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“A little place in the neighbourhood of a great city”: Landscape and Environment in Walter Pater’s “The Child in the House”, “An English Poet” and “Emerald Uthwart”

Abstract I: Il mio articolo indaga il ruolo del paesaggio in tre racconti di Walter Pater tradizionalmente legati tra loro: “The Child in the House”, “An English Poet” e “Emerald Uthwart”. Dopo aver mostrato la rigogliosità fisica e visionaria del paesaggio pateriano attraverso la sua *imagery* sinestetica e mitopoietica (giardini e fiori sono tra le immagini più ricorrenti in questi ‘ritratti immaginari’), analizzerò dunque la peculiare dialettica e fusione, in queste narrazioni, tra l’ambiente umano e quello naturale, tra arte e natura. Letto da questa prospettiva, “An English Poet”, testo ancora poco studiato, pare impostare un confronto tra l’idea ruskiniana di natura e quella pateriana, offrendo così proficue aggiunte tanto alla complessa relazione tra i due autori quanto all’ecocritica vittoriana.

Abstract II: My paper will consider the function of landscape in Walter Pater’s short narratives, focusing on three texts traditionally grouped together: “The Child in the House”, “An English Poet” and “Emerald Uthwart”. I will investigate the physical and visionary plenitude of the Paterian landscape through its synesthetic and mythopoeic imagery (gardens and flowers are among the most recurrent tropes in these ‘portraits’). Consequently, I will examine the peculiar dialectic and fusion, in these narratives, between human and natural environment, art and nature. Seen from this perspective, the still overlooked “An English Poet” suggests that Ruskin’s idea of nature may be juxtaposed to Pater’s and this may fruitfully add to the complex relationship between the two authors as well as to the subject of Victorian ecocriticism.

As it is honestly acknowledged at the very beginning of one of the most recent and fertile contributions to the subject of Victorian ecology, “The notion of applying principles of ecocriticism to Victorian literature has been relatively late in developing” and “the field is still being shaped” (Mazzeno & Morrison 2017: 1). Indeed, over the last fifteen years, while general critical and historical questions, such as ‘Was There a Victorian Ecology?’ and ‘Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?’, have been raised and discussed, much has also been done to bolster the development of ecocritical readings of Victorian authors, works and literary genres¹. Within this growing tradition of studies, Aestheticism and Decadence have nevertheless

¹ For the debate on Victorian ecocriticism and a fuller bibliography, see Parham 2002, Parham 2011, Taylor 2015 and Mazzeno & Morrison 2017: 3-5.

remained, strikingly, an unchartered field. My paper aims to help fill this gap by focusing on one of the founders of the Aesthetic Movement, Walter Pater. I will primarily survey three of Pater's short narratives: "The Child in the House" – published in 1878 and the first piece of proper fiction to be printed by Pater –, "An English Poet" – probably composed alongside or shortly after "The Child", but left unfinished – and "Emerald Uthwart" – published in 1893, one year before Pater's death. These three narratives have been traditionally grouped together by Paterian critics for their common autobiographical elements (reflecting Pater's infancy and school days) and their shared attention to the growth of a sensitive intellectual mind – a pervasive motif in Pater, but here at its purest². Such affinities, evident in many textual parallels, will all be reinforced by my reading.

The most noticeable feature of the natural environment as depicted in these narratives is its extreme, in fact almost unnatural, luxuriance. Seemingly suspended in a Edenic time when the flowers of April intermingle with the fruits of autumn ("and the blossom of an old pear-tree showing across it in late April, against the blue, below which the perfumed juice of the find of fallen fruit in autumn was so fresh" [Pater 2014: 84]), nature is often an inexhaustible source of pleasurable and refining sensations for the subject. In "The Child in the House" natural elements play a pivotal role in the "brain-building" of the protagonist (84), who remembers how one evening, as a child, having broken into a hitherto undiscovered garden, he chanced upon a grand fiery-coloured tree, the vehicle of his aesthetic initiation:

And lo! within, a great red hawthorn, in full flower, embossing heavily the bleached and twisted trunk and branches, so aged that there were but few green leaves thereon – a plumage of tender crimson fire out of the heart of the dry wood. The perfume of the tree had now and again reached him, in the currents of the wind, over the wall, and he had wondered what might be behind it, and was now allowed to fill his arms with the flowers (91).

The vision of this flaming mass of flowers, which demanded the exertion of all the senses ("perfume", "fill his arms" [...]), haunts Florian Deleal in the years to come with the reds of the "old Venetian masters or old Flemish tapestries" (91). The plenitude of nature enhances the individual perception, triggering a more intense, i.e. synesthetic, relation to the world. Florian, now obsessed by "beautiful physical things" and moved by a "tyranny of the senses over him" (91), is able to associate "all thoughts to touch and sight, as a sympathetic link between himself and actual, feeling, living objects" (92). Once the highest aesthetic faculty, the 'imaginative reason'³, is properly awakened, inner and outer, soul and body can successfully merge – as Pater would say of Plato's genius – "by a gymnastic "fused in music"" (Pater 1974: 236). This "intensity" of vision connected with nature, closely described in Pater's essay on Wordsworth (1874), entails a kind of sceptical and sensuous animism, a

² See the Introduction in Pater 2014: 1-66. For the analogies between the three narratives, see Bini 1993 and Bini 1996. See also Bizzotto 2001: 65-95 for a comprehensive account of Pater's short narratives.

³ To my knowledge, Pater uses the phrase 'imaginative reason' twice in his writings, both in the 1874 essay on Wordsworth (Pater 1874: 455) and in "The School of Giorgione" (1877) (Pater 2010: 122). This expression is omitted in the revised version of "Wordsworth" which was later included in *Appreciations* (1889).

“sense of life in natural objects” (Pater 1974: 130). As Paul Tucker has brilliantly explained in his analysis of Pater’s fragments on the French painter Corot, such a thriving landscape can result in actual mythopoesis inasmuch as it brings back to the observer that primitive aura “in which the old Greek gods were first begotten” (130)⁴. Lush images of nature like “The Child in the House”’s red hawthorn or the redolent tuberose evoked in “An English Poet”, are built on a Romantically-derived naturism and on vivid synaesthesia, and, tellingly, are all flower-based. As observed by Catherine Maxwell in her recent study of scent – which, therefore, necessarily also extends to flowers – in Pater’s *œuvre* (Maxwell 2012), synaesthesia becomes indeed a fundamental trope, with his language constantly looking for “words compact rather of perfume than of colour”⁵.

This rich natural imagery, however, is by no means exclusively the province of wild flowers. Rather, these “strange blossoms”, as the ones loved by Pater’s Leonardo (Pater 2010: 66), are always cultivated and arranged by an attentive florist. As hinted at in my description of the red hawthorn, Paterian flowers grow and bloom in dainty gardens, not in the wilderness. Indeed, gardens are structural elements in the narratives under examination and the most tangible sign of the artificiality of nature as represented by Pater.

In “The Child in the House”, we are told at the very beginning of the story that the home where the protagonist’s mind experiences its first artistic awakening is located, in “a little place in the neighbourhood of a great city” – more precisely, “not far beyond the gloom and rumours of the town, among high garden-walls” (Pater 2014: 83-85). This tranquil garden and the other “neighboring gardens” (85), which represent a liminal place between the city and the countryside, the ideal fusion of the artificial and the natural, do not isolate the child from the urban landscape; its effects on him are described in a passage which it is worth quoting at length:

for the house, as I said, stood near a great city, which sent up heavenwards, over the weather-vanes, not seldom, its beds of rolling cloud and smoke, touched with storm or sunshine. But the child of whom I am writing did not hate the fog for the crimson lights which fell [...].

For it is false to suppose that a child’s sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it, though this indeed comes to be the rule with most of us in later life; earlier, in some degree, we see inwardly; and the child finds for itself, and with unstinted delight, a difference for the sense, in those whites and reds through the smoke on very homely buildings, and in the gold of the dandelions at the road-side, just beyond the houses, where not a handful of earth is virgin and untouched, in the lack of better ministries to its desire of beauty (85).

To a certain extent preserved from the most detrimental aspects of city life and alien to moral prejudice, the child can learn how to appreciate beauty even in the suburban envi-

⁴ See Tucker 1996. See also Evangelista 2002. For Pater’s assessment of Wordsworth, see Daley 2001: 17-50, Ward 1991 and Østermark-Johansen 2011: 277-290.

⁵ The quotation is from “Emerald Uthwart” (Pater 2014: 241).

ronment, either in the colour patterns of the architecture that emerge through the foggy air or – and the flower imagery returns – in the sudden appearance of golden dandelions “at the road-side”. Going against a long-established literary and cultural tradition which posits children as true natural creatures and glorifies wilderness as the most authentic source of inspiration, Pater shows how the urban environment may also provide fertile ground for the aesthetic refinement.

Pater’s opinion was not shared by all his contemporaries. John Ruskin, the Victorian champion of the ecological tradition that stems from Wordsworth⁶, was notoriously hostile towards modern industrialised cities, “to the rest of the world what the larder and cellar are to the private house”, and deprecated the “ghastly houses” of their suburbs (“The Study of Architecture in our Schools” [1865], quoted in Mallett 1995: 44). While Ruskin contends that the modern city “destroys the possibility of art” (Mallett 1995: 46) and stifles any aesthetic arousal, the urban environment depicted by Pater throws the child into a positive “imaginative mood” and marks him with “a kind of comeliness and dignity, an urbanity literally, in modes of life, which he connected with the pale people of towns, and which made him susceptible to a kind of satisfaction in the trimness and well-considered grace of certain things and persons” (Pater 2014: 85). The same graceful “urbanities” reappear in *Marius the Epicurean*, where the contact of the protagonist with the “old town of Pisa” causes his first sensual turmoil and, as the red hawthorn did for the child, makes him aware “of the reality, the tyrannous reality, of the things visible” (Pater 1985: 60-62).

Irreducible to a nature-centred ideal of landscape such as that described by Jonathan Bate, the representation of the environment in “The Child in the House” is consonant with more integrated approaches to the subject of literary ecology, such as Ashton Nichols’s ‘urbanatural roosting’, a model that emphasises a less rigid separation “between cities and the wilderness” and “recognizes close ties between those who live within the city limits: in the suburbs, the small towns, rural areas” (Nichols 2011: xviii). Nichols’s perspective is even more relevant to Pater’s depiction of aesthetic development in that it observes how “many of the great “nature” poems of the Romantic era were actually written” – almost an echo of “The Child in the House” – “in suburbs, in the back gardens of great cities” (xviii).

The synthesis of nature and artificiality reoccurs in “Emerald Uthwart”, although in a less optimistic way. Gardens and flowers loom large in the whole narrative, with Emerald himself associated, to the “*flos parietis*” (Pater 2014: 242), the wall-flower of Florian Deale’s house (85), a perfect symbiosis of human architecture and vegetal growth. Emerald was born and raised among the verdant Sussex lands, from a long lineage of gardeners – scholars have linked the Uthwarts to the Tradescants, the prominent seventeenth-century family of gardeners and importers of exotic plants (240-241, note 7). He leaves this planted landscape of “velvety fields” (241), a Sargentesque “native world of soft garden touches, carnation and rose” (243), to begin his education at ancient school in Canterbury⁷. Even though the school’s milieu is initially seen, probably through Emerald’s first reaction to it, as a hard “world of grey stone” (243), it is nevertheless depicted as a venerable “place of ‘great

⁶ For which see chiefly Bate 1991.

⁷ For a discussion of Sargent’s floral imagery in its cultural context, see Syme 2010.

matters', great stones, great memories out of reach" (243) whose strong "*genius loci*" is almost mythopoeic (246): the narrator compares its influence on the protagonist to the Spartan "*ascêsis*" (247), a practice particularly dear to Pater. The simple sight of the students in the school premises is able to "harmonise present with past" (244). As the green universe of his childhood – to which he tragically returns at the end of this quasi-nihilistic story – the stony world of Canterbury proves equally fundamental to the fate of the enigmatic Emerald⁸.

If in "The Child in the House" the crucial role of the urban environment in the aesthetic development of the protagonist may be slightly downplayed by the mention of the "lack of better ministries" to its fulfilment (85), in "An English Poet" pure and traditional wilderness is unequivocally dismissed as adverse to the creative mind⁹.

As with the other two texts that I have examined, this narrative also opens on a thriving natural scene, the sunny French district of the Pays de Caux, where every farm "is isolated by the outer world by a dense enclosure of trees" and "there is room for a garden also" (101). After his mother died giving birth to him, the "languid child" goes "early away to be reared in the braver air of its English relations among the stern Cumberland mountains" (103). Here he suffers from a violent kind of cultural seclusion; the mountainous landscape, which visitors to the Lake District traditionally idealise, is a hostile "barrier" to the sensitive souls who dwell there:

For in these scenes, however beautiful, there are, over and above, those absolutely suffering, under whose windows we pass so ignorantly, waiting there so longingly for the reliever who comes not, those who in full possession of their powers are in some sense bondmen there, those for whom the beautiful restful valley is but the barrier which shuts them from a possible happier field they know or dream of for the exercise of gifts felt slumbering within them. The solemn girdle of hills which seem to raise our jaded thoughts to themselves for a moment, does but shut them off from opportunity, from the city, the university, the brave gathering place of art, where the business of the mind is done, and the sacred fire is kept up whence their minds also might take sacred fire (103).

Untouched nature – the "secluded valleys" of the essay on Wordsworth (Pater 1974: 132) – is here portrayed as a "place of exile or punishment" (Pater 2014: 104), whereas the cultured urban environment represents the shrine of "the sacred fire" of Art. Such an emphasis on cosmopolitan artificiality against the immaculate Romantic scenery is characteristic of many French – and later English – post-romantic poetics, all of them influential on Pater and resonant in the Anglo-French story of "An English Poet", from the Parnassian cult of verse form to the Baudelairean *surnaturalisme*, which dreams of banning "*Le végétal irrégulier*"¹⁰.

⁸ See Bini 1996: 194-202 and Shuter 1990.

⁹ For an analysis of the narrative, see Bini 1993 (with reference to the mountainous landscape and its effect on the protagonist) and Østermark-Johansen 2011: 277-290.

¹⁰ The quotation is from Baudelaire's "*Rêve parisien*" (Baudelaire 1975: 101). See also his 1853-1854 letter to Fernand Desnoyers: "je suis incapable de m'attendrir sur les végétaux [...]. J'ai même toujours pensé qu'il y avait dans la Nature, florissante et rajeunie, quelque chose d'impudent et d'affligeant" (Baudelaire 1973: 248).

Even John Addington Symonds, a British contemporary of Pater, both recognized and to a certain extent shared this condemnation of the brisk mountainous environment when, speaking of *Marius the Epicurean*, he stated that he would appreciate the style of the book better in the refined Venetian lagoon rather than in the Swiss valley where he was sojourning, a place polluted, as it were, by the “larger air of the mountains, where everything is jagged & up & down & horribly *natural*” (Maxwell 2012: 37).

Not only does the narrator deplore the “horribly” natural landscape, he also dwells on mocking the innocent ardour of its advocates. The hard and dreary Cumberland of the young aesthete is contrasted, from the very start, with its majestic appearance in the eyes of those visiting “some celebrated spot among the mountains, Swiss or English even, to admire the deep lake or the precipice with its rose at twilight” (Pater 2014: 103), travellers that may be identified with William Wordsworth or John Ruskin (both of them are alluded to among the protagonist’s formative readings, the latter as “the master of imaginative prose who might seem to bear on his single shoulders the whole Alpine world” [108-109]). Ironically, the enthusiastic travellers walk the region only in the clement summer weather, even then often “shuddering” at its coldness, and candidly ignore that not all the inhabitants are at ease with their “hard mechanical existence” (104). “I never visit these places” without feeling their misery (104), is, on the contrary, the narrator’s sour and surprisingly open confession (the bold first person pronoun strongly evidencing his own and, possibly, the author’s opinion). Like the narrator, the young poet is afflicted by “the really dominant note of mere inclemency in a scenery supposed by summer visitors simply grand” (104-105).

Strange though it may seem, this satirical corrosion of the mountainous environment presents, at least superficially, several analogies with Ruskin’s “The Mountain Gloom”, the penultimate chapter of *Modern Painters IV* (1856). In this chapter, Ruskin tears down the stereotypical glossy picture of the Alpine villages, by exposing and investigating with a disenchanting gaze the peculiar suffering which occasionally infects their inhabitants. As with “An English Poet”, the essay ridicules both the naive traveller “on his happy journey” (Ruskin 1904: 388) through those isolated districts and the “poetically minded” intellectuals “in London or Paris” (390): deluded by their hypocritical utopia of a “happy life led by peasants” (390) and chasing the chimera of a primeval and peaceful “fellowship of the human soul with nature” (388), they fail to perceive “that gloomy foulness that is suffered only by torpor, or by anguish of soul” (388), an endemic psychophysical disease. While Ruskin speculates that this local gloom is apt to plague only sufficiently “intellectual” and sensitive individuals (405), and indeed mentions the absence of books among the privations of the villagers, his “proto-ethnographic approach” (Sdegno 2015: 43) differs widely from Pater’s narrative focus on the growth of a singular artistic mind. Ruskin argues that the mountainous environment may, among other symptoms, cause an impairment in its inhabitants’ appreciation of beauty, ranging from absolute insensitivity to an “unnatural”

For a concise introduction to Baudelaire’s idea of *surnaturalisme* see Pichois & Avicé 2002: 449-451. For the influence of Baudelaire and other French post-romantic poetics on Pater, see chiefly Østermark-Johansen 2011: 113-160, Clements 1985: 77-139 and Conlon 1982: 17-135.

perception of the sublime¹¹. Less concerned with this alleged pathology than with the crueler fate of those who, conversely, “are in full possession of their power”, Pater stresses that there cannot be any aesthetic fulfilment in that “physical hardness” (Pater 2014: 104). The poet’s artistic faculties are not originally compromised by the environment, but his tragedy consists in their not being able to fully blossom in the place where he is forced to live. In “An English Poet”, even the purely aesthetic value of the “beautiful” mountainous landscape, which is never questioned in Ruskin¹², is disparaged through the impressions of the protagonist: the clichéd “rose after sunset” on the rocky peaks is nowhere sublime and in no way changes their arid monochrome; the lake, instead of fantastically blending with the sky above, is seen as “a little wanting in celestial blueness”; the streets of the village are repellently “sunless” (104)¹³.

It is in this light that we should also reconsider what is both the emblem of this narrative and the enduring stylistic ideal of its protagonist, the “metal honeysuckle” (111) embodying the only two things the poet liked in his little town – the red honeysuckle “over the gateway of the grange”, an “exotic from France” (105), and the metal screen work of the old church. This image, which is the synthesis of the many dichotomies of the story – and, more generally, of Pater’s work – (“sweetness-strength”, “female-male”, “soft-hard”, “taste/smell-touch” and the more linguistic opposition “Romance-Anglo-Saxon”, [28, Introduction]), also symbolises the unique blend of nature and culture as expressed in the natural and the urban environment. By de-idealising Romantic pantheism and yet eschewing Ruskin’s moralism, by compounding, as Harold Bloom says, “the idealistic naturalism with a corrective materialism” (Bloom 1974: xv), Pater subverts the Romantic ecological tradition: his flowers are indeed artificial, but their remnant organicism is nevertheless essential for the growth of that ‘crystal’ form of subjectivity which, once fused with the most brilliant products of human culture, can lead a to “regeneration of the world”¹⁴.

¹¹ Ruskin’s discussion of this morbid recognition of beauty occasionally resembles some of Pater’s aesthetic formulations: “the corpse, borne with the bare face to heaven, is strewn with flowers; beauty is continually mingled with the shadow of death” (Ruskin 1904: 396). While the first part of this passage chimes with the description of Emerald Uthwart’s corpse covered by flowers, the second is strikingly similar to the Paterian association of beauty and death as expressed both in “Aesthetic Poetry” (“the sense of death and the desire of beauty” [Pater 1974: 198]) and in “The Child in the House” (“for with this desire of physical beauty mingled itself early the fear of death” [Pater 2014: 93]).

¹² Before concluding the book with “The Mountain Glory” chapter, Ruskin ends his exceptionally tentative discourse on “The Mountain Gloom” with a strong religious note. He explains the possible coincidence, in the mountainous landscape, of the “perfection of beauty” and the “extreme of ugliness” (Ruskin 1904: 409) as a postlapsarian condition where “no good or lovely thing exists in this world without its correspondent darkness” (416). Needless to say, this view of the world is incompatible with Pater’s.

¹³ It is not by chance that Kenneth Daley begins his monograph on Pater and Ruskin (which remains the only one on the subject) by mentioning this anecdote: “Walter Pater’s early biographer, A. C. Benson, reports that Pater used to pretend that he shut his eyes when crossing the Alps so as not to see those “horrid pots of blue paint”, his standard epithet for the Swiss lakes” (Daley 2001: 1). On the relationship between the two authors see also Bloom 1974, Marucci 1994, Keefe 1986, Brake 2001 and Riquelme 2013.

¹⁴ The quotation is from Pater’s “Diaphaneitè” (Pater 2014: 82).

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