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REFERENCES

Stefano Evangelista, Fellow and Tutor at Trinity College, Oxford, and Lecturer at the University of Oxford, is one of the most active researchers on Pater and Wilde, examines the reception of ancient Greece among nineteenth-century writers associated to the aesthetic movement. Evangelista develops an approach based on Foucault’s definition of modern male homosexual identity in four chapters, each focussing on one author—Walter Pater, Vernon Lee (Violet Page), Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), and Oscar Wilde. He shows how “literary aestheticism” exploits ancient Greece to deploy “a discourse of dissent from the dominant culture of the mid-Victorian decades” (2) in the fields of literary or art criticism and the aesthetic as well as in the private sphere. These authors find experiences and discourses that legitimize “polemical and counter-cultural identities” and same-sex desire. Evangelista synthesizes works on late nineteenth-century reception of Greece—from the first general surveys of Victorian Hellenism (F.M. Turner), to the seminal works on the recuperation of Greece by homosexual aesthetes and Hellenists (L. Dowling, L. Brake, R. Dellamora, J. Bristow) or the more recent studies on female aestheticism (T. Shaffer, Y. Prins). But he also offers an original dialoguing between male Oxford-trained figures—who turn “ancient Greece into a utopia in which the gratification of homoerotic desire is a subcategory of the aesthetic” (19)—and women writers standing outside “the traditional institutions of classical learning”—who try to create “a space outside male poetics, in which the liberated female identities of the female aesthete or the lesbian can be articulated” (19).

In the first chapter, “Pater, Winckelmann, and the Aesthetic Life,” Evangelista draws on previous studies on Pater to show how he uses Greece to reconsider religious, sexual or aesthetic categories, and the relationship between art and morality, so as to paradigmatically encode homoerotic desire into his polemical discourse on the aesthetic (35). Greece is recuperated as a mythical past that may resurface and provide a regenerative “dynamic act of reception” for the modern world. Evangelista sees a paradox in his evolution from the Winckelmannian Hellenic ideal to the acknowledgement of the Dionysian or chthonian elements of Greek culture (irrationality, the cult of suffering, primitivism, ritualised ecstasy, or the grotesque). In the wake of David DeLaura’s work, Evangelista shows how Pater insists on the proto-Christian elements present in pagan religion. Evangelista provides an original analysis of an unpublished manuscript, “Introduction to Greek Studies,” in which Pater emphasizes the “romantic” elements of Greek culture. This text is a clue to his published essays on English Romanticism, in which he establishes a dialectic between classicism and romanticism and points to continuity between the cultural past and the literary present.
Evangelista interestingly reassesses Pater’s definition of Goethe’s “concept of life in the whole” (Ganzheit), which entails “a secular epistemology of sensation” (47) and helps understanding Wilde’s own life-as-art concept. Evangelista then usefully dwells on another unpublished text, “The Aesthetic Life,” in which Pater advocates a self-culture and an “aesthetic formula of conduct” (48) that may fit in the modern, capitalist age. Pater’s aesthetic life, Evangelista claims, is a profoundly democratic “anti-social creed” (49), but paradoxically it is also a minority discourse. A political Pater is reclaimed here.

Chapter two, entitled “Vernon Lee and the Aesthetics of Doubt,” argues that Lee first followed Pater by rejecting Ruskinian didactic and ethical principles in art criticism and favouring the experience of pleasure. But she then advocated an experience of antiquity that should not be rooted in an academic training but be connected with the physical experience of travels to southern countries. Criticism should not be founded on a specialised academic and textual approach but on a universal because visual and sensory knowledge of Greek culture. Evangelista then contrasts J.A. Symonds and Lee: Lee came to diverge from the male-gendered aesthetic criticism centred on Greece as she wanted to create a space for a female radical outside the male tradition. She also questioned the trope of Greece as a regenerating aesthetic and erotic encounter. At this point, one wonders why Evangelista does not devote a whole chapter to Symonds. Indeed, Lee’s (and Michael Field’s) works are appraised in terms of their divergences with his (and Pater’s) own texts. He then examines how Lee channels the idealism of aestheticism towards “a practical aim of social improvement” and “turns Pater’s radicalised aesthetics of sensation into an imperative to act” (75)—an analysis which, however, remains quite general. The chapter ends with an interesting digression on the lesser-known women classicists Jane Harrison and Eugénie Sellers and their views on modern aesthetic reception of the ancient art object.

In chapter three, “‘Two dear Greek Women’: The Aesthetic Ecstasy of Michael Field” Evangelista shows how Bradley and Cooper reject Winckelmann’s Apollonian Hellenism and promote a more Dionysian vision which privilege irrationality, taboo, and Bacchic aestheticism. They provide their own Sapphic version of Pater’s aesthetics of reception and this enables Evangelista to distinguish a less visible female approach to the ancient world, although one may wonder whether there was indeed such a tradition since he concentrates on Michael Field. Many pages are devoted to Symonds’ interest in female subjectivity and homosexuality, which influenced Michael Field: in the poem Long Ago, which Evangelista analyses at length, the pleasurable quest for the expansion of the self entails a plurality of desire (heterosexual to homosexual). In Underneath the Bough (1893), the influence of the Dionysian is central as they recuperate the figure of the maenad to reconsider female sexuality. They revolted against Victorian social and religious models and revived a tradition associated with Persephone and Dionysus, which leads to a mood of pessimism, inwardness, and morbidity and also to the creation of a theatrical self akin to Wilde’s.

Chapter four, “The Greek Life of Oscar Wilde,” shows how Greece influences his intellectual development and his identity as aesthete, critic and writer. The “Greek life” involves a performative dimension that he exploits in the construction of his public image, and it provides a discourse for the private regulation of emotions and of desire for other men (126). Wilde uses several influences (German Hellenism, French symbolism, Arnold, Pater, and Symonds) to launch his modernist programme of cultural renewal and the “new Hellenism” that is at the core of his aesthetics (126). Evangelista offers a useful
synthesis of works on Wilde, but he also dwells upon some unpublished or less-known material, such as “Historical Criticism”, in which Greece is linked with antinomianism—an idea that leads to the concept of the antinomian identity of the critic. Evangelista then analyses Wilde’s use of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas to show how he dismissed his earlier Apollonian vision of Greece to adhere to the aesthetics of sorrow (as in De Profundis). One may diverge with Evangelista’s reading here that Wilde realized Pater’s shift from serene Hellenism to the darker Greece quite late in his career. The chapter ends on Wilde’s version of the Platonic dialectiké (the fusion of eros and philosophy), which shapes his literary choice of the dialogistic form.

6 Evangelista shows how the “gods-in-exile tradition” (21)—the fictional rewritings of mythic figures—links the aesthetes (Pater’s Apollo or Denys, Lee’s Dionea, Wilde’s Dorian). Such “spectral classicism” (81) is characterised by the trope of the return of the god in exile seen as a revenant who embodies hopes and anxieties linked to the repressed homoerotic. In the conclusion to this important synthesis on Victorian aesthetic Hellenism, (“Afterword: A Dream, Three Trials, Two Ghosts”), Evangelista interestingly mentions how, after 1895, critics adopted contemporary theories of degeneracy to reject the Greece of the aesthetes.