non c'era.

Il ritratto di Beatrice Cenci, della cui autenticità nessuno allora dubitava, era la principale 'attrazione turistica' di Palazzo Barberini, non tanto per i suoi valori estetici quanto per il suo supposto valore referenziale esaltato da P.B. Shelley nella tragedia *The Cenci* (1819), uno dei primi scritti che nell'Ottocento avevano documentato e amplificato l'enorme fascino esercitato dal ritratto sugli osservatori e sui viaggiatori, soprattutto stranieri: oltre a Shelley, del ritratto di Beatrice Cenci avevano scritto Stendhal, Melville e parecchi altri.[36] Qui mi propongo non di ripercorrere per l'ennesima

[33] S. HAWTHORNE, *Notes in England and Italy*, New York, G. P. Putnam & Son, 1869, pp. 211-15.

[34] M. TWAIN, *Life on the Mississippi*, with an Introduction by H. BEAVER, New York, Avenel Books, (1883) 1962, p. 291.

[35] P. DUNLAVY VALENTI, "Sophia Peabody Hawthorne: A Study of Artistic Influence", *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1990, pp. 10, 14. Sophia era stata la 'mentore' del marito e lo aveva stimolato "to verbalize his inchoate ideas about pictorial expression", anche se le loro discussioni su alcuni racconti contenenti "specifically pictorial elements" illuminano "the visual nature of Hawthorne's imagination" (*ibidem*, p. 11). Con la pubblicazione delle *Notes*, Mrs Hawthorne "presented herself before the public gaze as an author" e rivelò il proprio "impulse to speak with her own voice, to tell her own story, to claim authority an authorship for herself" (J.E. HALL, "'Coming to Europe', Coming to Authorship: Sophia Hawthorne and her *Notes in England and Italy*", *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 19 [2], 2002, pp. 138-39), secondo il progetto esposto alla figlia Una in una lettera del 24 maggio 1857: "I wish you to have a complete idea of what I am seeing and doing, or I shall not be contented that you are not with us. I will describe to you as well as I can, though I know words are inadequate, and I hope you will read my letters quietly, and endeavor to see as pictures what I write, so as to travel with me" (Lettera ms conservata alla Morgan Library and Museum, riprodotta in J.E. HALL, "Romantic Gothic, Ruskin's Aesthetics, and Sophia Hawthorne's *Notes in England and Italy*", *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 37 [2], 2011, p. 122). Il dubbio che le parole possano essere 'inadeguate' affiora per essere sùbito eliminato dalla certezza che la figlia vedrà e sentirà esattamente ciò che la madre ha visto e sentito. Le lettere di viaggio di Mrs Hawthorne sono un classico esempio di *ekphrasis* (*ibidem*, p. 129).

[36] Il mito di Beatrice Cenci nella letteratura è stato analizzato da numerosi studiosi, dei quali è impossibile dare

volta le versioni letterarie e teatrali della 'leggenda', ma di considerare gli effetti conoscitivi della convinzione *a priori* che quel dipinto fosse il ritratto di Beatrice colta dal vero nel momento di andare al patibolo. Tale condizionamento induceva ciascuno a 'vedere' nel ritratto ciò che non c'era né poteva esserci. Che l'autore del ritratto fosse Guido Reni, come si credeva a quel tempo, è un dettaglio non rilevante, se non per il fatto che quella paternità aggiungeva all'opera un soprappiù di seduzione, ma non ne condizionava totalmente la lettura e l'interpretazione. L'attribuzione del dipinto a Reni e l'intitolazione di esso alla sventurata fanciulla erano state autentiche 'invenzioni' storiche nate alla fine del Settecento, in séguito alle quali "the portrait 'became' Beatrice" e cominciò ad alimentare la sua propria leggenda, trasformandosi in una sorta di schermo o di schema *a priori* di lettura della leggenda stessa.[37]

È legittimo immaginare, infatti, che, se avesse avuto un altro titolo e se non fosse stato collocato accanto al ritratto della Fornarina e a quello della matrigna di Beatrice, il dipinto non avrebbe richiamato in maniera così prepotente l'attenzione di tanti scrittori e artisti e non avrebbe suscitato tante reazioni e tanti commenti. Il breve resoconto fatto da Ludovico Antonio Muratori, che, senza accennare al ritratto, aveva reso nota la storia dei Cenci,[38] non può essere ritenuto responsabile della 'costruzione romantica' del mito, benché proprio in séguito alla lettura di esso Shelley, giungendo a Roma nel 1819, avesse concepito la sua opera teatrale.[39] La propensione dei critici dei nostri tempi ad attribuire caratteristiche romanticheggianti alla cronaca dell'annalista primosettecentesco è la conferma della potenza illusionistica della leggenda, che addirittura si rovescia all'indietro e riscrive testimonianze, come quella di Muratori, che svolse probabilmente la funzione del granello di sabbia che all'interno dell'ostrica, senza suo merito e senza sua volontà, si trasforma in perla per aggiunte successive di una materia ad esso estranea.

Non posso passare in rassegna tutti gli scrittori che hanno vergato pagine intorno a Beatrice, ma faccio un'eccezione per Stendhal, che rappresenta il caso-limite di chi ripete lo schema della leggenda senza però esserne affascinato e, anzi, rimanendo estraneo ad essa. In un pezzo apparso sulla *Revue des Deux Mondes* del 1 luglio 1837, lo scrittore raccontò di essere andato a guardare "les portraits de Béatrix Cenci et de sa belle-mère" non per desiderio proprio, ma per uniformarsi alla "curiosité commune" di tutti gli altri viaggiatori. Ed ecco che cosa aveva visto:

conto in questa sede. Da ultimo si veda P. ORVIETO, "Beatrice Cenci vittima innocente o spietata parricida?", in ID., *Da Giuda a Manzoni. Personaggi inquietanti tra storia, religione e letteratura*, Roma, Salerno Editrice, 2013, pp. 78 e sgg.: "Attorno al processo e all'esecuzione di Beatrice Cenci" nacque "una folta stratificazione di mitologie", soprattutto di natura giuridica e processuale, "che hanno contribuito non poco alla costruzione della 'leggenda nera' dell'Italia della Controriforma" e hanno fatto di Beatrice la "protagonista di innumerevoli opere letterarie, figurative, teatrali e cinematografiche". La lettura degli atti processuali dimostra però quanto fosse infondata la "santificazione" simbolica di Beatrice Cenci che più volte, "insolente", sfidò "i giudici e i testimoni a suo carico" e rintuzzò le domande "con tracotanza" (A. MAZZACANE, "Diritto e miti: il caso di Beatrice Cenci", *Studi storici*, 51 [4], 2010, pp. 936, 954). Per una veloce rassegna sui principali scrittori americani che si ispirarono al mito, si veda L.K. BARNETT, "American Novelists and the *Portrait of Beatrice Cenci*", *The New England Quarterly*, 53 (2), 1980, pp. 168-83.

37 B.E. JACK, *Beatrice's Spell: The Enduring Legend of Beatrice Cenci*, London, Pimlico, 2005, p. 5.

38 Cfr. L.A MURATORI, *Annali d'Italia*, Tomo XV, Edizione seconda, riscontrata con i Manoscritti dell'Autore, Milano, 1753, a spese di Giambattista Pasquali, pp. 105-108.

39 C. NICHOLL, "Screaming in the Castle: The Case of Beatrice Cenci", *London Review of Books*, 20 (13), 2 July 1998, pp. 23-27.

Ce grand peintre [Guido Reni] a placé sur le cou de Béatrix un bout de draperie insignifiant; il l'a coiffée d'un turban; il eût craint de pousser la vérité jusqu'à l'horrible, s'il eût reproduit exactement l'habit qu'elle s'était fait faire pour paraître à l'exécution, et les cheveux en désordre d'une pauvre fille de seize ans qui vient de s'abandonner au désespoir. La tête est douce et belle, le regard très doux et les yeux fort grands: ils ont l'air étonné d'une personne qui vient d'être surprise au moment où elle pleurait à chaudes larmes. Les cheveux sont blonds et très beaux. […] Malheureusement, les demi-teintes ont poussé au *rouge de brique* pendant ce long intervalle de deux cent trente-huit ans qui nous sépare de la catastrophe dont on va lire le récit.[40]

Stendhal non si meraviglia della corrispondenza zoppicante fra l'immagine e l'oggetto che l'immagine pretende di rappresentare, ma l'accetta come un dato indiscutibile. Questo passo è un esempio-limite della distorsione che la leggenda suscitava negli osservatori, i quali erano spinti a vedere nel quadro un soggetto la cui pretesa identità contrastava con i dati materiali forniti dal dipinto stesso, secondo la logica dell'"effetto dell'automa giocatore di scacchi" (descritto da Poe nel 1837), grazie al quale gli spettatori credevano che il pupazzo vestito da turco giocasse a scacchi perché condizionati da uno schema *a priori* di natura pubblicitaria.[41] La paradossalità della descrizione stendhaliana sta nel fatto che i termini poco appassionati in cui essa è formulata mettono a nudo l'infondatezza, se non l'assurdità, della tesi che pure l'autore mostra di condividere. L'esposizione è fondata infatti sulla retorica del 'nonostante': il pittore, invece di raffigurare realisticamente una fanciulla che sta per essere decapitata, ha dipinto *un'altra cosa*, obbligando gli interpreti a reinserire dall'esterno ciò che il dipinto *non* dice. Sulla base delle sue stesse osservazioni, invece di concludere che quel dipinto non aveva nulla a che vedere con Beatrice Cenci, Stendhal ritiene che Guido Reni abbia compiuto una rimozione estetica (volontaria e non inconscia) per non spingere la verità fino all'orrore, evitando di riprodurre il vestito da condannata indossato da Beatrice, ponendole sul collo un banalissimo pezzo di stoffa, e mettendole sulla testa un turbante che con la persona storica non ha alcun rapporto. Ciò che dovrebbe esserci non c'è, e ciò che non dovrebbe esserci c'è, e *tuttavia* quello *è* il ritratto di Beatrice Cenci. La tragedia, lasciata fuori dalla rappresentazione, viene fatta rientrare per via di negazione allo scopo di rendere la descrizione coerente con la leggenda. La 'formazione di compromesso' che ne risulta consiste nel censire gli aspetti scarsamente patetici e orrorifici dell'opera e nel classificarli immediatamente come negazioni di un orrore irrappresentabile in quanto tale. All'ingrosso si può dire che le descrizioni di Stendhal e di Hawthorne presentino entrambe un oggetto che, così com'è, non può essere Beatrice Cenci, con la differenza non da poco che Stendhal è impermeabile al fascino della leggenda e registra a suo modo la banalità estetica del dipinto e riesce a descrivere l'opera, ma a patto di ridimensionarne la portata estetica e di spogliarla di tutte le implicazioni leggendarie, riportandola alla sua nuda essenza di ritratto di una ragazza ignota colta mentre si volge a guardare l'osservatore, mentre Hawthorne è convinto di trovarsi di fronte a un capolavoro talmente misterioso da non poter essere né descritto né interpretato.

[40] STENDHAL, *Les Cenci*, in *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, Éd. établie par Y. ANSEL et P. BERTHIER, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, Vol. II, pp. 1128-1130.

[41] Cfr. E.A. POE, *Il giocatore di scacchi di Maelzel*, testo inglese a fronte, trad. it. G. CROCCO, Milano, SE, 2009.

Hawthorne non poteva aver letto il pezzo di Stendhal ma conosceva sicuramente la tragedia di Shelley, "a great favourite" delle sue letture giovanili,[42] benché fosse rimasto indifferente alla tematica ateistica ed eversiva del poeta inglese, e certamente aveva letto il romanzo di Herman Melville, *Pierre or the Ambiguities*, pubblicato nel 1852, che collegava l'immagine di Beatrice ai temi della colpa, dell'incesto, dell'inscrutabilità della coscienza umana, dell'incrocio tra sesso e potere.[43] Hawthorne sembra però indifferente alle implicazioni politiche e rivoluzionarie o comunque di critica alla società che sia Shelley che Melville, sebbene in forme diverse, avevano posto al centro dei loro scritti. L'immagine di Beatrice era divenuta una presenza costante nella loro creazione artistica e perfino nella loro esistenza, mentre Hawthorne non rivela per la vicenda alcun interesse precedente il viaggio in Italia, anche se non possono esserci dubbi sul fatto che, al momento della visita a palazzo Barberini, egli conoscesse gran parte di ciò che era stato detto e scritto a proposito del ritratto e già in America ne avesse visto le tante copie in circolazione.[44] Ma, rispetto alla prevalenza dell'interesse per il contenuto della vicenda, che il dipinto richiama ed esprime allusivamente, egli vorrebbe collocarsi su un altro piano tenendo quella storia sullo sfondo e tentando di imporsi uno sguardo puramente estetico che motivi il fascino dell'opera mettendo tra parentesi gli elementi della tragedia. Questa disposizione non gli impedisce di scendere, circa un mese dopo la prima visita, alla luce delle torce, fino alla "artificial cavern, remote from light or air" dove Beatrice Cenci "was confined before her execution":

> she spent a whole year in this dreadful pit, her trial having dragged on through that length of time. How ghostlike she must have looked when she came forth! Guido never painted that beautiful picture from her blanched face as it appeared after this confinement. And how rejoiced she must have been to die at last, having already been in a sepulchre so long! (18 marzo 1858; *FIN*, p. 143)

Anche Hawthorne dunque, nei suoi modi e secondo i suoi parametri, finisce per privare l'opera della sua referenzialità osservando che Guido Reni non ha dipinto il viso

[42] B.E. JACK, *Beatrice's Spell*, p. 104. Hawthorne ammirava "profondamente" l'opera di Shelley, che aveva letto e studiato in gioventù, e come Shelley fu "mesmerized" dalla vista del supposto ritratto di Beatrice (G. BENDER, "'I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe': Chillingworth, Cenci, and the Silent Pleasure of Pain", *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 42 [1], 2016, p. 56). Secondo altri critici, invece, "there is no reason to suspect that Hawthorne used any documents for his knowledge of the story" perché "his notebooks and letters give no indication that he had read Shelley's play, or that he encountered any of the other versions of the story" (L.A. HASELMAYER, "Hawthorne and the Cenci", *Neophilologus*, 27 [1], 1942, p. 60). E infatti la sua Beatrice, sia quella dei *Notebooks* che quella di *The Marble Faun*, ha poco a che vedere con la Beatrice del poeta inglese, che nella creazione e nel trattamento del personaggio era stato molto influenzato dall'*Antigone* di Sofocle e soprattutto dalla *Mirra* di Alfieri, eroine che "recognize, like Beatrice Cenci, their inability to live in their own world and society" (L.M. CRISAFULLI, "Shelley's *The Cenci*: 'studiously written in the style very different from any other composition'", in F. DELLAROSA [ed.], *Poetic and Dramatic Forms in British Romanticism*, Bari, Laterza, 2006, p. 57). Secondo Robert L. White, invece, "Hawthorne's interest in Beatrice Cenci was first aroused by the publication in 1820 of Shelley's tragedy" (R.L. WHITE, "'Rappaccini's Daughter', *The Cenci* and the Cenci Legend", *Studi americani*, 14, 1968, p. 65).

[43] B.E. JACK, *Beatrice's Spell*, p. 80 e *passim*.

[44] Analogamente a tanti scrittori e artisti americani dell'Ottocento, Hawthorne "'visited' the foreign places that fascinated or interested him long before he actually set foot in them"; le sue opere precedenti il viaggio in Italia sono segnate da una scia di "white pebbles on a moonlit night" che conducono dalle primissime opere alla contemplazione dal vero dell'"Italian landscape" (L. BUONOMO, "Presences: Italian Signs in Hawthorne", *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 25 [1], 1999, pp. 23, 21).

sbiancato della condannata così come gli era apparso dopo la lunga prigionia, ma si è giovato del diritto dell'artista di idealizzare l'oggetto. A lui dunque il dipinto piace proprio perché non è 'realistico'. E infatti, altre opere ispirate allo stesso personaggio non lo interessano: il 3 aprile 1858 egli vede nello studio di Harriet Hosmer l'abbozzo di un ritratto statuario di Beatrice Cenci, "which did not very greatly impress me" (*FIN*, p. 158). Ma continua ad aggirarsi per Roma in cerca di riferimenti storici all'episodio, e il 23 marzo annota di essere passato da Piazza Cenci, dove ha visto "one or two ugly old palaces" e di aver individuato "one of them as residence of Beatrice's father" (*FIN*, p. 512). Ma, nella sua ultima visita, si mostra ancora assillato dalla consapevolezza che l'opera sia "quite indescribable, inconceivable, and unaccountable in its effect", perché, se un osservatore tenterà di analizzarla, non riuscirà mai a cogliere "the secret of its fascination". La sua "peculiar expression" elude lo sguardo diretto, "a straightforward glance", e può solo essere colta da sguardi laterali, "by side glimpses", o quando l'occhio cade su essa "casually", come se il quadro avesse "a life and consciousness of its own" e fosse deciso "not to betray its secret of grief or guilt" pur recandone "the full expression of it when it imagines itself unseen". Il dipinto genera un "magical effect" che "can ever have been wrought by pencil". La penna non potrà mai riprodurre l'effetto magico di un'opera che rivela se stessa quando *non* viene vista. Siamo dinanzi a un caso straordinario di conflitto tra sguardi: tra lo sguardo dello scrittore che si rivolge all'opera ponendosi il problema di come tradurre in parole l'immagine vista; e lo sguardo dell'opera che elude lo sguardo dell'osservatore e lo costringe a guardare di sbieco evitando la percezione diretta. Il rapporto (il conflitto) non è tra un occhio e un oggetto esistente e dato una volta per sempre, ma tra due "occhi":

> I looked close into its eyes, with a determination to see all that there was in them, and could see nothing that might not have been in any young girl's eyes; and yet, a moment afterwards, there was the expression (seen aside, and vanishing in a moment) of a being unhumanized by some terrible fate, and gazing at me out of a remote and inaccessible region, where she was frightened to be alone, but where no sympathy could reach her. The mouth is beyond measure touching; the lips apart, looking as innocent as a baby's after it has been crying. (*FIN*, pp. 520-21)

Se nella narrativa europea dell'Ottocento gli scambi di sguardi tra i personaggi esprimono il desiderio di conoscere e di essere conosciuti, in questo caso lo scambio di sguardi fra il turista e l'opera d'arte è destinato fin dall'inizio a uno scacco insanabile. Qui, quasi trasformandosi in personaggio di romanzo, Hawthorne rappresenta se stesso nell'atto di guardare "close" gli occhi di Beatrice, che a tutta prima paiono identici a quelli di qualsiasi ragazza dell'epoca. Ma lo sguardo dello scrittore, per quanto approfondito e ripetuto nel tempo, non produce conoscenza e lascia solo percepire l'esistenza di un segreto che il soggetto, nella sua apparente banalità, non tradisce. Il quadro non solo non può essere trasformato in parole, ma non può nemmeno essere "copied", e lo stesso pittore che lo dipinse una volta "could not have done it over again". Forse, pensando all'attività di copista esercitata dalla consorte, Hawthorne scrive che i copisti "get all sorts of expression, gay, as well as grievous", e che alcune copie "have a coquettish air, a half-backward glance, thrown alluring at the spectator, but nobody ever did catch, or ever will, the vanishing charm of that sorrow" (*FIN*, p. 521). In ogni

caso, non ci sarà un'altra occasione per tornare a interrogare il volto di Beatrice, perché il soggiorno italiano della famiglia Hawthorne volge al termine e la visita alla Galleria Barberini è proprio la visita dell'addio. Visto che quel segreto non potrebbe mai essere decifrato nemmeno se l'opera fosse interrogata altre cento volte, molto meglio allontanarsi per sempre e rinunciare a descriverla:

I hated to leave the picture, and yet was glad when I had taken my last glimpse, because it so perplexed and troubled me not to be able to get hold of its secret. (*FIN*, p. 521)[45]

Il gesto di Hawthorne non è quello di un semplice *guardare*, bensì quello di *prendere* l'ultima *occhiata veloce* sull'oggetto. È uno sguardo rapido, di sfuggita, quasi in tralice, lanciato verso il quadro un attimo prima di andar via, in carattere con la natura *obliqua* dello scambio tra lo scrittore e l'opera. Hawthorne, con questa ultima occhiata, sembra arrendersi al destino di impenetrabilità che ha segnato il suo rapporto con il dipinto fin dall'inizio.

L'interesse delle annotazioni su Beatrice Cenci sta nella 'riflessione' sui poteri e sui limiti dello sguardo, sull'incontro degli occhi, e sulla desolata affermazione che la penna e le parole dell'autore non potranno mai riprodurre il fascino e addirittura il segreto dell'opera, e dunque nella messa in discussione implicita del 'realismo' dell'arte. Hawthorne è abbagliato dall'immagine a causa della natura non-realistica di essa, ma non può descriverla né capirla proprio perché non è realistica. È una contraddizione insolubile. Hawthorne non teorizza l'incapacità della parola di esprimere un'intuizione già formata nella mente dell'osservatore, ma ipotizza l'impossibilità della conoscenza estetica in quanto tale, anche di quella intuizione che precede l'atto comunicativo. Si tratta dunque di un problema di conoscenza più che di espressione. Il quadro di Beatrice Cenci non solo non può essere *detto*, ma non può nemmeno essere *pensato*. Le parole non arrivano perché chi guarda non è capace di penetrare quel segreto. Tutto ciò che si può dire è l'assenza, o meglio l'intuizione inquietante della presenza di un significato che però rimane inconoscibile a chi guarda: e forse proprio a chi guarda troppo e si ostina a interrogare l'oggetto. Lo sguardo obliquo rimane dunque l'unico compromesso possibile tra la voglia totalitaria di conoscere e lo scacco della conoscenza che nasce da quella voglia e quasi 'punisce' l'arroganza del soggetto. Così Hawthorne, che pure ha fondato la sua creazione letteraria sul primato (per non dire sull'ossessione) dello sguardo, giunto quasi al termine della sua vita e del suo lavoro artistico, sperimenta l'impossibilità della corrispondenza esatta tra oggetti e parole: e lo fa proprio utilizzando al massimo il lessico dello sguardo, non per esaltarne le capacità ma, appunto, per mostrarne i limiti e l'insufficienza e lo scacco finale. O meglio, lo fa nel diario, nelle pagine destinate al segreto, e opera una specie di palinodia o di negazione preventiva del romanzo che pure quelle pagine preparano.

E infatti il romanzo, che per mille fili è legato all'esperienza romana e in particolare all'immagine di Beatrice, rappresenta un tentativo di superamento volontaristico di questa *impasse* conoscitiva. Si veda la descrizione del ritratto nel Cap. 7, intitolato "Beatrice":

[45] In questa occasione, Mrs Hawthorne fu meno sbrigativa e riportò quasi letteralmente le frasi scritte dal marito. Cfr. *Passages*, Vol. II, pp. 214-15.

The picture represented simply a female head; a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, enveloped in white drapery, from beneath which strayed a lock or two of what seemed a rich, though hidden luxuriance of auburn hair. The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a little redness about the eyelids, very slightly indicated, so that you would question whether or not the girl had been weeping. The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature; nor was it easy to see why the expression was not cheerful, or why a single touch of the artist's pencil should not brighten it into joyousness. But, in fact, it was the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region, the remoteness of which – while yet her face is so close before us – makes us shiver as at a spectre. (*CN*, pp. 904-905)

La prima impressione, che Hawthorne abbia qui ripreso quasi letteralmente il passo dei *Notebooks* citato all'inizio, cade quando si nota la mancanza della frase "for its spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else I have known" (*FIN*, p. 92), che nel diario introduceva il tema della corrispondenza impossibile tra l'oggetto e le parole usate per rappresentarlo. Nel romanzo manca l''Io' dell'osservatore, che nei *Notebooks* coincide con la persona di Nathaniel Hawthorne, titolare unico della visione e di una descrizione che nega la possibilità della descrizione stessa mentre la fa. Se, nel diario, Hawthorne aveva negato che il dipinto potesse essere copiato, qui l'oggetto della descrizione è la copia realizzata da Hilda, che (proprio come Mrs Hawthorne), dopo aver sperimentato la propria incapacità di essere artista originale, "became a copyist" (Cap. 6; *CN*, p. 899). Se, nel diario, lo scrittore era arrivato a dire non solo che il dipinto non poteva essere eseguito da nessun altro artista, ma che lo stesso Reni lo aveva realizzato quasi uscendo da sé, qui la copia fatta dalla ragazza americana è talmente perfetta da suscitare sensazioni apparentemente analoghe a quelle provocate dall'originale, ma tutte voltate in positivo. Miriam, che osserva la copia, *vede* e *conosce* esattamente ciò che il dipinto rappresenta. I dubbi sull'efficienza autoriale e sulla capacità conoscitiva dell'osservatore scompaiono. Nessun dubbio sulla 'riproducibilità' dell'opera d'arte sembra incrinare la qualità della riproduzione. Chi guarda? Non certo l'innominato narratore del romanzo, ma Miriam, che è andata a far visita all'amica e vede il ritratto per la prima volta. La descrizione non è formalmente attribuita a lei, ma non può essere stato che il suo sguardo a notare quei particolari e a derivarne le sensazioni registrate. Ma, in questo modo, il narratore le ha attribuito sensazioni e reazioni che richiedono una lunga riflessione e che appaiono un po' inverosimili in bocca alla ragazza appena arrivata. Le parole, che nel diario esprimevano drammaticamente la posizione di Hawthorne, sono qui distribuite tra l'una e l'altra delle protagoniste ma non colpiscono in modo particolare la fantasia del lettore, che si trova dinanzi a una scena 'costruita' secondo gli "allegorical instincts" dell'autore,[46] senza che le battute rivelino differenze significative di visione e di giudizio nelle due ragazze, le cui impressioni e i cui pareri si completano reciprocamente. Il *pathos* conoscitivo dei *Notebooks* è scomparso e tutti i problemi di conoscenza sono risolti. Poiché il principe Barberini ha vietato ogni copiatura dell'opera, Hilda l'ha guardata tante volte da impararla a memoria fino a 'fotografarla' nella sua mente:

[46] H. LEVIN, "Statues from Italy: *The Marble Faun*", p. 134.

"[…] I had no resource but to sit down before the picture, day after day, and let it sink into my heart. I do believe it is now photographed there. It is a sad face to keep so close to one's heart; only what is so very beautiful can never be quite a pain. Well; after studying it in this way, I know not how many times, I came home, and have done my best to transfer the image to canvas". (*CN*, p. 905)

Chiudo frettolosamente le osservazioni sul romanzo, che, se protratte ulteriormente, farebbero rientrare dalla finestra le problematiche escluse metodicamente all'inizio. Posso solo ipotizzare che la lettura non solo del capitolo dedicato esplicitamente a Beatrice, ma dell'intero romanzo (e soprattutto del Cap. 23, in cui il ritratto torna in un gioco di specchi e di identità tra le due protagoniste), confermerebbe la sostanziale diversità dei due testi, a cominciare dal fatto che la "preference for sculpture rather than painting" che orienta e regola le scelte estetiche del romanzo "favors a marble whiteness over the colors on the painter's palette",[47] mentre le osservazioni dei *Notebooks* sono fondate sul primato espressivo di un'arte, la pittura, che alimenta dubbi e ambiguità ignote alla tensione classica della scultura. Per spostare le sue riflessioni sulle due amiche, Hawthorne ha dovuto sopprimere i dubbi conoscitivi da lui provati nella contemplazione dell'opera e formalizzare una specie di lezione accademica che, come tante parti del romanzo, lascia freddo il lettore, che mai 'vedrà' il supposto ritratto di Beatrice Cenci osservato più volte da Nathaniel Hawthorne. Per converso, il romanzo si articola su una complessità e su un incrocio di temi e di simboli di cui le pagine del diario sono prive. Si potrebbe supporre a questo punto che la diversità dei due testi sia solo funzionale alla natura diversa di ciascuno, e che il dramma della conoscenza messo in scena nel diario non abbia luogo nel romanzo per la semplice ragione che, nelle sue pagine, il vero ritratto di Beatrice Cenci non compare e che il dibattito tra le due amiche si svolge su un oggetto che, per quanto perfetto, è un falso: o meglio, che è un falso proprio perché è troppo perfetto. A suo modo, lo scrittore è stato esteticamente onesto e ha organizzato il romanzo così bene da non consentire mai al suo narratore di 'vedere' i veri occhi di Beatrice.

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[47] *Ibidem*.

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Nicoletta Caputo*

"In Tuscan fields, the winds in odours steeped": Mary Shelley's Tuscany

Abstract: Mary Shelley loved Italy, the country where she resided for more than five years – from 30 March 1818 to 25 July 1823 – after fleeing England with her husband, who left unpaid debts behind him. Tuscany is where the couple lived longest, and the region figures prominently in Mary's writings. Referring, occasionally, to the author's letters and journals, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry and letters, my article intends to explore the various forms such a presence assumes in a selection of works, notably the novel *Valperga* (1823), the narrative essay "Recollections of Italy" (1824), and the story "A Tale of the Passions" (1823). From this survey, it will emerge how Tuscany is present with its landscape and topography, climate, language, literature, history, traditions, and the daily life of the common people.

Keywords: Mary Shelley. Percy Bysshe Shelley. Italy. Tuscany. Fiction.

Italy was Mary Shelley's homeland of choice. She resided here permanently, in fact, for almost five and a half years. She and Percy came to Italy after fleeing England in stormy circumstances, when they were very young. Italy was on several occasions defined by the couple as the "Paradise of exiles", as proof of how much they felt at home. The definition, which later became proverbial, appeared for the first time in the poem "Julian and Maddalo" on the lips of Julian, who is a mask of the poet himself:

> Oh!
> How beautiful is sunset, when the glow
> Of heaven descends upon a land like thee,
> Thou paradise of exiles, Italy!
> Thy mountains, seas, and vineyards, and the towers
> Of cities they encircle! – It was ours
> To stand on thee, beholding it: […][1]

Percy composed these lines, which seem a real hymn to Italy, in September 1818, when, after leaving his family (who joined him later) in Bagni di Lucca, he settled in Este, in Villa Cappuccini, which his friend Lord Byron had rented and allowed him to use. The phrase "Paradise of exiles" returns in a letter the poet wrote on 17 January 1820, when he was in Pisa. In urging his cousin Thomas Medwin to join him, he asserted: "Italy is the place for you – the very place – The Paradise of exiles – the retreat

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[1] P.B. Shelley, "Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation", in Id., *Posthumous Poems*, London, John and Henry L. Hunt, 1824, p. 7.

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of Pariahs – but I am thinking of myself rather than of you".[2] Mary made the metaphor her own and reused it in the letter she wrote to Leigh Hunt on 9 September 1823 (i.e., fifteen days after her return to England), where she declared that she was relatively pleased, although she was not in the "Paradise of Exiles". The word 'Paradise' is even underlined in the original.[3]

The writer felt at home in Italy, as evidenced by the fact that she continued to reside here for another year after her husband's death, and left the country only because she was forced to do so by her father-in-law, Sir Timothy, who otherwise would not have contributed to the maintenance of his nephew Percy Florence, future heir to the title of baronet. Percy Florence was named so in honour of the city that gave birth to him. In fact, the couple's only child who survived infancy was born in Florence on 12 November 1819. This alone would suffice to show how much Italy played a central role in the author's life. As she herself declared, Italy witnessed her greatest joys and her greatest *sorrows*. In addition to her husband, she lost two children here, Clara, who died of dysentery in Venice when she was only one year old (on 24 September 1818), and William, who died of malaria in Rome at three and a half years (on 7 June 1819). Moreover, on 16 June 1822, while she was in San Terenzo, near Lerici, Mary had a miscarriage that, as the doctor later said, would have cost her life if Percy had not been prompt enough to immerse her in a tub full of ice, thus stopping the copious bleeding.[4] The double value that Italy had for the author is evident from the poem "The Choice", which she completed before leaving the country and transcribed on the back of the "Journal of Sorrow" that she kept in the first two years after Percy's death. Here, Italy is at first seen as a symbol of her loss and called "a tomb", but then the end of the second verse paragraph reveals to what a degree the poet experienced leaving Italy as a real uprooting, as yet another trauma she had to suffer: "Tear me not hence – here let me live & die, / In my adopted land, my country, Italy!".[5]

During their Italian sojourn, the Shelleys led an almost nomadic life: they moved incessantly, and constantly changed houses. Retracing all their movements in Mary's journals is extremely difficult. However, there is no doubt that Tuscany was the region the couple loved the most, and where they resided the longest. The overall lengthiest stay was in "dear Pisa",[6] whose mild climate Percy found particularly beneficial to his health.[7] As Mary wrote in a note to her husband's poems:

[2] P.B. SHELLEY, "17 January 1820", in ID., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F.L. JONES, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, Vol. II, p. 170.

[3] "I am in little neat lodgeings [*sic*] – my boy in bed, I quiet – and I will now talk to you; tell you what I have seen and heard, and with as little repining as I can try, by making the best of what I have, the certainty of your friendship & kindness, to rest half content tho' I am not in the 'Paradise of Exiles'" (M. SHELLEY, "To Leigh Hunt, 9 September 1823", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. B.B. BENNETT, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, Vol. I, p. 377).

[4] See P.B. SHELLEY, "18 June 1822", in ID., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. II, p. 434.

[5] M. SHELLEY, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, eds P.R. FELDMAN and D. SCOTT-KILVERT, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, Vol. II, pp. 490, 492.

[6] M. SHELLEY, "To Jane Williams, 19-20 February 1823", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, p. 311.

[7] This is what Mary communicated, with evident satisfaction, to Maria Gisborne: "You will be glad to hear that Shelley's health is much improved this winter – he is not quite well but he is much better – The air of Pisa

We then removed to Pisa, and took up our abode there for the winter. The extreme mildness of the climate suited Shelley, and his solitude was enlivened by an intercourse with several intimate friends. Chance cast us, strangely enough, on this quiet half-unpeopled town; but its very peace suited Shelley, – its river, the near mountains, and not distant sea, added to its attractions, and were the objects of many delightful excursions.[8]

The writer, however, had been sometimes merciless towards the city and its inhabitants, and, in the early days of her stay, she had sealed a very unflattering description stating in no uncertain terms that she detested the Pisans:

Pisa is a pretty town, but its inhabitants w[d] exercise all Hoggs vocabulary of scamps, raffs &c &c to fully describe their ragged-haired, shirtless condition. Many of them are students of the university & they are none of the genteelest of the crew. Then there are Bargees, beggars without number; galley slaves in their yellow & red dress with chains – the women in dirty cotton gowns trailing in the dirt – pink silk hats starting up in the air to run away from their ugly faces in this manner (for they always tie the bows at the points [of] their chins – & white satiny shoes – & fellows with bushy hair – large whiskers, canes in their hands, & a bit of dirty party coloured riband (a symbol of nobility) sticking in their button holes) that mean to look like the lords of the rabble but who only look like their drivers – The Pisans I dislike more than any of the Italians & none of them are as yet favourites with me.[9]

Yet, differently from what happened in the other Italian cities where the couple lived, in Pisa a circle formed around the Shelleys, which also included some locals: Francesco Pacchiani, professor at the University of Pisa; the improviser Tommaso Sgricci; the young Teresa Viviani, daughter of the Governor of Pisa and famous for being the Lady Emilia V., dedicatee of Percy Shelley's *Epipsychidion*; the doctor-surgeon Andrea Vaccà Berlinghieri, whom someone has identified as the inspirer of the character of Victor Frankenstein;[10] Count Pietro Gamba, exiled from Ravenna for political reasons, and his sister Teresa, Lord Byron's lover. In a letter written to his wife from Ravenna on 16 August 1821, while assessing whether or not to relocate to Florence, Percy even declared: "Our roots were never struck so deeply as at Pisa & the transplanted tree flourishes not".[11] From Pisa, the Shelleys moved to spend long periods in Bagni di Pisa, otherwise called San Giuliano Terme. In 1821, they remained there for nearly six months, from 8 May to 25 October.

Proof of how much the couple loved thermal localities is also the time they spent in Bagni di Lucca, which was one of their first destinations in Italy. The Shelleys – with Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, in tow – arrived in Italy on 30 March 1818, and after spending about one month in Milan, in May they were already in Tuscany. On the 7th they were in Pisa and on the 9th in Leghorn, a town that the author called "stupid"

is so mild and delightful and the exercise on horseback agrees with him particularly" (M. SHELLEY, "To Maria Gisborne, 20 December 1821", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, p. 213).

[8] M. SHELLEY, "Note on the Poems of 1820. By the Editor", in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. M. SHELLEY, London, Edward Moxon, 1839, p. 279.

[9] M. SHELLEY, "To Marianne Hunt, 24 February [error for 24 March] 1820", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, pp. 136-37.

[10] This thesis was advanced by Virgilio Papini in his essay-novel *Un the con Mary: un viaggio romantico. La vera storia del* Frankenstein, Lucca, Sodalizio per l'Arte, 2005. The author then re-proposed it in the episode of the television program *Mistero* broadcasted by "Italia 1" on 6 February 2014.

[11] P.B. SHELLEY, "16 August 1821", in ID., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. II, p. 339.

in her journal.[12] The following month, precisely on 11 June, from Leghorn they moved to Bagni di Lucca, to Casa Bertini, which Percy had rented from "Signor" Chiappa. Here they remained for more than two and a half months, until 31 August 1818. The literary product that was most influenced by the period spent in Bagni was certainly the second novel published by the author, which came out on 19 February 1823: *Valperga: or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*. It was in a letter she wrote to Leigh Hunt later that year that Mary described *Valperga*'s scenery and the actual landscape that had inspired her in the composition of the work:

> Passing through the plain of Lucca & the Val di Nievole you will see much of the scenery of Valperga – If you stay to rinfrescare there, my dear friend – go to the top of the tower of the palace of Guinigi an old tower as ancient as those times – look towards the opening of the hills, on the road to the Baths of Lucca, & on the banks of the Serchio & you will see the site of Valperga and towards the west you will see a dark wood where they will tell you there are the ruins of a castle which Castruccio built – & that wood is the scene of the incantations where Castruccio & Tripalda appear.[13]

Valperga is the name of the castle owned by the young Countess Euthanasia dei Adimari. The importance the toponym plays in the novel is already evident from the fact that it gives it its title. Valperga is an imaginary place, exquisitely feminine, which becomes the emblem of a utopian counter-history that contrasts male ambition and the logic of conquest at all costs with empathy and universal love. The position of Valperga is highly significant, since it is symbolically equidistant between Lucca and Florence, the two cities involved in the conflict between the Ghibellines and the Guelphs on which the story focuses.

The novel is rich in landscape descriptions where the author shows an extraordinary capacity for observation. If the castle of Valperga is an ideal place, the topography of Tuscany that is drawn in the work could not be more real in its detailed precision. As Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam note, *Valperga* can also be read as an actual map of the Shelleyan sites, since it traces the eventful itinerary of Mary and Percy's Italian sojourn:[14] the Alps, the Val di Susa, Lombardy, Rome, the Bay of Naples and the Vesuvius. Obviously, we also find the many places of their residence in Tuscany: Florence, Pisa, Lucca (birthplace of Castruccio), and Bagni di Lucca. The *incipit* to Chapter IX, entitled "Castle of Valperga described. Friendship and Love", follows the protagonist as he rides across the plain of Lucca towards the hills of Bagni and admires the Apennine peaks that stand out in front of him:

> "This is a well known road to me", thought Castruccio, as he rode across the plain of Lucca towards the hills of the Baths; "there is still that mountain, that as a craggy and mighty wall surmounts and bounds the other Apennines; the lower peaks are still congregated round it, attracting and arresting the clouds that pause on their summits, and then slowly roll off. What a splendid garb of snow these old mountains have thrown over themselves, to shield them from the *tramontano,* that buffets them all the winter long, while their black sides appear almost as the shadows of a marble statue".[15]

[12] M. SHELLEY, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, Vol. I, p. 209.

[13] M. SHELLEY, "To Leigh Hunt, 7 August 1823", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, p. 364.

[14] See M. SHELLEY, *Valperga. Vita e avventure di Castruccio, principe di Lucca*, a cura di L.M. CRISAFULLI e K. ELAM, Milano, Mondadori, (1823) 2021, p. XVII.

[15] M. SHELLEY, *Valperga: or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. T. RAJAN, Peterborough (Ontario), Broadview Press, (1823) 1998, p. 139.

The contemplation of the landscape, which shows evident affinities with the description taken from the letter to Leigh Hunt mentioned above, triggers a sort of journey back in time in Castruccio, resurfacing dormant memories of his childhood and adolescence:

> Castruccio's heart was much softened, as he successively recognized objects, which he had forgotten for so many years, and with which he had been most intimately acquainted. The peculiar form of the branches of a tree, the winding of an often-trod mountain-path, the murmurs of small streams, their banks bedecked with dwarf shrubs; things which would have appeared uncharacterized to one who viewed them for the first time; bore for him some distinguishing mark, some peculiar shape, which awoke within him memories that had been long laid asleep.[16]

The meticulous description of the route from Lucca to Valperga leads to the equally detailed presentation of the castle itself, and then culminates in the portrayal of its "lovely possessor".[17]

The Tuscan natural landscape is again overtly connected to the memorial process and assumes an autobiographical character in the already mentioned elegiac poem entitled "The Choice", which offers one of Mary Shelley's most accomplished literary expressions of her mourning for both her husband and her son William:

> 'Tis thus the past on which my spirit leans,
> Makes dearest to my soul Italian scenes. –
> In Tuscan fields, the winds in odours steeped
> From flowers and cypresses – when skies have wept,
> Shall like the notes of music – once most dear,
> Which brings the unstrung voice upon my ear
> Of one beloved, to memory display
> Past scenes – past joys – past hopes, in long array.
> The Serchio's stream upon whose banks he stood –
> The pools reflecting Pisa's old pine wood,
> The fire-flies beam – the aziolo's cry –
> All breath his spirit, which shall never die. –
> Such memories have linked these hills & caves,
> These woodland paths, & streams – & knelling waves
> Fast to each sad pulsation of my breast
> And made their melancholy arms the haven of my rest.[18]

However, it is in "Recollections of Italy" that we find an overall appreciation of Tuscany, which involves not only its natural landscape but also its inhabitants. Mary Shelley wrote this narrative essay in October 1823, a couple of months after her return to England, and påublished it in the *London Magazine*, anonymously, in January 1824. The "three weeks of incessant rain, at Midsummer" on which the narrative opens refer us to that aversion to the English climate that the author often manifested in her letters. Equally recurrent in her correspondence is the predilection for the mildness of the Italian (and Tuscan) climate. Such a preference is also expressed in the following description of the Sienese countryside, which is taken from "The Brother and Sister, an Italian Story":

[16] *Ibidem*.
[17] *Ibidem*, p. 141.
[18] M. SHELLEY, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, Vol. II, pp. 493-94.

Spring was opening with all the beauty which that season showers upon favoured Italy; while blights and chilly rain usually characterise it in these northern lands. The almond and peach-trees were in blossom; and the vine-dresser sang at his work, perched with his pruning-knife among the trees. Blossoms and flowers, in laughing plenty, graced the soil; and the trees, swelling with buds ready to expand into leaves, seemed to feel the life that animated their dark old boughs.[19]

A reason for which Mary resented leaving Pisa was precisely the climate, as we infer from a letter she wrote to Jane Williams from Genoa: "I do not know what to say to you of Marianne [Hunt]'s health, for I do not know what to think of it myself. She ought to have remained at Pisa for this is a frightful climate, cold & rainy. […] This place is almost as unlike Pisa as England can be – We have a succession of rains, storms & wind, such as I never before witnessed in Italy".[20]

Going back to "Recollections of Italy", the work is written in the form of a dialogue and, as the title suggests, it is autobiographical. The setting is Henley upon Thames, a town near Marlow, where the Shelleys lived between 1817 and 1818 (just before moving to Italy), and where Mary concluded *Frankenstein*, conceived the novel *Valperga* and gave birth to their daughter Clara. The narrator embodies the typical English traveller who is too self-referential and biased to appreciate the beauties of Italy. He is the un-Italianised English "endowed with Spurzheim's bump, denominated stayathomeativeness", from whom the Anglo-Italian Mary will distance herself in the review of "The English in Italy", published in 1826 in the *Westminster Review*.[21] The narrator's interlocutor, Edmund Malville, represents instead the author's point of view, and his description of Italian localities incorporates excerpts from the Shelleys' writings. For example, the excursion from Bagni di Pisa to Vicopisano follows the trip that the Shelleys made with Edward and Jane Williams on 15 September 1821, and the description of the view that a moved Malville puts on the lips of his "best, and now lost friend" incorporates *verbatim* a prose fragment by Shelley himself, which would be published only in 1862:

"Look", cried my best, and now lost friend, "behold the mountains that sweep into the plain like waves that meet in a chasm; the olive woods are as green as a sea, and are waving in the wind; the shadows of the clouds are spotting the bosoms of the hills; a heron comes sailing over us; a butterfly flits near; at intervals the pines give forth their sweet and prolonged response to the wind, the myrtle bushes are in bud, and the soil beneath us is carpeted with odoriferous flowers".[22]

The "carpet of odoriferous flowers" that appears in the last two quoted passages could be reminiscent of the "Prato Fiorito", which, as we learn from the Shelleys' letters and the author's journals, was the destination of one of Mary and Percy's rides during their stay in Bagni di Lucca.[23] Although neither writer properly described the flowery spot

[19] [M. SHELLEY], "The Brother and Sister, an Italian Story", in *The Keepsake* for MDCCCXXXIII, ed. F. MANSEL REYNOLDS, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1832, pp. 124-25.

[20] M. SHELLEY, "To Jane Willams, 5 December 1822", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, pp. 295, 297.

[21] See [M. SHELLEY], "The English in Italy", *The Westminster Review*, October 1826, pp. 327-28.

[22] [M. SHELLEY], "Recollections of Italy", *The London Magazine*, January 1824, pp. 25-26. For Percy's virtually identical version, see P.B. SHELLEY, "Fragment xxxviii", in ID., *Relics of Shelley*, ed. R. GARNETT, London, Edward Moxon & Co., 1862, pp. 89-90.

[23] In her letter to Mary Gisborne of 2 July, Mary wrote: "For us we generally walk Except last Tuesday,

in their records, the impression they received must have been enormous. In fact, as Percy told his cousin, the scent of jonquils almost made him faint:

He did not there [in Bagni di Lucca] forget to visit the Prato fiorito, a spot on the mountain, carpeted with jonquils, from which the place takes the name of the Meadow of Flowers. So powerful is their odour, that many persons have fainted with their excess of sweetness, and Shelley has described to me, that they were nearly producing on him the same effect.[24]

That the memory, for Percy at least, was also lasting is proved by *Epipsychidion*, which he composed three years later in Pisa, and where we see how the scent of jonquils is deemed capable of inducing fainting: "And from the moss violets and jonquils peep /And dart their arrowy odour through the brain / Till you might faint with that delicious pain".[25]

The following passage is taken from "Recollections of Italy" and contains excerpts from the description of Tuscany and its inhabitants. It is interesting to note how the judgment on the Tuscans, which opens the section, is very different from the one quoted above, which dated back to the early days of Mary Shelley's stay in Pisa:

… and now [I] bring you to Tuscany. After all I have said of the delights of the south of Italy I would choose Tuscany for a residence. Its inhabitants are courteous and civilized. I confess that there is a charm for me in the manners of the common people and servants. Perhaps this is partly to be accounted for from the contrast which they form with those of my native country; and all that is unusual, by divesting common life of its familiar garb, gives an air of gala to everyday concerns. These good people are courteous, and there is much *piquanc*e in the shades of distinction which they make between respect and servility, ease of address and impertinence. Yet this is little seen and appreciated among their English visitors. […] The country of Tuscany is cultivated and fertile, although it does not bear the same stamp of excessive luxury as in the south. […] In spring, nature arises in beauty from her prison, and rains sunbeams and life upon the land. Summer comes up in its green array, giving labour and reward to the peasants. Their plenteous harvests, their Virgilian threshing floors, and looks of busy happiness, are delightful to me. The balmy air of night, Hesperus in his glowing palace of sunlight, the flower-starred earth, the glittering waters, the ripening grapes, the chestnut copses, the cuckoo, and the nightingale, – such is the assemblage which is to me what balls and parties are to others. And if a storm come, rushing like an armed band over the country, filling the torrents, bending the proud heads of the trees, causing the clouds' deafening music to resound, and the lightning to fill the air with splendour; I am still enchanted by the spectacle which diversifies what I have heard named the monotonous blue skies of Italy.
In Tuscany the streams are fresh and full, the plains decorated with waving corn, shadowed by trees and trellised vines, and the mountains arise in woody majesty behind to give dignity to the scene.[26]

Thus, the Tuscans would be "courteous and civilized". The primacy of Tuscany in terms of 'civilisation' had already been expressed in the *incipit* of *Valperga*, where it

When Shelley and I took a long ride to il prato fiorito; a flowery meadow on the top of one of the neighbouring Appenines" (M. SHELLEY, "To Maria Gisborne, 2 July 1818", in EAD., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. I, p. 74). The tour is recorded in almost identical terms in her journal, see. M. SHELLEY, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, Vol. I, p. 216. This, instead, is the episode in the version that Percy gave of it, on 10 July, in a letter addressed again to John and Maria Gisborne: "We have ridden – Mary & I – once only to a place called Prato fiorito on the top of the mountains" (P.B. SHELLEY, "18 June 1822", in ID., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. II, p. 20).

[24] T. MEDWIN, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, London, Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847, Vol. I, pp. 313-14.

[25] P.B. SHELLEY, *Epipsychidion*, in ID., *Selected Poems*, ed. T. WEBB, London, John Dent, 1977, p. 137, vv. 450-52.

[26] [M. SHELLEY], "Recollections of Italy", pp. 24-25.

was rooted in history and matched to another, unfortunately less flattering, primacy. That of bloody infighting:

> The other nations of Europe were yet immersed in barbarism, when Italy, where the light of civilization had never been wholly eclipsed, began to emerge from the darkness of the ruin of the Western Empire, and to catch from the East the returning rays of literature and science. [...] Lombardy and Tuscany, the most civilized districts of Italy, exhibited astonishing specimens of human genius; but at the same time they were torn to pieces by domestic faction, and almost destroyed by the fury of civil wars.[27]

This short passage introduces another form that 'Tuscanity' assumes in Mary Shelley's writings. As the novel *Valperga* shows, in them we find not only the natural landscape of Tuscany, but its history and traditions as well. According to the author, the freedom and autonomy that the medieval Tuscan republics enjoyed had to be a source of pride and rebirth for contemporary Italy. They could offer a stimulus to the independence movements that were stirring Italy and other Mediterranean countries in those years. The medieval Tuscan setting of *Valperga* became an opportunity for Mary Shelley to express herself on an issue she had much at heart: the political situation of Italy at her time. This is not only true of the novel, but also, and to an even greater extent, of "A Tale of the Passions", a story the author wrote while working on *Valperga* and published in January 1823 in the second issue of *The Liberal*, the periodical her husband conceived with Lord Byron and Leigh Hunt during their stay in Pisa.

The unfortunate protagonist of the story, Despina, is the Ghibelline counterpart of the protagonist of *Valperga*, the Guelph Euthanasia. Actually, "A Tale of the Passions" is a sort of prequel to the novel, as we are told that Castruccio Castracani's father has been the "faithful page and companion" of "the unfortunate Manfred, king of Naples".[28] Despina and Euthanasia are two brave and "pure" women who sacrifice themselves for a pure political ideal. The creation of Despina while working on the novel enabled the author to carry on a discourse *in utramque partem* to highlight, beyond factional divisions, a nobility of heart and a spirit of self-sacrifice that are peculiarly feminine and stand in sharp contrast with the cruelty of a power that rests, instead, on unbridled ambition, intrigue, and abuse. Despina and Euthanasia risk everything to reach a peaceful solution in a world dominated by power-hungry men who cannot see beyond war and violence.[29]

As hinted above, setting the story in thirteenth-century Tuscany enabled the author to introduce the contemporary 'Italian question', a topic of great importance for the circle that revolved around *The Liberal*. The narrator passes judgment on the events: on the fate of the house of Swabia, on Charles d'Anjou, and on the role of Pope Clement

[27] M. Shelley, *Valperga*, ed. T. Rajan, p. 57.

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 58.

[29] The ways in which Mary Shelley, in various of her works, engages in a counter-discourse aimed at denouncing the patriarchal system on which the (male) concept of fame is founded, and proposes instead a different logic, based on human affections and universal love, are explored in my essay "'The most civilized district of Italy': Mary Shelley's Tuscan Tales Between History, Literary Echoes and Politics", in C. Del Grazia e G. Milone (a cura di), *Immagini e paesaggi della Toscana nella tradizione letteraria e artistica europea*, Lucca, Edizioni La Vela, 2022, pp. 15-38.

IV, the 'arch enemy' of Manfred of Swabia first, and then of his nephew Corradino.[30] Interestingly, such judgments are expressed using a terminology that is often blatantly anachronistic when applied to the thirteenth century. Despina, for instance, while pleading her cause with Lostendardo, the villain of the story, passionately exclaims: "if you could hear the united voice of Italy".[31] In this patent anachronism we find an explicit reference to the unification of Italy, which the Pisan Circle advocated. In the same confrontation, the girl also declares that the Italians are born free, and defines the Pope as "the enemy of freedom and virtue".[32] Then, in the final part of the story, when the king of Naples defeats Corradino and has him executed in the marketplace at Naples, we are even told that "the same tragedy was acted on those shores which has been renewed in our days",[33] and the sobbing subjects who mourn the death of Corradino are called "oppressed and conquered".[34] The progressist readers of *The Liberal* could not fail to grasp the connection with the political situation of their time. Actually, only a couple of years earlier, in 1820-1821, the Sicilian, Neapolitan, and Piedmontese insurrectional movements had been crushed by king Ferdinand and the Austrians, with the implicit support of Pope Pius VII, who had excommunicated the Carbonari in 1817.

If in *Valperga* we only find a covert reference to the Italian risings (to the Piedmontese insurrection, to be precise), in "A Tale of the Passions" the author is much more explicit both in offering political evaluations and in encouraging the Italian cause, which, as the following extracts show, finds a prefiguration in the opposition to the foreign "tyrant" Charles d'Anjou:

> Charles himself has left [Florence], and is gone to Naples to prepare for this war. But he is detested there, as a tyrant and a robber, and Corradino will be received in the Regno as a saviour.[35]

> Let [Charles] return to Provence, and reign with paltry despotism over the luxurious and servile French; the free-born Italians require another Lord. […] Their king, like them, should be clothed in the armour of valour and simplicity.[36]

The greater degree of explicitness that we find in this story is not surprising: *Valperga* had to find a publisher, and the reputation of 'radicals' that the Shelley circle had earned made the task anything but easy. In fact, when Percy wrote to the publisher Charles Ollier to propose the publication of the novel, he inserted a postscript precisely to insist that it was not a risky enterprise, since "the novel ha[d] not the smallest tincture of any peculiar theories in politics or religion".[37] When writing for a declaredly reformist periodical, the author was instead permitted far greater freedom. What in *Valperga* was a fleetingly suggested, allusive subtext, in "A Tale of the Passions" could come out into the open.[38]

[30] [M. SHELLEY], "A Tale of the Passions", *The Liberal. Verse and Prose from the South*, 1 (2), 1823, p. 321.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 307.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 310.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 323.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 325.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 299.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 310.
[37] P.B. SHELLEY, "25 September 1821", in ID., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. II, p. 355.
[38] For a more complete analysis of how the story narrated in "A Tale of the Passions" stands as a prefiguration

In the tale, we find History with a capital H. It opens on a description of the situation of Italy after Manfred's defeat.[39] Battles are mentioned, some of which fought in Tuscany, such as that of Montaperti, where the son of the elderly couple with whom the narrative begins was killed:

"Since the battle of Monte Aperto, thou hast never been well washed of [the blood] shed by thee and thy confederates; — and how could ye? for the Arno has never since run clear of the blood then spilt". — "And if the sea were red with that blood, still while there is any of the Guelphs' to spill, I am ready to spill it, were it not for thee. Thou dost well to mention Monte Aperto, and thou wouldst do better to remember over whom its grass now grows".[40]

In the concluding section, the events that led to the tragic end of Corradino are summarised: his advance first, then his defeat by the forces of Charles d'Anjou at Tagliacozzo, up to his execution in the marketplace at Naples.[41]

In "A Tale of the Passions", however, we also find microhistory, as the narrator dwells abundantly on the daily life of ordinary people. The author borrowed this aspect chiefly from two of the many historical texts on the Italian Middle Ages she had consulted as research for *Valperga*: Ludovico Muratori's *Dissertations on Italian Antiquities* (1751-1755) and Giovanni Villani's *New Chronicle* (published posthumously in 1537). The writer, in fact, had turned to her sources not only to acquire a thorough knowledge of the events, but to learn about the customs and traditions as well. A peculiar headgear of that period, the "*fazioles*", is mentioned; we are then told that, at that time, it was usual to place one plate of *minestra* in the middle of the table so that everyone could eat with his spoon from it.[42] Great attention is also paid to tradition and folklore, as the following description of the first of May celebrations shows:

The first of May was ever a day of rejoicing and festivity at Florence. The youth of both sexes, of the highest rank, paraded the streets, crowned with flowers, and singing the canzonets of the day. In the evening they assembled in the *Piazza del Duomo*, and spent the hours in dancing. The *Carroccio* was led through the principal streets, the ringing of its bell drowned in the peals that rang from every belfry in the city, and in the music of fifes and drums which made a part of the procession that followed it. […] The principal families vied with each other in the display of their magnificence during the festival. The knights followed the *Carroccio* on horseback, and the windows were filled with ladies who leant upon gold-inwoven carpets, while their own dresses, at once simple and elegant, their only ornaments flowers, contrasted with the glittering tapestry and the brilliant colours of the flags of the various communities.[43]

In "A Tale of the Passions" we have the anecdotal aspect of history too, which is embodied by Buzeccha, the Saracen chess player. This character is drawn from Villani's *Chronicle*. In the passage below, we also meet Guido Novello dei Guidi, the son-in-law of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca of Dantesque memory. Mary Shelley had read,

of the contemporary Italian cause, see my article "Con occhi britannici. Mary Shelley, Felicia Hemans e i moti rivoluzionari italiani del 1820-21", *LEA - Lingue e Letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, 11, 2022, pp. 61-78.

39 See [M. SHELLEY], "A Tale of the Passions", p. 289.

40 *Ibidem*, p. 294.

41 See *ibidem*, pp. 321-25.

42 See *ibidem*, pp. 290, 297.

43 *Ibidem*, pp. 289-90.

in Italian, the whole *Divine Comedy*, which is an important literary intertext for both this story and the novel *Valperga*. There, she also found the character of Manfred of Swabia, whose virtual presence pervades "A Tale of the Passions":

> After a while, Buzeccha introduced his favourite subject of chess-playing; he recounted some wonderfully good strokes he had achieved, and related to Ricciardo how before the *Palagio del Popolo*, in the presence of Count Guido Novello de' Giudi [*sic*], then *Vicare* of the city, he had played an hour at three chess-boards with three of the best chess-players in Florence, playing two by memory, and one by sight; and out of three games which made the board, he had won two.[44]

Apart from the material Mary Shelley derived from her sources, however, "A Tale of the Passions" also feeds on her experiential knowledge. It is evident, in fact, that the author was very familiar with Tuscan localities. Sites of Florence are mentioned: Piazza del Duomo, the Palagio del Governo, and Porta Romana. We find Lucca and Vicopisano, and Pisa, with the Arno and Palazzo Lanfranchi, where Lord Byron and Leigh Hunt lived at the time the story was written. Then, we have the language. Just as she did in her letters, Shelley scattered the pages of her story (especially the first and last) with Italian words, which were often printed in italics: "*minestra*", "*festa*", "*contadini*", "*Vicario*", and "Podesta". We even find phrases, such as "Gesu Maria!" or "Messer lo Forestiere".[45] This is further proof of the author's profound Anglo-Italianness, which emerges as much from her letters and journals as it does from her works.

What this paper has endeavoured to show is how Mary Shelley's love for Tuscany was reflected in her writings, where the region is copiously and variously present through its natural landscape and topography, climate, language, literature, history, traditions, and, also, the daily life of its people. Such richness and variety are due to the winning combination of a knowledge derived from personal experience and a careful, meticulous, and 'passionate' study of texts and documents.

[44] *Ibidem*, p. 300. This, instead, is the passage in the source: "In questi tempi venne in Firenze uno Saracino ch'avea nome Buzzeca, ed era il migliore maestro di giucare a scacchi, e in su il palagio del popolo dinanzi al conte Guido Novello giucò a un'ora a tre scacchieri co' migliori maestri di scacchi di Firenze, cogli due a mente, e coll'uno a veduta, e gli due giuochi vinse, e l'uno fece tavola; la qual cosa fu tenuta grande maraviglia" (G. VILLANI, *Nuova Cronica*, a cura di G. PORTA, Parma, Fondazione Pietro Bembo/Guanda, [1537] 1991, p. 349). Mary Shelley also published an essay on Giovanni Villani, which appeared in the fourth (and last) issue of *The Liberal*.

[45] See [M. SHELLEY], "A Tale of the Passions", pp. 291, 296, 297, 300, 317, 318, 319. As for her letters, although inserts from other foreign languages often appear, Italian (sometimes adapted to English) is the most consistent presence. The author ranges from opening and closing formulas to entire sentences, exclamations, single words, and quotations of modes and expressions that she found peculiar. Her correspondence even includes twenty-one letters written entirely in Italian.

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Anja Meyer*

Female Visualities and Urban Experience in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*

Abstract: Amy Levy's first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), tells the story of four orphaned sisters starting a photography business in late Victorian London. The decision to abandon the domestic safe environment in favour of the risks and pleasures of the modern city allows them to redefine conventional ideologies of space and gender relations. The New Woman proposed by Levy is an urban artist who enjoys riding the omnibus and gazing out at the city through a renovated visual ability. This essay investigates the trope of the female gaze in a reconfiguration of old gender hierarchies, as well as the implications for a woman living in a *fin-de-siècle* urban environment to find opportunities for social recognition and emancipation.

Keywords: Amy Levy. *The Romance of a Shop*. New Woman. Photography. Gaze.

In her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*[1] (1888), Amy Levy explores the theme of the modern city in late Victorian London as the aptest background for the emergence of the New Woman, an emancipated female character who seeks to become independent and enjoys gazing freely at the boundless sights of the city. The novel's protagonists, four orphaned sisters, make an unconventional decision to open a photography studio in the heart of the city, which exposes them to the risks and pleasures of urban life, such as meeting new people, working in a male business, and travelling around with new modes of transportation. The vibrancy and dynamism of the city's public spaces allow them to break free from the constraints of the Victorian domestic space, while managing to economically sustain themselves jointly. Gertrude, the most introspective of the sisters and the one who most closely resembles the author, stands out as an aspiring urban *flâneuse*, whose camera-like perspective allows her to observe and capture a city in turmoil while riding on top of the omnibus. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the significance of the urban motif and the trope of vision as fundamental elements in the development of a new type of woman, who distinguishes herself as an urban figure characterised by her own subjective perception of reality.

Anglo-Jewish writer Amy Levy has been rediscovered by critical scholarship in the last decades due to a growing interest in rescuing silenced female voices from the Victorian Age and, consequently, an increased accessibility to her texts. Levy was born in an upper middle-class family in 1861 and became the first Jewish woman to attend the Newnham College at Cambridge University. During her brief life (1861-1889), she

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[1] A. Levy, *The Romance of a Shop*, Cambridge, Black Apollo Press, (1888) 2005. Further references from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

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wrote three novels, three collections of poems, short stories, and periodical essays, as well as translations of Hebrew and German poetry. As a well-educated and emancipated woman, Levy witnessed first-hand the significant changes of Western culture in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, which she vividly chronicled in her writings, paying particular attention to the condition of the woman and the restrictions she was subjected to. Indeed, as Cynthia Scheinberg points out, "many of the issues [...] [Levy] addresses in her writing speak to concerns of the contemporary critical moment: Jewish Diasporic identity, lesbian identity, women's emancipation, and more general theories of 'otherness' within the English literary tradition".[2] During her lifetime, she was admired by literary figures such as Richard Garnett and Oscar Wilde, among others. After she committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight, due to depression, Wilde wrote Levy's obituary, praising her artistic talent and calling her a "girl of genius".[3]

Much of Levy's literary production is characterised by the depiction of the urban experience, particularly that of London, as seen through the eyes of women. This is precisely the case of her debut novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), in which she places the Lorimer sisters at the centre of a rapidly evolving modern city, where they open a photography business in order to become financially independent. As a matter of fact, Levy had travelled around many European cities and actively participated in London's literary life by attending writers' clubs and circles, eventually establishing herself as a professional woman who economically supported herself through her literary activities. She would thus embody the *status* of the New Woman, namely a contemporary woman who defied traditional conceptions of femininity by plunging into urban life as a freelancer. As Sally Ledger evidences:

> The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement.[4]

Levy wrote prolifically on women's issues and her fiction frequently addressed the topic of the new opportunities for women cropping up in late Victorian London's urban setting, as well as the controversies fuelled by the New Woman's challenging attitude towards the traditional constraints of Victorian society.[5] In *The Romance of a Shop*, in fact, Levy describes the unorthodox decision of four sisters to determine their future by living in the city as emancipated working women. By doing so, she aimed to demonstrate how the New Woman was a distinctly urban figure whose self-realisation was directly influenced by the circumstances of metropolitan life.

[2] C. Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture,* Cambridge, CUP, 2002, p. 190.

[3] C. Pullen, *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy*, Kingston upon Thames, Kingston U.P., 2010, p. 7.

[4] S. Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle,* Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1997, p. 1.

[5] See I. Dobosiewicz, "'She Dwells in London Town': The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy", *Revista Anglo Saxonica*, 3 (9), 2015, p. 84.

When the Lorimer sisters – Gertrude, Fanny, Lucy, and Phyllis – suddenly lose their father, they find themselves on the verge of starvation. If aware of the extraordinary risk of their decision, they choose to stay together and survive by their own means, refusing to accept a fate that would see them divided among the various relatives who had offered them hospitality and protection. Having learned the art of photography from their father, they decide to leave the quiet area of Campden Hill and move to the crowded and lively Baker Street in the heart of London, where they open a photography studio, much to the dismay of the general public. Together with Gertrude, the eldest sister and main protagonist of the novel, the urban environment plays a fundamental role as an element intrinsically related to the progressive development of the female characters. As scholar Deborah Epstein Nord underlines, the "opportunities afforded by London attracted aspiring women novelists, social investigators and political activists, but the city also represented the antithesis of those private and protected spaces that middle-class women traditionally had occupied".[6] As a matter of fact, the sisters leave a safe domestic space – their big family house surrounded by a garden – to rent "two floors […] above a chemist's shop" (p. 36) in a busy central street in London, where the distinction between domestic and commercial space, private and public sphere, becomes blurred.[7] This spacial transition epitomises "a historical movement from old to new gender roles, the latter exemplified by the arrival of an urban New Woman".[8] Levy depicts a vibrant urban environment connoted by a multitude of interactions between people, events and venues which generate a sense of rhythm and vitality. London is a constantly changing, gathering space for people of various social classes and with different customs, and the four sisters start to enjoy the pleasures and opportunities offered by it:

> Life, indeed, was opening up for them in more ways than one. The calling which they pursued brought them into contact with all sorts and conditions of men, among them, people in many ways more congenial to them than the mass of their former acquaintance; intercourse with the latter having come about in most cases through "juxtaposition" rather than "affinity". They began to get glimpses of a world more varied and interesting than their own. (p. 104)

In the busy urban space, the sisters have the opportunity to encounter new people by chance or for working reasons and, therefore, to create new relationships. Furthermore, they enjoy watching and listening to what is happening in the city, especially Gertrude, an aspiring urban artist who "was beginning, for the first time, to find her own level; to taste the sweets of genuine work and genuine social intercourse" (*ibidem*). The increasing presence of women seeking independence in late Victorian London and the opportunity of moving around freely is a central theme in Levy's urban vision. In her short essay "Women and Club Life", published, like the novel, in 1888, she claims that the limitations of patriarchal family life relegated women to the sole roles

[6] D. Epstein Nord, "'Neither Pairs nor Odd': Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London", *Signs*, 15 (4), Summer 1990, p. 734.

[7] See I. Dobosiewicz, "'She Dwells in London Town': The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy", p. 87.

[8] S. Brooke Cameron and D. Bird, "Sisterly Bonds and Rewriting Urban Gendered Spheres in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", *Victorian Review*, 40 (1), 2014, p. 79.

of mother and wife, preventing them from accessing the city and all of its resources, such as libraries, literary clubs and other cultural venues. In such a context, according to Levy, the woman's club could offer them an alternative world of opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable: "And here is a haven of refuge, where we can write our letters and read the news, undisturbed by the importunities of a family circle that can never bring itself to regard feminine leisure and feminine solitude as things to be respected".[9] Levy thus describes the club as a safe place where women, liberated from the restrictions of the family circle, are able to forge relationships with people they share affinities with and gain new positions in line with their passions and interests, just like the Lorimer sisters do by opening their own photography business in the centre of London.[10] As scholars Cameron and Bird clearly point out, both the short essay and the novel explore "how alternative social structures might liberate women from the constraints of traditional family life";[11] the club and the shop are instrumental in converting the 'old' woman "who owns no interest beyond the circle of home"[12] into the 'new' one, striving to become independent and willing to expand her knowledge of the world.

In the frenetic and dangerous Victorian London, the shop-apartment at 20B Upper Baker Street comes to represent a safe domestic space from which the Lorimer sisters can easily move and enjoy the energy of city life. In this female-centred sphere, they both work and live together, managing to sustain themselves jointly. There is no need for male involvement because of the effective organisation and division of labour they planned before their arrival in London:

"Gertrude and I," went on Lucy, "would do the work, and you Fanny, if you would, should be our housekeeper."
"And I," cried Phyllis, her great eyes shining, "I would walk up and down outside, like that man in the High Street, who tells me every day what a beautiful picture I should make". (p. 14)

The strong bond between the sisters seems to guarantee a balanced subdivision of work and pleasure in the feminine microcosm situated at 20B Upper Baker Street. Much differently from the typical middle-class Victorian house, which tended to isolate women from the rest of society, this space becomes both a safe haven from the dangers of the city and an observation point gravitating between the streets of London and a voyeuristic view of city life captured from the window. Phyllis, the youngest of the sisters, is particularly keen on staring out the window:

"After the meal, Phyllis went over to the window, drew up the blind, and amused herself, as was her frequent custom, by looking into the street."
"I wish you wouldn't do that," said Lucy; "anyone can see right into the room". (p. 70)

Phyllis enjoys so much observing the chaotic street life that, disregarding the Victorian etiquette for ladies, she cannot help commenting on what people do: "'There is a light

[9] A. LEVY, "Women and Club Life", in EAD., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-1889*, ed. M. NEW, Gainesville, Florida U.P., (1888) 1993, p. 533.
[10] See S. BROOKE CAMERON and D. BIRD, "Sisterly Bonds and Rewriting Urban Gendered Spheres", p. 80.
[11] *Ibidem.*
[12] A. LEVY, "Women and Club Life", p. 537.

in Frank Jermyn's window—the top one,' she cried; 'I suppose he is dressing. He told me he had an early dance in Harley Street. I wish I were going to a dance'" (*ibidem*). Similarly to the lens of a photographic camera, the window glass offers the sisters a unique viewpoint on the outside world, allowing them to keenly observe the ever-changing metropolitan spectacle from the safety of their studio.

The sisters, however, do not simply stare at the window, but also physically enter the city streets for the pleasure of visual consumption. In one of the novel's most memorable episodes, Gertrude takes an omnibus ride, where she is exposed to both the joys and hazards of the new and fascinating metropolitan environment:

> Indeed, for Gertrude, the humors of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Campden Hill to regions where the pulses of the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbed. (p. 41)

In fact, as an aspiring artist of the city, she longs to be immersed in its sights and sounds, which are a source of inspiration. For this reason, she excludes the possibility to travel by underground railway with her sister Phyllis: "'Because one cannot afford a carriage or even a hansom cab,' she argued to herself, 'is one to be shut up away from the sunlight and the streets?'". Instead, she is seen "mounting boldly to the top of an Atlas omnibus" (*ibidem*). As scholar Ana Parejo Vadillo observes, the specific mention of the *Atlas* omnibus demonstrates Levy's familiarity with London's transportation system, as well as her interest in exposing women's interaction with the city through it.[13] It should be noted that this type of public transportation had been originally designed with the aim of giving priority to the accommodation of ladies and children, who were supposed to travel on the interior level of the omnibus, while men would occupy the open top.[14] Gertrude's decision to sit at the top of it reflects not only the increasing mobility of women in late Victorian London, but also her disregard for conventional customs in order to experience the aesthetic pleasure of sightseeing. In this context, the use of mass transit may be regarded as a significant motif linked to modernity, particularly to a reconfiguration of gender and class in metropolitan life, as it enables a single woman like Gertrude to enjoy a favourable view from above a new means of transport without risking to lose her honour for wandering alone outside the domestic space.

The protagonist's predilection for sensory consumption in the urban environment recalls the figure of the *fin-de-siècle* urban stroller in search of visual stimuli, namely the *flâneur*, who was first explored and popularised by French writer Charles Baudelaire in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863). According to Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is a solitary artist, a dandy who loves mixing with the crowd and observing the myriad expressions of the modern city. He is associated with the act of gazing, which makes him a solitary spectator visually consuming the facets and attractions of the city. However, it was German philosopher Walter Benjamin who consecrated the *flâneur* as the

[13] See A. Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 71-72.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

icon of modernist culture in his seminal work *The Arcades Project*.[15] In this exploration of the effects of urban life on the human psyche, Benjamin makes a distinction with regard to the notion of experience, identifying the complementary concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.[16] While *Erlebnis* refers to the temporary shock and estrangement caused by the first overwhelming sensory stimulation produced by modern city life, *Erfahrung* generates a more positive and lasting reaction, as it relates to the *flâneur*'s movement and wandering, to an unmediated sensorial experience of the city's multitude of sights, sounds, and odours. As a modern *flâneuse*, a *flâneur*'s female counterpart, Gertrude reacts to the city in a way that may be understood through Benjamin's concept of *Erfahrung*, since her mobility enables her to immediately experience the city's variety of sights and noises.[17] Through her imaginative and sensitive gaze she brings the city to life, as when Levy describes her enthusiasm for the system of illumination: "Gertrude […] had herself a secret, childish love for the gas-lit street, for the sight of the hurrying people, the lamps, the hansom cabs, flickering in and out the yellow haze, like so many fire-flies" (p. 70). In this passage, the city appears to be animated due to the constant movement of people and cabs, which look like small luminous fireflies at night leaving a luminous trail in their wake. Gertrude's gaze, which recalls the use of photography as an artistic medium,[18] will evolve along with her self-awareness over the course of the narrative, becoming, at times, an instrument of defence as well as a means of enacting her personal point of view.

As several critics have evidenced, the urban New Woman – the *flâneuse* – could not represent, by the end of the nineteenth century, an equal counterpart of the male *flâneur.* According to Janet Wolff, for one, women were primarily the object of a male gaze and, as such, were not regarded as real participants in the act of gazing.[19] As a result, the city was mainly a space for men's adventure and visual pleasure. Furthermore, in Martha Vicinus's words, the city and its public spaces were not safe havens for women: "a lady was simply not supposed to be seen aimlessly wandering the streets",[20] as this would have posed a threat to her reputation. This becomes clear when, on a bright winter day, Gertrude decides to take an omnibus ride, with "her hair blowing gaily in the breeze, her ill-gloved hands clasped about a bulky note-book" (p. 64). She then meets the gaze of Frank, an artist living across her studio, who takes off his sombrero and waves it to greet her. This pleasurable moment is, however, immediately spoiled the instant Gertrude catches her aunt's gaze, which is filled with "speechless

[15] See W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, eds and Engl. trans. H. EILAND and K. MCLAUGHLIN, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard U.P., (1982) 1999 (or. title *Passagenwerk*).

[16] See B. SEAL, "Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur", 14 November 2013, https://psychogeographicreview.com/baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/ (last accessed on 18 March 2022).

[17] See I. DOBOSIEWICZ, "'She Dwells in London Town': The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy", p. 89.

[18] See M. CHIA-CHIEH TSENG, "Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? Redefining Gender, Gaze, and Photography in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", in E.V. SHABLIY, D. KUROCHKIN and K. O'DONNELL (eds), *Women's Emancipation Writing at the Fin de Siècle,* New York, Routledge, 2018.

[19] See J. WOLFF, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Los Angeles, California U.P., 1990, p. 28.

[20] M. VICINUS, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1985, p. 297.

horror" at the inappropriateness of her behaviour. From an open carriage, her aunt's disapproving "frozen stare of nonrecognition with a humiliating consciousness of the disadvantages of her own position" (*ibidem*) is enough to make Gertrude stop looking outward and realise being the object of a negative gaze that epitomises an old generation's conservative perspective. The weight of such a meaningful gaze makes Gertrude feel ashamed and "undignified". She has thus internalised the aunt's reproach without the need for words, simply by being the target of her hostile gaze, which makes it hard for her to continue enjoying the urban journey.

In other circumstances, Gertrude and her sisters are also subjected to male gazes that reinforce the notion of women as visual objects for male pleasure, rather than equal counterparts. When, for instance, Gertrude meets for the first time Sidney Darrell, a painter of the Royal Academy and a perfect example of the modern *flâneur*, she seems to endure the weight of his gaze when "looking up and meeting the cold, grey glance" (p. 73). Yet, Gertrude's identity as a novice female photographer is directly challenged by the painter's confident and masculine gaze. In front of "his heavy-lidded eyes", she instantly feels uncomfortable and worries about her external appearance as a result of the internalisation of the man's judgmental gaze: "What was there in this man's gaze that made her, all at once, feel old and awkward, ridiculous and dowdy?". Gertrude is intimidated by his "indifferent politeness through which she seemed to detect the lurking contempt" to the point of "beginning to take part not only against herself but also against the type of woman to which she belonged" (*ibidem*). At this stage, Gertrude is still new to the photographic profession and has made no contacts in the social circle. She is vulnerable and lacks the confidence to work as a self-sufficient woman. Following a simple exchange of gazes, she immediately perceives Darrell's rejection and disdain for her, and this makes her "long to snatch her heavy camera and flee from his presence, never to return" (*ibidem*).

On the one hand, the conflict between Darrell and Gertrude recalls the rivalry between the traditional art of painting, regarded as superior, and the newly emerging art of photography, considered by many as a far inferior trend destined to fade. The tension created by their antagonistic gazes, on the other hand, exemplifies a traditional gender-power dynamics in which the woman is in a typically submitted position to the man. Gertrude internalises so much the *flâneur*'s judging gaze as to be defeated by it and to feel her identity as an independent New Woman being questioned even by herself in a kind of submissive self-blame. Levy was aware that a woman of her time could not enjoy the same level of intellectual and physical freedom as men. Indeed, in her essay "Women and Club Life" she claims that the *flâneuse* is an imaginary woman who does not exist in reality: "the female club-lounger, the *flâneuse* of St. James's Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on nose, remains a creature of the imagination".[21] Nevertheless, Levy does manage to draw attention to a real, emerging and more independent woman, namely the female passenger.

Despite the male dominance of the urban landscape, a growing presence of women in the late nineteenth-century city was still something that, in part, was made possible

[21] A. LEVY, "Women and Club Life", p. 537.

by mass transportation, as well exemplified by the image of Gertrude riding the omnibus as a passenger. Public transportation became in fact a valid option for women seeking to move around safely and without being overly exposed to urban dangers. Levy herself loved to travel on the top of the omnibus, an experience that she celebrates in the poem "Ballade of an Omnibus",[22] where the female passenger enjoys the pleasures of the city and the freedom to move across its places. As Vadillo points out:

> for Levy, the figure of the passenger had important social and political implications because it was as passenger, she argued, that women poets could become spectators of modern life, challenging masculinist representations of women in the modern metropolis and transgressing the incarcerating ideology of the private/public spheres.[23]

In other words, Levy proposes her own version of the modern *flâneuse*, whom she identifies with the female passenger touring the city aboard the omnibus. Despite the social barriers that still prevented women from strolling alone, the female passenger would represent a step closer to the independence of the ideal *flâneuse*, who, from the top of the omnibus, could enjoy a privileged viewpoint and freely gaze down on the city it was passing through. As Benjamin asserted, urban mass transportation played a crucial role in the development of modern visuality by exposing its passenger-observers to a sequence of temporary visual moving images, showing reality at an accelerated speed. As a result, this type of visual experience helped project the woman into a modern context.

Along with the successful development of urban transportation, the rapid advancement of photographic technology also contributed to the emergence of a new type of visuality and made the camera a popular instrument in the hands of the middle class. The Lorimer sisters' decision to open a photography studio in London is a progressive choice, not only because it looks at a new, flourishing industry, but also because it allows them to become self-sufficient without relying on men. The female protagonist, in particular, epitomises the new visual sensibility through her photographic gaze, which leads her to observe reality with curiosity and in search of stimuli as if she were looking through a camera. During a party at Frank's house, Gertrude openly expresses to Mr Watergate her fascination with observing things:

> "You look so tired, Miss Lorimer; let me find you a seat."
> "No, thank you; I prefer to stand. One sees the world so much better."
> "Ah, you like to see the world?"
> "Yes; it is always interesting". (p. 81)

Levy frequently employs a vivid photographic language that demonstrates a high level of technical competence in the field – she refers to tripods, chemicals, studio fittings and other equipment – but she also focuses on visual qualities such as clarity, blurriness, shadow, frame, focus, and so on, which are applied to both people and situations.[24] As a matter of fact, the novel's main characters are often introduced with a

[22] See A. LEVY, "The Ballade of an Omnibus", in EAD., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-1889,* ed. M. NEW, Gainesville, Florida U.P., 1993.

[23] A. PAREJO VADILLO, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, p. 40.

[24] See M. CHIA-CHIEH TSENG, "Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? Redefining Gender, Gaze, and Photography in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", p. 59.

description of their eyes or some visual details they perceive, as in the case of Gertrude, who has "short-sighted eyes" and "as she stood in the full light of the spring sunshine […] she looked, perhaps, older than her twenty-three years" (p. 10), while Frances is said to have "look[ed] the picture of impotent distress", and Phyllis appears as "a slender, delicate-looking creature of seventeenth" (p. 11). Frank, their next-door neighbour, is recalled for his "eager young face, the brilliant, steadfast eyes" (p. 55) that transmit a sense of protection.

However, it is Gertrude's unique perspective that proves most intriguing throughout the novel. Levy frequently portrays her vision in vivid photographic terms, since Gertrude has developed a camera-like approach and a natural ability to frame reality through her own eyes as if it were a picture:

> The curtain between this apartment and the studio were drawn aside, displaying a charming picture—Lucy, in her black gown and Holland pinafore, her fair, smooth head bent over the re-touching frame; Phyllis, at an ornamental table, engaged in trimming prints, with great deftness and grace of manipulation. (p. 60)

The depicted scene seems to have been staged by her, almost as if she were on a photographic set, ready to take a picture of it. Yet, the focalising lens is represented by Gertrude's eyes instead of her camera. She is indeed an acute observer whose visual sensitivity increases over time and mainly consists in "brief flashes of insight, in passing glimpses scarcely realised or remembered" (p. 31).

Another intriguing scene relating to Gertrude's ability to frame reality as a camera takes place in a professional setting. Among the commissions received by the Lorimer sisters at their studio is a request to photograph the dead wife of a certain Lord Watergate.[25] Once Gertrude arrives at his house, it is fascinating to see how her eyes act like a camera even before she uses the photographic apparatus, as she looks around, silently registering distinct pictures of what surrounds her to the point of allowing readers to perceive traits of her consciousness. While quietly preparing things "for her strange task", she gets accustomed to the light of the apartment, initially dark, and observes the beautiful woman lying on the open bedstead. She thus notices that "another figure, that of a man, was seated by the window, in a pose fixed, as motionless, as that of the dead woman herself" (p. 49). The man in the room is the widowed Lord Watergate, who gets framed in Gertrude's head as if he were a still picture. While silently doing her job, she is "instinctively refrained from glancing in the direction of this second figure; and had only the vaguest impression of a dark, bowed head, and a bearded, averted face". Then, once finished, she finally meets the man's eyes:

[25] In this period, *post-mortem* photography became very popular among the Victorian middle-class people. The images of deceased people chimed with a particular feeling of nostalgia for the past and an obsessive need for mementoes and empirical evidence.

For one brief, but vivid moment, her eyes encountered the glance of two miserable grey eyes, looking out with a sort of dazed wonder from a pale and sunken face. […] these together formed a picture which imprinted itself as by a flash on Gertrude's overwrought consciousness, and was destined not to fade for many days. (*ibidem*)

In this scene, we never see Gertrude actually taking the picture she is there for, but we are presented with a series of meaningful snapshots captured through her visual insight, which is highly selective and denotes her ability to see things differently, somewhat off the grid. Levy's photographic narration lets readers familiarise with Gertrude's consciousness and, in the same breath, gain "an appropriate experience of modernity itself",[26] as she reveals herself through her subjective perception of reality. In a world where the act of gazing was considered an all-out male prerogative, Levy demonstrates, through the character of Gertrude, that women could actively see beyond the boundaries of their domestic sphere.

It is worth noting that, as the novel progresses, Gertrude's self-esteem increases in parallel with her business's success. As a consequence, also her gaze gets more confident and fearless. This becomes evident near the end of the story during another confrontation with Darrell, the arrogant painter who, in the meantime, has started an affair with Phyllis and plans to secretly escape with her to Italy. Gertrude, determined to save her younger sister, finds them at his place and informs Phyllis that he is a married man and thus cannot marry her. At this point, the two come face to face and Gertrude is finally standing up to the man who once defeated her with his arrogant gaze:

His face was livid with passion; his prominent eyes, for once wide open, glared at her in rage and hatred. Gertrude met his glance with eyes that glowed with a passion yet fiercer than his own. […] Face to face they stood; face to face, while the silent battle raged between them. Then with a curious elation, a mighty throb of what was almost joy, Gertrude knew that she, not he, the man of whom she had once been afraid, was the stronger of the two. For one brief moment some fierce instinct in her heart rejoiced. (p. 147)

In this moment of tension, no words are required. Gertrude's empowered self-confidence activates her visual power, as well as her ability to fiercely stare into the man's eyes without any feeling of submission. Darrell is thus forced to engage and respect her firmly triumphant gaze: Gertrude's "fierce instinct" wins the 'battle of gazes', allowing her to bring her sister back to the safety of their studio at Upper Baker Street. In this episode, the enhanced gaze of Gertrude reflects her personal development into a more conscious and self-assured woman, as well as the possibility for a woman to redefine certain conservative power dynamics in a male-dominated society.

Despite the novel's conventional happy ending, in which Gertrude complies with Lord Watergate's romantic quest, Levy has here been able to redefine the spaces and roles of women in late Victorian culture. Even if Gertrude's independence and dimension still differ from what a male *flâneur* experiences, Levy suggests that, for women, living in an urban context can act as a key to a world that has always been denied to them. The four sisters' decision to open a photography studio not only provides them

[26] D. Wanczyk, "Framing Gertrude: Photographic Narration and the Subjectivity of the Artist-Observer in Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (1), 2015, p. 136.

with financial independence, but also contributes to opening their eyes to a world that is more varied and exciting than expected. Gertrude, in particular, is the one who is most pleased with the "new state of things": "Fastidious and sensitive as she was, she had yet a great fund of enjoyment of life within her; of that impersonal, objective enjoyment which is so often denied to her sex" (p. 104).

The creative experience of the world, which she first achieves through her visionary gaze, is best described via Benjamin's concept of *Erfahrung* as a cultural journey and sensorial internalisation of the city's variety of sights and noises. In this context, the mobility provided by the modern modes of transportation of the time reveals itself as essential in allowing women to move around safely while ensuring them a privileged point of view on the city. Gertrude's photographic gaze, in particular, follows a path of empowerment which mirrors her transformation from an inexperienced and vulnerable female photographer to a more confident and self-assured woman. As a result, Levy's work does not seek to equate men and women in the late Victorian era, but rather to envisage the possibility for women to embrace the urban environment as an alternative world of freedom and opportunities where they can pursue their self-realisation.

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"We Learned to Whisper Almost Without Sound": Blurring the Boundary between Fiction and Fact in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine Margaret Atwood's blurring of the boundary between fiction and fact as a key mechanism underpinning the literary construction of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). By drawing on Atwood's statements concerning the documentary imprint of her dystopian-speculative novel, this discussion sheds light on the disguised references to historical figures, momentous events and phenomena which can be discerned throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. From Nazi Germany to Nicolae Ceauşescu's Romania, passing through Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iran or 1980s' America, Atwood has hugely drawn inspiration from historical events and transfigured them in order to offer a memorable depiction of the futuristic state of Gilead. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* from this perspective will provide evidence of the novel's capability to negotiate with the extra-textual domain and deliver a powerful cautionary message.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*. Fact. Fiction. History. Dystopian-speculative fiction.

1. In recent years, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has experienced a resurgence in popularity, especially thanks to the remarkable success of the homonymous 2017 Hulu TV series created by Bruce Miller and starring Elisabeth Moss and Joseph Fiennes, among others. Although a movie adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* had already been made in 1990, according to Barbara Miceli "the impact of this new filmic version of Atwood's novel has been wider and more political, due perhaps to the similarities between the fictional society of Gilead and today's social realities".[1]

It is indeed no coincidence that this novel was brought back to light during Donald Trump's presidency as a political manifesto in defence of women's freedom of choice as opposed to Trump's overtly 'pro-life views', his attempt to promote anti-abortion policies in some American states and what was perceived by many feminists as a misogynistic attitude. As a consequence, a large group of female dissenters began to organise public protests in the USA, where they chose to wear the typical outfit of Atwood's Handmaids and displayed banners with iconic phrases such as "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum", "*The Handmaid's Tale* Wasn't Meant to Be A How-To Manual", "Fiction or Reality?". In the same period, *The Handmaid's Tale* also became a source of inspiration for the creation of the website *The Handmaid's Coalition*, whose aim was to support political battles for equal rights. Its slo-

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[1] B. Miceli, "Religion, Gender Inequality, and Surrogate Motherhood: A New Family Arrangement in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Comparative Studies in Modernism*, 12, Spring 2018, p. 95.

gan was both illuminating and cautionary: "Fighting to Keep Fiction from Becoming Reality".[2]

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood portrays a dystopian scenario overwhelmed by an environmental crisis and a worrisome decline of the fertility rate. In order to stem these problems, a group of Christian fundamentalists, the so-called 'Sons of Jacob', has established a totalitarian regime, the Republic of Gilead, which is governed on the basis of patriarchal dictates literally borrowed from the Bible. Handmaids, representing the only fertile women, play a crucial (if subordinate) role in this society. Bereft of their proper name, they are assigned a patronymic consisting of the preposition 'Of' followed by the name of the Commander they are entrusted to and entirely depend on. Indeed, their major task is that of 'surrogate mothers' bearing children to the ageing ruling class of the Commanders of Gilead and their wives. In the narrative, the central character is of course Offred ('Of Fred'), i.e. the Handmaid who is responsible for the tale. Before the rise of Gilead, this woman, whose real name is never explicitly mentioned, was leading a 'normal life', together with her husband and her infant daughter, and also had a job. In the context of the fundamentalist republic she has lost everything: her loved ones have been torn away from her and she is not allowed to work, being no longer regarded as a fully independent woman, but rather as an ancillary tool for procreation.

Critics have taken into account other possible meanings hidden in the word 'Offred', underlining the intrinsic connection existing between the protagonist's name and her life conditions in Gilead.[3] 'Offred' might be associated with the past participle of the verb 'to offer' ('offered'), thus suggesting that Offred's role in Gilead is similar to that of a sacrificial lamb, since her subjectivity and her freedom are sacrificed to the greater cause of procreation. This interpretation is reinforced by the character's age, 33, which calls to mind Jesus Christ's age when crucified. Moreover, 'Offred' might be conceived as a compound term playing on 'off' and 'red', as though evoking her desperate attempts to get rid of the red dress, an objective correlative for her imposed role as a surrogate mother. Finally, 'Offred' might be connected with the adjective 'afraid', with reference to the psychological stress and fear to which the character is constantly subjected.

Offred's reconstruction of her past life and current predicament in Gilead represents the core of *The Handmaid's Tale*, since it is through the eyes of this 33-year-old woman that the reader is plunged into the dystopian scenario of the novel. Despite being stripped of freedom of thought and expression, Offred seems determined to tell her life story, from the pre-Gilead period to the present. Her telling stands as an attempt to "create a self through language"[4] and as a rebellious act against the unrelenting impositions of a coercive regime which would have individuals forget their name and their past life. It is through her reconstruction that Offred struggles to recover her sense of self and

[2] A. Liptak, "How *The Handmaid's Tale* Inspired a Protest Movement", *The Verge*, 31 October 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/31/15799882/handmaids-tale-costumes-cosplay-protest (last accessed on 24 November 2022).

[3] See in particular D. Ketterer, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia", *Science Fiction Studies*, 16 (2), July 1989, p. 210.

[4] K.F. Stein, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 61 (2), Winter 1991-1992, p. 269.

prevent it from sinking into oblivion. Quite significantly, she is absolutely aware of the relevance of her original name, standing as a symbol of her previous self: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. […] I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past".[5]

Critics have also pointed out the parallels between Atwood's depiction of a dreadful scenario in which individuals, particularly women, are totally subjected to the power of the state, and such landmarks of the dystopian genre as Evgenij Zamjatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). As Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson put it: "Like *We*, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents totalitarian politics and repressive laws. Like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania, Gilead is always at war with external enemies […] and those who do not fit the society's norms are re-educated, expelled or executed. Like *Brave New World*, Gilead is a hierarchical society with highly differentiated roles, status-rankings, and activities".[6] However, if it is true that the novel shares the traits and dark ambience of the aforementioned works and that it engages in dialogue with some of the commonest themes in dystopian fiction, it is also true that Atwood's literary strategy has its own distinguishing features.

Atwood has often underlined that the events depicted in the novel are no sheer fruit of the imagination: "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist".[7] When it comes to what lies behind the portrayal of Gilead, with its atrocities and its denial of an individual's basic rights, a subtext of historical sources can be discerned. The realistic palimpsest which underpins Gilead's 'possible world' is indeed derived from the author's confrontation with a number of historical episodes and contexts which were either at the core of public debates in the period in which *The Handmaid's Tale* was written, or had become part of the public consciousness. Lisa Jadwin has aptly defined this novel *a roman à clef*, since it is imbued with echoes and references to historical characters and momentous events that perceptive readers have no difficulty in recognising.[8] Deciphering these clues and parallels allows one to see how Atwood proceeds to blur the boundary between a fictional dimension and history.

2. One methodological point needs to be made about the contextual analysis of the novel that is carried out here. First of all, special attention is given to Atwood's interviews and essays concerning the events that inspired *The Handmaid's Tale*. Secondly, space is devoted to the "Historical Notes" section placed at the end of the novel, which hints at events and circumstances that inspired Atwood's work and are therefore

[5] M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London, Vintage, (1985) 1996, p. 90.

[6] P.G. Stillman and S.A. Johnson, "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Utopian Studies*, 5 (2), 1994, p. 71.

[7] M. Atwood, "Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*", *The Guardian*, 20 January 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/20/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood (last accessed on 7 December 2022).

[8] L. Jadwin, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): Cultural and Historical Context", in J.B. Bouson (ed.), *Critical Insights:* The Handmaid's Tale, Pasadena and Hackensack, Salem Press, 2010, p. 22.

worth further investigation. Finally, light is thrown on historical events which have not been explicitly mentioned by Atwood but whose echoes are clearly audible.

Let us start by considering Atwood's looking at the history of the Puritans in the USA, given that the futuristic theocratic state portrayed in the novel is supposedly based in New England. This geographical area, comprising six states in the North East of the USA, has gone down in history as the very cradle of the Puritans' first settlements. It was here that, on 26 December 1620, the Pilgrim Fathers arrived on board the Mayflower and established their first permanent colony, namely Plymouth, Massachusetts. A strong (critical) interest in Puritan history is also foregrounded by Atwood's choice of Mary Webster and Perry Miller (1905-1963) as the two dedicatees of her novel. Webster, probably one of Atwood's ancestors, was actually an enemy to the Puritan society of her time, which accused her of witchcraft in 1683. However, she amazingly survived hanging and, for this reason, was set free. On the other hand, Miller was Atwood's Professor of American Studies at Harvard University. Unlike other contemporary historians, who were committed to celebrating the inner strength, moral values and spirit of enterprise of the Puritans, he unveiled some darker features in the Puritan mindset, such as intolerance and authoritarianism.

Atwood herself has suggested that many parallels can be drawn between the Commanders of Gilead and the American Puritans of the 17th century. The misogyny and patriarchal structure underpinning 17th-century New England find an outlet in the fictional world of Gilead, where women are compelled to play subordinate roles related to the domestic field, such as those of Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas. Similarly, the political view of the Puritans is conjured up through that of the Commanders. Far from envisaging a truly democratic state, the Puritans were eager to establish a theocratic regime in the 'New World' they had set foot in, to the point of carrying out a 'witch purge' in order to neutralise whoever dared dissent from their ideology. They were responsible for "the dispossession, eradication, and/or incarceration of those not considered chosen ones by the dominant group",[9] which calls to mind the treatment that in *The Handmaid's Tale* is reserved to gender traitors, Unwomen and political opponents to Gilead's *status quo*.

Nevertheless, as Danita J. Dodson points out, "Gilead is most wholly the USA, embodying its past, its present and its potential future".[10] In fact, in the novel, Atwood's confrontation with the history of the USA is not limited to Puritan New England. In many interviews, she has explicitly underlined the presence of a common thread existing between the misogyny and authoritarianism of 17th-century Puritans and the attitude of ultraconservative movements which became more and more prominent in the USA throughout the 1980s (when the novel was written) and which, among other things, turned a deaf ear to the issue of women's rights and their emancipation.

In this regard, when taking into account the historical figures that could have inspired Atwood's depiction of the Commanders of Gilead, one cannot avoid mentioning

[9] D.J. DODSON, "'We Lived in the Blank White Spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Utopian Studies*, 8 (2), 1997, p. 70.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 66.

the close connection of the novel's period of composition with the rise of the so-called 'New Right' in the 1980s. The New Right was mostly composed of right-wing extremists, who espoused a Christian worldview and believed in the necessity to re-establish a society built on religious values and on a renewed alliance with God. The members of this circle promoted conservative approaches and overtly stood against relatively modern conceptions, such as the secularisation of the state. Furthermore, they encouraged women to reassume their ancient and 'natural' roles as mothers and wives. With reference to maternity policies, they considered themselves "pro-life" and raised their voice against the 1973 court sentence "Roe v. Wade", which had decriminalised abortion in the USA. Indeed, they deemed a woman's recourse to abortion as an unforgivable crime, a violation of God's law and will. The sexophobia that characterised several members of this faction also found an outlet in their utter condemnation of both sex outside of marriage and homosexual intercourses, which were perceived as a menace to the safety of a righteous society.

The New Right hugely contributed to Ronald Reagan's victory in the presidential elections. Reagan did in fact share many of the ideological assumptions of the New Right. He supported the idea of the 'traditional family' and wished for the return of a religious America, capable of overcoming the flaws of a diffused secularism. Throughout the years of his presidency, he endorsed a view whereby abortion should only be carried out in dramatic cases, such as in the wake of a rape or incest, or when the continuation of pregnancy might have caused a serious damage to the mother's health. Furthermore, Reagan did next to nothing to prevent homosexuals from being mistreated and discriminated during the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. His two political terms are still recalled by homosexuals as an oppressively dark time.

The backdrop linked to the rise of the New Right and Reagan's political statements are at the core of Atwood's novel. Through the means of dystopian-speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores real-life anxieties which were rampant in that period, particularly among feminists. Atwood recognised a threat to women's rights in the claims of those 'Christian fundamentalists' and was afraid that a set of acquired civil rights might be overturned.

In the novel, the Republic of Gilead is cast as a totalitarian regime in which men have reclaimed their ancient place as leaders both in the public and the private sphere, while women have lost all of their acquired rights and have been forced to retrocede to ancillary roles.[11] They are not regarded as subjects but rather as helpmates, subordinates, pariahs and, when it comes to the Handmaids, as 'two legged wombs', whose relevance is grounded in their potential for procreation only. In this society, abortion has been outlawed and homosexuals are stigmatised 'gender traitors', subjected to torture or sent to clean toxic waste in the distant colonies.

The Handmaid's Tale encapsulates a cautionary tale about the potentially devastating consequences of a myopic attitude towards a recrudescence of patriarchal ideology. Thus, especially the female reader is made wary of taking any acquired rights for grant-

[11] See B. MICELI, "Religion, Gender Inequality, and Surrogate Motherhood: A New Family Arrangement in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", p. 99.

ed and is prompted to keep her eyes open on whatever might threaten them. The very words of the protagonist shed light on the fact that the rise of Gilead has been made possible by the civil and political disentanglement of a good part of the population (including her).[12] By choosing not to take an interest in political and social questions, people, and particularly women, did not grasp the signs of a conservative backlash that would obliterate the democratic rights they had acquired through decades of struggles. A mixture of selfishness, opportunism and detachment indirectly allowed the Sons of Jacob to go unnoticed and eventually succeed in holding sway.

Double standards, however, are also at the core of the state of Gilead, as testified to by the Commanders' search for alternative, unofficial forms of relationships with the other sex. At the same time, it is the Sons of Jacob themselves who legitimise a very peculiar kind of 'simultaneous polygamy' by literalising an episode from the Bible. Though Commanders are married to Wives – mature, no longer fertile women who habitually wear long blue clothes and veils reminding of the Virgin Mary's – they are supposed to have sexual intercourses with the young Handmaids, acting as 'ghost wives' and surrogate mothers. The sexual intercourse between a Handmaid and her Commander occurs at a monthly "Ceremony". During this rite, the Wife must be present and compliant as, in the Book of Genesis (30), Rachel had been when, in the face of her own sterility, she encouraged and gave permission to her husband Jacob to sleep with her handmaid Bilah, so that the latter might bear children in her place. In the "Historical Notes" section, Atwood also argues that the institution of simultaneous polygamy connoting the social structure of Gilead was akin to the one practised by Mormons in 19th-century Utah. Indeed, Mormons used to celebrate polygamy and even called it 'The Principle', in the belief that God had spoken to Prophet Joseph Smith, inviting all Mormon men to endorse it as a sign of their new faith.[13]

Besides the phenomenology stemming from religious fundamentalism, in the article "The Road to Ustopia" Atwood discusses the mechanisms underlying the control of women in totalitarian regimes. She sheds light on the fact that women's subjection has often been achieved through a pervasive control of their reproductive capacity, by "limiting births, demanding births, specifying who can marry whom and who owns the kids".[14] In this respect, Atwood's concern with the Handmaids' role as child-bearers might be related to an accurate survey of a number of historical contexts in which women were subjected to authoritarian measures reverberating on their reproductive capacity.

In the "Historical Notes", we are told that Romania "had anticipated Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on the female population, and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility".[15]

[12] See M. Billi, "Margaret Atwood", *Belfagor*, 44 (4), 1989, p. 433.

[13] For further details on the practice of polygamy among Mormons throughout the 19th century, see S. Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002, and T. Carter, "Living the Principle: Mormon Polygamous Housing in Nineteenth-Century Utah", *Winterthur Portfolio*, 35 (4), Winter 2000, pp. 223-51.

[14] M. Atwood, "The Road to Ustopia", *The Guardian,* 14 October 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia (last accessed on 9 December 2022).

[15] M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 313.

The commitment of surrogate mothers promoted by the Commanders of Gilead calls to mind the pronatalist policies enacted by dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu during his presidency (1967-1989). Ceauşescu adopted various measures in order to cope with a decline in the birthrate and consequently increase the number of births.[16] While highlighting women's significant role as mothers of the children of Romania and emphasising their paramount contribution to the process of national resurgence, he funded initiatives that ended by transforming them into 'machines' for procreation. Not too differently from the dystopian scenario of Gilead, Romanian women were subjected to a severe state control. First of all, abortion was outlawed, except for extremely rare cases. Contraceptives were banned as well, since they were seen as obstacles to the pronatalist polity. As a backlash against this conservative policy, more than 9,000 Romanian women died owing to complications linked to illegal-abortion practices. At the same time, women were constantly subjected to medical examinations meant to prevent any resort to illegal abortion. The psychological stress exerted on Romanian women finds a parallel in the process of forced motherhood involving the Handmaids in the novel. Publicly celebrated when succeeding in bearing children, the Handmaids are constantly reminded of their mission (or, for that matter, their failure in carrying it out). They are made acutely aware of the fact that their life depends on their capability to procreate and that, if not succeeding, they will be exiled to the distant colonies filled with toxic waste, a tragic prelude to their death.

However, the case of Romania is not the only one to have inspired Atwood in connection with the imaginary world of Gilead. The portrait of the Handmaids as surrogate mothers also looks at the history of Nazi Germany, namely the "Lebensborn Project", promoted by German politician Heinrich Himmler (1990-1945). Himmler, a Schutzstaffel's leader, was obsessed with the ideal of racial purity and struggled to pursue the ethnocentric dream of a noble, Aryan 'master race'. For this purpose, he selected a number of women characterised by allegedly Aryan traits and forced them to sexually join with members of the SS, so as to preserve and enhance a proto-Indo-European heritage.[17] Concurrently, the one-child policy implemented in China during the second half of the twentieth century provided Atwood with useful material concerning another authoritarian measure targeted at controlling women's reproductive capacity. If, on the one hand, Ceauşescu's Romania and the "Lebensborn Project" bindingly 'encouraged' women to have babies, the Chinese female population was liable to severe punishment and forced to have an abortion if refusing to align itself with that stringent birth-control programme.

[16] Further information concerning Ceauşescu's pronatalist polity can be found in G. KLIGMAN, "Abortion and International Adoption in Post-Ceauşescu's Romania", *Feminist Studies*, 18 (2), 1992, pp. 405-19, and G. KLIGMAN, "Political Demography: The Banning of Abortion in Ceauşescu's Romania", in F.D. GINZBURG and R. RAPP (eds), *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 234-55.

[17] Evident echoes of Nazi Germany's authoritarian policies can also be discerned through a closer glance at the symbolic meaning of the Handmaids' tattoos. Like her patronymic, the Handmaid's leg tattoo stands as a symbol of her loss of identity and calls to mind the Nazi policy of tattooing a series of numbers on prisoners' arms as a classification system in concentration camps.

Needless to say, Gilead's policy of centralisation and constant surveillance of citizens is a *fil rouge* that runs through a corpus of previous dystopian novels, such as George Orwell's 1949 masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this respect, both Oceania and Gilead possess the features of totalitarian regimes which "offer individuals the grim option of either freedom and anarchy or repression and security".[18] But, as with Orwell and the Stalin regime, Atwood also drew on a historical and documentary palimpsest, namely that of Communist countries in Eastern Europe during the Cold War Years. While travelling in Europe, Atwood had the opportunity to see firsthand the people's way of life in satellite nations of the Soviet Union, such as East Germany. She commented: "During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain – Czechoslovakia, East Germany – I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing".[19] East Germany was notorious for its strict surveillance of citizens coordinated by a secret police body known as "Stasi". The Stasi was in charge of controlling every single aspect of the people's life, from the public sphere to the private one. People were continuously under the eyes of this modern "Big Brother" and any subversive action was promptly nipped in the bud. Through its brutal methods, comprising the harassment and even the murder of those who did not conform with the ideology of the country, this secret police gave a decisive contribution in maintaining the *status quo*.

The sense of paranoia and the feeling of being unrelentingly spied on find an outlet in the depiction of Gilead. In this totalitarian state, all citizens are constantly bugged by a secret police organisation known as "The Eyes of God". One of the most remarkable slogans in Gilead is "The Eyes of God run all over the earth",[20] which perfectly highlights the Eyes' capability to control all individuals in any place at any time. Offred keeps on pointing to the privacy breach and the fact that the Handmaids can only communicate through whispers or gestures. Even when they succeed, there is always a diffused fear of being heard and subsequently denounced:

> We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:
>
> Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.[21]

It is also worthwhile considering that Atwood began to write her novel in 1984, when she was in West Berlin. At the time, the city was split into two major areas of influence, namely West and East Berlin. The boundary traced by the Berlin Wall between the two

[18] E. Ingersoll, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Echoes of Orwell", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 5 (4), 1993, p. 64.

[19] M. Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on what *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump", *The New York Times*, 10 March 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html?_r=1 (last accessed on 30 November 2022).

[20] M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 199.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

sectors of the city simultaneously marked the division between the two most relevant political powers of those years, i.e. the Soviet Bloc and the Western Bloc. Living in West Berlin allowed Atwood to perceive the dangerous instability of the political situation. Simultaneously, it granted her a special glance on the strategies adopted by the regime to control its citizens' movements. In this respect, a major role was played by the construction of the wall, a physical and psychological barrier deterring people from fleeing East Berlin. In Western consciousness, the Berlin Wall has been conjuring up images of violent death and of people being crushed by the blind power of the state. With reference to Berlin and its iconic concrete barrier's impact on people, Atwood said that "[a]t that time it was a very dark, empty city, by which I mean there were a lot of vacant apartments […] People didn't want to live there, because it was surrounded by the wall".[22]

The image of the wall seems to re-emerge in a disturbing way in Atwood's novel. Gilead's Wall is a place which epitomises the regime's power to suppress dissent and to prevent anyone from challenging the state rules in the future. Criminals' corpses are displayed against this wall, after they have been subjected to a "Salvaging" and executed. Their bodies stand as an admonishment for the Handmaids passing by during their daily walks: "We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall".[23]

I shall now elaborate further on the historical roots of two of the most emblematic rituals practised in Gilead, namely the "Salvaging" and "Particicution". Rituals like these are a crucial component in the text's symbolic structure. Indeed, they take place concurrently either with joyful and celebratory events or with more dramatic ones, such as the punishment of criminals. With reference to the Salvaging, the "Historical Notes" inform us of the factual imprint of the procedure. The word 'salvaging' is said to have been borrowed by the Commanders from the Philippine context, where it referred to an extrajudicial execution carried out without a proper trial. This word was used in Atwood's years to identify the many victims of extrajudicial killings under Ferdinand Marcos's regime (1965-1986). However, in the scenario of Gilead, the term broadly includes any public execution of lawbreakers.

The features of the "Particicution" are historically based, too. As suggested by its blending of two terms – 'participation' and 'execution' – this ritual consists in the *execution* of a criminal carried out through a collective *participation* from the Handmaids themselves. The "Historical Notes" stress the parallels between such a ceremonial and the ancient fertility rites in honour of an Earth goddess. In my view, however, the orgiastic energy unleashed by the Handmaids during the gruesome event is also akin to that of the ancient Maenads, the priestesses of Dionysus. As a matter of fact, throughout this ritual the Handmaids give free rein to their most violent impulses, until they kill the criminal with their own hands, even tearing him apart. This act emblematically calls to mind one of the most ferocious forms of ancient sacrifices, namely that of *spar-*

[22] S. Field, "Author Margaret Atwood on Why *The Handmaid's Tale* Resonates in 2018", *Forbes*, 31 July 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/shivaunefield/2018/07/31/author-margaret-atwood-on-why-the-handmaids-tale-resonates-in-2018/?sh=2da3302c64b0 (last accessed on 2 December 2022).

[23] M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 38.

agmòs, enacted by the Maenads during Dionysian orgies, where the sacrificial victim was usually an animal, but in a few cases might be embodied by a human being.

3. Over the course of her reconstruction, Offred overtly mentions the events leading to the foundation of Gilead. This regime is cast as the outcome of a *coup d'état* in which both the Congress and the President of the USA were allegedly eliminated. Although the blame had been demagogically pinned on Islamic extremists, that violent attack on the most important American institutions was carried out by none other than the Sons of Jacob, who subsequently suspended the Constitution and began to widely implement censorship and ban newspapers for 'state safety' reasons. Again, in the pseudo-documentary "Historical Notes" working as an appendix to the novel, one reads that the Sons of Jacob were in possession of and drew inspiration from a CIA dossier dealing with strategies to be employed when aiming to subvert a hostile foreign government. In this connection, one notices similarities between the rise of Gilead and that of authoritarian regimes in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s. In Chile, the establishment of Salvador Allende's socialist government was of course viewed with suspicion by the United States of America, which were struggling against Communism and coping with the influence of the Soviet Union in South American countries. For this reason, in 1973 the CIA supported the military overthrow of Allende's government, to which Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship would follow. Something akin occurred in Argentina in 1976, when a military junta toppled the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón and paved the way for an autocracy. In both cases, this was accompanied by the suppression of constitutional values and a relentless repression of dissent. Physical violence and censorship were used as means to contain the spread of nonconformist thought, with the tragic fate of dissenters directly calling to mind the inhuman treatment reserved to Gilead's opponents.

Atwood's imaginary also drew lymph from the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), as an ever-increasing opposition to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's pro-Western foreign policy and his secularisation of the Imperial State of Iran would eventually lead to mass uprisings and upheavals all over the country. Indeed, the Shah's 'White Revolution' was not positively welcomed by a huge part of the population, who conceived this process as antithetical to the dictates of Islam. When his government was overthrown, Reza Pahlavi was forced to flee and leave the throne to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Ayatollah immediately began to work on the restoration of a society built on 'authentic values' directly derived from 'Pure Islam'. By the end of March 1979, he announced the birth of an Islamic Republic, actually a theocratic state wiping off the boundaries between political and religious power. Khomeini, who held the office of Supreme Leader until his death, promoted an anti-American and anti-Western policy and, above all, commended a radicalisation of Islam as well as a fundamentalist reading of the Quran. He simultaneously strengthened the use of torture and began to eliminate those who did not conform to the rules of the Islamic Republic. Among these 'state traitors' were women charged with adultery and homosexuals. Before the rise of the Islamic Republic, women had enjoyed civil rights and the possibility to take part in public life. If, in Atwood's Gilead, freedom of speech, movement and choice is denied to the female sex, in Iran the Ayatollah had similarly adopted a strongly limiting policy,

starting with his 1979 public address concerning women's duty to wear the veil. Other restrictive measures included the outlawing of abortion, the removing from office of all women working for the government and the revocation of the Family Protection Law.[24] In a nutshell, Khomeini's rise set off a pervasive reactionary turn.

Atwood's attention towards the Eastern world also involved Afghanistan. In 1978, she had the opportunity to visit it with her husband and infant daughter, at a historical juncture when the nation was somewhat skating on thin ice. As a matter of fact, the following year would bring with itself the outburst of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) and the beginning of one of the most dramatic phases in that country's history. Reconstructing her journey in "When Afghanistan Was at Peace", an article originally published in *The New York Times* in 2001, Atwood wrote that, on her arrival, she immediately became fascinated with the millenary history of Afghanistan. During her trip to Kabul, she could not take her eyes off certain staple 'wonders of the Orient', such as the majestic Afghan mountains, the donkeys and camels, but also the *Arabian Nights*-like houses of the Afghan people. However, her enthusiasm soon turned into a gloomier feeling when she discovered that in the city no man seemed eager to address her, as if refusing to acknowledge a woman's intellectual or moral independence.

Her view about women's lack of voice in Afghanistan was subsequently confirmed by another experience. While walking across the streets of Kabul, her attention was captured by the traditional female garment worn by women in several Islamic countries, i.e. the *chador*, a long cloak which entirely covers the body, except for face, hands and feet. Again, in "When Afghanistan Was at Peace", Atwood provides context for a discussion of her feelings about the *chador* and of what she sensed when trying one. At first, she guessed that wearing that garment might be a unique and fascinating experience. In fact, she thought of it as an empowering tool, capable of allowing people to become invisible from others while being able to see them. However, after trying it on herself, her assumption suddenly changed. Wearing the *chador* proved a nearly uncanny experience in a negative way: she had "an odd sense of having been turned into negative space, a blank in the visual field, a sort of antimatter".[25] In other words, far from being a highway to enhancement, in Atwood's view the *chador* was an instrument meant to hide and control women, as is precisely the case with the Handmaids' clothes in the novel.[26] Gilead's oligarchy basically wants them to become self-effacing to the point of invisibility: "'Modesty is invisibility', said Aunt Lydia. 'Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be […] penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable'".[27]

The contact with Afghanistan did have a great impact on Atwood. When pondering about the literary refractions of her trip to that country in *The Handmaid's Tale*,

[24] See G. NASHAT, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Iranian Studies*, 13 (1-4), 1980, pp. 174-75.

[25] M. ATWOOD, "When Afghanistan Was at Peace", in EAD., *Writing with Intent*: *Essays*, *Reviews*, *Personal Prose 1983- 2005*, New York, Carrol & Graf, 2005, p. 207.

[26] With reference to the Handmaids' outfit, Atwood said she drew on girls' schools' smocks as well as the image of the cleaning woman on the *Old Dutch Cleanser* box, but also on the *chador* she herself had bought while visiting Afghanistan.

[27] M. ATWOOD, *The Handmaid's Tale*, pp. 34-35.

she asserted: "Would I have written the book if I never visited Afghanistan? Possibly. Would it have been the same? Unlikely".[28]

4. Atwood's confrontation with history and factuality in the novel invites readers to meditate upon other paramount issues, such as environmental degradation and its possible consequences. At first glance, environmental issues seem to play a backseat role in this work, especially when compared with Atwood's concern with the female question, partriarcal forms of totalitarianism and religious fundamentalism. However, one should also keep in mind that the causes of the devastating fertility crisis which affects Western society in *The Handmaid's Tale* must be traced back to widespread pollution and decades of massive, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Briefly put, an unrespectful and indeed cannibalistic approach to nature stands out as a sort of original sin. As the narrative unfolds, we become aware that, before Gilead was founded, the world had been coping with high-priority environmental problems, such as disease, a devastating pollution, and a lethal use of chemicals.

The environmental backdrop is therefore a poignant subtext. In particular, *The Handmaid's Tale* appears to elaborate on fears and anxieties which were widely diffused at the time the novel was written. During the Reagan years, many environmentalists raised their voice against the president's "big-business-small-government attitude toward natural resources".[29] Reagan demonstrated insensitivity towards the environmental policies endorsed by former president Richard Nixon and granted little attention to the pursuit of a sustainable exploitation of nature. Furthermore, the novel retains traces of a fervent public debate which had been hugely promoted by biologists such as Rachel Carson a few decades before *The Handmaid's Tale* was published.[30] In *Silent Spring* (1962), conceived by many as the founding work of contemporary environmentalism, Carson had shed light upon the ruinous impact that pesticides had on nature and the biosphere, pleading with governments for the introduction of suitable measures meant to prevent devastation. *The Handmaid's Tale* also contains echoes of another debate fostered by scientists in the mid-1980s and concerning a worrying decline of the fertility rate in some animal species, in particular amphibians, whose causes were to be mostly attributed to environmental degradation, uncontrolled pollution, toxic waste and the use of heavy metals.[31]

In addition to this, the novel hints at one of the most relevant issues generally addressed in post-Second-World-War dystopias, namely nuclear fear. Over the course of the narrative, Offred mentions the existence of distant colonies filled with toxic waste and contaminated by radiations, hellish places where dissenters are dispatched. During the Cold War years, as Atwood well knows, the imminent risk of a nuclear conflict was perceived as closer than ever. Lisa Jadwin argues that such an anxiety is so crucial in *The Handmaid's Tale* that Atwood even resorted to a conso-

[28] M. Atwood, "When Afghanistan Was at Peace", p. 207.

[29] C. Sethna, "'Not an Instruction Manual': Environmental Degradation, Racial Erasure, and the Politics of Abortion in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 80, 2020, p. 4.

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[31] See L. Jadwin, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): Cultural and Historical Context", p. 32.

nant image when describing the phases of composition of this dystopian-speculative novel: "Every book is a sort of mushroom cloud thrown up by a large substance of material that has been accumulating for a lifetime".[32]

The surge in militarisation characterising the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the perfecting mastery in nuclear weaponry in those very years and a number of close calls, such as the Cuban Missile Crises (1962), drove many to believe that the world would soon be overwhelmed by a nuclear war. Similarly, in Offred's description of "exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault",[33] one perceives echoes of the most serious atomic calamity in the history of the USA, that is, the Three Mile Island accident of 28 March 1979, which provoked a frightening spread of radiations into the air and stirred up fear among the population.

5. Some comments should also be made with reference to the "Historical Notes" section, which, like "The Principles of Newspeak" in Orwell's *Nineteent Eighty-Four*, projects us into a distant, allegedly post-dystopian future. In Atwood's case, this future is associated with an international symposium taking place in 2195, in the Arctic Canadian regions. The keynote speaker is Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, from the University of Cambridge, from whose contribution "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" the reader easily gathers that the state of Gilead is a thing of the past and that Pieixoto himself was in charge of collecting, reassembling and editing Offred's oral tale. However, as underlined by Dominick M. Grace, among others, the future scenario envisioned here ought not to be regarded as a utopian alternative to the past regime.[34] Quite significantly, Pieixoto's words are tinged with irony and a misogynistic vein that end up diminishing and relativising the importance of Offred's message. For its part, the audience often complicitly reacts by laughing, thus showing anything but empathy towards the Handmaid's testimony and, what is worse, her reliability as a homodiegetic narrator. Pieixoto's sly sexist attitude prompts us to suppose that some of the cultural and ideological premises facilitating the rise of the theocratic regime of Gilead can still be discerned in the third millennium. Far from strengthening our sense of hope for a better future, then, this appendix insinuates that a Gilead-like state might actually be re-established.

As a concluding remark, it is worth underscoring how *The Handmaid's Tale* shares with most dystopian-speculative narratives a powerful communicative purpose and an ethical goal, since it aims to awaken readers to the thin dividing line between real-life conditions and their fictionalisation. Some real-life events have recently suggested the extent to which Offred's message might be ignored or misunderstood. To cite an example, more than thirty years after *The Handmaid's Tale* was written, a Gilead-like regime seems to have been re-established in Afghanistan. During the twenty years of interim government in that country, women had been allowed the right to vote and the

[32] M. ATWOOD, "Note to the Reader", quoted in L. JADWIN, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): Cultural and Historical Context", p. 22.

[33] M. ATWOOD, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 118.

[34] See D.M. GRACE, "*The Handmaid's Tale*: 'Historical Notes' and Documentary Subversion", *Science Fiction Studies*, 25 (3), November 1998, p. 481.

possibility to play an active role in the political life; they could attend school and freely choose what clothes to wear. Soon after the American troops departed from Afghanistan, the Taliban forces powerfully re-emerged on the public scene. Little effort was required for their reconquest of Kabul and the foundation of an Islamic Emirate. We are unfortunately well aware of women's life conditions under Taliban rule, since many of us will remember the abuses they suffered during their first rule (1996-2001). Forced to wear the *burqa*, stripped of their freedom to attend school or to travel without being accompanied by a man, the Afghan women's predicament was (and will again be) similar to that of the Handmaids inhabiting the not-too-fictional world of Gilead.

Atwood's compelling confrontation with history in *The Handmaid's Tale* indicates how the boundary separating literary dystopias from real ones could be surprisingly thinner than expected. It also testifies to the ways literature might prove instrumental for investigating social and political phenomena. The analysis I have been carrying out has shed light on Atwood's disturbing, credible depiction of a scenario which takes shape through a network of historical vicissitudes. From Nazi Germany to Ceauşescu's Romania, passing through Khomeini's Iran or 1980s' America, history is filled with clues, events and situations that become food for thought for a writer of dystopian fiction. Figuring out the contextual palimpsest on which *The Handmaid's Tale* is built is a necessary step to assess the value of Atwood's writing as well as the cautionary-tale relevance of her celebrated novel.

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INTERVIEW

‘Wanderlust Women’– Three Poets
An Interview with Lesley Benzie, Donna Campbell, and Linda Jackson

On 12 May 2022, Scotland took centre stage at the University of Pisa, thanks to a meeting with Lesley Benzie, Donna Campbell, and Linda Jackson hosted in the Aula Magna Boilleau at the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics. The three poets, introduced by Diana Devlin, read some of their compositions from the recently published collection *Wanderlust Women – Three Poets* (Glasgow, Seahorse Publications, 2022). The performance – during which Linda also sang some traditional songs – turned into a wonderful occasion for a wide-ranging discussion on some of the poets’ most engaging themes, such as poetry and memory, Scottish identity and traditions, language and languages, contemporary politics, women’s emancipation.

The pervasiveness of the theme of the journey is made clear from the very title of the collection, *Wanderlust*, a longing for wandering which became particularly crucial during the Covid lockdown in 2020, when the three women decided to work on this project as a way of coping with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic all over the world. The very nature of the meeting, where music and poetry were interwoven thanks to Linda’s marvellous singing and the musicality of the Scottish dialects (Scots and Doric), immediately highlighted that the boundaries separating these different forms of art can easily be crossed, enhancing the emotional impact of the moment.

Lesley Benzie is an Aberdonian who has lived in Glasgow for twenty-five years. Traces of her origins are still strongly present in her poetry, where she uses Doric. She has published two collections of poems, *Sewn Up* (Wisdom Teeth, 2000) and *Fessen/Reared* (2020), which Graham Fulton has defined as “lyrical, incisive, true… Gently brilliant”. She is currently involved in various literary projects, like the *Dead Scots Project* and the Doric collection *Norlan Lichts* by Rymour Books.

Donna Campbell is a well-known poet and performer. She has had poems published in various magazines and anthologies; her collection *Mongrel* was issued by Seahorse Publications in 2021. Over the past twenty years she has been working with community groups, children, and recovering addicts and alcoholics, since she considers art as a sort of therapy. She has also recently developed a creative course incorporating writing, reading, basic drawing and collage, called *Where Are You At?*.

Linda Jackson is a poet, singer, and writer who taught Creative Writing until 2019, when she founded Seahorse Publications, a small press publishing works by new and established Scottish writers. Thanks to her holistic approach to art, she offers extreme-

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ly touching performances of songs, as happened during the meeting, when she sang *La riva bianca, la riva nera* in the original. As a singer, she has published five albums and performed throughout the world.[1]

In the following pages, Lesley, Donna, and Linda are interviewed by some students of the Master Course in Euro-American Languages, Literatures, and Philologies of Pisa University: Angel Antonio De Oliveira Amata, Tommaso Giannardi, Simona Peria, Giada Pinelli, Matilde Piu, Mariachiara Rosi, Chiara Rotondo, Greta Sergiampietri, and Veronica Vannucci.

GIADA PINELLI: *Being a student of literature, I am particularly interested in the process of writing poetry. First of all: when did you start to write and why, of all forms, did you choose poetry? When did you realise the 'publication potential'? And, comparing with the beginnings of your career, what has changed in your relationship with your poetry and how? As for your writing process, how do you recognise the right idea, the spark of inspiration among all your daily thoughts and feelings? Do you immediately write it down and then go back to it to develop it better, or do you keep thinking until it takes a precise 'shape' and you start working on it only after that? Does it ever happen that you choose to keep the 'raw' version of a poem? And, last but not least, do you feel that having published several of your poems, and thus gained some fame, has changed something in your personal life and as a poet?*

LB: I began writing when I was around 31, so half my lifetime ago now! My initial impetus for writing was that I missed speaking in my native Aberdonian Doric. I had moved from my hometown of Aberdeen to Glasgow where I had to consciously modify my natural speech to be understood; this felt stilted initially and I was self-conscious. I don't exactly remember the point at which I decided to write but the first poem was about my father and grandmother – about personal history. Doric is often described as sing-songy and the way I wrote the words had a strong rhythm and the images came naturally, so poetry didn't feel like a choice, it seemed to choose me.
In terms of my writing process, I tend to be drawn to write about things that impact me at an emotional level, whether it's a personal experience or global injustice, the inspiration begins with how I feel about it. Although more recently I've been asked to write about, for example, travel, it again relates to how I feel. I don't think there is a 'right' idea. If there is a right or wrong, it's in the end product. Sometimes poems work and you have that 'yes' moment and other times, no matter how much work you put into a poem, it never quite resonates. I don't have one way of writing a poem, sometimes a few lines about a subject form in my head and I spend more time thinking, and a poem begins to form. Usually, the first draft is in a very raw form and then the process crafting can result in a few more drafts before you have something worthwhile. Some poems don't change much from the first draft, but most of the time they need crafting.

[1] Further information on Lesley, Donna, and Linda may be found at https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/

Being published is wonderful, especially because part of any writing is about communication. It has also helped build my confidence and sense of self.

DC: I first began writing when I was about 8 years old. I wrote many short stories and poetry. My favourite subjects at school were English and Art and, being shy as a child, I always found it easier to express myself through creativity as opposed to communicating verbally. I was in my 30s when I began to write more in a poetic format. Poetry has an immediacy to it and feels more in-depth than stories.
I did not think about the idea of the publication potential, I just wanted to be published to see if what I was writing had any merit. If anything has changed, it would have to be that I feel more comfortable with my writing. It feels more 'me'. Most of the time I have conversations with myself going on in my head and I will say something and if it has a rhythm to it, I jot it down straight away. If I do not write these ideas down, I forget. Usually I will begin to write the poem when I am going about my daily business and often I will be adding to it using the notepad on my phone. When I get home I further develop the notes/poem. This can take quite a bit of time until I feel it is finished. It is a good idea to keep the raw material until the poem is in its final draft. I am at my happiest when I am engaged in this process.
No, I do not feel anything has changed in my personal life as a result of being published, but I do feel more confident as a poet.

LJ: My poetry days began very early with an aunt that I often stayed with as a young child. My lung health was poor and her country house was thought better for me. She was a very keen reader of prose and poetry and encouraged me from childhood to keep diaries/journals – to write things down, emotions and 'special events'. I went on to study literature and eventually taught at university, so I was always reading/analysing and found respite from this in writing poetry and songs.
Not sure you 'realise' publication, mostly it is suggested by others – I always advise that small indie magazines/outlets are a good place to start. This is where I was first published and, as a tutor of Creative Writing for many years, I read numerous works that I felt should be out there (often very difficult), so I set up Seahorse Publications. It is always a marvellous feeling to see your own work in a book and the work of other writers you think should be more widely published.
Writing poetry often involves impact, whether political or personal. In my case, it is also about a state of mind/being whereby I feel my senses more responsive to the external world, whether place or people. It is sometimes about an acute awareness that *has* to be responded to. There are those poems that 'arrive' from that 'spark', almost as they will appear, only requiring a little rearranging, tweaking of rhythm and/or lexical choices. Often walking with an idea helps it to gather focus and gives a break from the relentless reworking. File it to the unconscious and then return for another look.

TOMMASO GIANNARDI: *One of the issues I most appreciated in your poems is their focus on Scottish identity. I was wondering whether there is a specific Scottish poetic tradition*

in the intertextual background of your poetry; or, to put it differently, are your models mainly Scottish models? And would you also subscribe to a female poetic pantheon?

LB: Obviously Scotland has historically birthed many famous poets and the current poetry scene is burgeoning with talent. And, although each poet brings their unique 'voice', I personally recognise that themes of Scottish identity, how our languages play into our identities and the context of who we are in a 'union' that is not of equals, do find their way into the work of many, and definitely into mine. I don't directly draw on anyone else's work, but the nature of being part of Scottish culture and its poetic heritage means it impacts you almost by a process of osmosis.
I would subscribe to the female poetic tradition – by virtue of being female, we have different experiences, roles, expectations than men and we continue to live in a society where patriarchal assumptions about the world predominate and, for me, that cannot but come through in what women write about and in how they write.

DC: I enjoy writing in English, it's a beautiful language and is perfect for some of the poems I write. However, the Scots language can convey deeper feelings that I have, especially through the rhythms of Scots. Thus, when performing in Scots, there is more fluidity to what I am doing. The Scot's language also has words that better express my sense of belonging and Scottish identity is important to me. Coming from a long line of family who worked in the shipyards at Govan and Clydebank, I feel an infinity with what Scotland has contributed to the world through the ships and the multitude of inventions and discoveries from this country. The geographical landscape of Scotland has shaped its people and I feel very much a part of that landscape.

LJ: Scotland and its literary heritage have strongly influenced my thinking and writing. Reading Robert Burns from a young age and being introduced to the philosophy of David Hume in my teens, I feel that the Scottish Enlightenment and the Romantic Poets have inherently contributed to my own work in terms of subject matter and the political perspectives therein. The current poetry scene in Scotland is enjoying a huge renaissance with all languages being represented – wonderful. The most notable perhaps is the amount of female poets in Scotland now *finally* enjoying some critical acclaim. And yes, my Scottish identity is strong – the geography of this country and the changing light is like a feast for anyone engaged in the Creative Arts.
I enjoy much of the new poetry coming from all over these diverse islands and also European writers in translation, but I do notice that my poetry shelves teem with female poets more than Scottish ones.

MARIACHIARA ROSI: *Putting together a collection of poems by different authors usually implies a process of collaboration, a shared repertoire of themes and motifs and a mutual ideological perspective, in order to give life to a coherent work; thus, my question is about your poetic relationship and whether it could be considered as a crucial factor in the making of your latest release or not. From a technical point of view, how did you conceive your*

creative path? Did you find yourselves agreeing on the structure and on the aims of the collection? And, as far as the artistic side is concerned, do you share the same ideas on poetry – namely female poetry – its functions and its role in contemporary society?

LB: Linda was the catalyst for the collection. It was her idea and she asked us to be part of the collaboration based on the theme of writing about travel. I loved the idea and was very pleased to be involved. Writing on travel and its modes was our only brief initially but, once we began submitting, Linda, as the publisher, edited the collection. She would make sure there was a balance of different countries/cities, not too many poems on the same place. We also had to begin considering having a mix of emotional tones, lengths of poems and personal vs political too. Although we have our own unique style, I don't think that any of us would have got involved without that underpinning of positive regard for each other's work, as well as the relationships and the fact of our womanist/feminist/social justice perspective, which does lend the collection coherence. Positive regard and relationship have also proved important when touring with the book. We have spent a lot of time in each other's company and worked together to present the range of poems at different events, and that would have been very difficult without that.

DC: I believe that our poetic relationship has been instrumental in the success of the collection. We each have strong individual voices and writing styles, which gives the collection the power to speak to many different audiences. We enjoy and respect each others' work and the fact that we are friends has contributed to the success of the book. Each of us reads and critiques all of the poems, so that we can get the best out of the work. It is Linda who brings the poems together and creates a coherence that works for the final collection.
The structure and aims of the book were there at the very beginning. The impetus for the book came from the locking down of the world due to the Covid pandemic. We agreed that women had a more difficult time during lockdown, due to their workload and having to look after children, often having to help with school work and the frustrations of children not being able to see friends etc.
I do not see myself as a 'female' poet. I do not like to differentiate between male and female because I feel that it belittles women's poetry... we do not refer to 'male poets'.

LJ: In thinking about the *Wanderlust Women* collection, without doubt, I approached poets whose writing I enjoyed, whose company I enjoyed and who I knew shared similar views on the world we live in. However, alongside these considerations, they were also poets who had very different 'voices' and pathways into poetry. In this way, the collection would bring different 'sounds' of Scots and diverse experiences to readers/audiences. Like myself, these were women who enjoyed travelling and, during Covid, no one could move far and it felt to me that creating poems that recalled travel and otherness would be a release or relief.
I was aware, and still am, of the enormous impact Brexit would have on Scotland, so these poems would be a way of reaching out again into the world. These were my aims

in conceiving the book, shared with the others. We then discussed territories for the voices and content to get a balance and coherence to the finished product.
For me it was important that all poets would be female and working-class females.

ANGEL ANTONIO DE OLIVEIRA AMATA: *The questions of identity and gender you stress in your poetry also play a crucial role in some contemporary Scottish narrative, for instance in Ali Smith's novels. Do you think the choice of a different medium (poetry vs narrative) actually affects the way writers deal with such cogent issues, and would you say different genres perform the task of spreading awareness in different ways?*

LB: Although both forms are equally about communication, I would definitely say poetry vs narrative affects the way the writer tackles the subject matter. With narrative you have more time to describe and tell/show the story and can be more direct with how you or your character feel or what they want to say about an issue. There is often plot, story arc and resolution. With poetry you have to be economic while also infusing your language with meaning, selecting each word carefully, so that it 'says' as much as possible, without telling the reader what to think. The focus is on images and metaphors to show the issues and their consequences in action. Although poems can be narrative, they can also be snapshots with the focus on the emotional/sensing/impact of events. Messages can be more oblique and thought-provoking and the reader is left questioning and bringing their own interpretation to the meaning.

DC: I do not believe that the choice of medium affects the way writers deal with the issues that they are writing about. Whatever genre is comfortable for the writer to get to the heart of a subject is probably the right one for any given theme.
Yes, I do think different genres perform the task in different ways. Some people prefer to read a novel, a short story or poetry to explore issues and stories.

LJ: Ali Smith is one of many Scottish writers who explore feelings of alienation, including gender dysphoria, and she does this particularly effectively in *Girl Meets Boy*. James Kelman and Irvine Welsh explore other forms of alienation – social deprivation and exclusion. Kelman has written widely about the need to make the voice of the Scottish working classes the narrative voice, not the language 'caged' in direct speech punctuation.
Yes, these are prose narratives, but could have memorable impact if written in poetic prose or poetry. Challenging writing on gender, class, and race needs all literary genres to spread awareness.

CHIARA ROTONDO: *In your poems, you partly recall and partly fabricate a remembrance of place and time, in a combination of recovery and creativity, by re-interpreting your past in the re-telling and adapting it to present purposes. I was wondering how much of the poetry of memory relies on fact, and how much it depends upon imagination. And is it mainly a personal memory, or do you also grant importance to collective memory?*

LB: I think it relies on fact and imagination in equal measure. Clearly, if I'm writing about a childhood memory, I am looking back at it through adult eyes. Yet, at the same time I am trying to bring to the fore the *child's* perspective and the emotional reality and impact of the experience. So, I am drawing both on memory and my current imagination, using words and images carefully to communicate to others. I am often transforming the experience for myself, but also trying to tell the world "this is what that experience does or feels like". In terms of collective memory, in one of my own collections, I wrote a long poem about the Vietnam War, which occurred during my childhood. When I went to the War Remnants Museum in Vietnam as an adult, I was seeing their history told by them in graphic detail, images and artefacts, instead of through our Western media. I utilised my emotional reaction to being there, and the memories it awakened from my childhood of the impression the TV images had on me at the time – so it is both collective and personal.

DC: When writing about memories, it is the feeling or mood of the memory that informs the poems. To remember the facts of the past can be elusive, but the feeling is more accessible. It is not so much as fabricating details of the memories, but more about using poetic techniques to evoke the essence of what it is I am remembering. Also, it is about extracting the importance of what was happening at the time and eliminating those facts that are not important for what it is I am trying to convey.
I mostly use personal memory but feel that, through the poetry and the use of imagination, the personal can be part of the collective, in so far that I am using emotions to write the poem and this can spark memories of emotions universal to us as humans.

LJ: I have written journals and diaries for fifty years; I always have them with me when travelling, but acknowledge that even something written on the evening of an event or a journey is still a 'selection' from the wealth of sensory information travelling to the brain. Thoughts arise and it is the task of the writer to use both 'facts/truths' and imagination to write. It is perhaps the emotional impact that first directs the focus of the recall and thereafter the poem itself may go in a direction that follows that emotional 'truth'. Currently, I am completing the second of a memoir trilogy on my life as a musician and trying to catch the facts and details as far as possible, but individual agendas and perspective will always influence the outcome.
In *Wanderlust Women*, we wrote about places and the universals of love, family, reactions to war and trauma – these personal 'memories' hopefully resonate with others.

MATILDE PIU: *About the genesis of* Wanderlust Women, *you have explained that it was conceived during the ongoing Covid crisis, as a reaction to travelling restrictions. Being a condition shared by all of us, we can understand the symbolic import of the theme of the journey. But can you tell us something about its usage in describing or exposing specific social and political issues? In what way may it be particularly suitable to this aim? And also, do you reckon that even nowadays there is a gender connotation, or gender-related issue, not only in travelling, but also in everyday commuting by public transport?*

LB: When it comes to being socially and politically aware, it is almost impossible for that aspect of me not to be reflected in many of my poems. In terms of the 'journey' as a theme, obviously in this collection we focused on places we have been or modes of travel as a starting point. Depending on the place, its history and my experience, the 'journey' can lend itself to raising or reflecting on social and political issues. It can also reflect my own personal journey as a woman throughout my life, and how the world reflects what being a woman in various places means back to me. Undoubtedly there continues to be a gender connotation on transport, in the street, and in the workplace anywhere we travel in the world.

DC: I think the book is a celebration of the world and the freedom of movement, particularly throughout Europe. However, with Brexit, that freedom has been lost and it feels like we have become an island isolated from the rest of the world. The UK seems very small and has somehow been cast adrift, much to the detriment of everyone who lives here.
Some of the poems deal with observations of political and social injustices in some countries, and I think it would be wrong not to recognise this when writing about a specific country.

LJ: I read the world as a resisting reader in terms of social injustice along gender, race, and class lines. Therefore, as a writer travelling, I cannot be unaware of social and political issues. In my songs, prose and poetry there is often a clear statement or *leitmotif* about these matters. My aim is to avoid being didactic, but just express what I perceive and feel when aware of abuses of power socially and politically. Writing is a different medium to bring attention to critical issues in the world which may be omitted or, indeed, misrepresented in the media and official political forums.
There are different levels of gender-related issues in the world: some countries appear to be still lodged in the dark ages with respect to gender freedoms. However, I would also argue that it is a global issue with much work still to be done. In 'modern' Britain's transport system, I have witnessed serious abuse and more concealed commentary relating to gender and have seen similar abuses in many parts of Europe.

SIMONA PERIA: *Your poems focus on travelling and wandering, and in them you discover both new and familiar places. What role do you think poetry plays in connecting and reconnecting with the places you visit? Do you think being poets (and writing poetry on the subject) gives you a different approach to travelling?*

LB: Though I have always loved travel, even before I wrote poetry, I definitely think/feel that writing poetry about travel, the journey, and the place reconnects me to the whole experience in a way that nothing else does. Poetry by its nature is about me tapping into and allowing my sub-conscious, deeper senses and feelings about an experience to emerge. I do write when I'm away, but not all the time and not always about the place I'm in. I am sometimes too busy experiencing the journey or place and its impact is too immediate for me to write about it there and then. But I can then connect and

reflect and draw on memories of the experience later, through images, emotions, and sounds, and bring it to life and connect with it all over again. Occasionally, I am more intentional and will research for my writing while I'm travelling.

DC: I think poetry can transform the places that have been visited and, instead of just going to a place, poets, perhaps, are more likely to discover the essence of places and connect with that in a creative way and will express that essence in language. I believe the poet is consuming journeys on a subconscious level and the impact will reveal itself when given time to digest and come to the fore.

LJ: Writers have used travel as a means of poetic stimulation for hundreds of years. I am no different. Different skylines, seascapes, architecture, language and interpersonal relationships deliver a plethora of ideas to work with. I do not always travel with intent, and yet I cannot but be affected and this emerges in writing. There is also a reconnecting with place. My poem "Enniscrone" is about a near-death experience that I had in Ireland having swum from Enniscrone beach. The poem, written thirty years later, is the first time I could 'revisit' that event and that has been quite cathartic. When writing or rewriting, one can be transported back to either revisit/replay the experience, or indeed reflect on how your present self reads or feels about that situation/event now.
I do think all people who approach the world *creatively* will often use the stimuli from travelling to create and recreate.

GRETA SERGIAMPIETRI: *In the two Kenyan poems, "Kenyan Flight" and "The Great Rift Valley", the lyrical voice seems to undertake a vertical movement connecting the air and the ground, respectively epitomised by the airplane and the valley's natural details – the verdant hills, volcanoes, lakes, and precious stones. However, this movement from above seems to repeat itself at the end of the second poem with the verb 'flying' in a sort of circular structure of the journey, which acquires a more metaphorical meaning, growing into an identity quest by human beings who re-connect to their most ancient roots associated with "hominid fossils". To what extent do the African landscape and, more specifically, the power of nature play a crucial role in this human quest for identity?*

LB: For me the human quest for identity doesn't really make sense if we are only considering personal/political history and culture. Our cultural identity grows out of the environment and landscape around us. In addition, despite the hostile press it receives, combined with the environment and nature, 'migration' is pivotal to the variety of ethnicities on planet earth.
In terms of being there, I can't conceive of anyone not being completely awed by the African landscape, where the power of nature is omnipresent and inescapable. I really felt it challenges the false sense we can have of ourselves in modern, technologically developed societies where meeting most of our needs is relatively easy. The very fact that we can treat nature purely as a resource, even at the cost of our own extinction, is like a collective denial that we are *of* it. I was very aware of how disconnected we often are

from the source of our own becoming. Flying over the Great Rift Valley in a 12-seater plane, I was particularly conscious of my vulnerability, and at the same time it was as if the immensely powerful primal force of that vast rift/fault line in the earth was drawing me to it and vibrating through me. When I first wrote the poems, I wasn't consciously aware of the circular structure, but now I recognise that they reflect my intimate sense that we are of that earth and also that it is to the earth we return.

VERONICA VANNUCCI: *In general, when we refer to the different fields of poetry, performance, and music, we tend to synthesise everything with the term 'Art'. Since, in your case, these elements are inextricably intertwined, how do your two artistic souls come together? To Donna Campbell: Do you consider yourself first a performer or a poet, or would one simply not exist without the other?*

DC: I agree that one would not exist without the other. Generally, the performance poetry that I do is more autobiographical; they have an emotional depth to them that doesn't appear in what I call 'page poetry'. With performance poetry I feel the poems are in my body, often different parts of my body, where I believe we hold memories, particularly of trauma. I feel very much alive during performing. I do not get the same feeling when reading from the page. The poem feels outside of me as opposed to the performance poetry which feels inside of me.

To Linda Jackson: What role does traditional Scottish music play in your repertoire as a singer?

LJ: In my teens I sang traditional Scottish ballads professionally and, while I enjoyed doing that (and still do), like most teens my musical taste shifted and I grew towards blues and gospel music of the American South, then rock and back to blues, but my biggest influence was the narrative experimental songs of Joni Mitchell. Blues men and women, singer song-writers, traditional Scots Border ballads. All telling stories.
Ironically, I have since read widely about 'presenting the line'. The unaccompanied singing of psalms by presbyterian Scots may be the ancestor of 'lining out', a hymnal singing style of 19th-century slaves practised in Southern churches. It has been suggested that 'lining out' is the forerunner of the 'call and response' of Gospel singing. Over 40,000 Gaels were cleared or emigrated in the 18th and 19th centuries to the Carolinas. Most of them would also be well aware of the folk/ballad tradition. The central belt of Scotland has had a rich blues music scene for many decades now and many gospel choirs. I am and have been involved in both as well as writing many contemporary themed songs in the traditional ballad format.[2]

[2] See https://glasgowbluesplayers.co.uk/linda-jaxson; www.lindajaxson.com.

NOTES & REVIEWS

Lorenzo Santi*

Francesca Mussi, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation*

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In *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation*, Francesca Mussi explores the ways and extent to which contemporary South African literature has been affected by the procedures and spirit of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This non-judicial body was created "to provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed" in South Africa from 1960 to 1994 (Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995), and it played a crucial role in the process of political transition towards democracy in the country after the demise of apartheid.

As Mussi asserts, her study is less involved in determining whether the Truth and Reconciliation Commission failed or succeeded in coping with the atrocities of the past, than in discussing how literary works written in the post-apartheid period have emerged as interlaced with the history of the Commission and with concepts like trauma, truth, and reconciliation, which closely revolve around the TRC's mandate and proceedings. In order to better investigate how literature has initiated a discussion on the TRC, the book is divided into four chapters, namely "Introduction: The South African TRC and Its Narrative Legacies", "Trauma: Conflictual Interplay Between Voice and Silence", "Truth-Telling: Hybridity, Authorship and Ethics", and "Fictional Journeys Towards Reconciliation". The Conclusion section summarises the results of the huge research carried out by the author in the previous chapters.

In the first chapter, Mussi provides the reader with paramount information about the historical context in which the TRC was established, together with an account of its aims, successes and shortcomings. The focus then shifts to literature. While underlining that her main interest is in the novel genre and in the strategies adopted by novelists to examine the role of the TRC, Mussi does not totally neglect other literary genres. At first, she draws attention to theatre, as one of the most prominent fields engaging in dialogue with issues raised by the TRC. Secondly, she investigates the influence of the Commission's agency in the sphere of poetic themes and stylistic choices, dedicating space to the *oeuvre* of South African poet Ingrid de Kok, especially her collection *Terrestrial Things* (2002). Finally, she tackles Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, a well-known landmark in contemporary South African literature in which Krog, a dissident Afrikaner writer, excels at providing touching, crucial insights into the Commission's sessions and hearings. In her acclaimed as well as controversial 1998 book, Krog blends episodes from

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the official history of the country in the transition period with her personal memories, fictional strategies and, of course, her direct experience as a South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio journalist committed to reporting on the work of the TRC.

After dealing with the production mentioned above, Mussi concentrates on the novel genre, which she sees as particularly suited to posing questions connected with the agenda and goals of the TRC, such as the achievability of the ideals of truth and reconciliation, the ethics of confession and the very possibility of coping with apartheid's deep-rooted legacy of traumatic memories. Mussi looks at Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), a fictionalised account of the dynamics of Amy Biehl's murder in 1993. A white American student and anti-apartheid activist, Amy was stabbed and stoned to death by a mob of blacks in the township of Guguletu, while she was taking one of her friends home. The four boys convicted of her murder were eventually granted amnesty on the grounds of the Commission's policies. Magona's reconstruction, taking on the form of a diary and poignant first-person letter from the mother of one of the killers to Amy's mother, induces one to reflect on the complexity of the notions of 'innocence' and 'guilt' and on the tragic blurring of the boundary between the predator/prey, perpetrator/victim identities, if considering that the assailants' "environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity" (p. 24). Also, we could argue that

> [by] withholding Mrs Biehl's response, *Mother to Mother* refuses to underwrite the TRC's narrative of unity and reconciliation, but rather opens up questions as to the real efficacy of the Commission's work and the meaning of "closure", thus alluding to the long road that remains to be travelled to achieve real reconciliation in South Africa. (p. 26)

The focus then turns to Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust* (2000), a novel which elaborates on the 1990s' encounter, during the TRC's proceedings, between MK activist Alex Mpondo ('victim') and policeman Dirk Hendricks ('perpetrator'), sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment for the death of a detainee and now applying for amnesty. Mussi evidences how, by capitalising on the epiphenomenal ramifications, shocking revelations and collateral effects of such a confrontation, Slovo manages to shed light on the ambiguities and eerie overturnings at the root of the process of truth-seeking and hidden behind the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'.

Chapter 2 brings to the fore the topic of trauma. Mussi lays emphasis on the TRC's gendered approach to trauma by examining the role and behaviour of women in the course of the Commission's hearings. Although women hugely suffered from violence on both a physical and psychological level during the apartheid years, they often showed reluctance to dwell on their tragic stories before the Commission. By reformulating Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remarkable question in her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" into "Can the Subaltern Be Heard?", Mussi wonders whether the TRC was actually able to provide women with a safe place to speak, especially as far as sexual violence was concerned. In this regard, she mentions the novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001) by Achmat Dangor, in which the author expresses his perplexity towards the TRC's capability to either cope with female traumas or grant women a secure location from which to have their say, especially when it came to sexual assault and rape. The chapter then passes on to Njabulo Ndebele's

The Cry of Winnie Mandela (2003, 2013), a novel made up of two different discursive pathways. On the one hand, the text points out the difficulties and worries that harass the lives of a small group of "Penelope's descendants", four non-white women waiting in vain for their husbands to come back either from the liberation struggle or from their far-off workplaces and commitments during the apartheid years. Hence the depiction of the miserable condition of 'ordinary' South African women faced with the combined impact of the racist regime's oppression and the constraints of patriarchal subordination. On the other hand, as suggested by its title, the book revolves around the 'extraordinary', charismatic presence of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (1936-2018), Nelson Mandela's second wife and Mother of the Nation, whom the four abandoned women address while sharing their testimonies. Ndebele shows the extent to which such a proud and controversial public icon endured, but also reacted to, humiliations and discredit throughout the decades of segregationism. As a result, Madikizela-Mandela found it very difficult to "express regret" when appearing before the TRC and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. By interlacing these survival stories of forced separations, Ndebele problematises the TRC's notion of '*gross* human rights violations', inviting the reader to reflect on 'ordinary' traumas too, on how the everyday tragedies of wounded persons sadly risked to go unheard.

After exploring gender realities with reference to novelistic discourse and the TRC's objectives, the volume's second chapter takes up the vexed notion of race and its huge social implications. A major point in Mussi's discussion is that, besides women suffering from everyday violence, the TRC's proceedings failed to encompass all the implications linked to racism and systemic discrimination. In this case, too, the primacy given to the concept of 'gross violation' inevitably overshadowed the statements and testimonies of those who experienced ordinary traumas due to the racial laws (i.e., through the Population Registration Act and racial classification, the pass laws, the forced removals, the loss of land with the associated system of migrant labour, and so forth). In dealing with race, Mussi also devotes particular attention to the complexities embedded in the life of Coloured people in the new South Africa. Her analysis of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) shows how, after the demise of apartheid, Coloureds were still bound to cope with several hardships in order to tell their stories of trauma and have them heard.

Chapter 3 provides context for a consideration of the TRC's interpretation of 'truth'. The very banner of that restorative-justice body's public hearings – "Truth: the Road to Reconciliation" – extolled the role assigned to truth as a highway to forgiveness and peace via confession, chronicles of suffering, apologies, expressions of regret and the healing of the wounds of the past. In the face of such a magnification of truth, Mussi concentrates on the tangled process which should have led to its discovery and reflects upon the possibilities as well as limits of truth-telling and truth-seeking with regard to the Commission's mandate of uncovering past abuse.

The third chapter explores this topic by examining three novels. The first is *The House Gun* by Nadine Gordimer. Published in 1998 and receptive to the overwhelming winds of change of post-apartheid/post-racial South Africa, this 'courtroom drama' interrogates any neat definition of truth by showcasing a different kind of crime: the murder of an upper-middle-class white man by another upper-middle-class white man, namely Duncan Lindgard, a young architect who becomes enmeshed in promiscuous

sexual relationships. As the narrative unfolds, with its bewildering Dostoevskyian echoes, moments of conscience-probing and sense of guilt, the reader is teased into wondering about the nature of crime and the burden of accountability, against a backdrop where Duncan's light sentence – seven years in prison, with extenuating circumstances – would not have been possible without a black lawyer's support, a black friend's testimony and the new South Africa's changing legal system (the death penalty now being banned by the Constitutional Court). By employing a complex, multi-layered narrative structure, Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) can similarly be shown to dig deep and ultimately call into question the epistemological foundations of truth-telling. The third chapter's final focus is on Patrick Flanery's *Absolution* (2012), which, penned by an American writer and academic, records the enormous impact that the TRC has had on literature from all over the world. By foregrounding the encounter between Sam Leroux, a young academic charged with the task of writing a biography of acclaimed author Clare Wald, and Wald herself, Flanery builds up a story of lies, unspoken truths and gaps, thus exposing the deceitfulness of any narrative purporting to fix a unique and universal truth.

The last chapter is devoted to reconciliation, which is, for Mussi, the toughest concept to grasp because of its dynamic, multi-dimensional nature and utopian urge. Her discussion of the literary refractions of the TRC's approach to reconciliation starts with J.M. Coetzee's remarkable novel *Disgrace*. This 1999 work articulates a critique of the TRC's policy by depicting a post-apartheid South Africa still affected by endemic violence and widespread hatred between whites and non-whites. Meanwhile, Coetzee discloses the inadequacy of the TRC's striving to invite women to publicly go through their shattering experiences of sexual violence, thus counterposing silence as a possible alternative to come to terms with sorrowful memories. At this juncture, Mussi briefly turns her attention to the theme of domestic violence against women, a crucial topic in Thando Mgqolozana's *Un-importance* (2014). Through a stream-of-consciousness narration, Mgqolozana's novel tells the story of Zizi's journey towards reconciliation, after he decides to confess the violence he perpetrated against his girlfriend. As Mussi carefully notes, the novel calls to mind the ambiance of the TRC's public hearings and the confessions made by perpetrators in order to atone for their guilt and be granted amnesty. By engaging with the TRC's tenets of truth-telling, accountability and reconciliation, along with a main focus on gender inequality, *Un-importance* awakens us to the necessity of dealing with issues not yet fully tackled by the Commission.

The notion of reconciliation is further probed in Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* (2016), defined as "a raw, uncompromising and intensely emotional account of a young woman's struggle to find her own place in contemporary South Africa" (p. 210). When discussing this novel, Mussi gives a great deal of thought to relevant issues in post-apartheid South Africa such as widespread xenophobia, a flawed healthcare system and significant cases of 'corrective rape', thus prompting one to wonder whether freedom, peace and equality have really been achieved in the 'Rainbow Nation'. Xenophobic violence is also at the core of *Call It Dog* (2013), Marli Roode's debut novel and the last literary work analysed here. By telling the story of Jo Hartslief, a South African-born, London-based journalist, and of her visit to her home country to collect information and give a full account of the xenophobic riots in Alexandra, *Call It Dog*

expands on real events, namely the anti-immigrant riots that took place in Alexandra in 2008 and that quickly extended to other cities like Durban. Through an analysis of this work, Mussi invites the reader to reflect on how reconciliation is still a long way from being achieved. Meanwhile, she underlines the novel's capability to pose questions about the status of truth-finding and truth-telling, again with an eye to assessing the TRC's assumptions and proceedings.

In conclusion, *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth, and Reconciliation* brings to the fore the considerable extent to which post-apartheid literature has engaged with a critical discourse on the TRC. Through her perceptive analysis, Francesca Mussi has shown how literature, and particularly novels, have succeeded in looking into the TRC's policy and key notions such as trauma and guilt, violations and repentance, truth and reconciliation. In doing so, she has contributed to shedding light on literature's capability to become a site for a compelling investigation of historical and collective phenomena of great relevance.

Linda Fiasconi*

Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English* Fin de Siècle*: Citizens of Nowhere*, Oxford, OUP, 2021, pp. 282, ISBN 9780198864240

Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle*: Citizens of Nowhere* offers new insightful perspectives on cosmopolitanism in *fin-de-siècle* writing in English. Building on important works by Regenia Gagnier, Matthew Potolsky and Parejo Vaillo, Evangelista's book sets out to bridge a critical gap between English Studies and new developments in comparative and world literature. Moving beyond investigations of imperial networks tackled by postcolonial scholarship, he aims to open up a wider perspective on Victorian Studies by looking at linguistic and geographical entanglements, spaces of mediation, and moments of cross-cultural contact that cannot be framed within a national focus on Britain or the English language. As the debate between nationalists and cosmopolitans unfolds at the turn of the twentieth century, Evangelista attempts to shed light on the fundamental role of literature in simultaneously promoting and interrogating cosmopolitanism, observing how "the literary medium not only reflects but *creates* specific conditions to reach beyond the social, cultural, linguistic, affective and ethical boundaries of national cultures" (p. 20).

Each of the first three chapters of the book conducts an in-depth study of a single writer – Oscar Wilde, Lafcadio Hearn, and George Egerton, respectively – who brought English literature and language into dialogue with foreign cultures, embracing the creative potential of world citizenship. Evangelista's analysis underlines the variety of their literary responses and simultaneously emphasises their shared ability to cut across geographical and linguistic borders, as well as their productive interest in translation. In the age of imperial expansion and national jingoism, these three writers of British descent are shown to fashion new, alternative identities and cultural practices, while at the same time embodying "the existential anxiety of the cosmopolitan writer as citizen of nowhere" (p. 120). Evangelista's carefully chosen subtitle for his book reflects indeed the "paradoxical nature of cosmopolitanism", which he sees as "a position of both strength and vulnerability" (p. 4) where privilege and loss, worldliness and exile, connectivity and unbelonging exist in "an uncomfortable state of symbiosis" (p. 19).

The first chapter, "Oscar Wilde's World Literature", focuses on the canonical figure of Wilde as a key theorist and promoter of the new literary cosmopolitanism of the English *fin de siècle*. After providing a background on the concept of 'world literature' as defined by Goethe and its English reception, Evangelista shows how Wilde played with this idea from the very start of his career, stressing the need for an international critical dialogue in which authors and works – when viewed

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from abroad and thus inhabiting a supranational space – would acquire different meanings. The following section moves on to consider Wilde's French-language play, *Salomé* (1893), which, far from being an isolated and eccentric experiment, is seen as representing "the culmination of [Wilde's] desire to cross and disrupt national borders, providing at the same time a practical outlet for the theory of world literature elaborated in his critical writings" (p. 36). Encapsulating his cultural and physical mobility between France and England, this work and its well-known publication history stir up reflections on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and national identity, provoking and frustrating "the desire to clean and standardize the text, to make it fit into a stable language and national identity" (p. 71).

While Wilde frequented salons and readily identified with metropolitan networks, Lafcadio Hearn escaped the metropolis and emphasised cultural diversity by lending ear to the peripheral. A highly admired writer in Japan, where he adopted the name 'Koizumi Yakumo', Hearn has been progressively marginalised in the West as an unexceptional travel writer or as a Japanophile at a time of anti-Japanese political sentiment, before being labelled as an orientalist *tout court* by postcolonial criticism. In the second chapter, "Lafcadio Hearn and Global Aestheticism", Evangelista attempts to bring this literary figure to the forefront and to complexify his subject position by showing how the author's cosmopolitanism actually consists of an "unsolved dialectic of uprooting and rootedness, of balancing contradictory positions of socio-cultural privilege and vulnerability. Politically and aesthetically, his literary cosmopolitanism compounds anti-imperialism with elements of orientalism" (p. 81). Fearing the ambitions of geo-political domination and cultural homologation coming from the British Empire, Hearn fought for the preservation of the local in Japan, including in his writings a series of anecdotes, snatches of translation, tales and legends that he learned from the people he encountered, as well as explanations of different customs and traditions. Evangelista's analysis of Hearn's cosmopolitan commitment ultimately has him stand out as a foremost cultural mediator whose literary work both "shaped the knowledge of Japan in the West by broadcasting Japanese culture" and "left a lasting mark on the literary culture of his adopted country by promoting the preservation and appreciation of Japan's traditional folk tales" (p. 111).

If Wilde's gaze was pointed towards France and Hearn's towards Japan, George Egerton looked at Northern Europe and was particularly drawn to Norway. In his third chapter, "George Egerton's Scandinavian Breakthrough", Evangelista turns his attention to this innovative and experimental writer who, though overlooked in the twentieth century, has been recently rehabilitated thanks to feminist scholars. However, Evangelista contends, approaching Egerton's work through the critical lens of Gender Studies has led critics to overlook another crucial facet of her identity, that is, "how much Egerton positioned herself at the margins of English literary culture, writing from the point of view of strangers and outsiders, translating foreign literatures, and adopting cosmopolitanism as a discourse of cultural authority" (p. 118). After investigating Egerton's portrayal of women's mobility in her fiction, which unravels the conflicting associations of cosmopolitanism with an empowering individualism and emotional dislocation, Evangelista sheds light on her work as translator of modern

Scandinavian literature. Far from being a mechanical activity aimed at profit, translation was for this writer "an act of dissent against the rules of the British literary market, which then as now favoured original work in the national language" (p. 131). Her textual dialogue with Ola Hansson and Knut Hamsun did not merely contribute to the English assimilation of Scandinavian literary modernity but affected her own creative process as a writer of fiction, thus inviting scholars to re-assess translation as an act of cooperation and productive contamination.

Moving from individual works to larger international backdrops for the circulation of literature, the last two chapters of the book shift the focus to how different kinds of networks shaped the construction of literary cosmopolitanism in the public sphere at the turn of the century, emphasising first the role of the periodical press and then the emergence of movements for the promotion of universal languages.

The fourth chapter, "Controversies in the Periodical Press: *Cosmopolitan* and *Cosmopolis*", examines the relationship between world literature and journalistic practices by providing a comparative analysis of two monthly journals launched at the *fin de siècle*: the American *Cosmopolitan* and the short-lived European *Cosmopolis*. Linked to social privilege, glamorous consumerism and *savoir faire*, the former tried to reach as wide an audience as possible and redefined world citizenship as an increasingly feminised social identity driven by materialistic desires, while still taking its educational ambition seriously. The latter, instead, was a high-brow, multilingual journal which counted on a prestigious list of contributors and embodied an idealistic vision of cosmopolitanism trying to generate new ideas and create transnational encounters. Evangelista points out how their discursive construction of literary cosmopolitanism was thus profoundly different, revealing "the tension between the politico-philosophical ideals of world citizenship inherited from the eighteenth century and filtered via Goethe's notion of world literature, and the fast-developing new understanding of cosmopolitanism inflected by consumer culture" (p. 169). At the turn of the century, both periodicals nevertheless encouraged the creation of "a dynamic international space" (p. 165) enabling authors, for example, to review foreign literatures or being discussed by foreign critics, or simply to be published alongside writers from abroad.

The last chapter, "Those Who Hoped: Literary Cosmopolitanism and Artificial Languages", focuses on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and the artificial language movements of the *fin de siècle*, whose goal was mainly to facilitate communication between people of different nationalities. Evangelista underlines how the adoption and proliferation of a universal language responded to the perception of an increasingly interconnected world and the desire to create a brotherhood of men:

> In common with other forms of cosmopolitan activism, universal language movements shared an ethical commitment to securing equality among different nations and races, dialogue, fraternity, and justice. For their exponents, language was where differences between peoples and nations were most indelibly encrypted: it was the framework that needed to be questioned and dismantled most urgently if divisive nationalisms were to be effectively opposed. (p. 208)

The chapter first concentrates on Volapük, unpacking the associations, controversies and prejudices attached to this 'universal' language as they emerge in Henry James's

short story "The Pupil". Evangelista then moves on to evaluate key features of the literary cosmopolitanism of Esperanto, the most successful artificial language ever created which overtook Volapük, and ultimately closes with an investigation of the Esperanto movement in *fin-de-siècle* Britain.

A crucial and much-welcomed contribution to the scholarship devoted to late nineteenth-century literature, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English* Fin de Siècle invites scholars to move beyond the categories of author, canon, and text as traditionally constructed within the boundaries of the nation and to "rehabilitat[e] translation as a constituent part of the literary landscape" (p. 258), as an extremely rich cultural activity which is to be considered alongside other forms of artistic creation. As it unveils the tensions and controversies that the notion of 'world citizenship' carried with it, the book further shows "how the debate on cosmopolitanism that took place in the *fin de siècle* laid the foundations for our own understanding of this concept in the twenty-first century" (p. 5). Against the backdrop of rising xenophobic nationalism, right-wing extremism, populism and the oppression of minorities, Evangelista's book helps us shed new light on key issues that still preoccupy us today, enriching contemporary debates relating to transcultural dialogue and the culture of mobility and migration.

Camilla Del Grazia*

Michela Marroni, *Eleanor Marx. Traduttrice vittoriana e militante ribelle*, Pisa, ETS, 2021, pp. 155, ISBN 9788846761798

Il testo monografico di Michela Marroni, *Eleanor Marx. Traduttrice vittoriana e militante ribelle*, si configura sin dalla premessa (pp. 7-8) come il tentativo di decifrare il complesso percorso di vita di Eleanor Marx, o 'Tussy,' come era conosciuta in famiglia, secondo chiavi esegetiche alternative. Come nota Marroni, la vicenda biografica di Eleanor è inscindibile da una società 'in trasformazione,' in fase di crescita ed evoluzione tanto quanto lo era la stessa Marx: "Tussy […] si trovò al centro di un dibattito che si apriva su più fronti: il socialismo, la 'woman question,' la nuova scena teatrale e, non ultime, la letteratura e la traduzione" (p. 7). Sempre al centro di un contesto socio-culturale dinamico, sia nell'orbita della figura paterna, sia in virtù di un vivo e profondo desiderio di partecipazione alla sfera civile e intellettuale dell'epoca, Eleanor Marx non si può ridurre a un unico nucleo di significato. Ed ecco che Marroni fornisce al lettore molteplici decodifiche, supportate da un attento lavoro bibliografico e ordinate sì diacronicamente, secondo lo scorrere della vita di Tussy, ma legate indissolubilmente ai temi e ai campi di indagine a lei più cari.

Il primo capitolo, "Nel nome del padre" (pp. 9-32), si apre per così dire *in medias res*: una Eleanor sedicenne viene convocata dal padre nel suo studio per ricevere da lui l''investitura' di traduttrice. Selezionare questo specifico episodio, in cui Marx comunica alla figlia che "era sua intenzione fare di lei una traduttrice" (p. 9), come *incipit* della monografia, evidenzia come il lavoro di ricostruzione di Marroni si orienti verso un'integrazione completa tra prospettiva biografica e intellettuale. Non è il principio della vita di Tussy a contare, ma piuttosto l'inizio del suo percorso formativo e professionale, che è, però, del tutto inscindibile dal contesto familiare. È il padre che decreta il futuro della figlia e glielo comunica. "Nel nome del padre" sottolinea l'idealizzazione del genitore che diviene una guida quasi divina, anche e soprattutto dal punto di vista della realizzazione spirituale: "Senza forzatura alcuna, Tussy capiva che il desiderio di essere dalla parte della giustizia sociale, dei più poveri e indifesi, era semplicemente l'esito della lezione morale di un'anima nobile e sensibile come quella del padre" (p. 10). L'intervento paterno, perciò, non viene presentato come una costrizione, ma come un solco profondo nel cui tracciato Eleanor potrà seminare ciò che più desidera. Difatti, della sua attività di traduttrice Marroni sottolinea la caratura morale: "Traduceva pensando al cambiamento, avendo in mente una sua utopia sociale che in parte era lo specchio della teoria paterna" (p. 22).

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È però fondamentale notare che, per quanto il titolo del capitolo accenni alla devozione di Eleanor per il padre, i temi trattati configurano la relazione tra i due come dialettica. Il legame con Lissagaray, per esempio, nasce dal suo frequentare i circoli vicini a Marx, ma viene al contempo profondamente osteggiato dalla famiglia di lei. Eleanor, perciò, riconosce la stima che il padre nutre per il compagno sul piano dell'attività politica, ma si ribella ai tentativi di allontanarla da un uomo ritenuto inaffidabile su quello sentimentale: "Il suo desiderio di libertà, mai separato da un radicato senso di affermazione di sé e delle sue idee, rivelava quanto fosse forte in lei, anche in termini di *gender*, il concetto di autonomia: nessuno avrebbe potuto esercitare una sorta di diritto di veto sulla sua vita, come invece avveniva regolarmente in tutte le famiglie vittoriane nel caso delle figlie" (p. 15). L'ambivalenza tra l'attaccamento alla figura paterna e il bisogno di sentirsene approvata, da un lato, e la volontà di indipendenza (sfociata anche in un soggiorno di un anno a Brighton) dall'altro, segnano profondamente lo sviluppo della personalità di Tussy, che in più occasioni vive momenti di ripiegamento interiore. Il conflitto, come sottolinea Marroni, non deriva solo dal contrapporsi tra l'amore per il padre e quello per il compagno, ma dalla quantità di stimoli che i due le offrivano. Per Lissagaray, ad esempio, Eleanor contribuisce al settimanale di politica (di scarso successo) *Rouge et Noir*, nonché alla traduzione della *History of the Commune of 1871*, trascendendo il ruolo di 'segretaria personale' che Marx le aveva attribuito. Come quella con il padre, la relazione con Lissagaray viene dunque inquadrata nell'ottica del contributo da essa apportato al *lavoro* di Tussy, alla sua attività intellettuale e, di conseguenza, alla sua produzione critica e traduttiva.

A partire dal secondo capitolo, Marroni segnala ancor più apertamente lo stretto legame tra biografia e letteratura che segna la vita di Eleanor. "Tussy, Aveling e il mito di Shelley" (pp. 31-59) mette infatti sullo stesso piano il rapporto con Edward Aveling (ancor più problematico di quello con Lissagaray) e l'approccio al testo shelleyiano. L'elevazione di Shelley, romantico 'rivoluzionario' e ateo, a "modello da imitare al femminile, […] voce a cui improntare la sua voce" (p. 34) scaturisce da un reciso rifiuto dell'*ethos* vittoriano, delle sue costrizioni e ipocrisie. Di Shelley, ricorda Marroni, hanno profonda stima sia Marx che Engels, il padre e l'amico che lo affianca in tutto, anche nel contribuire all'educazione di Eleanor. Ma la predilezione della giovane per questo particolare autore è frutto tanto della guida paterna, quanto di una profonda affinità personale con una figura che sembrava anticipare molti dei temi cari al socialismo. Questa stessa affinità elettiva la spinge anche verso Aveling: conosciuto nella Reading Room del British Museum, "il nuovo compagno aveva tutte le carte in regola per essere una persona con cui intrattenere un rapporto di confronto costruttivo sui temi a lei più cari, non ultimo su Shelley" (p. 40).

Un confronto produttivo, se si pensa che la coppia Marx-Aveling contribuì all'attività della Shelley Society con l'intervento "Shelley and Socialism", pubblicato in un opuscolo dal titolo *Shelley's Socialism. Two Lectures*. Eleanor, evidenzia Marroni, è attenta a ricordare la propria partecipazione e, anzi, a rivendicare il proprio lavoro a fianco di quello del compagno. Aveling è un *compagno* di vita, significativamente non un marito: Tussy, controcorrente anche in questo, convive con lui in un *common-law marriage*, in sprezzo alle convenzioni vittoriane. Anche in questo caso, si può riconoscere nella giovane

l'anelito a formare un proprio percorso di vita, un tracciato che si snoda sì all'ombra di alberi ad alto fusto – il padre, Engels, Shelley, i due compagni, o Ibsen, più avanti nella sua vita – ma che si costituisce interamente in linea con la sua volontà. La morte di Marx, sopravvenuta nel marzo del 1883 – quindi precedentemente al consolidarsi del legame con Aveling – non fa che cementare questo tentativo di auto-definizione in rapporto all'eredità paterna. Ciò emerge, ad esempio, nelle conferenze per la Shelley Society, che tuttavia non mancano di proporre un'interpretazione originale, come quella che riconosce l'influenza delle due 'Mary' (Wollstonecraft e Shelley) sul poeta (p. 57).

Il terzo capitolo, "Tradurre *Madame Bovary*: in difesa di 'una donna moralmente corrotta'" (pp. 61-79), prende nuovamente le mosse dalla convergenza tra gli studi di Eleanor, il suo impegno sociale, il suo lavoro come traduttrice e il dato biografico. Attenta a rimarcare questa corrispondenza, Marroni mette in luce come tradurre *Madame Bovary*, per Tussy, significasse prendere una precisa posizione ideologica: prima in difesa di una libertà espressiva minacciata dalla vicenda di Flaubert, perseguito dal procuratore Ernest Pinard, e poi in contrasto con il perbenismo dell'epoca che la figura di Emma Bovary sfidava apertamente. Inoltre, ricorda Marroni, *Madame Bovary* è anche formalmente distante dalla tradizione del primo romanzo vittoriano: "il *reading public* britannico non sopportava un narratore che scomparisse del tutto dal testo, facendo prevalere una scrittura fondata sull'impersonalità" (p. 63). Per Eleanor, dunque, approcciarsi alla traduzione di questo testo significa intraprendere una difficile ricerca stilistica che restituisca autenticamente la narrazione 'neutra' scelta da Flaubert. Allo stesso tempo, l'interpretazione dell'eroina del romanzo è necessariamente segnata da una profonda empatia, che vede nella tragedia di Emma "anche la tragedia di tante figure femminili, che non trovavano spazio alcuno, che non avevano modo di esprimere la propria personalità se non con un silenzio intriso di inquietudine, oppure con gesti estremi come il suicidio" (p. 67). Una negoziazione non facile, che spinge Tussy a cercare di lasciar parlare il testo e i suoi personaggi quanto più possibile. La traduzione letterale che ne emerge non è però apprezzata dalla critica, che la vede come troppo artificiosa e innaturale per un pubblico anglofono. Eleanor risponde con una propria disamina degli stili traduttivi e del lavoro del traduttore come mediatore culturale, funzione che la giovane ritiene fondamentale e a cui si attiene nella propria attività.

"Ibsen e il Nuovo Teatro: tradurre l'identità femminile" (pp. 81-108), il quarto capitolo della monografia, si inserisce nel solco del precedente: ancora una volta, l'oggetto degli studi di Tussy diventa il cardine attorno al quale ruota anche il suo percorso di donna e intellettuale. D'altra parte, nessun autore meglio di Ibsen può prestarsi a una simile riflessione, se è vero che le sue opere mostrano personaggi per i quali "crisi personale e cambiamento della società vanno di pari passo" (p. 82). È evidente che i temi trattati in *Casa di bambola* – l'ipocrisia e la crisi della famiglia borghese come 'pietra angolare' della società – fossero di profondo interesse per Eleanor, per la quale tradurre l'opera e presentarla così a un pubblico sempre più ampio assume quasi il significato di adempimento a un dettato morale. Non solo: Marroni osserva che i temi proposti da Ibsen sono perfettamente in linea con l'evolvere del dibattito socio-politico del tempo (gli anni Ottanta dell'Ottocento), cosicché le sue opere vennero frequentemente 'adottate' dagli intellettuali inglesi come veicolo di istanze socialiste o femministe. Di converso, l'autrice

rimarca che questa traduzione di *Casa di bambola* non è una mera celebrazione di Ibsen, ma una riflessione critica sul dramma, in grado di porre le basi per una sua dissacrante revisione, "*A Doll's House* Repaired", a firma di Eleanor Marx-Aveling e Israel Zangwill. La Eleanor che si profila in questo capitolo è quindi un'intellettuale militante che si serve del proprio lavoro come interfaccia costante con la società nella quale è immersa, ricevendone stimoli che poi rielabora in prospettive originali.

L'autore evocato nel quinto capitolo, "In viaggio con Shakespeare: dal sogno giovanile al Dogberry Club" (pp. 109-125), è nientemeno che Shakespeare, sorta di costante nella vita di Eleanor. Non a caso, il capitolo interrompe brevemente la linea diacronica per riportare il lettore alla prima infanzia della giovane e vederla di nuovo sotto la tutela del padre. È Marx che avvicina Tussy a Shakespeare, di cui recita i versi per esercitarsi nella lingua inglese ma che, soprattutto, apprezza per l'universalità della sua opera. La somiglianza tra l'autorità paterna e quella shakespeariana è resa esplicita da Marroni, la quale nota quanto per Eleanor il Bardo fosse diventato "una lettura che, oltre ad incidere profondamente sul piano formativo, interveniva pressoché quotidianamente a determinare le sue scelte, anche sul piano dei legami affettivi" (p. 114). Shakespeare, cioè, funge da guida al pari del padre, che la indirizza per esempio in modo quasi provvidenziale verso l'amicizia con Clara Collet, con la quale Tussy fonda nel 1877 il Dogberry Club, una società culturale volta a promuovere "la conoscenza di Shakespeare attraverso la lettura delle opere e altre attività culturali che includevano anche rappresentazioni private" (*ibidem*). La passione di Tussy per il teatro, mai del tutto trasformata in attività professionale, trova quindi esplicazione nella convergenza tra pubblico e privato, in un interesse per rappresentazioni che si distinguessero per ricerca stilistica e interpretazione anticonformista.

Con il titolo del capitolo conclusivo, "Come Emma Bovary (o quasi)" (pp. 127-41), Marroni si riallaccia a Flaubert e all'ultima parte della vita di Eleanor, menzionandone anche la tragica fine. Come nel pubblico, Tussy era generosa e quasi 'militante' anche nel privato: negli anni della loro relazione, aveva supportato Aveling in ogni modo, dalla collaborazione professionale alla decisione di vivere insieme in un *common-law marriage*. Marroni ricostruisce le circostanze della morte di Eleanor e la successiva inchiesta con delicatezza, ma senza mancare di 'schierarsi' con la protagonista oggetto del suo studio, così fragile e decisa allo stesso tempo. Accostarla a Emma Bovary significa rilevare che "alla vigilia della sua morte, la frizione tra la sfera pubblica (la politica e i suoi fallimenti) e la sfera privata (il suo amore sempre vivo per Aveling) finì per determinare una deflagrazione ontologica che culminò nel desiderio di autodistruzione – di annientamento di sé di fronte alla storia" (p. 129). Una crisi totale che riunisce in sé le varie linee interpretative qui percorse, e che ribadisce ancora una volta la necessità di considerare tutte le dimensioni di Eleanor Marx: quella di figura storica e 'nella storia', attivista politica e pensatrice libera; quella di traduttrice e artista; quella di figlia e compagna; quella di lettrice.

L'opera di Marroni si propone di prendere in esame tutti questi aspetti, focalizzandosi sull'intento di mostrarne le difficili dinamiche e interrelazioni più che sul tentativo di restituire un'immagine 'stabile' di Tussy. A ben guardare, anche in questo Eleanor si fece portavoce della propria epoca, di un 'Victorian compromise' che, più che un compromesso, ricorda un dissidio interiore, una dissoluzione in frammenti che è possibile accostare ma non ricomporre *in toto*.

Anna Rocchi*

Franco Marucci, *George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil": A Sequential and Contextual Reading*, New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 246, ISBN 9781032156422

After minutely deconstructing "The Lifted Veil" (hereafter LV) and comparing it to George Eliot's entire *oeuvre* and to various external references and sources of inspiration, Franco Marucci, a leading figure in English Studies and a versatile essayist, assesses the central position of this novella in Eliot's canon, bringing about meaningful adjustments to the prevailing critical view.

In Marucci's perceptive reading, LV, first published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1859, acts as a 'lynchpin' between the earlier and later phases of Eliot's work. All thematic, structural, and semantic aspects of LV are considered by Marucci and related to corresponding traits in Eliot's macrotext, as well as in other authors relevant to her writing, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Marucci highlights new perspectives and recreates a kaleidoscopic vision for the reader, who is thus expertly guided through the intricacies of textual, historical, and biographical details.

In Eliot's era, the veil motif is recurrent in both European and American literature, to which her two greatest models, Poe and Hawthorne, belong. This metaphor is employed, with different modulations, by outstanding poets and essayists, such as Shelley and Carlyle. The latter adds metaphysical meanings and prophetic ultimate truths to the Victorian search for what is hidden under multiple layers, using, for example, the trope of clothes in his *Sartor Resartus*. The veil motif is connected to the idea of a poet-seer, a figure not so far away from a prophet, responding to the romantic stereotype of an inspired individual who is able to pierce the mysteries of a universe in which philosophical truths and aesthetic conceptions come together. This motif is also closely intertwined with that of blindness, embodied by a poet or prophet capable of deep mental visions in spite of his impaired physical skills. In Eliot's text, Latimer, the protagonist/narrator of LV, affected as a child by a transient blindness, is visited in his youth by insurging paranormal visions, which he ascribes to his poetic vocation. This inclination for poetry is experienced by him in terms of ineffectual bursts of inspiration matched to inertia of mind or "rapt passivity". Latimer's clairvoyance also presents mesmeric nuances, placing LV in a literary current inspired by the lively scientific debate of the time, as recorded for instance in many of Poe's tales as well as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Marucci considers Latimer from all possible angles, including the onomastic one. In LV the names of persons, as well as dates and place names, are often left unsaid or incomplete, in keeping with a diffused vagueness of reference which gives the novella

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a fluctuating quality. Marucci elucidates the obscure origin of names by tracing them back to various fictional isotopies. For instance, the name 'Archer' points to the full/empty dialectic, but also to the French 'arracher', or to historical sources. Latimer, too, has at first glance a rather opaque name. Two main traits emerge here. The word 'Latimer'– from Anglo-Norman French – originally referred to 'a clerk who knows Latin': quite an apt connotation for the well-read Latimer, the scholar of classical languages. A historical Hugh Latimer also existed. He was an Anglican bishop burnt at the stake by Mary I (Bloody Mary), Queen of England, for heresy. Despite his apparent disregard for religious matters, Eliot's Latimer could thus be included among her prophetic figures, from Dinah Morris (*Adam Bede*) to Savonarola (*Romola*) and Daniel Deronda.

That Latimer might be viewed as a *reversed* prophetic figure – both looking back on and anticipating one of Eliot's recurring themes – is the captivating *fil rouge* of Marucci's analysis. The understanding of Latimer as a prophet is supported by his powers of insight and visions, but is apparently contradicted by his nihilism and his lack of positive expectations, which makes him quite a gloomy figure. His only upsurge of elation is elicited by his infatuation for Bertha, a Lucrezia Borgia-like figure, who tries to poison him.

Nevertheless, Latimer's alleged prophetic powers aptly support the central hypothesis of LV acting as a keystone in Eliot's macrotext, which pullulates with characters in search of a religious and racial identity. In his penetrating analysis of the epigraph written by Eliot twenty years after the first publication of LV ("Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns / To energy of human fellowship; / No powers beyond the growing heritage / That makes completer manhood"), Marucci argues that she wanted to add a clue for readers to grasp the wider implications of her search for the nature and function of poetry, which would further blossom in her subsequent writings. Even if Latimer might be seen as the ideal Romantic poet, he lacks the creative energy which should serve altruistic aims, as Eliot eventually realised and as she underlines through the epigraph. Latimer actually renounces his vocation under the pretext of a frail physical constitution.

Marucci carefully shows – unveils – the composite nature of this character, whose thoughts recall Eliot's reflections on poetry in the first part of her career. The Victorian author Matthew Arnold greatly contributed to this elaboration of ideas, especially through his support of constructive action as an antidote against morbid states of mind. This was a position which Eliot reinforced by emphasising the ethical implications of aesthetic catharsis.

In Latimer's manifold facets, Marucci also detects a mixture of aesthetic pronouncements about poetry, derived from British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, as well as from the contemporary cultural debate. Echoes of Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge are present in Latimer's tentative definitions of poetry. Besides, Emerson's conception of a poet gifted with divine vision who lifts veils for the benefit of others is reflected in the "rapt passivity" – the attitude of effortlessly waiting for poetic inspiration – of Eliot's character. On the other hand, fragments from the life of British poets (Arnold), or especially German ones (Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin), also contribute to defining the figure of the 'unpractical poet', mainly passive, unable to direct his readers towards human fellowship.

The oxymoronic expression 'rapt passivity' epitomises Latimer's inner attitude. He is indeed poised on many brinks, susceptible to developing opposite trends: action and inaction, belief and disbelief, and also a wish for life versus a wish for annihilation. As for other characters in Eliot's production, the spectre of death by water, another recurring motif, looms over him. In LV there are borderline situations – a boat going adrift or someone falling from a bridge – in which the temptation of letting go aptly represents the thin threshold between life and death drives.

The narrator's voice is sometimes overshadowed by Eliot's, allowing us to appreciate the degree of her identification with her character and 'avatar'. Marucci, who is thoroughly committed to unveiling hidden nuances and profitable insights, manages to trace back endless links connecting the *ensemble* of Eliot's characters. There is a whole map of analogies and oppositions, deeply entangled in her macrotext, which bear on the elaboration of moral ideas and on defining the social function of the arts. In LV, agnostic pessimism prevails. Even an ancient auspicious symbol like the rainbow, which in both the Old and New Testament is the sign of God's salvific intentions towards humanity, remains incomprehensible for Latimer. Eliot's character is blind to the rainbow's metaphysical significance, and also missing the hint which points to his hypothetical Jewish provenance, in Marucci's opinion. In keeping with the then prevailing trend to interpret it as a mere optical phenomenon, he regards it as the by-product of a smashed glass.

The analysis of the connections of Eliot's novella with the Gospels also proves very fruitful. Latimer is a minor Christ figure, reflecting a frustrated aspiration to discover the secrets of the afterlife or the key to defeating death. In LV *tout se tient*: the pattern of the *Imago Christi* applied to Latimer's vicissitudes intersects the mesmeric strand, giving it an occult vitality, nourished by religious undertones. There are strong similarities between Jesus' supernatural faculties and those only sought after by mesmerists: reading others' minds, prophecy, healing by laying on of hands, and even reviving the dead. Most of these are the prerogative of Latimer, who, however, does not control them. For instance, the reanimation of the dead is performed by his double, a doctor Meunier who had studied with him in Geneva, this being a tell-tale place that connects him to Mary Shelley's Doctor Frankenstein. This storyline culminates in the vivification experiment practised on Latimer's wife's dead maid, who thus reveals the attempted crime of Bertha.

These powers, intermittent as they are, do not alleviate in any way the protagonist's unaccomplished and unresolved state of mind. Like Christ, Latimer foresees his own death, but is granted no option of resurrection. The only episode of the kind – the brief return from the dead of Bertha's maid – does not remove any significant veil from ultimate truths. It simply reveals a trivial, murderous intent in human nature. Like Christ, Latimer is warned against the sinister outcome of his union with Bertha, a temptation which he does not resist. Light and darkness remain irreducible opposites, and salvation is denied to this luckless, unassuming hero, set up by Marucci against other figures in Eliot's novels. Amongst them, Daniel Deronda is the author's last and most complete achievement. For his part, Latimer vicariously shows the enactment of certain aesthetic inclinations of the author, which will be subsequently exorcised and dismissed in favour of a healthier poetic ideal, based on ethical and social commitment.

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