1 'The sterile ascetic of beauty': Pater and the Italian *fin de siècle*

Benedetta Bini

The hills around Florence

Although Violet Paget (better known by her androgynous pseudonym of Vernon Lee) wrote several letters of introduction for her distinguished friend, Walter Pater does not seem to have made any use of them – and his visit to Rome in 1883 remains, even today, a complete mystery. Nor did his sister Hester throw much light on the matter when she thanked Miss Paget for her thoughtfulness:

> Walter enjoyed his visit to Rome very much. He was very obliged for the introductions you sent him and was very sorry he had no time to use any. A month is a short time to see much of Rome. He found he had to give all his time to the galleries and churches and was so tired in the evening he was quite unfit for social intercourse. (Pater 1970, 48)

This blank – one of the many, as we know – is particularly regrettable. Pater had already visited Ravenna, Pisa and Florence in 1865 with C. L. Shadwell, but the mystery surrounding this second trip to Italy, following the publication of *The Renaissance*, and at a time when Pater was engaged in writing *Marius the Epicurean*, deprives us of an important clue in tracing his presence in the Roman *fin-de-siècle* intellectual society. The particular physiognomy of Vernon Lee as a writer, critic and influential figure, and especially her remarkable role in introducing the 'new' British culture to the Italian literary and artistic *milieux* of the 1880s and 1890s would have made his stay and his meeting with some of his admirers particularly rewarding to all. Although she moved to the famous Villa il Palmerino on the outskirts of Fiesole only in 1889, Miss Paget had been living first in Rome for two winters, and then in Florence since 1873, devoting herself to her invalid half-brother, the poet and translator Eugene Lee-Hamilton and to her researches in the still untilled field of what later became *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880). This brilliant work which made her known in England and elsewhere was translated into Italian in 1881. Then only twenty-four, from that moment on she was to become a pivotal figure in the cosmopolitan social life which gathered in Italy at the turn of the century, especially in Venice, Florence and Rome (Gunn 1970; Colby 2003). It was a peculiar mixture of artists, writers, men and women of letters, who had either made Italy their

permanent home, like Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Wetmore Story (Bini 2004) and others, or had, like Henry James, the habit of spending long periods of time in Italy.

In Florence the Anglo-American community was particularly numerous (McComb 1966), and like any colony of cultured expatriates inevitably prone to gossip, social rivalries and intellectual misunderstandings: nothing is probably more significant than the long quarrel about aesthetics (Wellek 1970) which for many years divided two troublesome neighbours, Bernard Berenson and Vernon Lee, living at an uncomfortably short distance from each other on the hills around Fiesole (Samuels 1979). Then there were her Italian friends: the Baroness Elena French-Cini, the writer and *émigré* Giovanni Ruffini, well known in England for his novel *Doctor Antonio* (1855) (Corrigan 1962), the critic Enrico Nencioni, the painter Telemaco Signorini, Pasquale Villari and his English wife Linda, the cosmopolitan 'cortegiano moderno' (Praz 1944) Carlo Placci, friend of Berenson (Pantazzi 1961), and many others. For the 'expatriates', the occasional visitors from abroad, and her Florentine friends, the very opinionated and eccentric Vernon Lee was to become, probably more than any other figure of the time, a many-faceted *trait d'union* in the history of cross-cultural relations: introducing people and ideas, mixing stereotypes and discoveries, enchanting the mixed Florentine society with the unique gifts of her conversation. And, inevitably, making enemies. From the story of her life, friends and relations, a fascinating portrait emerges of the – somehow inevitably distorted – mirroring of one culture within another. At the same time, her acquaintance and friendship with some of the Italian *literati* made her presence invaluable in the still provincial cultural life of the young Italian nation, in which the glorious season of English Romanticism was still considered the one and only acme of 'modern' artistic and critical achievement and which opened very slowly but with eager innocence to a new understanding of English culture. If it is true that the circle which gathered around her was the successor of the group which in the 1850s and 1860s had found its identity around the Brownings and the Trollopes (Pantazzi 1961), then it is also true that the shift of two or three post-Risorgimento decades makes this Anglo-Italian colony a very revealing and significant paradigm of the profound changes that Italian culture and society were undergoing in those years: reflecting, and reinterpreting, that great period of transformation involving the whole of Europe known as Decadence.

It was into this circle of learned anglophiles and romantic italophiles that Vernon Lee was to introduce the new trends of contemporary English literature and culture (Zorn 2003): first and foremost among others, the name of Walter Pater would soon be circulating.

Vernon Lee had managed to meet Walter Pater in the summer of 1881 at Oxford. Although in a letter to her mother she remembers him as a 'heavy, shy, dull looking brown moustachioed creature over forty, much like Velasquez' Philip IV, lymphatic, dull, humourless' (Lee 1937, 78), there is no doubt about the impression that his critical approach to the Renaissance and the style of his imaginative prose had already left on her mind. As is known, a real friendship was soon to develop between them, with Pater obviously considering Miss Paget a young and gifted scholar. *Belcaro: Being Studies on*

Sundry Aesthetical Questions (1881) seemed to prove that Vernon Lee had abandoned forever the teaching of Ruskin in connection with which she had been gently quoted by Robert Browning in 'Asolando' ('"No, the book / Which noticed how the wall growths wave", said she, / "Was not by Ruskin". / I said, "Vernon Lee?"').

As a matter of fact, Vineta Colby's definition of Lee as a 'puritan aesthete' (1970), alternating between the two modes of aesthetic reception, is very apt, and it will have its bearings on the early reception of Pater in the Italian cultural world. In Lee's next collection of essays on the Renaissance, *Euphorion* (1884), she included a dedication to Pater ('in appreciation of that which, in expounding the beautiful things of the past, he has added to the beautiful things of the present') which definitely put her among the true and enthusiastic followers and emulators of the master, as, later, would her remarkable writings on the *genius loci* (Bini 2003) and her short stories, so obviously reminiscent of the indelible trace left by her reading of *Imaginary Portraits*.

Vernon Lee's shift towards Pater is highly significant. This is not only because it follows a tendency in criticism, typical of *fin-de-siècle* redefinition of taste, which she shared with John Addington Symonds, Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Herbert Horne and others. But it is also because she took on the role of disciple of a new aesthetic *credo* in her actual writing on Pater, marking her position in the Italian cultural *milieu* as the clever and up-to-date 'correspondent' on English literary matters, at a time when the name of John Ruskin was still well known and respected among the Italian reading public (Praz 1937). In fact, Vernon Lee had started as early as the mid-1870s to contribute to various Italian literary papers. *La rivista europea*, edited by Angelo de Gubernatis, had published her articles dealing with both Italian and English cultural issues: on the leading novelists of England, but also on the need for the Italians to have more respect for their own past greatness. She subsequently went on to write for other journals such as the famous *Fanfulla della domenica* (the cultural supplement to *Il fanfulla*, edited by Ferdinando Martini) which was soon to become one of the most relevant periodicals in turn-of-the-century Italy.

Although (or maybe because) Pater's presence in Lee's work is so pervasive as to act as a kind of general subtext, only a few direct comments on her mentor can be found in her writings. It was in the *Fanfulla della domenica* that, in 1885, she produced a lengthy article ('Ethics into Aesthetics: Notes on Walter Pater's New Book')[1] on *Marius the Epicurean* in which she reveals her admiration 'awakened by the subtlest of thinkers and by the more artistic of writers in contemporary England'[2] and goes on to remember the success of *The Renaissance*, the 'wonderful *rêverie* on Monna Lisa', before introducing the lesson of *Marius*, seen as the figure of moralized aesthetics:

> Physical beauty, which is to say symmetry, purity and loveliness in the material world, finds its equivalent in the strength, temperance and chastity

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1 'La morale nell'estetica. appunti sul nuovo libro di Walter Pater.'

2 'destata dal più sottile pensatore e dallo scrittore più artista dell'attuale Inghilterra' (1).

> of the moral world. This thought is not new, nay, it is very ancient: it was the dominating intuition of Greek art and poetry, a teaching that was after all essentially platonic, and that it was utterly important to recall in our times, when the desire for a sensation which should be *new and unique* as Pater himself had once defined it, made the search for malady and moral death analogous to the search for physical beauty.[3]

Vernon Lee was later to mention *Marius* again, in the dedication of her collection of essays *Juvenilia* to her friend Carlo Placci. Her attitude to the novel seems rather romantic, lingering on the 'aesthetic, classic, Goethian days' (1) evoked by the novel and its being 'the Lehrjahre of an antique Wilhelm Meister: but a Wilhelm Meister simpler, purer, more dignified than the hero of Goethe' (8). Given the status of Vernon Lee and the relevance of the journal where she wrote, it is legitimate to assume that the review of *Marius* must have left an impression on its readers, especially those who were to become Miss Paget's good friends and frequent visitors to Il Palmerino. It is not a surprise, then, that a journal like *Nuova antologia* – in which a section ('Notizie di Scienza, Letteratura ed Arte') was devoted to a brief updating on the European literary world – should have informed its readers in 1889 not only that Robert Browning was buying a house on the Canal Grande in Venice but also that:

> Messrs. Macmillan & Co. publishers in London are about to bring forth a new book by Mr. Walter Pater, entitled *Appreciations*.[4]

Moreover:

> The May issue of *Macmillan's Magazine* contains a piece by Mr. Freeman on *The Difference between Towns and Boroughs* and an essay on *The Bacchanals of Euripides* by Mr. Pater.[5]

Concise though they are, these notes are illuminating in as much as they tell us that Pater was no longer an unknown name, but that his fame had by that time already reached Italy's literary world, although the first translation of *The Renaissance* and *Marius* were only to appear in 1912 and 1939 respectively. Not many people were able to read in English: Italian society was still very much French-oriented in its taste, and all the new literary fashions arrived from Paris. English poetry had been widely translated and would continue to be, and only a small group of cultured people were able to read texts in the

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[3] 'il bello fisico, cioè la simmetria, la purezza e venustà nel mondo materiale, possiede il suo equivalente nella forza, la temperanza, la castità nel mondo morale. Pensiero non nuovo, anzi antichissimo, intuizione dominante dell'arte e della poesia greca; insegnamento in fondo essenzialmente platonico, e che era importantissimo richiamarci ai nostri tempi, quando il desiderio della sensazione *nuova ed unica*, come l'aveva una volta definita lo stesso Pater, ha fatto ricercare come analogo della bellezza fisica la malattia e la morte morale' (2).

[4] 'Gli editori Macmillan & Co. di Londra stanno pubblicando un nuovo libro del signor Walter Pater, intitolato *Apprezzamenti*' (16 November).

[5] 'Il numero di maggio del *Macmillan's Magazine* contiene uno scritto del Signor Freeman su *La distinzione fra città e borghi* e uno studio su *Le baccanali di Euripide* del Signor Pater' (1 May).

original. Nevertheless, the slow process of de-provincialization of Italian culture – of which the new approach to English literature and criticism was a relevant factor – dates from this period. It reached its acme with d'Annunzio, coinciding also with the slow fading of Ruskin's supremacy in favour of other, and more modern, sensibilities, although it was to receive its decisive impetus more from the prestige of the new trends in European visual arts (Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolism) than from the challenge of the written word.

After Pater's death in 1894, Vernon Lee was to remember her master and friend in the final chapter of her *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895). Here, as elsewhere, she pays homage to the name with which 'I began my first book on Renaissance matters', thus acknowledging the presence of Pater as a constant guide in her work, and then goes on to draw a comparison between the author and the character of Marius:

> He began as an aesthete, and ended as a moralist. By faithful and self-restraining cultivation of the sense of harmony, he appears to have risen from the perception of visible beauty to the knowledge of beauty of the spiritual kind, both being an expression of the same perfect fittingness to an ever more intense and various and congruous life (255–56).

These words, variously reinterpreted, would echo frequently in the next few years in which the figure of Pater became little by little more visible in the cosmopolitan culture of the *fin-de-siècle* society in Italy.

A good friend of Vernon Lee and a frequent visitor at Il Palmerino was Enrico Nencioni, the first Italian man of letters destined to play an important role in the reception of Pater. Nencioni is a very interesting transitional figure in the literary landscape of that period, which is marked by a slow assimilation of more advanced cultural and intellectual trends from abroad (Sormani 1975): his criticism, commended by Croce for his 'most precious gift [...] sureness of taste', was later damned with faint praise as 'the effusion of a fervent and happy lover of art' (Cicognani 1943, 371). If in the 1890s he was not 'a critic in the rigorous sense of the word' – indeed nobody was yet, apart from de Sanctis – and if it is true that his approach to the arts was still in many respects impressionistic and honestly bourgeois (Praz 1943), his role in introducing English contemporary literature and thought to the Italian world cannot be denied or underestimated.

Enrico Nencioni was for twenty-three years private tutor in a number of Italian aristocratic milieux, living for many years in Siena with Count Gori Pannilini's family and meeting there some interesting and famous figures of expatriates such as William Wetmore Story, Walter Savage Landor and the two Brownings. It was only when Ferdinando Martini asked him to join the staff of the *Fanfulla della domenica* that Nencioni moved to Rome, where he came in contact with some of the leading writers of the time like Luigi Capuana and Matilde Serao. From 1883 he lived in Florence, where he was appointed professor at the Istituto Superiore di Magistero (secondary school for girls), renewing his acquaintance with Vernon Lee. At the same time he began to define a more visible role for himself as a lecturer, a translator (Coleridge and Swinburne), a literary critic with a strong interest for French and English contemporary literature, and a poet with a perceptive ear. Among his manuscripts there was found a long list of authors 'imitandi e traducendi':

especially Hugo, Bourget, James, V. Lee, Hawthorne, Ruskin and Pater (Angeli 1999). He was later to write for some of the more influential 'new' magazines of the time, the international journal *Nuova antologia*, the *Cronaca bizantina*, directed by Angelo Sommaruga, the *Domenica letteraria* and other periodicals, becoming a close friend of several important figures like Angelo Conti, Angiolo Orvieto (founder in 1896 of the magazine *Il Marzocco*) and Gabriele d'Annunzio. The latter had passionately devoured his essays while still at school at the Collegio Cicognani in Prato and was later to dedicate to him his *Elegie romane*, besides writing two articles in his memory when Nencioni died in 1896. The *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (*Critical Essays on English Literature*), a collection of essays and reviews previously written for the *Nuova antologia*, were published posthumously in 1897 with the preface by Giosuè Carducci, the main poetical voice of post-unity Italy, Nobel prize winner for poetry in 1907 and a lifelong friend. In these essays Nencioni shows a lively curiosity and a firm grasp of English themes and figures: as early as 1867 he had published an essay in the *Nuova antologia* in which, introducing to the Italian reader the poetry of Robert Browning, he had criticized the Italian lack of curiosity with regard to English literature, especially when compared to the craze which surrounded other influences from abroad:

> In Italy, where everything that comes from France, novel and poetry, criticism and history, is read voraciously, little or nothing is known of modern and contemporary English literature. With the exception of Byron, Walter Scott, Macaulay, the names of the great poets, novelists, critics and historians who in our century have flourished and are flourishing in England are, generally speaking, new names in Italy, while perhaps of all foreign literatures the one that can be studied with the greatest profit by Italians is the English.[6]

The essay is illuminating in that it states very clearly what was to be for many generations the trend – and, if you like, the paradox – of Italian cultural society: full of anglophiles, but at the same time strangely reluctant to approach English culture except on a very superficial level, and apparently indifferent to its formal and critical developments. This explains also the scanty direct comments we find in those years relating to Pater and his work, even in such a favourable milieu as the one that Vernon Lee had created around herself, where the magic of Pater did not go unnoticed.

There were, of course, a few notable exceptions, like Nencioni himself. In his reviews and essays for the various periodicals of the time he showed remarkable insight and passion in introducing new English and American literary voices to the Italian public: Rossetti, Whitman, Tennyson, Swinburne and, later on, even Henry James, at a time when the American author was still

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[6] 'In Italia, dove si legge avidamente ogni scritto che viene di Francia, romanzo e poesia, critica e storia, poco o nulla si sa della letteratura inglese moderna e contemporanea. Se ne eccettui Byron, Walter Scott, Macaulay, i nomi dei grandi poeti, dei grandi romanzieri, dei critici e degli storici che nel secol nostro han fiorito e fioriscono in Inghilterra sono, generalmente parlando, nomi nuovi in Italia: mentre forse di tutte le straniere letterature quella che con maggior profitto potrebbe studiarsi dagl'Italiani è la inglese' (1).

relatively unknown on the Continent. His friendship with Vernon Lee, who always considered him a very good friend and who dedicated to him the second edition of her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1907), was helpful in widening his circle of English expatriates and providing him with new means to investigate the contemporary English world of letters. In two reviews of Lee's works (*Euphorion* and *Juvenilia*) in the *Nuova antologia* Pater is mentioned on the one hand as having influenced the style of Miss Paget with his 'meditative calm and lucid control',[7] and on the other as having contributed, together with Ruskin, Symonds and Lee herself, to the admirable new trend of English studies on Botticelli. Only in 1890 did Nencioni deal directly with Pater, and this was in his review of *Appreciations*, once again from the pages of *Nuova antologia*. After acknowledging the value of *The Renaissance*, Nencioni characterizes Pater's role as a critic:

> For him a painting, a character, a plant, a poem, have a special value and deserve to be analysed only for their faculty to procure us a distinct and unforgettable impression of pleasure. He is in the world of criticism what Dante Gabriel Rossetti was in the world of poetry: a refined, aristocratic, and if the word did not often have an odious meaning, I would also say a fine and delicate *dilettante*.[8]

Characteristically, Nencioni sees what he calls 'dilettantismo' and 'pessimismo' as the two main currents of contemporary literature. Pater is one of the most exquisite representatives of the first category, argues Nencioni, adding that the author shares with all the other aesthetic critics the vice of expressing ideas, which are sometimes far from being original, in an oracular tone. Having stated the limits of Pater's work, Nencioni expresses his appreciation for all the essays in the volume, among the most beautiful and perfect of modern English prose, and goes on to remark that

> The greatest of modern and contemporary critics in Europe are in their writings – even in their most scholarly and philosophical pages – artists of the word; able to produce real *works of art*: such are Wilhelm Schlegel, Carlyle, Ruskin, Michelet, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Renan.
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> How is it that in our country, apart from a very few and commendable exceptions, a book of literary, artistic or historical criticism is vulgarly written [...] without life, or warmth or colour, without grace: grey and boring like a slate roof in November? I think that the reason lies, at least in part, in this. The Italian critic has the dread of being taken for a *poet* – he is afraid of being accused of not being sufficiently serious and scientific. This is absurd. Any real criticism is – or should be – a resurrection, an interpretation of life.[9]

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7 'calma riflessiva e lucido ordine' (81).

8 'Per lui un quadro, un personaggio, una pianta, una poesia, hanno speciale valore e meritano essere analizzati solo in quanto hanno facoltà di procurarci una distinta e indimenticabile impressione di piacere. E' nel campo della critica quel che fu Dante Gabriele Rossetti nel campo poetico: un raffinato, un aristocratico, un delicatissimo *dilettante*' (415–16).

9 'I più insigni critici moderni e contemporanei di Europa sono nei loro scritti, anche nelle più dotte e filosofiche pagine, artisti della parola; e fanno veramente

Nencioni's lucid awareness of the necessity for a different critical approach is what really drives him to write this review: although not completely without flaws, Pater's image slowly emerges as the model of a new style of criticism. It was in this role that his fame was to assert itself in the 1890s and especially in the Roman *fin-de-siècle* artistic circles. For the moment, however, apart from the insights of Nencioni, he remains the fascinating but slightly dangerous essayist whose influence, although elusive, is in the process of emerging from behind the scenes to capture the attention of Vernon Lee, Placci and others. Understandably, more attention is given to Pater's gifts as a new interpreter of the Renaissance than as a narrator: the more subversive aspect of *Marius* and of the *Imaginary Portraits* seems to have been overlooked – or, in the case of Lee, just very deftly interwoven into her own writing. Soon Pater would become a name in a selected group of authors who would be cited as participating in the new trend of the aesthetic essay: even, perhaps, slightly neutralized in the process and reduced to an icon of the cultivated traveller. Nothing is more revealing of this new habit than a review of Vernon Lee's *Euphorion* by the cosmopolitan Carlo Placci (Cambieri Tosi 1984) for the *Fanfulla della domenica* in 1884:

> Who has enjoyed more fully a reading of texts from the Elizabethan age than those who have had as companions Symonds to order them and Swinburne to reproduce the impressions thereof? What lesson of architecture has been more fascinating than the one you have received wandering along the Canal Grande with a book by Ruskin on your knees? What guide more attractive than a chapter of Pater to help us understand with pleasure a dance by Botticelli?[10]

Had he written this review a few years later, Placci would have added to this list of names that of the eccentric architect and connoisseur Herbert P. Horne, editor of the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, a frequent visitor to Italy and from 1904 a permanent resident in Florence (Fletcher 1970). A collector of primitives, Renaissance furniture, Old Masters' drawings, Horne was to buy Palazzo Corsi in Via dé Benci and bequeath it and his collection to the Foundation which still bears his name. His *Botticelli: Painter of Florence* (1908), profoundly influenced by his friend Walter Pater, would be the final and

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opere d'arte: tali Guglielmo Schlegel, Carlyle, Ruskin, Michelet, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Renan.

Come va che da noi, fatte pochissime e più lodevoli eccezioni, un libro di critica letteraria, artistica, o storica, è quasi sempre scritto barbaramente [...] senza vita, senza calore, senza colorito, senza allettamento veruno, grigio ed uggioso come un tetto di lavagna in novembre? Io credo che derivi, almeno in parte, da questo. Il critico italiano ha una sacrosanta paura di passar da *poeta* – e che gli si addebiti di non esser abbastanza serio e scientifico. Ed è un assurdo. Ogni vera critica è, o dovrebbe essere, una resurrezione, una interpretazione di vita' (417–18).

[10] 'Chi ha gioito più pienamente d'una lettura di testi dell'epoca elisabettiana di quelli che hanno avuto a compagni il Symonds per ordinarli, e il Swinburne per riprodurne le impressioni? Quale lezione d'architettura è stata più affascinante di quella che avete ricevuto vagando pel Canal Grande con il libro di Ruskin sulle ginocchia? Quale guida più attraente di un capitolo del Pater, per aiutarci a contemplare con più piacere una danza del Botticelli?' (10).

definitive critical statement that put Botticelli back into the canon (Kermode 1985). Indirectly, it served the same function for Pater himself.

This new cult of the painter of 'The Birth of Venus' was soon to become, significantly, the theme of a novel, although a minor one. In his *Un furto* (*A Theft*, 1890), Carlo Placci tells the story of an amateur art historian who steals a painting, convinced it can be attributed to Botticelli. The hero is described as reading

> with admiration the fine sentences of Vernon Lee, Pater and other English writers [...] these critics possessed extraordinary gifts of intuition and a real love for the Quattrocentisti; moreover, they sometimes were able to find the right epithets to define the temperament, and paint the style of the various artists of that age.[11]

Another kind of literary presence, however, was needed to embody more fully these aspects of Pater's work: and this could only be the controversial and highly gifted figure of d'Annunzio. It was only when his star began to rise in the firmament of *fin-de-siècle* Italian literature that the figure of Pater seemed to emerge more clearly, even though – perhaps inevitably – reduced to a useful stereotype of the decadent.

Very revealing in this context is Nencioni's review in the *Nuova antologia* in 1889 ('Two New Novels'[12]), of d'Annunzio's *Il piacere* (*The Child of Pleasure*) and Matilde Serao's *All'erta sentinella!* (*Look out, sentry!*). Here, and for the very first time, Pater is seen not only as an author but as the major influence on the characterization of d'Annunzio's first hero:

> Many have been quoted as being the models for d'Annunzio: Gautier, Flaubert, Goncourt, Mendès, the *Quattrocentisti*, the Pre-Raphaelites, Keats, Shelley, Rossetti, Alma Tadema, Michetti [...] and nobody has mentioned Pater [...] *Il piacere* has more affinities with his *Marius the Epicurean* than with any other novel, poem or painting. But what does that prove? Perhaps d'Annunzio does not even know Pater's novel; and the affinity derives only from the kindred similarity of the two temperaments.[13]

The statement, although almost hidden in a minor review of the time, seems relevant for two reasons. First, it reveals in Nencioni the ability to detect the presence of a dialogue between two texts that stem from different cultures. Secondly, it forms a significant transition between two ways of interpreting

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11 'delle belle frasi di Vernon Lee, di Pater e di altri inglesi [...] questi critici possedevano un'intuizione straordinaria, un vero amore per i Quattrocentisti; inoltre, sapevano qualche volta trovare giusti epiteti per caratterizzare l'indole, e dipingere la maniera dei diversi artisti di quel tempo' (118).

12 'Due nuovi romanzi'.

13 'Si sono citati molti *modelli* del D'Annunzio: e Gautier, e Flaubert, e Goncourt, e Mendès, e i quattrocentisti, e i Preraffaelliti, e Keats, e Shelley, e il Rossetti, e Alma Tadema, e il Michetti [...] e nessuno ha ricordato il Pater, col cui *Marius the Epicurean Il piacere* ha più affinità che con qualsiasi altro romanzo, poema o pittura. Ma ciò che prova? Forse il D'Annunzio non conosce neppure il libro del Pater; e la somiglianza deriva solo dall'indole consimile dei due ingegni' (664).

Pater, shifting ideally to d'Annunzio and the cultural climate of the Roman *fin de siècle*.

If Florence had been the first literary scenario for the introduction of Pater's work into Italy, Rome would prove to be the perfect visual setting for its – however elusive – canonization.

The lure of Rome

Had d'Annunzio read *Marius* by the time that he composed *Il piacere*? He might have done. We know that some of Pater's works were present in his library. They are heavily underlined, although it is difficult to establish the date of his actual reading. The eclectic and ambitious young poet from Pescara was a voracious reader, and at that stage of his apprenticeship was particularly fascinated by the English 'movimento estetico': Swinburne, Wilde and Pater are the names always mentioned as being fundamental in his approach to – and discovery of – modernity (Anceschi 1976). Cultural life in post-unity Rome was experiencing a moment of great and creative excitement and it was especially the fate of the visual arts to fall under the spell of European Symbolism and take the lead in the battle against what seemed the old and dusty supremacy of Realism, the vulgarity of *Verismo*, the uninspiring legacy of positivism (Damigella 1981).

New magazines like *Il Convito* and *Cronaca bizantina* were emphatically advocating a different approach to art and criticism, gathering under their banners the best talents of that generation: painters, sculptors, writers, critics, who all looked at the great artistic movements in Europe and especially at the English experience as the fertile example to imitate (Frandini 1972). The first Esposizione Internazionale di Belle Arti which took place in Rome in 1883, and the turmoil which followed, were probably a watershed in the definitive rejection of academic taste. Three years later, the group *In Arte Libertas*, founded in 1886 by the painter Nino Costa in the premises of an historical meeting-place for artists, the Caffè Greco in Via Condotti (Angeli 1930), had been conceived as an imitation of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. The names of its members – Cellini, Coleman, Sartorio and others – are the same that would be found gathering round *Il Convito*, one of the most representative magazines of the literary and artistic tastes of Roman *fin de siècle*. Nino Costa had always had close contacts with the English artistic milieu: his lifelong friendship with Frederic Leighton dated from 1849, and he himself had exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1862. It was probably through him that the first real knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelites' work had reached the artistic circles in Rome, whereas it was through Angelo Conti's reading of Ruskin that the attraction to the Brotherhood and the revaluation of Botticelli found its intellectual justification (Piantoni 1972; d'Anna 1996). Other painters like Cabianca, Carlandi and de Maria had worked in London in the 1880s, bringing back new ideas and suggestions which they were to use as a weapon in the same battle against Naturalism, the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites and the classical inspiration of Alma Tadema and Frederic Leighton. These two painters, it is worth remembering, had lived and worked in Italy. The fact that the debate around the figurative arts was so central to the

Rome of the 1880s–90s paved the way for the emergence of Walter Pater as the hidden *maestro* of a new theory of art and of a new way of interpreting history – and memory.

It was through the vogue of the Pre-Raphaelites, to whom he had been introduced by Nencioni, that d'Annunzio had first discovered that English aesthetic world which was to be so influential on the anglophilia of his Roman years (Sborgi 1990), shared with the entire artistic and intellectual milieu with which he had come in contact. Between 1890 and 1892 the annual exhibitions of the *In Arte Libertas* group had showed for the first time works by D. G. Rossetti and Burne-Jones (who in the same years was drawing the mosaics for the Protestant Church of S. Paolo dentro le Mura in Rome). Although it was only in 1893 that the Biennale di Venezia presented a more complete survey of the Pre-Raphaelites, their style was a continuous source of imitation and questioning; and various contributions to *Il Convito* (1895) by the charismatic painter Giulio Aristide Sartorio on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and English painting would represent an important milestone. Sartorio especially highlighted the last phase of the movement, with its more explicit Symbolist turn, and associated it with Pater as well as Swinburne, Burne-Jones and Morris.

Rome, then, was significantly receptive towards English culture and art at this moment. Gabriele d'Annunzio was quick to capture the spirit of the times, and transform what for others was a simple source of ideological inspiration into something more complex. Pater, as we shall see, is the figure in the carpet in his first phase, coinciding with the publication of *Il piacere* (*The Child of Pleasure*, 1889), *Le vergini delle Rocce* (*The Maiden of the Rocks*, 1896), *Il fuoco* (*The Flame*, 1900) and some essays in the pages of *Cronaca bizantina*, *Il Convito* and *Il Marzocco* (Oliva 1979). Although the extent of d'Annunzio's celebrated anglophilia, and its consequences, exceed the scope of this chapter, this is the broad and colourful scenario – made of imitations, contaminations, forgeries and social rituals – in which we have to start our quest for the traces of Pater in Italian *fin-de-siècle* art and aesthetics. The quest is not easy – or maybe it is all too easy. The continual reference to English Aestheticism, Symbolism and Decadence seem to point to the hidden master and at the same time to blur his figure on an ideal canvas that is crowded with other names: the great *fin-de-siècle* wave of anglomania submerges Pater's profile and it is only indirectly that we can detect his presence.

As early as 1887, from the pages of *La Tribuna*, d'Annunzio had tried his hand at what was in all likelihood a little imaginary portrait (Vita-Finzi 1978) of a young and unknown English poet, Adolphus Hannaford ('Un poeta d'autunno', 'An Autumn Poet'), follower of the aesthetic school which stemmed from Hunt, Millais, Rossetti and Swinburne. With a different surname, Adolphus Jeckyll will appear again in *Il piacere*: one of the many evocative English names, in the Roman world of 1887, that surround the figure of the hero. Right from the start the novel reveals its paradigmatic aspect in being deeply pervaded by an English atmosphere, which reflects both the upper-class rituals of the Roman anglophile society and the vivid impression left on d'Annunzio's creative mind by his encounter with the poetry of Keats and Tennyson, on the one hand, and on the other with the

language – both poetic and figurative – of the Pre-Raphaelites, Alma Tadema and others.

But it is not in the flowery and eclectic bric-à-brac of the setting, nor in the continuous allusions to themes and figures of the English decadence that significant traces of Pater will be found, other than in a vague reference to the aesthetic vogue which he was rather hazily believed to have initiated. Rather, in some more oblique but relevant way, Pater's figures and themes seem to run under the surface of d'Annunzio's sumptuous fictions. Andrea Sperelli, a man of the present and of the past, is the first character to embody that concept of analogy which was so crucial for d'Annunzio and which had probably been inherited from the great lesson of the master. Nencioni had been very perceptive in pointing to Marius as the predecessor of Sperelli: a character which seems to be at least in part conceived by d'Annunzio as an imaginary portrait of a hero who is the last of a noble family, 'the ideal type of the young Italian gentleman in the nineteenth century, the legitimate champion of a lineage of noblemen and elegant artists, the last scion of an intellectual race'.[14] This hero belongs to an age of transition, as the famous *incipit* of the novel makes clear, when the season is seen in the moment of its natural and symbolic death: 'The year was, rather softly, dying'.[15] A similar inclination to create an anti-naturalistic hero seems to have driven d'Annunzio along lines that were strangely similar to Pater in the latter's creation of Marius, despite some obvious dissimilarities.

If Andrea Sperelli can be considered one of the many embodiments of the spirit of the age (more, as Nencioni conceded, because of the analogy between his temperament and that of Marius than because of any evidence of a direct influence) there is no doubt that it was only when the much-respected *doctor mysticus* Angelo Conti (see Maurizo Ascari's essay, pp. 35f.) introduced d'Annunzio to the reading of Pater that the first real impact of the master could be sensed. Conti's *Giorgione* (1894) attacked the 'frozen inquiry' of positivism in favour of an idea of the critic's mission as being similar to that of the artist, and consecrated Pater's famous statement that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' which from that moment was to echo innumerable times in *fin-de-siècle* criticism. This was to be in spite, perhaps, of the more perceptive and detailed insight into Pater's text which finally arrived in the work of Federico Olivero (1914, 1918) and of course Mario Praz.

D'Annunzio was deeply impressed by the direct reading of Pater under the guidance of the *doctor mysticus*: his review of Conti's work ('Note su Giorgione e su la Critica', 'Notes on Giorgione and Criticism') which appeared in *Il Convito* in 1895 pays homage to 'That rich and delicate stylist, Walter Pater, who has died recently, and who was until now unknown in Italy'[16] (and thus overlooking Vernon Lee's and Nencioni's earlier discoveries). The same

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[14] 'L'ideal tipo del giovin signore italiano nel XIX secolo, il legittimo campione d'una stirpe di gentiluomini e di artisti eleganti, l'ultimo discendente d'una razza intellettuale' (35–6).

[15] 'L'anno moriva, assai dolcemente' (5).

[16] 'Quello stilista delicato e ricco che fu Walter Pater, morto di recente, ignoto in Italia fino a oggi' (73).

review was published six years later as an introduction to *La beata riva: trattato dell'oblio* (1900), Angelo Conti's definitive critical work which was, again, to prove extremely influential on d'Annunzio's idea of the role of style and criticism in the system of the arts of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics. What is even more revealing is the way in which Pater's figures and ideas appear to surface, although intermittently and endlessly interwoven with the other great texts of European decadence (from Nietzsche to Séailles, from Schopenhauer to Barrès), in the two novels by d'Annunzio which follow *Il piacere*.

In the prose-poem *Le vergini delle rocce* – a true repertory of decadent imagery and thought – the figure of Claudio Cantelmo is seductively evocative, as the title itself suggests, of Pater's myth of Leonardo – he is the belated hero in whose physiognomy, like a palimpsest, the past writes and rewrites itself in a manner which is strikingly reminiscent of Pater's reworking of memory and history in *Marius* and the *Imaginary Portraits*. At the same time the metamorphosis of Plato into the aesthetic thinker, and the predominance of the figure of Socrates in *fin-de-siècle* thought, find their way into the novel through d'Annunzio's familiarity with Pater's *Greek Studies*. The dying Socrates who, fascinated by the sensuality and beauty of life, renounces the certainty of knowledge is not only derived from Nietzsche but, in the context of the novel, he is more significantly the result of the imaginative reworking of the figure of Winckelmann (Marabini Moevs 1976; Lorenzini 1989) as Pater had portrayed him in *The Renaissance*. Claudio Cantelmo is at the same time Socrates and Leonardo, in a play of free association of images and themes which makes *Le vergini delle rocce* such a unique point of intersection of the various influences simultaneously at work in d'Annunzio's text. The landscape, following the precepts of Symbolist aesthetics and revealing itself in the double paradigm of rocks *versus* garden, is openly evocative of the 'country of pure reason or half-imaginative memory' that Pater had explicitly described in his essay on Giorgione: 'That great moribund ancestry added to that land of rocks a sort of mournful beauty.'[17] Time itself has in the novel a strange, definitely Paterian echo: the present is touched by the shadow of a previous life, by the fate of repetition and by that perpetual return to the past (Raimondi 1989) which was one of the themes that Pater had so meaningfully reworked into the fabric of his essays and narratives.

It is again in the pages of *Il fuoco* – in which the discourses on art and its languages, art and life dominate the entire formal and thematic structure of the novel – that the presence of *The Renaissance* can be traced, although obviously mediated by Angelo Conti, and as always combined with a whole array of powerful influences from Nietzsche and European Symbolism: it is indeed a 'splendid accumulation of material', as Henry James (1968, 340) described it. The *locus classicus* of *fin-de-siècle* imagery, Venice, is the rich and golden canvas from which the novel seems to draw its meaning and life. Its colours, form and light, as d'Annunzio evokes them, owe much to the lure of 'The School of Giorgione' (1980), but they especially conjure up the figure of the painter himself: and it is his *fuoco giorgionesco* as Pater had de- and re-constructed it,

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[17] 'Quella grande stirpe moribonda aggiungeva a quel paese di rocce una specie di funebre bellezza' (45).

that casts a spell on the themes which weave closely around the three characters. The novel itself, in its rhapsodic texture (Lorenzini 1989, 1194), seems to fulfil the concept of *Anders-streben* from which Pater derived the famous concept of music as the ideal of art which had become, as we know, the generative metaphor of the decadent idea of art. 'Look', he said, pointing to the silent level of the lagoon, creased here and there by the passage of a breeze. 'Do not these infinite lines of silence aspire to become music?' (361)[18]

D'Annunzio's poet Stelio Èffrena, in his search for the perfect art, offers the reader in his description of Giorgione's *The Concert* a fascinating reworking of Pater's text, mixing it with the evocation of Socrates' death in *Le vergini delle rocce* which again takes its source from *Greek Studies*:

> [E]merging from the warm shadow like the expression of desire itself, we see the youth with the plumed hat and the unshorn locks, the fiery flower of adolescence, whom Giorgione seems to have created under the influence of a ray reflected from the stupendous Hellenic myth whence the ideal form of Hermaphrodite arose [...] He knows that he is master of the life that escapes both the others; the harmonies sought after by the player seem only the prelude to his own feast. He glances sideways intently as if turning to I know not what fascinates him, and that he would fascinate.[19] (62)

It is to *Greek Studies* and specifically to the chapter on 'The Myth of Demeter and Persephone' that we have to return again to discover one of the last, and most intriguing, rewritings of Pater's influence into d'Annunzio's novels. The powerful, mournful myth of Persephone does not only act as the major influence on Stelio Effrena's art: it also lends its features to the great actress Foscarina, 'nocturnal creature', described by d'Annunzio in a long *crescendo* which can be read as a final apotheosis and metamorphosis of Pater's Mona Lisa:

> Thus, with an unlimited vastness and through endless time, the outlines of human age and substance seemed to widen and perpetuate themselves [...] the very genii of the place consecrated by poetry breathed over her and girded her round with alternate visions [...] regions furrowed with blood, laboured by pain, transfigured by a dream or lighted by an inextinguishable smile, appeared, receded, and melted away behind her head.[20] (106–7)

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18 'Guarda' egli disse, indicando la taciturna pianura lagunare che qua e là si corrugava al passaggio dell'aura. 'Queste infinite linee di silenzio non aspirano a divenir musica?'

19 'Ma è pur quivi, emerso fuor della calda ombra come la espressione stessa del desiderio, il giovanetto dal cappello piumato e dalla chioma intonsa: l'ardente fiore d'adolescenza, che Giorgione sembra aver creato sotto un riflesso di quello stupendo mito ellenico donde sorse la forma ideale d'Ermafrodito [...] Egli sa d'essere padrone di quella vita che sfugge ad ambo gli altri, e le armonie ricercate dal sonatore non gli sembrano se non il preludio della sua propria festa. Il suo sguardo è obliquo e intenso, rivolto a una parte come per sedurre non so qual cosa che lo seduca' (247).

20 'Così in una vastità senza limiti e in un tempo senza fine pareva ampliarsi e perpetuarsi il contorno della sostanza e dell'età umana [...] i genii stessi dei luoghi consacrati dalla poesia alitavano sopra di lei, la cingevano di visioni alterne

Again, Persephone blends in with the mood of enchantment that arises, first of all, from the physical geography of Venice and its dead waters, and is transformed, imperceptibly, into a Paterian sense of death.

> [D]uring the afternoon we went to visit Torcello. I had already begun living in the myth of Persephone in those days, and the work was being slowly formed within me, so that I felt as if I were gliding on Stygian waters and passing into the regions that lie beyond them. Never had I known a purer and sweeter foretaste of death, and that feeling had made me so light that I could have walked on the meadow of Asphodel without leaving a footprint.[21](20)

Symptomatically, *Il fuoco* is also the novel in which the presence of the master himself as a source of endless suggestion is evoked beneath the fictional disguise of Daniele Glauro, 'fervent and sterile ascetic of beauty' (30).[22] Though this is an obvious reference to Angelo Conti, the figure of the aesthetic critic seems at the same time a coded homage to Pater and the influence that he exerted on the first, fertile period of d'Annunzio's controversial career.

It is with this passing reference to Daniele Glauro that this essay must end. From Pater's mysterious visit to Rome in 1883, to his virtually ending up as a fictional character, we seem to have come full circle. *Il fuoco* was published in 1900: at the beginning of the new century, new critical eyes would soon look with profound insight into Pater's work and his achievements.

[...] i paesi rigati di sangue, travagliati dal dolore, trasfigurati da un sogno o rischiarati da un sorriso inestinguibile, apparivano, lontanavano, dileguavano dietro la sua testa' (283).

21 'nel pomeriggio andammo a visitare Torcello. Come in quei giorni io avevo già incominciato a vivere nel mito di Persefone e l'opera andavasi formando in me segretamente, mi sembrava di navigare su le acque stigie, di trapassare nel paese *di là*. Non avevo mai avuto un più puro e più dolce sentimento della morte; e quel sentimento mi rendeva così leggero che avrei potuto camminare senza lasciare orma su la prateria d'asfodelo' (212).

22 'fervido e sterile asceta della bellezza' (225).

Chapter 1

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