

TRANSLATION

On Vernon Lee's Walter Pater and Translating the Victorians

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VERNON Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935) first met Walter Pater (1839–1894) at Oxford during the summer of 1881, though she was already well acquainted with his work. The extent and import of their relationship, which lasted until Pater's death, has received significant attention by biographers and critics.¹ Like many of Lee's friendships, its intimacies were both personal and intellectual—risking, as she put it, “a question of caw-me-caw-you” through reciprocal endorsement.² The epistolary-averse Pater was uncharacteristically forthcoming in their correspondence, and Lee often stayed with his family when visiting England. The two read aloud from drafts, exchanged books, and met repeatedly on the published page. Indeed, scholars have traced an elegant intertextual arc from Lee's rewriting of Pater's “The Child in the House” (1878) in *Belcaro* (1881), to her dedication of *Euphorion* (1884), through her introduction to *Juvenilia* (1887), and arriving at her “Valedictory” conclusion to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895).³ By this account, Lee initially adheres to Paterian aesthetics, then grows skeptical of the doctrine's epicurean features, but finds solace when her mentor's late work takes its own ethical turn.

Less known, however, is Lee's most explicit engagement with Pater's writing: an Italian-language review of his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). The review, “La morale nell'estetica: Appunti sul nuovo libro di Water Pater,” appeared in the Roman weekly *Il Fanfulla della Domenica* on May 10, 1885, just two months after the novel's publication. As Benedetta Bini and Elisa Bizzotto have shown, the review constitutes the first instance of Pater's italphone reception, features the first

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Italian translations of passages from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), and offers an illustrative capsule history of British aestheticism.⁴ It is also a stunning piece of prose: a phenomenological study of what it means to read books across life's seasons, both literal and metaphoric. I present it here in English translation for the first time.

Il Fanfulla della Domenica was the weekly supplement to the *Fanfulla* newspaper. Founded in 1879 by Ernesto Obliedht and Ferdinando Martini, it was the first cultural publication of post-Risorgimento Italy and attained an impressive circulation of twenty thousand copies.⁵ Work was featured from the period's most illustrious Italian names, from the poetry of Giosuè Carducci to the *verisimo* fictions of Giovanni Verga to early pieces by decadent-to-be Gabriele D'Annunzio. The *Fanfulla* balanced that national coverage with a cosmopolitan outlook, paying particular attention to French and British literature. The issue of May 10, 1885, is typical in this respect: Lee's *Marius* review is preceded by a "Paris Correspondent" column discussing the publication of Jules de Goncourt's letters and followed by an article on the *mezzogiorno* cities Serino and Naples.

The article is also characteristic of Lee's critical output for Italian periodicals. It was promptly followed by two more *Fanfulla* pieces: one on the Italian writer Mario Pratesi, and one on a Coombe Wood production of John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*.⁶ All three texts experiment with the constraints of the review genre, making use of personal experience to construct a strong authorial persona and to stake out larger aesthetic claims. Further, the *Fanfulla* was just one of the many Italian publications that featured Lee's work; the same year alone, she wrote on the composer Baldassare Galuppi for the *Cronaca Bizantina* and George Eliot for the *Domenica del Fracassa*.⁷ Though Lee often complained about the Italian periodicals' substandard payments and publication delays, her bibliography bespeaks a concerted interest in this national literary field.⁸

That Lee's Italian writings remain largely untranslated is unfortunate but not entirely surprising. The past decades have seen Lee transition from a marginal to major figure in scholarship on the late-Victorian period. Translation and multilingual studies, meanwhile, have been hailed as vital fulcrums in the ongoing work to reimagine our discipline's borders.⁹ Yet there is a stark gap between theory and praxis. Few venues exist to publish translations, and the work is not professionally rewarded in the same way as research. To use Lawrence Venuti's language, scholars are incentivized to critique the "invisibility" of Victorian translators rather

than to translate Victorians—which would mean risking invisibility ourselves.¹⁰

Stefano Evangelista has recently asked: “What would a map of Victorian literature look like if we reinserted translations alongside works that were originally published in English?”¹¹ A similar counterfactual might be posed about Victorian literary history if we included—and translated—non-English-language reviews.¹² Not many Victorianists today are trained to have the foreign language competency of Victorian readers, let alone that of Vernon Lee. We would all love to pick up additional tongues. But in advance of a fluency utopia, translations remain indispensable for the study of individuals like Lee and Pater, as well as that of their literary and cultural moment.

Lee's *Fanfulla* review offers a unique window into that transnational fin de siècle, though it presents more questions than answers. How, for instance, does our understanding of aestheticism change when we see it refracted through a different social and linguistic context? Does writing for an Italian audience render Lee a more lucid literary historian of the present? Or does it invite creative misreading, allowing her to adapt Pater's prose to her own critical ends? Why does Lee translate excerpts from *The Renaissance* but not *Marius*, and why did she place the piece in an Italian periodical to begin with? Did the *Fanfulla* give Lee a less surveilled space to reassess the art of fiction after the disastrous reception of her novel *Miss Brown* (1884)? Or might the kind words for *Marius* be an indirect apology, given *Miss Brown*'s satirical treatment of a Pateresque character?

If Lee intended an olive branch, we lack clear evidence of its receipt.¹³ But we do know that Pater encountered the sections that Lee reworked for the introduction to *Juvenilia*—since he reviewed that volume (anonymously) for the *Pall Mall Gazette*.¹⁴ There, he praised its combination of charm and erudition as well as Lee's “singularly virile dialectical power, always on the alert for the falsities which may lurk in those impressions.”¹⁵ Yet he also observed an “increasing ‘ethical’ tone”: less an ideological swerve than a new accent on her disposition for treating “what is sometimes perhaps decadent art [with] a touch of something like Puritanism.”¹⁶

Both dialectical power and Puritanism are present in Lee's *Fanfulla* review, and the combination can make for tortuous prose. As Bizzotto observes, the piece also features “intra- and extra-textual references that must have seemed too learned and specialized for the Italian readership of the time, even for the clique of connoisseurs the periodical

could count on.”¹⁷ From our own vantage point, the text’s critical value might be said to lie precisely in these mental acrobatics, namely in the way Lee uses Pater’s novel to interrogate her own premises, impressions, and artistic maturation. That recursive form also illustrates the thin line between impugning and identifying with an aestheticist position. For while purporting to disavow aestheticism’s “moment” as infantile in both biographical and literary-historical terms, the piece continually attests to that moment’s allure. Lee’s final image of two “ever-split roads” leading toward the good and the beautiful may be linear and telic, but the review largely trades in seasonal metaphors: a calendric model in which aestheticism’s spring returns each year.

When it came to *Marius*, Lee kept cycling back until the end of her life. Her final published essay, “The Handling of Words: A Page of Walter Pater” (1933), applied the literary-critical method of *The Handling of Words* (1923) to *Marius*, providing the exact textual engagement missing from the *Fanfulla* review. In an extended close reading, Lee explored “*how long Pater carries an item in consciousness* by showing how long he expects his reader to carry it,” a prodigious memory that explained his “quite astonishing clinging to the pronoun” and “conspicuous preference for semicolons where other folk would put full stops.”¹⁸ All these features—from punctuation predilection to readerly demands—might be equally ascribed to Lee’s own 1885 Italian handling of Pater’s words. The following translation aims to maintain those textual affinities; it adds no full stops.

“THE ETHICS OF AESTHETICS: NOTES ON A NEW BOOK BY WALTER PATER”

Upon closing Walter Pater’s new book *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, I feel in myself, beyond the admiration awakened by the subtlest thinker and most artistic writer in present-day England, something that I would almost call personal gratitude.

It was one of the first days of spring when I read the book’s first chapters.¹⁹ On the farms, fennel, mint, and the yellow daisies we call “Maria’s gold” were starting to emerge, all sorts of aromatic grasses that perfume the hands of whoever picks them; the green paths among the dry grapevines were sprinkled with daisies; on the hills, the almond trees and blooming peaches were like a white foam atop the silvery plots of grapes and copper-colored plots of withered oaks; and all throughout the vividly verdant wheat burst the little red and purple flames of anemones. The serene sky was washed by the recent rain; the air delicately cool.

To those impressions of serene and austere spring beauty were joined, as certain songs are joined to words, the impressions of that book: the descriptions of the life of a studious and poetic youth from the time of the Antonini; of the country house, half villa, half farm, close to Porto Venere; of the temple of Asclepius where he is brought as a boy; of the old lodge full of grain and timber where he and his friend read together Apuleius's *Psyche*; and above all of that rustic procession of the *ambarvalia*, in which farmers carry candles and torches across the fields, scattering flowers on the cobblestone paths, placing garlands before images of gods—a procession Tibullus saw over eighteen centuries ago, and which we too can see, with lights and incense spreading across the tracks of the Tuscan countryside.

Impressions like these do us good, we who unfortunately live amid the dust of ideas, and who, thrusting open the window of our moral abode, find mostly the sight of muddy streets, strewn with the broken pots and discarded rinds of human life. It does us good, this little spring wind, this sparkle of verdant wheat.

Then for me, personally, there is the additional circumstance that the spring impression of Walter Pater's book relates to the way it reawakens memories of books—of the *Georgics* for example and the *Elegies* of Tibullus and Propertius—that I read and avidly enjoyed in the springtime of life, when, charmed by Goethean ideas, blessedly ignorant of the sad realities of thought, I set myself in search of the beautiful and the true, believing, alas, that they would be unfalteringly united, indeed but a single thing. And thus from the first chapter I read of *Marius the Epicurean*, I felt a sense of personal gratitude toward the author of this book.

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But this is not all. The new book of this illustrious English *essayist* has an importance of which all that I have said so far is only the symbol. The serious and total impression of that book revives and calms the serious whole of the mind exactly like that other impression, primary and superficial, that impression of pure fantasy and delicate sentiment which I called *spring*, revives and calms the surface, if I dare say so, of the soul. It gives you, so to speak, an interlude of calm in the struggle, or perhaps, if you prefer, in the empty masquerade of intellectual life. And it does that because it attempts, and up to a point succeeds, to reconcile the beautiful and the good.

And here it is valuable to explain the great significance of the attempt being made by this writer.

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About ten years ago, a modest volume appeared of so-called “Essays on the Literature and Art of the Renaissance”: short essays without any pretense of erudition, on the poetry of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Luca della Robbia, Sandro Botticelli, the medieval novel *Aucassin and Nicolette*, and finally Winckelmann; a volume that immediately made famous the name until then unknown of Walter Pater.²⁰

Let us pause to consider that historical moment.

The so-called *aesthetic* movement, concentrated to the utmost power in a cluster of artists and poets, was disseminated, or rather, had invaded the entire intelligent public of England; old Philistia had submitted with enthusiasm to the advocates of the beautiful. In poetry, Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne were at the height of genius; the same Rossetti and Burne-Jones, together with a crowd of imitators, gave the illusion of painting that could compete with this poetry. Nor was it an enterprise, that grand aesthetic enterprise of the time, only of creation. Everywhere one sought to discover and accumulate the products of genius or artistic eccentricity of every century and every people: Swinburne, with his disciples, preached both the serene Paganism of Greece and the modern Rococo, or else the modern French Byzantinism of Gautier and Baudelaire; Morris presented to readers the novelesque epic of the medieval North; Rossetti translated the *Vita Nuova*, and the songs and sonnets of the first Italian poets, from Cielo d’Alcamo to Dante; and finally an eminent prose writer, Symonds, called English attention to both the art and the bizarre, terrible sins of the Italian Renaissance.

What did this movement mean?

If we search for its spirit, for something shared by all, and which gathered so many different talents, we will find that this spirit was the yearning for the beautiful, for the novel, for more refined, more dazzling things, which could invade, provoke, or shake the imagination: the desire of sensation, emotion, and vision, or, if you prefer, of aesthetic hallucination; the beautiful was desired by any means, and so the beautiful came to include, due to an oddity of all creatively zealous eras, also the horrible, the revolting, I would almost say the ugly.

The fame that Pater suddenly achieved in that moment suffices to explain his character, or at least the character of his book. Among these avid seekers of new and unique imaginative impressions, he presented himself as that critic who, to use his own words “regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art and the fairer forms

of nature and human life, as powers or forces, producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind"; he was the theorist of the instinctive and universal practice of that moment of intellectual life.²¹ Of that intellectual life, of the soul of that time, one can say that he made a mystical description in that page of stupendous *reverie* that he wrote about Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in his first volume. Listen; and reflect if in the imagination of that woman does not appear the mystic portrait of his and his contemporaries' soul. "All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and molded there in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has molded the changing lineaments and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea."²²

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Walter Pater's first book corresponded to these desires; and in that correspondence, in that fact of expressing that moment's mode of feeling, is encapsulated the essence of that beautiful work: that first book was the gospel of that which I would call, in English, aestheticism. Now, ten years later, what will be the spirit of his second book?

And here comes the important question. We all, or almost all of us, went through that period of aestheticism, English or Italian, French or German, since that historical moment in the development of the English people corresponded, in each of us, to a moment of early youth, when the whole world seems to us nothing but an immense emporium of imaginative impressions, when we search in all things only for their essential power to induce in us, as Pater says, pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. And in all, or almost all,

this period of aestheticism lasted a very short time; how short it lasted among the English people: it vanished into artificial trifles, it disappeared before the tide of materialism, vulgar miseries, and vulgar interests of life; in some, and those are the most elevated souls, it was violently and sadly terminated by the discovery that in this world, artistic enjoyment is infinitesimally small compared to physical and moral pain; and by the discovery that beyond artistic essence, there is in things a terrible essence called good or evil, resignation or struggle, life or death.

And so, we are made to ask of fantasy, of art, of beauty:—What rights do you have over our soul? What place do you merit in life? and further: Are you an aid and encouragement for us in doubt and sadness; or simply a threat, a wearying influence, indeed a cause of bitterness and impotence that makes us feel even more the insoluble dissonances, the gloomy exigencies of real life?

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A disturbing moment, although unknown to others, and scarcely known to ourselves, in the depth of our soul; a moment in which every mind and every heart threatens to become sterile. To us, who are in such a moment, comes a man who had to pass through it; appears Pater, the prophet of vanished aestheticism, with a new book, precisely this *Marius the Epicurean*.

The great value of that book consists in having shown, or rather, in having made us feel (a far more effective method with aesthetic things) that physical beauty, that is the symmetry, purity, and elegance of the material world, has an equivalent in the power, sobriety, chastity, and goodness of the moral world. A thought not new but rather quite old, indeed the dominant perception of Greek art and poetry; a teaching fundamentally Platonic, and that was so important to summon back to our time, when the desire of the *new and unique* sensation, as the same Pater once defined it, induced the search, as if analogous to physical beauty, for malady and moral death. Teaching, then, that came to us infused with irresistible and imperceptible force in that serene and pleasing book. In that book, we are not told of struggles, we are not forced to see the opposition of good and evil; we are not reminded of a potential yearning for evil. It recalls the *Lehrjahre* of Wilhelm Meister, as Goethe might have wanted to paint them, but which could not be painted except by a spirit far more simple, candid, and chaste than his own.

The young Marius, raised among the gentle and dignified impressions of a calm and beautiful nature, and of a cult that can be glimpsed in the *Georgics* and Tibullus's *Elegies*, fond of the noble simplicity of rural

life and family; that blessed soul, harmonious as the portrait of a young Greek athlete, incapable of feeling the lowly lusts of life, incapable of contaminating himself in contact with them, walks serenely on the path whose purpose is its own perfection. He opens himself to all beautiful influences, and acquires something from them all: from the rustic Paganism of his ancestors, from the epicurean temperance of the Cyrenians, from the stoic austerity of Marcus Aurelius, from the heroic serenity of the new Christianity; he profits without ever losing; and, magnanimously resisting the temptation to fully identify with any of these partial and imperfect life philosophies, he joins at last, without sacrificing the noble freedom of his thought, the most beautiful spirit of Christianity, dying peacefully in the place of his persecuted friend. *Abi! Abi Anima Christiana!* With this song of future martyrs who surround the dying young man the book ends. *Anima naturaliter christiana*; Yes; but a soul in which the sweetness and Christian bravery of the other disciples of the divine mother Cecilia are but the ultimate perfection given to the candor, sobriety, and love of truth and beauty within Pagan philosophy.

It is a book which, by reason of its evident love for that magnificent Christian rite which artistically symbolizes the purity and excellence of the soul and its ardent desire of attaining the highest ideal, may appear to some as the apologia of nascent Catholicism, like to others it will seem the apologia of a dying epicurean skepticism. But it is a book whose real lesson lies in that repeated impression that the greatest beauty is that which is natural, simple, and healthy, and that its equivalent is perfect moral purity; it is a book that makes of life a temple of the finest form, one in which we consume, hands washed and dressed in white clothing, the most wholesome bread and the purest wine, which symbolizes the beautiful and the good, oblivious to the sinister and obscene forms that dare not enter that sacred ground.

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It is a book of the greatest consolation, much like the consolation brought to us by the first gentle and austere day of spring, with its sky cleaned by the recent rain, with its sun that comforts us, with its delicate splendor of verdant wheat and flowering almond trees. It is a book, for this reason, whose lesson should be of great use.

But is it true, that so consoling lesson of the equivalence of the beautiful and the good, of austere and calm perfection? Let us speak frankly: it is not, or it is only true in part.

The ideal escapes us and will always escape us. The true supports us everywhere. The morally beautiful, that is the good, forces us to contemplate, to approach in this terrible struggle moral obscenities that are tantamount to the ugly. The soul does not reach perfection simply by gazing upon it; the soul becomes an accomplice of evil, imperfection, and all it ignores, if instead of stopping and confronting these things, it avoids their hated sight. Ethics, treated aesthetically, will never be a perfect art; for ethics and aesthetics, the good and the beautiful, are distinct things, which cannot be exchanged. Those parallel energies of the soul, the desire for the good and the desire for the beautiful, will forever exist apart from each other, and, forever divided, the moment of their union will never come.

But while we attend to this truth, while we try to set our spiritual energies out on these two ever-split roads, let us recall with gratitude the truth taught to us by the moral incidents of Marius the Epicurean, namely that the road which leads to the good lies always parallel to the road which leads to the beautiful, that both lead toward a life that is richer, sounder, and more favorable for all: and that if this parallelism disappears, it is a sign that either ethics or aesthetics has lost its way.

NOTES

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1. See Brake, "Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle"; Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 60–77; Evangelista, *British Aestheticism*, 55–92; Friedman, *Before Queer Theory*, 116–46; Zorn, *Vernon Lee*.
2. Gagel and Geoffroy, *Selected Letters*, 1:368. The expression generally referred to political backscratching.
3. Pater's death did not halt the textual engagement. Lee returned to his work in "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills" (1921), *The Handling of Words* (1923), and "The Handling of Words: A Page of Walter Pater" (1933).
4. Bini, "The sterile ascetic of beauty"; Bizzotto, "Pater's Reception in Italy."
5. Greene, "Bizantium and Emporium," 539–43.

6. Lee, "Un Italiano dalla natura nordica"; Lee, "Pastorellerie aristocratiche." Both pieces had English-language analogues. The former refashioned ideas Lee had published in "Italian Fiction"; the latter was subsequently developed into "Perigot."
7. Lee, "L'immortalità del maestro Galuppi"; Lee, "George Eliot."
8. "Oh, those Italian papers haven't paid me a penny," she complained to her mother in September 1885: "I am owed for two articles of *Fanfulla* & one of the *Fracassa*. I am going to make a hideous row about it" (Gagel and Geoffroy, *Selected Letters*, 2:101).
9. See Banerjee, Fong, and Michie, "Introduction"; Evangelista, "Translational Decadence"; Reeder, "Toward a Multilingual Victorian Transatlanticism."
10. See Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*.
11. Evangelista, "Translational Decadence," 823.
12. To take one recent example: Linda K. Hughes's piece on Lee's journalism and slow seriality would look rather different if it attended to Lee's non-English writings, and especially to her tendency to rework material across languages for different venues. See Hughes, "Vernon Lee."
13. A case might be made on an intertextual basis, however. There is a striking resonance between Lee's seasonal conceit and the one developed in Pater's unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour*.
14. For the relevant comparison passages, see Lee, *Juvenilia*, 1:7–11.
15. Pater, "Vernon Lee's 'Juvenilia,'" 5.
16. Pater, "Vernon Lee's 'Juvenilia,'" 5.
17. Bizzotto, "Pater's Reception in Italy," 62.
18. Lee, "The Handling of Words," 303 (emphasis original).
19. Lee had technically encountered *Marius* before that 1885 spring. In June 1884, while staying with the Paters at Oxford, she wrote to Carlo Placci that she had heard two chapters of "a curious kind of spiritual romance" read aloud (Gagel and Geoffroy, *Selected Letters*, 1:546).
20. The book's original title, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, was changed in later editions to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Lee's rendering, "Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte del Rinascimento," does not quite match either.
21. I have used Pater's original quotations here and below. See Pater, *Studies*, viii–ix, 118–19. These passages only change in accidentals between the original 1873 and revised 1877 editions of *The Renaissance*.

22. Lee takes some artistic liberties with this translation. For instance, she divides the first sentence into two independent clauses linked by a semicolon, embellishes the etching image, and sneaks in a qualifier for Greek animalism. A back-translation of the opening, “Tutti i pensieri e tutte le esperienze del monde hanno modellato quel viso, ed hanno lavorato come lavora nella piastra di rame l’acido dell’acquafortista, per quanto potevano raffinare la forma visibile e renderla espressiva; tutto: il sano animalismo della Grecia . . .” might look something like: “All the thoughts and all the experiences of the world have molded that face, and have worked as etcher’s acid works on a copper plate, as far as they could refine the visible form and make it expressive; everything: the sound animalism of Greece . . .”

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