

## **The English in the Marche**

Foreword by Giorgio Mangani

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Italy's and the Italians' perception in the British world between 17th and 19th century was mainly conditioned by two ideologies: the Machiavellism of the leading classes and the backwardness of the lower classes, often viewed as a consequence of religious superstition, as Roman Catholicism was often regarded by the Protestant milieu of Northern Europe.

The Marche, a region of Central Italy, subject to Papal domination until 1860 and with an agricultural economy and a social and political organization that had remained basically feudal till the arrival of Napoleon's troops, in the early 19th century was still regarded as the patent demonstration of the pernicious effects of papal misgovernment, exclusively entrusted to the clergy, and of "papist" religion.

The beliefs in magic diffused in the country and the habitual use of malocchio (the evil eye) in social relationships appeared to Protestant eyes as the popular correlation of the official cult of saints and faith healings practised in sanctuaries such as Loreto, which, as early as the 17th century had already become the main centre of the Counter-Reformation in Europe.

Moreover, the commerce of rosaries, the splendour of the Treasury of the Holy House and the wealth of the donations of churchgoers and pilgrims strengthened the feeling, on the part of English travellers, of being witnesses to a great show of falsehood, the great imposture Papists performed in order to acquire political and economic profits.

For Fynes Morrison (1566-1614), an English writer and traveller who collected the memories of his journeys in his work *Itinerary* containing his ten years' travel (London, 1617), Loreto pilgrims recovered from their illnesses thanks to the atmosphere of the sanctuary, the mysterious and obscure language (*Latinorum*) of the priests, the half-light of the small Holy House, a building so poor in its walls but shining with jewels and gems in the dim candle light. Similar feelings and opinions were expressed by other travellers such as Joseph Addison (1672-1719), Ann Riggs Miller (1741-1781), Lady Sydney Morgan (1783-1821) and several more.<sup>1</sup>

To an Anglican English person the region appeared (and partly it actually was) a sort of sinister backstage of the great baroque show made up by the rituals and subtleties of the Roman Curia.

This situation fell at its lowest pitch in the years after the Puritan age, especially when, from 1717, Rome played host to the court of the Old Pretender to the English throne, James Stuart, a Catholic, whom Pope Clemens XI Albani (from Urbino) never deprived of his prerogatives as the legitimate king of England.

The fact that in 1718 the legitimate English Court had chosen as its residence Palazzo Muti in Piazza Santi Apostoli in Rome (all names that were significant) and that it had officially been given hospitality right in Urbino, the Pope's birthplace, (where, however, the quietness of Montefeltro had proved to be too boring for the Court) was not too slight a nuisance for the English Government.

The existence of a double authority often gave rise to complicated problems of documents, permits, authorizations, safe-conducts granted with complaisance by the exiled king to Legitimists, and confirmed the alliance between Rome and James who, on the other hand, looked more and more isolated on the international stage.

The situation forced the College of Cardinals to walk on a political and diplomatic tightrope with the English Government to which, on the other hand, they were generous with reserved information on the life and the diplomatic activities of James's Court in Rome and Urbino thanks to the cooperation of an "illustrious" spy: Cardinal Alessandro Albani, one of the Pope's nephews, which confirmed the general opinion on the deceitfulness of the Roman Court.<sup>2</sup>

In 16th century the Marche Region consisted of Marca Anconetana (which included the territories of Ancona, the towns of Jesi, Fabriano, Fermo and Macerata and the surrounding areas (in particular Macerata was the seat of the main Judiciary Court and the official residence of the Governor of the Marca), Ascoli and its territories, down to the border with the Kingdom of Naples along the river Tronto and the ancient Dukedom of Urbino inherited by the Pope in 1631 on the death of the last Duke della Rovere who had no legitimate heirs, still called "State of Urbino" though it had become an integrant part of the Roman States. Rather than being one single organism, it actually was a constellation of several territories subject to Papal rule in force of different bilateral treaties that left more or less autonomy to local dominating oligarchies, while tax collection and the administration of justice were held firmly in the hands of the Papal Government that appointed Governors and other officers mainly among the clergy, while entrusting laymen exclusively with civil local duties.

The rural landscape that travellers admired so much, the surrounding hills, dense with walled towns, with well tended fields protected by tenants' houses (a landscape which brought to mind the frescoes of the Buon Governo in Siena or the landscape backgrounds of the two famous portraits of Duke Federico da Montefeltro and his wife Battista Varano painted in the XV century by Piero della Francesca and now kept in the Uffizi in Florence), was the logical consequence of this system of political and social organization, with the government in the hands of the clergy, civic powers contracted out to small oligarchies confined within the town walls, while agricultural production weighed on the peasants' shoulders.

However, the region was still perceived as a large garden, as it had already been pointed out by Montaigne during his journey through Italy in 16th century.

Though filtered through the consciousness of papal misgovernment, to which the cultural (and spiritual) backwardness of the people of the Marche was attributed, the Marche landscape, its gentle hills, the walled villages, the varied colours of cultivations, which were so near the English 18th century taste for the picturesque, were still characterized by a feeling of admiration and magic.

In the 18th century, the region appeared as a sort of Arcadia and not by chance the homonymous literary academy was founded in Rome in 1690 by a group mainly composed of landlords of Marche origin, who elected as their "Guardian" Giovanni Francesco Crescimbeni, from Macerata.

Thanks to Arcadia, pastoral tales became the main occasion of amusement for Marche noblemen who often took part in plays as shepherds. The theatre was, in fact, the great passion of local upper classes.

It was on this love for the countryside (and for the common, diffused ideological appreciation of Arcadia on the part of English aristocracy) that during the Romantic age, in the years of the celebration of ethnic roots, of Volk, of the cult of popular traditions (the Folk-lore) and of wild nature, that the English based their attempts to modify what up to then had simply been the acknowledgment of a deplorable condition of backwardness.

In her journey to Italy, described in *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807), Madame De Stael started to modify the traditional, negative attitude towards popular superstitions.

What had hitherto been considered an intolerable form of backwardness due to the Church greed for power, became a state of grace, the revelation of the "persistence" of traditional values and sensibility that were genuine and intense, suggestive of a more intimate closeness to wild nature.

What had hitherto been considered a fault was thus changed into a value and even the superstitions of Loreto were attributed to the sincere and widespread religious feeling of the lower classes.

The reinforcement of this kind of feeling in a period – the first half of 19th century – when Tuscany had not yet become the favourite Italian region among the English, was due to the growing fame in England of a poet from the Marche: Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837).

Leopardi, a rational and sensationalist philosopher, destroyed the illusion of Nature's goodness, but he was also the romantic and lyric poet of the Marche countryside, of its villages, of its peasants' "illusions", so delusive but at the same time so necessary because comforting.

It was Leopardi who spoke about the character of Marche people in his *Zibaldone di pensieri* (38917, 3891-93) applying to them the ancient theory of the climate, according to which a people's character depends on its geographical environment. Leopardi maintained that people from the Marche present the most favourable mix, thanks to their position in the centre of Italy, which makes them "the most cunning by habit and the most generous by nature among all Italians" (i più furbi per abito e i più generosi per natura di tutti gli italiani).

The first English critics who introduced Leopardi into England were G. H. Lewes in 1848 and W. E. Gladstone in 1850. From then on there was a continuous flow of translations, notes, reviews, up to the entry devoted to him by Lorenzo Fresco in the 1857 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, later re-written in the 1882 edition by the Italianist Richard Garnett who praised Leopardi, despite his pessimism and sensationism, as a better interpreter than Tennyson of the romantic spirit that pervaded Northern Europe.

Leopardi's fame in England as a philosopher and a poet, greatly contributed to the diffusion of a new feeling towards the Marche among the accomplished and the intellectual.

The very biography of the poet, transformed into a sort of "fabula", his forced stay in rustic Recanati, his emotional instability, his scarce attractiveness, consolidated, especially in the veristic 19th century, the idea that the pale poet of these rustic places was – just as Edgar Allan Poe was considered a crazy genius – a sort of hypersensitive "genius loci", a guardian spirit of the place, who was able to emotionally perceive the traces of a world of traditions and illusions that was disappearing under the goad of modernity and the cruel discovery of reality ("l'apparir del vero"), as the Poet wrote in a line of *A Silvia*, one of his best known poems.

Thus, while Burkhardt was tracing in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Basel, 1860) the celebration of the Renaissance man as an epiphany of individualism and freedom from the ties of morality and religion, and found his champions in the Florentine culture, a Scottish nobleman: James Dennistoun of Dennistoun (1803-1885), a collector of miniatures and antiques, tramped the Marche in search of Primitives, discovered the beauty of then little known Piero della Francesca and made Urbino between 15th and 17th century a centre of neogothic revival.

James Dennistoun devoted to the history of the Duchy of Urbino a monumental work in three tomes *Memoirs of the Dukes of Urbino*, illustrating the arms, arts and literature of Italy, from 1440 to 1630 (London, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851) later re-printed by Peter Hutton, one of the main inspirators of the interest in Italian art and culture in 20th century England.

For one apparent paradox, Renaissance in Urbino came to the limelight thanks to the interest of a romantic and neogothic scholar, a refined collector of miniatures, who lived in Italy and Germany for twelve years, from 1836, who deeply loved the works by Piero della Francesca, nowadays considered one of the fathers of Italian Renaissance but whom he viewed as the last of Primitives.

Urbino and Florence, despite their cultural and even dynastic links later evidenced by historical studies, were considered in those times as emblems of different, almost opposed, kinds of sensibility in which the economic and social backwardness of the Marche and Umbria still played the role of an ideological filter. It conditioned the perception of places which acquired interest thanks to their “gothic” backwardness.

It is no surprise, therefore, that in 1850 the oppressed populations of the Roman States had become for the English people a population to be saved and protected in order to free them from a sad destiny: something similar to what modern Greeks had been for Byron.

The women writers presented in this anthology represent some of the most interesting examples of this interest of English culture in the Marche between 19th and 20th century, an interest that seems to proceed along a common path of tradition, in some cases of family tradition, as in the case of the link between Margaret Collier and Joyce Lussu.

Mrs Gretton wrote her journal, some chapters of which are published in our collection (*The Englishwoman in Italy. Impressions of life in the Roman States and Sardinia during ten years' residence*, London, Hurst and Blackett, 1860, two volumes) in the years when English

culture and policy supported the attempts of the Kingdom of Sardinia towards Italy's unification.

Mrs Gretton was in Ancona in the years after the revolutionary uprising of 1848 that was put down by the Papal Army with the help of Austrian troops which were still occupying the town when the book was written.

The author describes the social and cultural life of Ancona with peculiar freedom of opinion; she is serene, but she criticizes the priggishness of social and family relationships, the indolence and the ignorance of the aristocracy without any hesitation, and she points out, with Victorian sensibility but also with indulgence the excess of intimacy with servants and the poor level of hygiene.

Mrs Gretton is outraged by the oppressive Austrian regime in the Marche and by the opportunism of the clergy and aristocracy and, like any thorough subject of the British Empire, she advocates for her hosts a political model of British type, that is monarchic and liberal.

As Charley Henry Fothergill wrote in 1860 in the prestigious English review "Atheneum" enthusiastically commenting on the book, Mrs Gretton "has described the way of life of those places in detail, pointing out a certain slackness of habits probably due to the fact that this population is less used than the English to resist the harshness of a cruder climate" (once again the ancient theory of climate, but with very different conclusions from Leopardi's).

Despite the mild climate, English civilization had reached the Marche and unquestionable evidence was the vogue of tea drinking, the first sign of English globalization.

As William Mackpeace Thackeray (the author of *Barry Lyndon*, 1844, and *The Book of Snobs*, 1846) had ironically said – Fothergill quoted: "Tea parties are pretty much the same all the world over; save that in England we put the most tea in the pot"...4

A definitely more romantic attitude was showed by Lady Margaret Collier, an aristocratic young lady of an outstanding family, who went beyond a simple political sympathy for the Marche. Margaret fell in love with a handsome Roman Garibaldian, Count Arturo Galletti, married him and moved to a small estate in the Fermo area, in southern Marche, that they bought from the Italian State after the requisition of ecclesiastic possessions.

After moving from the world hub of the time to the arcadic Cappellania of Torre San Patrizio, in Ascoli Piceno province, Margaret Collier writes her memories (*Our home by the Adriatic*, London, Richard Bentley and Son, 1886, a volume made up by a selection of letters and notes which ran in two editions) and describes her experience in the Marche in a graceful though

merciless way, with words and expressions that remind the reader of an ethnologist's "participant observation" among some unknown Bororo tribe in Mato Grosso.

She pays great attention to differences, but she passionately participates in this full immersion in wild nature (landscape, country people, superstitions, amoral familism). Mrs Collier spent her prime in the Marche, even if, as her granddaughter Joyce Lussu explains in the foreword to the chapters published in the present collection, Margaret's marriage ended in a failure.

The peculiar aspects of this Anglo-Italian marriage led Joyce Lussu (1912-1998, writer, poet and translator, an activist of Italian Resistance and wife to Emilio Lussu, a writer and anti-fascist who was a minister of the Parri Cabinet in the after-war years), Margaret's granddaughter, to write the history of the two branches of her family, a real Anglo-French-Marche saga (*Le Inglesi in Italia. Una saga anglo-franco-marchigiana*, 1st edition Lerici, 1970).

The family saga is however just a pretext to describe the characters of her ancestors: restless, adventurous people, who concluded their lives, as in the case of Margaret Collier, in the Marche, a confirmation of this region vocation as Arcadia, a place of blissful peace after the storm, a refuge, as it is still perceived nowadays even in its touristic image; so much so that some, modifying the title of a famous English masterpiece, have defined it "Paradise found".

It was fatal that this land, celebrated by the neogothic revival, should arouse the interest of one of the post-romantic writers most actively engaged in the English anti-Victorian reaction, namely Vernon Lee (1856-1935, pseudonym of Violet Paget), a theorist of the evocative and fantastic strength of "genius loci", the guardian spirit of the place.

Her short story *Amour dure* (published in *Hauntings*, a collection of short stories, London, 1890, the last story in the collection) is the fantastic story of the love of the Polish historian Spiridion Trepka for the ghost of the beautiful Medea da Carpi. The story takes place in Urbania, a real town of Montefeltro, the summer residence of the Dukes of Urbino, but which, in the story, corresponds to Urbino.

In the half-light of sombre hotel rooms, churches and streets lit by candles and paraffin-lamps, Vernon Lee draws an apparently nonsensical plot (even if the story has some autobiographical implications) with deep symbolic meanings, central to the author's aesthetic thought.

The small Italian town, immersed in its quiet life and conformism, hides a secret that the main character of the story wants to know even at the cost of his life. By keeping and handing down that secret, the people of Urbania demonstrate the ability to live with images and stories that can come back to life, a privilege given only to those who have kept the ability to evoke and call back to life the mystery of the past.

For Vernon Lee, the blue stocking and feminist writer, history is deep “alterity” rather than rationalization and erudition, it is the power to vitalize fantastic images and make rusty chords vibrate again, history is something that can lead us to a state of grace.<sup>5</sup>

As Walter Pater – Vernon Lee’s literary mentor – had written: “a historian’s aim is not the fruit of experience, but experience itself”, that is the ability to bring the emotions of a lost world back to life.

For Vernon Lee, in Urbania, in the Marche at the end of 1800, this was still possible.

*(Translation by Vittoria Zompanti)*

## Notes

1 See A. Brillì, *Loreto e l'Europa. La “Città felice” negli itinerari dei viaggiatori stranieri*, Milan, Amilcare Pizzi, 1996.

2 L. Lewis, *Connoisseurs and Secret Agents in Eighteenth Century Rome*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1961.

4 “Athenaeum”, n. 1694, 14 April 1860, pp. 503-504.

3 See G. Singh, *I Canti di Giacomo Leopardi nelle traduzioni inglesi*, Ancona, Transeuropa, 1990.

5 See C. Zorn, *Vernon Lee. Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2003.

## Amour dure. Passages from the diary of Spiridion Trepka

by Vernon Lee

### Note by Giorgio Mangani

Vernon Lee (1856-1935, pseudonym of Violet Paget) is a writer of English nationality, famous for her fantastic stories and for her aesthetic and decadent inspiration.

She was born at Chateau St Leonard in France of a well off family. In her youth Violet Page strongly felt the influence of her mother, an energetic and convinced rationalist and she received a definitely non-conformist education. She travelled a lot, had a cosmopolitan education (her first languages were Italian and French and only later English); her first short story was published in French in a Swiss paper in 1870, when she was only thirteen.

She was mainly interested in history (her first important work is the essay *Studies in the Eighteenth century in Italy*, 1880), in landscape, in art and the so-called “genius loci” (*Genius*



*Loci*, 1899; *The Sentimental Traveller. Notes on Places*, 1908), in literature of a fantastic nature that often makes use of supernatural events (*A Culture Ghost*, 1881; *A Phantom Lover*, 1886; the collection of short stories *Hauntings*, 1890) which at times remind us of Karen Blixen's stories. Some of her books were published by Leonard and Virginia Woolfe's Hogarth Press.

The author explained the reasons for her interest in the supernatural in literature in an article (*Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural Art*) published in the "Cornhill Magazine" (later re-published in *Belcaro* in 1888: *Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetic Questions*, London, W. Satchell).

In the article Lee defended her choice to keep in her stories (which were criticized for their lack of logical reliability) the paradoxical, ambiguous and obscure character of the fantastic, which was able to give back literature and art their original evocative and emotional strength.

The aesthetic sensibility of Vernon Lee had found a mentor in Walter Pater (1839-1894; fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford till 1880, the author of historical works, such as *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 1873, and literary works such as *Imaginary Portraits*) and his historiographic works.

In his studies Pater had tried to recreate the spirit of past ages and their emotions through the suggestion of works of art by means of his impressionistic and literary style.

History – Pater and Lee maintained – must re-create the emotions of the past, not only ideas and past events. Both opposed what Nietzsche had already criticized as "monumental history", that is the history of scholars, unable to understand the deep cultural and emotional fractures between different ages.

In *Belcaro* (1881) Vernon Lee deepens this intuition and attributes to sensibility for the fantastic element an even more important, not only literary but also cultural and historiographic, function. The fantastic is the residual form of the ancient way of thinking. For it reality is just an opportunity to trigger imagination, which our modern world has completely lost. "Nowadays – she writes – we see things, but we cannot imagine them any longer."

Rather than being an evasion from a faithful historical reconstruction, the fantastic approach allows the emotions of a lost world, voiceless in the documents of the archives of erudition, to vibrate anew.

The short story *Amour dure* clearly reflects the literary, historiographic and feminist thought of Vernon Lee. The story, written in 1885, was at first rejected by the publisher Blackwood because it was considered too fantastic and the plot was not sufficiently realistic. It was later

published in the collection *Hauntings* (London, W. Heinemann, 1890, re-printed London and New York, John Lane, 1906) together with other short stories: *Oke of Okehurst* – originally published under the title *A Phantom Lover, A Wicked Voice, and Diane*, all of a fantastic character.

After Pater's style, the centre of the plot of this story is a portrait probably inspired by the Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi by Bronzino (about 1540, at Uffizi, Florence) and which, in the story, portrays Medea da Carpi, the beautiful daughter of Galeazzo IV Malatesta, Lord of Carpi, and wife to Pierluigi Orsini, Duke of Stimigliano and later to Guidalfonso II, Duke of Urbania, all fictitious characters of 16th century. Spiridion Trepka, a historian who has come to Urbania for his studies, soon falls in love with the portrait of Medea whose ghost he meets several times in churches and in the night landscapes of the duchy town where he experiences a series of growing emotions which, in the end, make him totally dependent on her.

The story is full of symbolic meanings. The painting shows how art can reawake imagination dormant in our times.

Images do not only reflect the spirit of the past, but they can actually reproduce it.

Spiridion Trepka, the historian of Polish origin, who came to Urbania in order to study dusty archive documents and to write a scholarly essay, discovers in the painting the emotions of a dead world that suddenly comes back to life revealing all the misery of academic storiography.

His typically masculine inability to operate a distinction between reality and imagination is showed by his blind infatuation for Medea, the fatal woman (in the literal meaning of the term) that takes inspiration from famous Renaissance women's stereotypes (such as the myth of Lucrezia Borgia) that were so popular at the end of 19th century.

Medea, however, is mainly described as an anti-Victorian heroine; she is the opposite of the timid, pale wife, devoted to her husband, that was celebrated in the London of those years.

Her manly ability to play the game highlights, ironically, Trepka's inadequacy and, through him, the inadequacy of academic science that cannot distinguish the truth from mental constructions.

The outwardly conformist provincial society of Urbania, devoted to the cult of saints and nostalgic of the Roman States, a town where the bells of all churches ring together on Christmas night, becomes the stage of a modern pagan ceremony that has Medea as its main character, Medea who kills her lovers as Medea of the classical world devoured her children: two anti-madonnas in an obscene and grotesque overthrowing of Victorian ethics.