Marco Canani

Rambles in the Tuscan Fields: Janet Ross's and Vernon Lee's Sketches of Places

Abstract: Between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries Tuscany was home to an intellectually vibrant Anglo-American community. Unsurprisingly, the region was the subject of a number of travelogues by English and American 'expatriates', that is, observing subjects whose gaze is simultaneously placed within and without the landscape and the culture that they explore. This article examines the work of British-born, expatriate writers Janet Ross and Vernon Lee, and argues that their travel memoirs represent Tuscan landscapes as a blotting paper conflating culture and the environment. Ross's *Italian Sketches* (1887) and *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany* (1904) and Lee's *The Enchanted Woods* (1905) and *The Tower of the Mirrors* (1914) appropriate the conventions of visual and verbal sketches to blur the distinction between environment and landscape on the one hand, and between objective descriptions and subjective impressions on the other. In so doing, Ross's and Lee's representations of Tuscan landscapes rest on an imbrication of visual and verbal elements that foreground the interplay of individual and cultural memory.

Keywords: Anglo-Italian Studies. Janet Ross. Landscape. Sketch. Cultural Memory.

Between the mid-eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries, an intellectually vibrant Anglo-American community found in Florence and its surroundings a modern-day arcadia. Fascinated with the hills nesting the cradle of the Italian Renaissance, British and American expatriates began to settle in the area in the 1840s, forming a colony that would thrive until at least World War II. According to consular estimates, in 1910 Florence and its neighbouring towns hosted about 35,000 British citizens. Their presence, as Ben Downing observes, was an integral "part of the texture of the city",[1] and the works of writers such as John Ruskin, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, and Edith Wharton certainly provide a fresco of their experience of Tuscany. Forster, for instance, first visited Florence with his mother in 1901, and their lodgings at the Pensione Simi inspired the ruthless criticism of British and American travellers in *A Room with a View* (1908). "If you will not think me rude", Mr Eager tells Miss Honeychurch during a trip to Fiesole, "*we residents* sometimes pity *you tourists* not a little" for "living herded together in pensions or hotels, quite unconscious of anything that is outside Baedeker".[2] Forster only temporarily relocated to Florence as part of an extensive tour of Italy, and as such he may not be considered a Florentine 'resident'. Nevertheless, underlying his reproaching remarks is the distinction between 'tourists' and 'expatriates' as two distinct observing subjects endowed with different perspectives and, I would add, different gazes.

[1] B. Downing, *Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013, pp. 5-6; on the Anglo-Florentine community see also B. Roeck, *Florence 1900: The Quest for Arcadia*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2009.

[2] E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View*, ed. M. Bradbury, New York and London, Penguin, 2000, p. 56.

Grounded in shared rituals and leading to the commodification of cultural heritage, the "tourist gaze" is traditionally defined as a social practice whose origin dates to the rise of mass tourism in industrial Britain. According to John Urray's notable theorisation, the gaze of the tourist rests on "culturally specific notions of what is extraordinary", a category that identifies what deserves to be seen. The tourist gaze, in other words, is at once inclusive and exclusive, directed to specific "features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience".[3] As such it determines – as Forster's ironical reference to Baedeker suggests – what should be observed and how. Urray does not distinguish between 'tourists' and 'expatriates', but his definition of the "tourist gaze" as a cultural practice is inherently connected to the status of the tourist as a short-term visitor to a place. Consequently, the "tourist gaze" may be opposed to what I term here the "expatriate gaze", that is, the perspective of an observing subject who is simultaneously placed within and without the culture he or she observes, and whose experience of the place to which he or she relocates is not temporary.

This distinction interestingly reverberates in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary representations of Tuscany.[4] The period saw the development of the Anglo-Tuscan community that hosted writers and intellectuals such as Janet Ross, Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, Iris Origo, and Ouida, but it also bears witness to a new sensitivity to the Tuscan countryside as opposed to the historical heritage of Florence and Siena. The 1903 edition of *Baedeker's Central Italy*, for example, only recommended the Casentino Valley as a rural place worth visiting in the region.[5] Against this trend, the writings of the British-born, Florentine residents Janet Ross (1842-1927) and Vernon Lee (1856-1935) reveal a different perspective, which is inherently linked to their gaze as expatriates.

Née Duff Gordon, Janet Ross was raised in an intellectually stimulant London environment. Victorian writers such as Thomas Carlyle, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Alfred Tennyson were regular visitors to her parents' house at Westminster, and it was Charles Dickens, as Ross recalled in her autobiography, that "encouraged" her early reading interests.[6] After marrying the banker Henry Ross in 1860, the couple moved to Cairo, where they lived for six years before relocating to Europe in 1867. The Rosses had planned to settle in France, but they eventually moved to Florence, first in the Lungarno and then on the hills of Coverciano, where they bought the Villa di Poggio Gherardo in 1888. With its *podere*, Poggio Gherardo was a historical site, traditionally identified with the "palagio"

[3] J. URRAY and J. LARSEN, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2011, pp. 75, 2.

[4] Although they do not explicitly distinguish between 'tourists' and 'expatriates', David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell arguably point to the same contrast in the anthology *Italian Pleasures* (1996). By alternating their own remarks with excerpts from canonical writers, they mean to provide readers with an image of Italy that rectifies common literary stereotypes. In much English and American travel writing, Mitchell claims, "the tendency is either to praise overmuch everything under the Italian sky (which the sky over no other country in the world can match), or to be sour and condescending about the same everything". Against this penchant, Leavitt and Mitchell intended to select texts testifying to "a lived", as opposed to a "visited, Italian life". Not all the authors anthologised in *Italian Pleasures* are in fact expatriates, but the aesthetic sensitivity of writers such as Ruskin, Pater and Wharton arguably raised their gaze above the perspective of the tourist. See M. MITCHELL, "Introduction" to D. LEAVITT and M. MITCHELL, *Italian Pleasures*, London, Fourth Estate, 1996, pp. 2-3.

[5] B. DOWNING, *Queen Bee of Tuscany*, p. 9.

[6] J. ROSS, *The Fourth Generation. Reminiscences by Janet Ross*, London, Constable & Company, 1912, pp. 7, 109.

where Boccaccio's pilgrims spend the quarantine in *Decameron*.[7] But Ross's villa soon acquired new historical significance as one of the central sites of Anglo-American Tuscany. When she visited Florence in 1909, the young Virginia Stephen noted in her diary that Ross was a "brusque & imperious" old lady, but she was also "the friend of writers", and embodied the "character of the country side".[8]

Ross's biography – and Woolf's comments – are to a considerable extent reminiscent of Vernon Lee's. *Née* Violet Paget, Lee was born in France to British parents, and after travelling extensively to Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, the Pagets settled in Florence in 1873. In 1889 the family moved to Il Palmerino, the Renaissance villa that was to become a cosmopolitan hub visited by writers such as Edith Wharton, Aldous Huxley, and Henry James. Almost echoing Woolf's remarks on Ross, the American novelist wrote to Edmund Gosse that Lee "was disputatious and paradoxical", but also "a superior talker".[9] In spite of these biographical convergences, Ross's and Lee's interest in Tuscan landscapes has never been viewed as grounded in a similar gaze.[10] Yet both Ross and Lee claim their status – and perspective – as expatriates, which, together with their interest in Tuscan history, art, and folklore, shape their 'sketches' of places. By adopting the sketch as a verbal and visual model for recording their impressions of the Tuscan countryside, and the culture that moulded its landscape over time, Ross's *Italian Sketches* (1887) and *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany* (1904) and Lee's *The Enchanted Woods* (1905) and *The Tower of the Mirrors* (1914) blur the distinction between environment and landscape on the one hand, and between objective descriptions and subjective impressions on the other. Moving from these assumptions, in the first section of this article I explore Ross's and Lee's use of the conventions of the literary sketch with a focus on their conflation of visual and verbal elements. Subsequently, I suggest that the non-linearity and incompleteness inherent to the sketch enable both writers to shift between present and past, and between natural landscapes and places of culture in their representations of Tuscany. Although the fragmentary construction of the sketch gives readers the impression of a discontinuous narrative, Ross's and Lee's process of textual assemblage grants conceptual wholeness to their literary rambles across the Tuscan countryside.

[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 287-88. This is the passage from *Decameron* that Ross refers to, and which is traditionally associated with Villa di Poggio Gherardo: "Era il detto luogo sopra una piccola montagnetta, da ogni parte lontano alquanto alle nostre strade, di varii albuscelli e piante tutte di verdi fronde ripiene piacevole a riguardare; in sul colmo della quale era un palagio con bello e gran cortile nel mezzo, e con logge e con sale e con camere, tutte ciascuna verso di sé bellissima e di liete dipinture raguardevole e ornata, con pratelli da torno e con giardini maravigliosi e con pozzi d'acque freschissime e con vòlte piene di preziosi vini: cose più atte a curiosi bevitori che a sobrie e oneste donne. Il quale tutto spazzato, e nelle camere i letti fatti, ed ogni cosa di fiori, quali nella stagione si potevano avere, piena e di giunchi giuncata, la vegnente brigata trovò con suo non poco piacere" (G. BOCCACCIO, *Decameron*, a cura di V. BRANCA, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 20).

[8] V. WOOLF, *A Passionate Apprentice. The Early Journals, 1897-1909*, ed. M.A. LEASKA, San Diego, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 398.

[9] H. JAMES, *Letters: Volume III, 1883-1895*, ed. L. EDEL, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1980, p. 181. On Lee's cosmopolitan *coterie* see S. CENNI, S. GEOFFROY e E. BIZZOTTO (a cura di), *Violet del Palmerino. Aspetti della cultura cosmopolita nel salotto di Vernon Lee: 1889-1935*, Firenze, Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2014.

[10] Albeit specifically focusing on Ross's and Lee's representation of the Florentine landscape, an exception is G. CORSANI, "Visioni vittoriane: il paesaggio fiorentino nelle opere di Janet Ross e Vernon Lee", *Ri-Vista. Ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio*, 2 (1), 2004, pp. 1-13.

Visual and Verbal Conventions

Ross's *Italian Sketches* was published in 1887 as a collection of articles, most of which had already appeared in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and *Longman's Magazine*. The book, enriched with illustrations by Carlo Orsi, was followed by an expanded edition, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, in 1904. Ross's first volume includes two chapters devoted to Apulia, which explains the absence of any explicit reference to Tuscany in the title. The word 'sketches', instead, places Ross's work into a well-defined literary genre, which had acquired new dignity as an artistic form in its own right as a result of the late eighteenth-century interest in picturesque beauty and the Romantic cult of spontaneity. In choosing to define her articles on Tuscan landscapes as sketches, Ross thus foregrounds her belief in the visual power of the written word while revealing her attempt at narrative authenticity.

By refusing rhetoricity in the pursuit of immediacy, the sketch, as Richard Sha has convincingly argued, had reached its popularity among Romantic artists, writers, and poets, who sought to reproduce the impression of genuineness typical of preparatory drawings in carefully fabricated 'first drafts'.[11] In the advertisement to *Poetical Sketches* (1783), for example, William Blake claimed that his work was "the production of untutored youth", suggesting that its "irregularities and defects" were also an indirect demonstration of the poet's "originality". Similarly, Robert Hills presented his verbal *Sketches in Flanders and Holland* (1816) as "the errors of an unpracticed pen", and the accompanying plates as drawings still "to be finished".[12] By claiming their status as incomplete works, visual and verbal sketches conform to an aesthetic paradigm consistent with William Wordsworth's plea for spontaneous emotions. Consequently, the literary sketch allows for an impression of authenticity and incompleteness while hiding the writer's attention for details behind an apparent lack of polish.

In the introduction to *Italian Sketches*, Ross makes a similar disclaimer to her readers. She is aware that her "pictures of the Tuscan peasants", which are an integral part of her representation of the landscape, might appear as "flattered and highly coloured".[13] Ross apologises for her excessive characterisation of the *contadini*, which she explains as a result of her long permanence in the Tuscan countryside. In so doing, she constructs her gaze as an expatriate, a long-term resident whose focus is placed, unlike tourists', on both ordinary and extraordinary features of landscapes and places. At the same time, Ross admits to possible technical flaws, to the lack of polish that readers may detect in her portraits of the peasants, but also to the combination of visual and verbal aspects that shape her *Sketches*. This conflation is particularly evident when the landscape is inextricably linked to the human presence. "In Vintaging in Tuscany", for example, she captures the vineyard before and after the grapes are harvested, emphasising the effects of the human action on the environment: "How melancholy the vines looked stripped of their grapes! The glorious white and golden, and pink and deep red bunches had given a beauty to the landscape

[11] R.C. SHA, *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 9.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

[13] J. ROSS, *Italian Sketches*, illustrated by C. ORSI, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887, p. v.

which one did not realise until they were gone, and the poor vines stood bare".[14] Ross's attention to colours and shapes visually evokes the Tuscan landscape between summer and autumn, but it also foregrounds the action of the peasants on the vines. When she focuses on the landscape as a subject in its own right, however, her descriptions are trimmed from excessive details and conform to the aesthetic tenets of the nineteenth-century sketch.

In "The Baths of Casciana in July", Ross presents her memories of the small town as if they were recorded on the spur of the moment. The hamlet of Parlascio offers the perfect viewpoint to capture the picturesque beauty of the Pisan hills, which she registers in the present tense:

> To the left Monte Moro, behind which lies Leghorn, stands out black against the sky; and the sea, with here and there a white sail glinting in the sun, stretches far away. Pisa, with the Carrara mountains behind, lies in the soft green plain, and in front is a curious, broken landscape, rounded, water-washed hillocks, each crowned by a grey townlet with its tall campanile; the haze caused by the heat made the whole land look like a large opal. The nearest grey town is Morrona, standing on the peak of a hill, near which, further along the ridge, lies the abbey, now the villa of a rich Livornese. To the far right Volterra rears her weather-beaten towers to the sky, perched on the extreme edge of a high hill like an eagle's nest.[15]

Either visual or verbal, the early nineteenth-century sketch rests on the principle of incompleteness, an aesthetic strategy which aims to resist "the excesses of art" to persuade viewers and readers of its simplicity, originality, and truthfulness.[16] Ross intentionally presents her readers with a visual description concocted as a first draft executed *en plein air*. Leghorn and the Tyrrhenian Sea towards the South-West, and the Carrara mountains in the North, are only slightly hinted at against a fragmented landscape, and so is the medieval townscape of Volterra, which is only briefly compared to a nest perched on a hill. Ross captures the multitude of visual inputs that Casciana and its surroundings offer to her sight, but she renounces reproducing the 'myriad impressions' that her eyes receive. In pictorial terms one might say that she substitutes ample strokes with soft lines, which crystallise her gaze on paper but invite readers to re-process them into the organic whole that can be perceived from the right viewpoint.

Ross's sketch of Casciana captures the picturesqueness of the scenery offered by the Pisan hills, which she reproduces with a maximum of variety and contrast. This combination, as Reverend William Gilpin argued in his *Three Essays* (1792), is a central element of picturesque beauty provided that it is reconciled into a harmonious whole, while Uvedale Price stated in *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794) that "intricacy in the disposition, and variety in the forms, the tints, and the lights and shadows of objects, are the great characteristics of picturesque scenery".[17] Ross's representation of the landscape in "The Baths of Casciana in July" arguably follows these aesthetic principles, and so do other passages from *Italian*

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 106.
[15] *Ibidem*, pp. 177-78.
[16] R.C. SHA, *The Visual and Verbal Sketch*, pp. 3, 5.
[17] W. GILPIN, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, Blamire, 1792; U. PRICE, *Essays on the Picturesque, As Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*, London, Mawman, 1810, pp. 22-23. On Gilpin and the picturesque see also F. ORESTANO, *Paesaggio e finzione. William Gilpin, il pittoresco, la visibilità nella letteratura inglese*, Milano, Unicopli, 2000.

Sketches. When she observes the road from Lastra a Signa to Malmantile in "A September Day in the Valley of the Arno", she pays the utmost attention to the plants, trees, and flowers that grow in the area. Ross emphasises her familiarity with the place, but she also gives prominence to the visual contrasts produced by the colours of the valley:

> The steep hillsides clothed with heather and pines, the cyclamen and the autumn crocus, or colchicum, glowing in the sunlight, the last year's leaves of the Christmas roses, yellow, bright brown, and black, and the shaggy goats climbing among the jutting rocks, formed a picture worthy of the brush of Salvator Rosa. We passed four water-mills, and then, perched on a well-wooded knoll, with jagged rocks and a tangled undergrowth of honeysuckle, heather and brambles, saw the farmhouse of St. Antonio, which must in old times have been a fortress, dominating the valley. It is *picturesque* enough, *all corners*, *angles*, and *arches*, with a grey tower, now the home of numerous pigeons.[18]

Even more relevant for an examination of the aesthetic principles that mould Ross's representations of the Tuscan countryside is the last of Gilpin's *Three Essays*, "On Sketching Landscape". The reverend's first recommendation concerns the need to find a suitable point of view for executing a sketch. At the same time, artists should not aim to reproduce all the details that the eyes perceive. When viewed from the right perspective, the scene may in fact appear pleasantly fragmented. "The ground, which folds awkwardly here", Gilpin explains, "appears to fold more easily there: and that long blank curtain of the castle, which is so unpleasing a circumstance, as you stand on one side, is agreeably broken by a buttress on another".[19] This is also Ross's composite perspective when one sums the multiple viewpoints that direct her gaze in Parlascio – the "curious" appearance of a "broken landscape" complemented by "rounded", regular hillocks, and the contrast between the horizontal and vertical perspectives designed by ridges and edges. In addition, her description of "The Baths of Casciana in July" rests on a process of reduction and allusion that is equally consistent with Gilpin's precepts. After finding the right point of view, the scenery needs to be "properly" reduced to fit the paper. The aesthetics of the sketch is grounded in absence and subtraction, and Gilpin promptly warns artists not to "include too much: it may perhaps be divided more commodiously into two sketches".[20] Sketchers should focus instead on an adequate portion of the landscape, and Ross's description of the view from Parlascio is a compound representation that stitches together separate sketches, each representing a part of the landscape according to where she places her gaze.

The same aesthetic principles guide Ross's representation of the lower Val d'Arno in "Oil-Making in Tuscany", but this time she neatly breaks her sketch into separate parts. The writer gives shape to the visual impressions gathered from a *podere* by first focusing on what she sees in the East: Florence, with its "dark cupolas looming out grandly against the snow-covered hills of Vallombrosa, which rose behind the bright city". Subsequently, she turns to "the fruitful valley of the Arno", hinting at the "glimpses of the river here and there, glistening like silver, and the slender, leafless branches of the willow glowing scarlet and orange as they tossed", like Wordsworth's daffodils, "in the breeze".[21] Ross sketches the Val d'Arno through a series of present participles that freezes her vision in time and

[18] J. Ross, *Italian Sketches*, pp. 78-79 (emphasis added).
[19] W. Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 63.
[20] *Ibidem*.
[21] J. Ross, *Italian Sketches*, p. 114.

conveys an impression of immediacy. After some brief remarks on the medieval and early modern history of Lastra a Signa, she resumes her sketch of the valley:

> Monte Morello and Monte Ferrato rose behind, while the villas dotted here and there on the dark hillsides gleamed out white in the brilliant sunshine. The picturesque little town of Prato seemed quite close, instead of being twelve miles away, and we could plainly distinguish the beautiful marble cathedral, in which Filippo Lippi worked so well, and inspired his brush with the lovely face of Lucrezia Buti, the young nun who left her cloister at Prato to follow the smooth-tongued painter.[22]

Ross softly sketches the scenario offered by the Val d'Arno, with the Renaissance villas appearing as dots hatching the landscape and the hills as gleams of light. Unlike the first section, she entrusts the description of the valley and the city of Prato to memory. However, her sketch rests not so much on subjective recollections, but rather on cultural memory, embodied in the Renaissance painter Filippo Lippi and his passion for the nun Lucrezia Buti while executing the fresco cycle *Stories of St Stephen and St John the Baptist* at the Duomo of Prato.

The same conflation of verbal and visual elements recurs in Vernon Lee's travel writing, which is indissolubly linked to the idea of the spirit of the place, the "genius loci" to which she devoted various volumes between 1899 and 1925. Lee's first travelogue, *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (1899), includes her impressions of Italian, French, and German landscapes and places. However, when she visits Touraine, the mere sight of a book abandoned in a ditch brings her memory back to Italy, which she recognises as "the country of my adoption".[23] Like Ross, Lee claims her status – and thus her gaze – as an expatriate, and compares the role of "race" and "language" in determining one's identity. Counterposing culture to nature, Lee states that "race is nothing and language all; for the blood carries only physical resemblance, which is simple and very individual; while the word carries thought, custom, law and prejudice, which are complex and universal".[24] This distinction confirms her cosmopolitan outlook, and her composite, expatriate gaze in observing landscapes and places.

Lee never refers to her impression of landscapes and places as 'sketches'. Nevertheless, the subtitle of her first volume of travel memoirs, *Notes on Places*, alludes to the aesthetic principle of the incomplete, unfinished draft on which sketches rest. In *The Enchanted Woods* and *The Tower of the Mirrors* she avowedly pursues the literary model of the essay, which is the genre that she found most congenial to her writing. However, even when she examines subjects such as Renaissance history, art and culture, she conceives the essay as a porous narrative form that defies rhetoricity in favour of seemingly fragmented remarks. In *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance* (1884), Lee defines her work as "impressions" based on "currents of thought and feeling", but she also points out that her essays "are not samples, fragments at which one tries one's hand, of some large and methodical scheme of work".[25] The analogy with the sketch is patent, from its calculated want of polish to its claim as a genre in its own right as opposed to a preliminary draft.

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] V. Lee, *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*, London, Grant Richards, 1899, p. 43.

[24] *Ibidem*, p. 154.

[25] V. Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols, London, Fisher Unwin, 1884, Vol. I, p. 16.

Lee's 'impressions' of Tuscan landscapes are mainly recorded in *The Enchanted Woods* and *The Tower of the Mirrors*. The volumes include her memories of the Maremma and Vallombrosa, Pisa, the Bocca d'Arno, and Viareggio, and this variety of places is already a clear indication of the diverse scenery that she represents. In "A Walk in the Maremma", Lee stresses the importance of finding the right viewpoint for appreciating the beauty of the place, but she also expresses the difficulty encountered in crystallising her visual impressions on the page: "As one rides along, the loveliest landscapes unfurl and furl, in front and behind; they are tantalizing, unclutchable".[26] Lee turns her gaze towards multiple directions, and her sketch foregrounds the biodiversity of the place, be it real or imagined:

> I scrambled […] along the banks where spates have filled the lower branches of the leafless elms and rosy-budding aspens with armfuls of dry bramble, clematis-tendril, and reeds; foolish Ophelia-wreaths under the real garlands of ivy, which crown the top; immense dry nests ready for fantastic birds, bigger than the heron who sailed over us at the ford, indeed for birds altogether of Fairyland.[27]

Lee is extremely sensitive to the Tuscan landscape, which she represents through a series of rapid touches embodied here in paratactic sentences separated by semicolons. The writer explicitly commends this minimalist aesthetics in her memories on "The Dockyard of Viareggio", where she claims that "There is an aesthetic virtue, more certainly even than a moral one, in the fact of not *having too much*; short commons stimulating the spirit to extract all the interest and beauty which things themselves contain".[28] Against the dizzy grandeur of the "Grecian hillsides and capes", Lee praises the delight that one feels around Viareggio, "the intimate pleasantness, and even amusement" that is found in its "pale, straight sands, and pale sea barely breaking into white; in the wide streets of little shut-up houses; in the whitish colours of things under the whitish scirocco sky".[29] Again, Lee emphasises the variety and contrast offered by the landscape through short sentences divided by semicolons, as if she were presenting readers with notes taken on site. At times, however, her verbal descriptions appropriate visual codes that are typical of painting. At the end of her excursion in the Maremma, Lee portrays the impending storm by following the effects of the nightlight, bringing to the fore the colours and shades that illuminate the landscape:

> As I scrambled along the stream, where the autumn leaves were sprinkled white with snowdrops, the water took rosy and purple stains; and the rainy sky opened blue and moist, surrounded by colossal mounds of white and crimson and inky cumulus. And when I had climbed up the Castle hill and got to its shoulder, behold! a great dark storm was coming up from the sea, filling the shallow valley with smoke. It thundered; and short white lightnings danced above the woods, only one blood-red stain marking the place of the setting sun.[30]

As the use of the first person suggests, Lee often conflates the objective representation of the landscape with her subjective impressions. As she had remarked in an earlier essay, titled "The Lie of the Land. Notes about Landscape" (1897), the individual experience

[26] V. Lee, *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905, p. 165.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 166.

[28] V. Lee, *The Tower of the Mirrors, and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914, p. 169.

[29] *Ibidem*.

[30] V. Lee, *The Enchanted Woods*, pp. 169-70.

of places acts as a visual filter, making "the real, individual landscape – the landscape one actually sees with the eyes of the body and the eyes of the spirit – *the landscape you cannot describe*".[31] Crucial to this intimate perception of the landscape is the observer's relationship with the "genius loci", which Lee considers a "substance of our heart and mind, a spiritual reality" that is manifest in "the place itself".[32] From this perspective, the representation of the landscape is the result of visual data, filtered by the subjective associations of the observing subject. In *Genius Loci*, Lee's view of the Tuscan Apennine at dusk combines visual perceptions with impressions gathered from other senses, conflating colours with noises and smells:

> The mountains gradually disappeared, and the high wooden hills lay folded as if in sleep against the pale sky with its first stars. The dead chestnut leaves rustled under foot, and the song of the torrent, the bell of the little town, alone broke the stillness. With the freshness of southern night, there came from the hill-sides the smell of charcoal-burning, of charring wood, and wet leaves and turf; a smell very peculiar, bitter-sweet, and heady, as of the wine drunk by the creatures of the forest.[33]

More frequently, the associations that Lee develops in her verbal sketches of landscapes and places are not subjective but grounded in cultural memory. This is due to her conception of the "genius loci" as a presence immanent in the land and revealing its history: Lee attributes a paramount epistemic function to the spirit of place, which turns landscapes and places into sites of memory.[34] As "Oil-Making in Tuscany" suggests, Ross's *Italian Sketches* rests on a similar conception, so that both writers anticipate the distinction that cultural geography would trace between the *environment* as a physical space and *landscape* as an environment infused with history and culture.

Tuscan Landscapes as Sites of Culture

According to Barry Cunliffe, the environment may be defined as a "physical" entity, a "measurable" parcel of the land acting as "a blotting paper into which the cultural images of landscape are absorbed".[35] In this sense, the environment identifies a portion of the land in itself, whereas the landscape may be viewed as a cultural artifact, and anticipating this distinction, Ross and Lee view the Tuscan landscape as an environment modelled by the anthropic presence. Against the increasing commodification of tourism and cultural heritage, Ross's and Lee's travel memoirs provide a cultural counter-history of the places they visit, albeit with a significant difference. Lee's gaze focuses on the landscape to catch the spirit of the place, which can be perceived in the relics and remnants that are dissemi-

[31] V. Lee, *Limbo and Other Essays*, London, Grant Richards, 1897, p. 45 (emphasis added).

[32] V. Lee, *Genius Loci*, p. 5. On these aspects see also L. Wanitzek, "'The South! something exclaims within me': Real and Imagined Spaces in Italy and the South in Vernon Lee's Travel Writing", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 83, 2016, http://journals.openedition.org/cve/2532 (last accessed on 28 September 2020).

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 126.

[34] On the epistemic function of the "genius loci" in Lee's travel memoirs see M. Canani, "The Epistemology of Place in Vernon Lee's *Genius Loci* and D.H. Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy*", *RSV. Rivista di studi vittoriani*, 25 (50), 2020, pp. 55-73.

[35] B. Cunliffe, "Landscapes with People," in K. Flint and H. Morphy (eds), *Culture, Landscape and the Environment. The Linacre Lectures 1997*, Oxford, OUP, 2000, p. 114.

nated in the environment. Ross never explicitly refers to the "genius loci", but her gaze is nonetheless placed on the cultural aspects of rural Tuscany, as her interest in the peasants and their customs demonstrates.

For both Ross and Lee, the representation of landscape is thus inseparable from the history, culture, and tradition that moulded it over the centuries. The anthropic presence in the physical space, embodied in sites such as castles, palaces, and churches, but also in *poderi* and farms, is an integral part of both writers' sketches of Tuscan places. Ross's description of the Arno valley in "Oil-Making Tuscany" intersperses visual impressions with history when she observes the battlement walls in Lastra a Signa, a "stern and weather-beaten" site that seems to be "still frowning defiance to the enemies of Florence".[36] Consequently, Ross breaks her sketch of the "astounding view" of the valley in order to foreground the cultural layers on which it is built. The medieval *mura* testify to the Pisan conquest of the town in 1365 and the siege of Florence in 1529-1530, when the Spanish army guided by the Prince of Orange, Philibert de Chalon, overthrew the Republic of Florence and restored the Medici. Ross concisely traces the atrocities committed during the siege in the proverb "*E* [sic] *meglio stare al bosco e mangier pignoli, che stare in Castello con gli Spagnoli* (Better to live in the wood and eat stone-pine nuts, than in a castle with the Spaniards)".[37] Similar insights into Tuscan folklore, substantiated in frequent references to popular sayings and songs, bear witness to Ross's status as an observing subject who is fully integrated into the culture she observes.[38] Her attention is not directed to the extraordinary, but to the ordinary, to the customs and traditions that the landscape conveys. This focus is part of her gaze as an expatriate, and at times it overlaps with what Urray defines "the anthropological gaze", that is, the ability to relate sites, landscapes, and places to their historical or symbolical meaning.[39]

As a proof of the impossibility to separate landscape, culture, and history, Ross's description of "The Valley of the Arno" is fragmented by a much more detailed digression on the history of Lastra a Signa. On the road from San Colombano she sees "pretty country lanes, the hedges all glowing with the scarlet berries of the orange thorn, and the trees clothed in vines",[40] but again the medieval remnants prompt her remarks on the history of the town – from its fortification in the thirteenth century and the following Pisan assault, supported by the English *condottiere* Sir John Hawkwood, up to the Spanish siege:

> Lastra a Signa was rebuilt in 1377 by the Republic of Florence, according to the advice of Sir John Hawkwood, and twenty years later the unfortunate little town was invested and taken by Alberigo, captain of Galeazzo Visconti, Lord of Milan, who was at deadly feud with the Signory. Again the walls were restored; and in 1529, when the imperialists besieged Florence, Francesco Ferrucci, whose headquarters were at Empoli, five miles down the river, garrisoned Lastra a Signa with some of his bravest troops. The Prince of Orange sent a strong force of Spaniards with scaling-ladders to take the place, who were repulsed with considerable loss; but munitions ran short in the fortress, and while

[36] J. Ross, *Italian Sketches*, p. 114.

[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] See the essay "Popular Songs of Tuscany" in *Italian Sketches*.

[39] J. Urray, *The Tourist Gaze*, p. 20. On Ross's knowledge of the Tuscan rural heritage see also C. Capancioni, "Janet Ross's 'Love of Italian Peasant Songs': Tuscan Folk Songs and the Victorians", in F. Ciompi, R. Ferrari, and L. Giovannelli (eds), *Interconnecting Music and the Literary Word*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp. 109-23.

[40] J. Ross, *Italian Sketches*, p. 43.

negotiations were going on, five hundred more Spanish lances arrived with battering-rams, effected an entrance on the south-east side, and cut the gallant defenders to pieces.[41]

Ross shifts from the Tuscan environment to the history that modelled it into the landscape she observes, thus foregrounding – albeit unnamed – the spirit of the place. This change of perspective also affects the linguistic construction of her sketch. She abandons the present tense and the sequence of participles that had characterised her attempt at immediacy and interrupts her visual description with a long verbal digression. Nevertheless, this fragmentation is consistent with the refusal of visual and verbal linearity that is inherent to the sketch. The literary counterpart of the visual principle of incompleteness, as Amanpal Garcha suggests, is a "temporal and spatial disconnection" that produces descriptions grounded in a "more-or-less synchronic temporality". The result is a discontinuous, "descriptive and essayistic text" that lacks a linear plot.[42] Garcha is primarily interested in the process that led Victorian writers such as Dickens, Thackeray, and Gaskell to incorporate the elements of the sketch into their novels, but the points that she makes also apply to the essay as a descriptive genre, which further suggests viewing Lee's travel memoirs as sketches of places conflating landscape and culture.

In "The Dockyard of Viareggio", Lee construes the delight produced by the landscape as inextricably linked to the past of the town, so that "one appreciates in this modern place whatever tells of former times: the Lucchese Palace, said to be haunted and evidently uninhabited, by the port; and the score of houses of the original bathing-place, now stranded far back by the receding Mediterranean, with their meagre grace of Empire pilasters and lintels".[43] As she bounces back and forth between visual and the verbal descriptions, and between the present and the past of the place, Lee implicitly states the impossibility to separate nature from culture. It is such bond that makes a portion of the environment a landscape and foregrounds its distinctiveness, as she explains in her memories of "Vallombrosa":

> After the head and stuffiness of the plain, what an impression, on going out, of coolness, freshness, scent of grass and flowers, songs of birds […]. That little garden had the delightfulness of something exotic: scant, *none of your Italian summer excess of vegetation*, just a few flowers, cared for, showing a little difficulty of growth, as in *an English cottage-garden*. But *here and there, affirming Italy*, an old gate, architectural and finely cut, of the monk's time; and behind the trees, the belfry and towers, the extent of the former monastery.[44]

In their interplay of nature and culture, Ross and Lee constantly move from the observation of the landscape to broader considerations on the human presence that has modelled such landscape over time. By conflating different time perspectives, they capture the action of man on the land both diachronically – as churches, towers, and battlements suggest – and synchronically – as the presence of peasants and farms indicates. In a passage from "Tuscan Midsummer Magic" that gently blends visual impressions with memories, and colours with fragrances, Lee remarks that "The Apennines of Lucca and Pistoia, with their sudden revelation of Italian fields and lanes, of flowers on wall and along roadside, of bells

[41] *Ibidem*, pp. 45-46.
[42] A. Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction*, Cambridge, CUP, 2009, pp. 5, 8.
[43] V. Lee, *The Tower of the Mirrors*, pp. 169-70.
[44] *Ibidem*, p. 176 (emphasis added).

ringing in the summer sky, of peasants working in the fields and with the loom and distaff, meant Italy".[45] In Ross's *Sketches*, the Tuscan landscape is inextricably linked to the life and activity of the peasants. The beginning of "San Gimignano delle Belle Torre [*sic*]" rapidly moves from the picturesque scenery of the medieval town, "crowning the hill" with "its square towers breaking the sky-line in a quaint and picturesque manner", to its medieval history. But the landscape is also home to the *contadini*, with their daily tasks and customs:

> On the road from Poggibonsi to San Gimignano, […] we came in view of the towers of unequal height, and the grey walls of the old town stood out against the blue sky. The country is rich and smiling, and the contadini were busy tying up their vines and cutting green fodder for their cattle, while the hedgerows were enamelled with flowers glowing in the bright April sun.[46]

According to Capancioni, *Italian Sketches* reveals Ross's desire to explore the identity of the Italians in the decades that saw the actual development of the nation after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. In this sense, her literary representation of Tuscan landscapes and places is first of all a social investigation of late nineteenth-century Italy, and bears witness to a crucial moment in the history of the country. Indeed, Ross's socio-anthropological interest was to consolidate over the following decades, as her examination of the social structure of *mezzeria* in *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany* suggests.[47] In Lee's case, this historico-cultural function is entrusted to the "genius loci", which she explores as a result of her non-human encounters. Despite such individual differences, it is their common engagement with cultural memory that bestows organicity to the fragmentary quality of their sketches of places. Either synchronically or diachronically, embodied in the peasants working the land or in landmarks and other historical sites, the action of humankind turns the environment into a landscape. Accordingly, in both Ross's and Lee's sketches of Tuscan places, the landscape becomes a site of memory that testifies to the history of the region, its towns and countryside, but also to its multiple stories, often neglected by official records.

References

BOCCACCIO, GIOVANNI, *Decameron*, a cura di VITTORE BRANCA, Torino, Einaudi, 2000.

CANANI, MARCO, "The Epistemology of Place in Vernon Lee's *Genius Loci* and D.H. Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy*", *RSV. Rivista di studi vittoriani*, 25 (50), 2020, pp. 55-73.

CAPANCIONI, CLAUDIA, "Victorian Women Writers and the Truth of 'the Other Side of Italy'", in CLARE BROOME SAUNDERS (ed.), *Women, Travel Writing, and Truth*, New York and London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 109-23.

—, "Janet Ross's 'Love of Italian Peasant Songs': Tuscan Folk Songs and the Victorians", in FAUSTO CIOMPI, ROBERTA FERRARI, and LAURA GIOVANNELLI (eds), *Interconnecting Music and the Literary Word*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp. 110-23.

[45] V. LEE, *Limbo*, p. 82.

[46] J. ROSS, *Italian Sketches*, pp. 154-55.

[47] C. CAPANCIONI, "Victorian Women Writers and the Truth of 'the Other Side of Italy'", in C. BROOME SAUNDERS (ed.), *Women, Travel Writing, and Truth*, New York and London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 109-11; see also the essay "Mezzeria, or Land Tenure in Tuscany", in J. ROSS, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, London, Dent, 1904, pp. 211-22.

CENNI, SERENA, SOPHIE GEOFFROY e ELISA BIZZOTTO (a cura di), *Violet del Palmerino. Aspetti della cultura cosmopolita nel salotto di Vernon Lee: 1889-1935*, Firenze, Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2014.

CORSANI, GABRIELE, "Visioni vittoriane: il paesaggio fiorentino nelle opere di Janet Ross e Vernon Lee", *Ri-Vista. Ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio*, 2 (1), 2004, pp. 1-13.

CUNLIFFE, BARRY, "Landscapes with People", in KATE FLINT and HOWARD MORPHY (eds), *Culture, Landscape and the Environment. The Linacre Lectures 1997*, Oxford, OUP, 2000, pp. 111-30.

DOWNING, BEN, *Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

FORSTER, E.M., *A Room with a View*, ed. MICHAEL BRADBURY, New York and London, Penguin, 2000.

GARCHA, AMANPAL, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction*, Cambridge, CUP, 2009.

GILPIN, WILLIAM, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, Blamire, 1792.

JAMES, HENRY, *Letters: Volume III, 1883-1895*, ed. LEON EDEL, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1980.

LEAVITT, DAVID and MARK MITCHELL, *Italian Pleasures*, London, Fourth Estate, 1996.

LEE, VERNON, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols, London, Fisher Unwin, 1884.

—, *Limbo and Other Essays*, London, Grant Richards, 1897.

—, *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*, London, Grant Richards, 1899.

—, *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905.

—, *The Tower of the Mirrors, and Other Essays on the Spirit of Places*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914.

ORESTANO, FRANCESCA, *Paesaggio e finzione. William Gilpin, il pittoresco, la visibilità nella letteratura inglese*, Milano, Unicopli, 2000.

PRICE, UVEDALE, *Essays on the Picturesque, As Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*, London, Mawman, 1810.

ROECK, BERND, *Florence 1900: The Quest for Arcadia*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2009.

ROSS, JANET, *Italian Sketches*, illustrated by CARLO ORSI, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887.

—, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, London, Dent, 1904.

—, *The Fourth Generation. Reminiscences by Janet Ross*, London, Constable & Company, 1912.

SHA, RICHARD C., *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

URRAY, JOHN and JONAS LARSEN, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2011.

WANITZEK, LEONIE, "'The South! something exclaims within me': Real and Imagined Spaces in Italy and the South in Vernon Lee's Travel Writing", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 83 (2016), http://journals.openedition.org/cve/2532 (last accessed on 28 September 2020).

WOOLF, VIRGINIA, *A Passionate Apprentice. The Early Journals, 1897-1909*, ed. MITCHELL A. LEASKA, San Diego, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.