Gothic Metamorphoses across the Centuries

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Contexts, Legacies, Media

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Mirella Billi, dear friend and talented scholar, whose seminal works on the Gothic – and whose passionately witty talks – inspired many of us in the pursuit of this field of study. You are always with us, Mirella.

The editors and contributors

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Carlotta Farese

Vernon Lee and the Renaissance as Gothic at the Fin-de-siècle

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to explore the representation of Renaissance Italy, in Vernon Lee's *Amour Dure* (1887) and *A Wedding Chest* (1904). The paper will examine the two short stories in the context of Victorian descriptions of the Renaissance (from Ruskin to Pater) and Lee's own critical essays (*Euphorion*, 1884; *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, 1895) discussing the ways in which they reflect an extremely ambivalent relationship to the past. Lee's Renaissance implies a meta-historical understanding of the Gothic as a form of reception of the Italian Renaissance exposing the ambivalence and the contradictions of the relationship between modernity and the "spurious ghost" of the past.

Keywords: Italian Renaissance in England, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, aestheticism, femme fatale, art criticism

At first sight, the Renaissance and the Gothic might seem two altogether incompatible and diametrically opposed categories: isn't in fact the Renaissance the denial, the very antithesis of the Middle Ages? A period of classical culture and enlightenment that supersedes the century-long gloom and ignorance of the so-called Dark Ages? A period that marks the rise of the modern world with its exasperated individualism, the assertion of the secular over the religious and contemplative life, the birth of modern science. An age, in a word, that seems to form a dramatic contrast with anything 'medieval' or Gothic. And yet there is something notoriously uncanny – something 'dark' one might say – about the Renaissance (and the Italian Renaissance in particular). It is a well-known story: generations of European authors and intellectuals, from the Elizabethan playwrights to Voltaire, Stendhal and Nietzsche, have felt both fascinated and shocked by the coexistence of high cultural accomplishments and immorality that seems to characterise Renaissance Italy: a splendid civilisation where sublime art and culture are accompanied by bloodshed and treachery, a society that has reached

the highest pinnacles of aesthetic refinement as well as the abyss of moral abjection.

The culture of Victorian Britain has contributed a crucial chapter to the history of this ambivalent reception of the Italian Renaissance. As shown by Hilary Fraser, "Victorian painters, writers and historians fabricated the Renaissance in their own image", and used this image in different ways: for some of them it was a reflection allowing a recognition of their inner self, for others the uncanny projection of the repressed and unacknowledged traits of their own identity. (Fraser 1992: 2) In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Renaissance was generally considered by British historians and critics as the "highest point in the development of Western Art" (Zorn 29) but, in 1854, the publication of John Ruskin's *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* deeply changed, and indeed reversed, such a view by providing an alternative critical paradigm. Ruskin's preference for the 'Gothic' was based on the alleged aesthetical and ethical superiority of medieval culture as compared to its "accursed" (137) Renaissance counterpart. According to Ruskin, the cultural production of the Renaissance was intrinsically flawed because it was the expression of a deep moral and religious crisis: "gathered by the Papal Church in the extremity of her sin [. . .], when her priests vested themselves not with purple only, but with blood, and bade the cups of their feasting foam not with wine only, but with hemlock; — raised by the hands of the Leos and the Borgias." (137–138) Ruskin advocates the virtuosity of the devout Middle Ages and attacks the "enormous moral evils" (137) arising from the decadent Renaissance; later Victorian critics such as Algernon Charles Swinburne (*Notes on the Designs of the Old Masters at Florence*, 1868), Walter Pater (*The Renaissance*, 1873) and John Addington Symonds (*Renaissance in Italy*, from 1875) propose a more sympathetic understanding of the period and, indeed, of the very 'evils' denounced by their predecessor. The art historian and writer Vernon Lee (1856–1935), whose first pioneering scholarship was devoted to the *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), joined in this debate with her 1884 *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* where she outlines a meta-historical understanding of the Gothic as a form of reception of the Italian Renaissance exposing the ambivalence and the contradictions of the relationship between modernity and the "spurious ghost" of the

past. Her second study, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*: *Being a sequel to Euphorion*, would come out in 1895 and testifies the continuing significance of the Renaissance in Lee's critical reflection.

Particularly attracted to the Renaissance "as a time of transition in which a richness of cultural styles provided multiple forms of identification for modern intellectuals", (Zorn 30) Vernon Lee in *Euphorion* sides with the likes of Pater and Swinburne and develops her own vindication of the Renaissance against Ruskin's negative comments, denying the relevance of moral or religious judgements on art. Thanks to her close relationship to Italy (she spent most of her life in the country), Lee saw herself as the ideal mediator between the Italian past and the British culture of her time; she was convinced that her long-standing, direct acquaintance with Italian reality qualified her as "free from theoretical impediments and thus superior to contemporary scholarship." (Zorn 39) In her essay on *The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists* included in *Euphorion*, Lee traces back the ambivalent and 'dark' image of the Italian Renaissance that resonates in Ruskin's *Lectures* to the Elizabethan playwrights such as Marlowe, Beaumont, Fletcher and Webster, who "brought home to the audience at the Globe or at the Blackfriars that wonderful Italy which every man of the day had travelled through at least in spirit, and had loved at least in imagination." (Lee 1884: 67) But this 'amor ripae ulterioris', this deep-felt fascination with Italy, was strictly intertwined to a more unsettling and 'frightful' feeling: "The English knew and were haunted by the crimes of Italy: the terrible and brilliant, the mysterious and shadowy crimes of lust and of blood. . ." (67–68). In this fascinating chapter of *Euphorion,* Lee, in her excessive and sometimes almost overwrought prose, insists on the captivating *allure* of the degeneration and immorality of the Italian Renaissance: "But the Englishmen of the sixteenth century were astonished and fascinated by the evil of Italy: the dark pools of horror, the dabs of infamy which had met them ever and anon in the brilliant southern cities, haunted them like nightmare, bespattered for them the clear blue sky, and danced, black and horrible spots, before the face of the sun." (107) According to Lee, the morally upright English readers were "all sucking avidly at this newly found Italian civilization", and to them "the wickedness of Italy was more than morbidly attractive or morbidly appalling: it was imaginatively and psychologically fascinating." (69) And indeed the crimes of Italy

provided the subject of at least half the tragedies written during the reigns of Elizabeth and of James I, so much so that at the time "It seemed impossible to satisfy the general greed for Italian horrors." (70)

From Lee's perspective, the representation of the crimes and horrors of Renaissance Italy on the Elizabethan stage is the starting point of a tradition that reaches the eighteenth century Gothic novel: for Elizabethan playwrights such as Webster, Ford, Tourneur, and Marston, Renaissance Italy was: "a country of mysterious horror, the sinister reputation of which lasted two hundred years; lasted triumphantly throughout the light and finikin eighteenth century, and found its latest expression in the grim and ghastly romances of the school of Ann Radcliffe, romances which are but the last puny and grotesque descendants of the great stock of Italian tragedies born of the first terror-stricken meeting of the England of Elizabeth with the Italy of the late Renaissance." (Lee 1884: 79) The "romances of the school of Ann Radcliffe" (i.e. the Gothic novel as such) are understood by Lee as the legitimate offspring of this tradition (indeed, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is notoriously set in the Cinquecento). The Renaissance (the *Italian* Renaissance) would thus emerge as the original Gothic dimension (the Gothic par excellence, one might say) and Ruskin would be the last Victorian scion of a Puritanical misunderstanding of the Renaissance haunted by "mere fantastic horrors, as false as the Counts Udolpho, the Spalatros, the Zastrozzis, and all their grotesquely ghastly pseudo-Italian brethren of eighty years ago." (80–81) Vernon Lee rejects such a description not because she deems it inaccurate (she dutifully admits that the horrors and crimes of the Renaissance are not entirely 'fantastic'), but because it applies to the Renaissance moral categories that are only relevant to English culture and deeply incompatible with the reality on which they are forcefully superimposed from the exterior (what she calls "the ethical judgment of the Puritan"). According to Lee, the Renaissance was not *immoral*: it was *amoral*. Its frightful and uncanny aspect is a projection of the modern observer while men and women of the Renaissance were unable to perceive their own sins: being indifferent to vice and virtue, they continued to walk "placidly through the evil which surrounded them." (107) Part of the charm that arises from Lee's theory is created by the power of her language and by "her own fascination with the strangely perverse sucking of the English at the

fount of Italian vice" (Wiley 72) and leaves the reader quite fascinated by the description of this uncanny coexistence, in the Renaissance, of beauty and indifference to evil:

> "While the foulest criminals of Italy discussed the platonic vapidnesses of Bembo's sonnets, and wept at the sweet and languid lamentations of Guarini's shepherds and nymphs; the strong Englishmen of the time of Shakespeare, the men whose children were to unsheathe under Cromwell the sword of righteousness, listened awe-stricken and fascinated with horror to the gloomy and convulsed, the grand and frightful plays of Webster and of Tourneur. And the sin of the Renaissance, which the art of Italy could neither pourtray nor perceive; appeared on the stage decked in superb and awful garb by the tragic imagination of Elizabethan England." (Lee 1884: 107-108)

One might want to question if such a description of Renaissance culture is less 'monstrous' or indeed 'gothic' than the one it is expected to oppose. The 'infamous depravities' are still there, but, as Lee argues, they should be considered more neutrally, with the same kind of moral indifference that she attributes to the men and women of the Renaissance. Only by adopting this 'amoral' attitude the modern subject will be able to understand Renaissance culture on its own terms, and reconcile its beauty with its wickedness. Wyndham Lewis was perhaps too harsh when (in his essay *A Lady's Response to Machiavelli*) he said that the reading of Lee's *Euphorion* was "like watching a person of some intelligence administering electric shocks to herself", (Lewis 111) but it would be difficult to disagree completely with his remarks when he observes that the vision of the Renaissance developed by Lee and other figures of the fin-de-siècle (such as Lee's mentor, Walter Pater) is "incurably gothic" and "diabolic." (110) In fact, it might be argued that supporters of such a vision, famously advocating the 'love of art for its own sake', are no less focused on the dark and 'Gothic' side of the Renaissance than their opponents.[1] They do not merely *accept* the wickedness of the Renaissance, but they are deeply fascinated and attracted by it as a source of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. Echoing the words used by Lee to describe the attitude of the Elizabethans, we might say that,

1 "Her talent, her appetite for these things, and perhaps her domicile in Italy, enables her to give us almost what the more stupid and provincial of Elizabethans must have felt about the society revealed by Machiavelli." (Lewis 111)

like other decadent admirers of the Renaissance, she found its alleged wickedness “more than morbidly attractive or morbidly appalling”: they found it “imaginatively and psychologically fascinating.” Of course, the most famous and clearest example of this fascination is Walter Pater’s description of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa as a vampire-like *femme fatale* who embodies a synthesis of vice and virtue:

> “All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded 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 mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias.” (Pater 80)

As appears from this oft-cited passage, in Pater’s view, the contrast between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is softened and blurred; in fact, Pater’s (and Lee’s) Renaissance “was still closely intermingled with the Middle Ages” (Brown 187) and retained many medieval features that were to be considered as an integral part of its fascination (“the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves”) alongside its abominable (and thrilling) crimes (“the sins of the Borgias”, of course). For both Pater and Lee the Renaissance is thus ‘Gothic’ in two respects: because it is much closer to the Middle Ages than Ruskin was willing to admit and because its medieval traits were infused with a morbidness that the modern aesthete found congenial and aesthetically appealing. According to this interpretation, the viciousness of Italian sixteenth-century society fed into Renaissance art and resulted in a moral ambiguity that was an integral component of its disturbing beauty. All these aspects emerge in Pater’s interpretation of the Mona Lisa, where an idealised image of Renaissance womanhood becomes the ‘dark pool’ where the Victorian critic is able to project and recognize a reflection of the phantasies and contradictions of his own culture. Leonardo’s portrait is thus transformed in a fin-de-siècle femme fatale, and associated with the most typically Gothic (and decadent) icon of the uncanny intersection between desire and the death drive, attraction and fear – the vampire:

> “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 lyers and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands." (Pater 80)

In her 1895 *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee herself will revise, and partially reject, this Gothic and decadent critical paradigm by admitting that the attitude of the likes of Pater (and herself) was indeed similar (though apparently opposed) to the attitude of the Elizabethans she had described in *Euphorion*.[2] In the final chapter of the book (a *Valedictory* to *Walter* Pater) she gets indeed very close to the point that, as we have seen, will be made by Lewis in 1927 – nineteenth-century English aesthetes were attracted to the Italian Renaissance precisely for the same reasons as their sixteenth-century compatriots whose "exaggerated repulsion" was in fact but a form of "inverted attraction":

> "When the Renaissance began to attract attention, some twenty or twenty-five years ago, there happened among English historians and writers on art, and among their readers, something very similar to what had happened, apparently, when the Englishmen of the sixteenth century first came in contact with the Italian Renaissance itself, or whatever remained of it. Their conscience was sickened, their imagination hag-ridden, by the discovery of so much beauty united to so much corruption; and, among our latter-day students of the Renaissance, there became manifest the same morbid pre-occupation, the same exaggerated repulsion, which is but inverted attraction." (Lee 1908: 247-48)

Writing in 1895, Lee retrospectively denounces such a fascination with wickedness as a symptom of "childish morbidness" (248) and rejects any suggestion that the aesthetic pleasure provided by the masterpieces of the Renaissance might be connected "as cause and effect" to the moral corruption of the society that produced them. On the contrary: art must be considered the expression of what is morally sound, harmonious and healthy within Renaissance culture; although the product of a period of "moral anarchy", Renaissance art is not tainted by it, and remains "spotless of all contact" with the "evil instincts" that surround it:

2 On the 1895 *Valedictory* as a reassessment of the decadent understanding of the Renaissance see: Wiley 58–74; and Evangelista 91–111.

> "For, taking the phenomenon historically, we shall see that although art has arisen in periods of stress and change, and therefore of moral anarchy, it has never arisen among the immoral classes nor to serve any immoral use: the apparent anomaly in the Renaissance, for instance, was not an anomaly, but a coincidence of contrary movements: a materially prosperous, intellectually innovating epoch, producing on the one hand moral anarchy, on the other artistic perfection, connected not as cause and effect, but as coincidence, the one being the drawback, the other the advantage, of that particular phase of being." (251-52)

The two short stories that I intend to discuss – *Amour Dure* (first published in *Murray's Magazine* in 1887 and republished in the collection *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* in 1890) and *A Wedding Chest* (first published in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* in 1904) – are very interesting if compared with Lee's essay on the Renaissance as they exemplify the complexities and ambiguities of their author's position and the continuing relevance of the recognisably 'Gothic' and decadent aspects of Pater's interpretation before and after the critical reappraisal (one could almost call it a palinody) of 1895.

A Wedding Chest tells the disturbing story of the making of a decorated coffer commissioned by a dark tyrannical villain, Messer Troilo Baglioni to Ser Piero Bontempi, the employer and future father in law of the craftsman Desiderio, who is to wed Maddalena, Sir Piero's beautiful daughter. On the wedding chest Desiderio depicts scenes from Petrarch's *Triumph of Love* and represents himself on the chest as a bridegroom to be. However, he decides not to represent his gorgeous fiancée, as he knows that the chest will be purchased by the villain Troilo who desperately desires the woman. And indeed, on the very night of the wedding Maddalena is abducted and, although the executioners wore Trolio's family's colours, rumours say that the girl had fled willingly with a lover. A year after Maddalena's disappearance a gift is sent to Desiderio from "Troilo Baglioni of Fratta" – it is the same wedding chest he had prepared a year earlier enclosing "the body of Monna Maddalena, naked as God had made it, dead with two stabs in the neck, the long golden hair tied with pearls but dabbed in blood; the which Maddalena was cruelly squeezed into that coffer, having on her breast the body of an infant recently born, dead like herself." (Lee 2006: 237) After having given burial to Maddalena's body in the wedding chest, Desiderio gets his revenge by stabbing Troilo to death; as he stabs him, Desiderio "stooped

over his chest, and lapped up the blood as it flowed; and it was the first food he tasted since taking the Body of Christ." (Lee 2006: 241)

If we compare this story with the ideas on Renaissance art expressed a decade earlier by Lee in her *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, it is easy to argue that the former is at odds with the latter. In fact, the plot of *A Wedding Chest* seems to provide a condensed summary of the typical motifs of the "Gothic" understanding of the Italian Renaissance inaugurated by the Elizabethans, which Lee had criticised in her essays as characterised by exaggerated repulsion/attraction: the Machiavellian villain who persecutes an "innocent virgin", the revenge tragedy, vampirism and anthropophagy. Far from belonging to a separate sphere that does not contaminate the work of art, such themes appear as strictly intertwined to its genesis and its function. In the 1895 essay, Lee had argued that Renaissance paintings bear no trace whatsoever of the base instincts of the "ephemeral magnificos who bought" them and that artists (she takes Perugino as an example) were not influenced by such instincts. As a consequence, the effect produced on the modern onlooker is not a morbid fascination with vice, but the desire to "live with a deeper, more devoutly joyful life":

> "Whatever his people might be doing, or if they were not people at all, but variations only of his little slender trees or distant domes and steeples, his art would have been equally high and holy. And this because of its effect, direct, unreasoning, on our spirit, making us, while we look, live with a deeper, more devoutly joyful life. What the man Perugino was, in his finite dealings with his clients and neighbours, has mattered nothing in the painting of these pictures and frescoes; still less what samples of conduct he was shown by the ephemeral magnificos who bought his works." (Lee 1908: 254)

In the 1904 story she seems to reverse this perspective and focuses precisely on the 'dealings' between an artist (Desiderio) and the villain who commissions and buys his work (Troilo). The fictional exploration of such dealings uncannily and overtly contradicts the serene detachment of art from vice defended in the essay. In fact, *A Wedding Chest* is easily understood as a sort of fictional reflection on the quintessential, deep-rooted relationship between Renaissance art and the most extreme (and destructive) forms of desire. The connection (and the counterpoint) between Lee's critical reflection on the Renaissance and the tale could be hardly more striking, and it is confirmed by the choice of the setting

(Umbria) and the family name of the villain (Troilo Baglioni). The story of murder, lust and revenge told in *A Wedding Chest* seems to display the unexpected dark side of that very region which, in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee had defined as "one of the earth's cases of spiritual rest and refreshment": that "wonderful Umbrian district" which "on the whole, has surely grown for us the highest and the holiest" amongst "all the sane and satisfying art of the Renaissance." (Lee 1908: 254) Furthermore, the handsome, but ferocious Troilo belongs to the "frightful Baglionis of Perugia", (Lee 1884: 96) a family which, though not as famous as the Borgias or the Malatestas, are repeatedly mentioned by Lee as a typical example of the "hideously depraved princes [. . .], despots and feudal nobles" who appear as "devils" to "us moderns" exactly "as to our English ancestors of the sixteenth century":

> "the evil Italian princes of the Renaissance, the Borgias, Sforzas, *Baglionis*, Malatestas, and Riarios appear, through the mist of horrified imagination, so many uncouth and gigantic monsters, nightmare shapes, less like human beings than like the grand and frightful angels of evil who gather round Milton's Satan in the infernal council. Such they appear to us." (Lee 1884: 92)[3]

According to Lee's own critical views, the negative "samples of conduct" of these "ephemeral magnificos" mattered "nothing" in the work of the artists, but *A Wedding Chest* tells a very different story – a 'Gothic' story where the production and exchange of art appears rooted precisely in the "mad lust and ferocity" which "intoxicated" (Lee 1884: 89) Italian Renaissance society. That the story is indeed about the role of desire (and unspoken sexual drives) as the motive power of art is already shown by the tell-tale name of one of the protagonists – the artist *Desiderio*. The object of this desire is of course the woman's body: (see Pulham 2008: 87)[4] Maddalena as a living woman has almost no agency in the plot; she disappears at the beginning of the text and haunts it as a ghost with her absence, reappearing as a disfigured, fetishized corpse at the end.

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3 For other mentions of the Baglionis among "the great criminals of the Renaissance" (91), see pages 59, 91, 92, 93, 96. The real-life model of Troilo is probably Gianpaolo Baglioni (1470–1520), who is presented in Lee's *Euphorion* as the prototypical Renaissance villain (see especially 93 and 101).

4 This is not to deny, however, the homoerotic implications of the story on which see Pulham 2008: 84–87 and Pulham 2007: 5–16.

(Maxwell and Pulham 17) The destructive drives that circulate within the triangular relationship between Desiderio, Troilo and Maddalena, and eventually cause the death of the young woman, are mediated by the artwork (the wedding chest), which, far from being detached from them, functions as both the vehicle and the product of such drives. Troilo's desire for Maddalena is precisely the reason why he orders the *cassone*, and the commission of the work is clearly part of his criminal plan. Desiderio, on the other hand, is aware that the artistic representation of the body of his beloved on the chest will be potentially dangerous and in fact avoids portraying her. However, the conclusion of the story will eventually show that this precaution does not suffice: the "most beautiful work" he has produced is strictly identified with Maddalena's "marvellously lovely" (Lee 2006: 233) body and the purchase of the former is, in Troilo's plan, just a premise for the possession of the latter. The story seems to illustrate the double meaning of the Greek word *sema* (which may mean both *sign* and *grave*) in its relationship to the female body as theorised by Elisabeth Bronfen. The box is indeed a sign (*sema*) that stands for the body (*soma*) as the real object of desire; allegedly created as a "wedding chest", the coffer is in fact used as a sepulchre (*sema*) for the corpse of the bride-to-be; the dead body is, most literally, *its content*, and articulates a warning about the reciprocal implication of death, desire and the aesthetic. The beautiful scenes from Petrarch's *Triumph of Love* depicted on the *cassone* are but the idealised, deceptively harmonious surface hiding (and eventually revealing) the secret truth that lies at the core of the artist's work: not only that "all earthly love leads but to death", (Lee 2006: 231) but also that art itself is a product of the death drive and that, far from transcending the evil instincts of Renaissance society, art is deeply implicated in the very "fury of lust and cruelty" (Lee 1884: 99) from which Lee's criticism had attempted to redeem it.

The other fantastic short story under scrutiny, *Amour Dure*, directly inspired by Walter Pater's analysis of Mona Lisa, develops the canonical fantastic and Gothic theme of the haunted portrait. Like *The Wedding Chest*, it could be described as the typical "tale of blood and lust" that appealed to the imagination of both Elizabethan and gothic authors, but, unlike *A Wedding Chest*, it does not provide a simple representation of Renaissance themes and settings, but a parable on the relationship

between past and present: it is a story about the modern perception and (mis-)understanding of the Renaissance. (see Kane 23) In *Amour Dure* the twenty-four year old Polish historian Spiridion Trepka ("a product of modern, northern civilisation") goes to Italy to write a history of the city of Urbania but soon finds himself interested in the figure of Medea da Carpi, a fascinating and mysterious lady who brought death and destruction to all the men who loved her. As his diary entry records, the historian becomes obsessed with this woman who had died three hundred years earlier, so much so that he believes Medea communicates with him. The story ends abruptly with the suspicion that Trepka has become Medea's latest lover and victim, but the mystery remains unsolved. It would be difficult to imagine a clearer example of the Renaissance-as-Gothic than the one provided by this story; all the essential (and even stereotypical) elements are there: the ghost, the living portrait, the haunted palace, love, lust, murder and all the 'infamous depravities' (as Ruskin would say) of the Renaissance. All these elements, however, do not belong to the Renaissance as such, to its objective reality, but seem to be the product of the protagonist's insane fantasy. Spridion Trepka is a typical unreliable narrator and there is no element in the story that confirms the reality of the events he recounts, his first-person narrative being the only source the reader can rely on to know the extraordinary circumstances of his death. Considering the disastrous conclusion of Trepka's adventure and his final mysterious disappearance, we could read the story as a sort of parable on the self-destructive potential of the modern fascination with the Renaissance and on the misunderstandings and distortions to which it can lead. The most interesting aspect of this parable is that Lee does not seem to target the 'wrong' conceptions of the Renaissance that she criticises in her essays as much as provide a sort of satire of her own understanding. Many elements would suggest that Trepka is a projection of the author herself (Trepka is Polish, and Lee's father had been born and brought up in Poland; he is the same age as Lee when she completed her first scholarly achievement. . .). As critics have already pointed out, the character of Medea da Carpi – who was allegedly put to death in 1582 for having caused the violent death of five of her lovers – reminds the reader of the typical Renaissance *femme fatale* as described by Pater and Swinburne, but the most significant element, the element that allows us to recognise Trepka's attitude towards the

Renaissance as a reflection (or a mise en abyme) of Lee's own ideas is the insistence on the amorality of the *femme fatale* and the irrelevance of "all pedantic modern idea of right and wrong." When judging her behaviour, Lee asserts: "First, we must put aside all pedantic modern ideas of right and wrong. Right and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist, least of all for creatures like Medea. Go preach right and wrong to a tigress, my dear sir!" (Lee 2006: 56) And she continues by saying that: "To suppose Medea a cruel woman is as grotesque as to call her an immoral woman." (57) These words clearly echo Lee's own words in *Euphorion* and suggest that Trepka is but a mouthpiece or a double of the author: the ghost of Medea da Carpi which haunts Trepka's mind is the ghost of the past, of the frightful and delightful fascination with the Renaissance that keeps haunting the minds of Lee and her contemporaries. This story expresses the awareness that such a ghost has little to do with the reality of the past; as all "genuine ghosts" (as Lee calls them in her *Preface* to *Hauntings*), it "exists only in our minds"; it is a ghost "born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard"; (Lee 2006: 38–39) it is the ghost of Renaissance Italy that, from the tragedies of the Elizabethans to the "grim and ghastly romances of the school of Ann Radcliffe", has always remained at the centre of the Gothic imagination.

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