

# **Linda Lappin's    The Etruscan    Metafiction in the Italianate Novel**

**First published in *The South Carolina Review*, Winter 2007**

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The aspect of *The Etruscan* of most interest to us here is the novel's connection to a narrative practice which, though it may be as old as story-telling itself, has continued to be more widely and variously employed since the era of critical debate over "the death of the novel." At that time, in 1967, John Barth, claiming that the traditional modes of literary representation were by now outworn, proposed the solution that literature should take itself and not life for its reference – stories and fictions should grow from and upon pre-existing stories and fictions. In this sense, *The Etruscan* is related to all English literature which has Italy as its subject or, in the case of fiction, its setting.

However, before examining this point, we should remember that whatever a writer draws from pre-existing literature for his own work, no matter how major or vast a borrowing he may make – this is only one of its two pillars, we might say, of support. The other pillar consists in what the writer draws from his own experience of life and of the things he writes about. Linda Lappin, an American poet from Tennessee, who studied at the Writers Workshop of the University of Iowa, transfuses into *The Etruscan* an intimate knowledge of rural Tuscia (gained in 1978 when she came to live in this area of Italy still untouched by modernity or mass tourism) as well as her fascinated discovery of the Etruscans, abundant testimony to whose civilization Tuscia contains, though many of those traces are in a deplorable state of abandon.

Her discovery unfolded in the light of DH Lawrence's interpretation of these ancient residents of Tuscia, as Lappin reveals in the acknowledgements. Her novel not only draws on passages of *Etruscan Places* for details of setting and action, but has also assimilated the very essence of Lawrence's reflections concerning the vitalism and animism of the Etruscan religion and the Etruscan concept of death, the journey of the dead to the other world, and the afterlife viewed as "a continuing of the wonder-journey of life."

*The Etruscan* is not a remake of a particular work belonging to the tradition of English literature set in Italy. Rather it should be considered a reprise – that is, both a repetition and a recapitulation -- of the entire tradition, starting with the "gothic novel" -- to which refer not only objects in the novel and its eerie settings (see, for example, pages 70-73), or the emphasis on shadowy, tempestuous atmospheres (i.e., pp 35-37, 114-119, 155-157, 168-170), but also the very core of the story. That core is the situation of a female character exposed to and nearly undone by a deceitful and insidious foreign environment tending towards hostile and by human wickedness. Except that, ironically (as is fitting for the postmodern writer drawing on the literature of the past), in *The Etruscan* we do not find a fragile maiden ignorant of the world, but an attractive woman in her forties, from a good family, who has grown up between America and England. Harriet Sackett is an incarnation of the "modern woman" of the 1920s, economically independent, free to enjoy the emancipation to which her bobbed hair, predilection for wearing trousers, and even her perception of her body as a "finely tuned instrument" of pleasure all testify.

Whereas in the acknowledgments, Lappin herself cites the gothic novel as one of her sources of inspiration, her familiarity with the rest of the tradition

is evinced by the number of elements in the novel which unfailingly call to mind the perceptions of Italy and of Italians which English and American visitors have had ( and, in part, continue to have). These are recurring elements in travel literature as well as fiction set in Italy, wisely selected by Lappin in order to give her novel the necessary degree of realism, and always treated with a veil of irony. Here we may list complaints concerning the physical hardships of traveling in Italy, the difficulty of communicating due to the language barrier, diffidence concerning the sort of Italians with whom travelers were obliged to come into daily contact ( humorously described in the scene of Mrs Parsons' late night arrival at the Orte train station where she must deal with porters and cart drivers [pp.33-36]). We refer also to the preconceived mistrust concerning the competency of Italian professionals ( quite justified in the case of the country doctor who performs a nearly fatal abortion on Harriet [p.124]), as well as to the blooming of the protagonist's sensuality thanks to the country's mild climate, accompanied, perhaps, by an exotic enhancement of the sense of taste ( Harriet's initiation into the pleasures of mushrooms and stewed porcupine [pp.113-114], the austere Mrs. Parsons' libations), the haughty derision of Italian superstitions (but despite her declared skepticism, Harriet undergoes the ritual of having the evil eye removed by her maid [pp.176-177]). Another typical element is the disconcerted discovery of the importance placed on "appearances" in Italy – ranging from the widespread obsession for aristocratic titles ("Federigo del Re" passes himself off as the nobleman of the non-existent county of Vitorchiano, Elisabetta Colonna, his official lover, claims to be a baroness) to the theatricality of individual and collective behavior ( "Federigo del Re's" every pose and remark are theatrical). The evil joke on

Harriet succeeds because an entire network of individuals are determined to act their parts to the very end. Other recurring elements include the hypostasis of Italy in the beauty of its women (with “thick black hair [...] olive skin, intense brown eyes [...] petite and shapely,” Elisabetta Colonna possesses “the classic traits of the Mediterranean beauty” [p. 79] – or in the quintessence of its civilization as summed up in the image of the villa – in this case, the villa in Fiesole where the Anglo-American characters spend their time in sumptuous *loisir* (pp.16-30) – evoking pages of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton and Harold Acton. Moreover and most importantly, particularly intense and complex is the relationship between *The Etruscan* and some of the more representative novels of the tradition insofar as concerns the characterization of “Federigo del Re” - to whom we will dedicate our remaining comments.

When Harriet arrives in Tuscia, she is a woman assuredly in control of her own life. A few months later, when she is taken back to London, tranquilized by powerful sedatives, she has lost her mind. Thus was the impact of her encounter with “Federigo del Re”, to whom she sacrificed the autonomy she was so proud of (“He is necessary to me. Quite simply to me he’s like the sun” [p.31] is the declaration of her dependence confessed to Sarah at the villa in Fiesole). In the end, she will sacrifice the last dregs of self-respect: “Come with me to America,” [p.183], she implores, offering to support “Federigo del Re’s” sister and son, the supposed offspring of his incestuous relationship with his sister, in case he would not leave without them.

Shortly we will examine the characteristics of “Federigo del Re” which are able to produce such a disturbing effect. Let us note in the meantime how

incongruous he appears in the eyes of the other characters as an object of attraction: “How had this vulgar, swarthy, pot-bellied Italian managed to enchant Harriet [...]?” (p.204) George Wimbyly, for example, asks himself as he studies the man’s photo. Similarly, in E.M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the young Gino glimpsed by Lilia Herriton “in a picturesque position on a wall,” succeeded instantaneously in igniting her love, while for Philip, who had come from England to take his sister-in-law home, he incarnated “the unexpected and the incongruous and the grotesque” capable of destroying any romantic vision of Italy. A half hour in his company was enough for Philip to conclude “[...] there was [no] redeeming feature about the man.” Likewise, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, that milestone in the history of the Italianate novel, substantial mediocrity is the dominant tone in the judgments of all the other characters concerning Gilbert Osmond, the man ( “Italian” in all aspects except by birth) who so fascinates the young American heroine. In *The Etruscan*, Signora Di Pilli’s cruel remark to Harriet as she sums up Federigo del Re’s perversity sounds very much like a postmodern parody of Henry James’ novel: “He doesn’t love anyone. He can’t [...] He has no soul” Her comment fits perfectly with Osmond’s chilling egoism -- just as her description of Harriet “You were the perfect target for him. Rich, eccentric, and quite gullible. Goes with being American, I suppose.” (p.171) could easily refer to Isabel Archer, the victim of a plot perfidiously masterminded by Madame Merle and cynically carried out by Osmond.

But as we have seen “Federigo del Re” is “necessary” to Harriet: what is it about him that makes him so? What makes him so irresistible? Not youth and attractiveness (the weapons possessed by the young Gino in *Where Angels*

*Fear to Tread*), even though his body “radiat[es] a youthful vigor (p.80) and “emanate[s] a certain something [Harriet] cannot explain” (p.81) Being near him makes her head buzz as though she has received an electric shock and the touch of his hands fills her with instantaneous heat. If, as Harriet declares, “[h]e was no doubt the most extraordinary man I had ever met “ (p.83) that depends on reasons which are, in part, similar to those for which Isabel soon found herself reflecting that Osmond “resembled no one she had ever seen [...h]e was a specimen apart.” This thought flits through Isabel’s mind while, guided by Osmond, she is admiring his rare collection of bibelots in his enchanting home atop a Florentine hill where she has come to visit him. Collections also play a part in Harriet’s seduction when she goes to the medieval tower where “Federigo del Re” lives in order to photograph him for a portrait, which he has asked her to do. With erudite explanations, he shows her his rich collection of Egyptian, Roman and Etruscan antiquities. ( it would not be out of place to note the author’s touch of parody here: the pieces the count shows Harriet are votive offerings in the shape of male and female sex organs). Osmond, whom the narrator compares to an “elegant complicated medal struck off for a special occasion” , who appears to Isabel to be “an original without being an eccentric” and who has succeeded in “making one’s life a work of art” could be considered a model for “Federigo del Re.” Certainly the charm he exerts upon Harriet is largely the charm of his intelligence and knowledge, both offered with a dandyish hauteur and nonchalance. Harriet is well aware of this. In rapt contemplation of her sleeping idol, she describes the features of his face : “[t]he thin lips of an aesthete, the jutting forehead of a brooder” [105].

Obviously, the charisma of Federigo del Re also dwells in the mystery surrounding him and with which he surrounds himself. Here too, the reader is tempted to call to mind the tradition of the Italianate novel. In the scene we have just mentioned, what makes Osmond so singularly interesting to Isabel is “ [...]not so much what he said and did, but rather what he withheld,” and in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, when Philip learns that Caroline Abbot is about to travel alone to Italy in order to persuade Gino that the child he has had with Lilia would be better off growing up in civilized England, he bursts out, “[Gino]’s a bounder [...] He’s *mysterious* and terrible. He’s got a country behind him that’s upset people from the beginning of the world,” an interesting remark from a twofold point of view: for its connecting mystery and danger ( in this specific case, the unpredictability of Gino’s reaction and his dreadful dangerousness) and for its confusing a single individual with an entire nation. Indeed Italy has revealed itself to be “too dangerous” for many female characters ( including Harriet) from other cultures. In Italy, which is and remains dangerous for them because it is mysterious, they find far more and also something quite different than what they came here to look for. Often they pay the price of their own happiness.

The work which appears to have functioned as a genuine subtext for all that which draws Harriet so strongly to the mystery represented by “Federigo de Re” is *The Marble Faun*. In the opening scene of Hawthorne’s romance, the four main characters are contemplating the Faun of Praxiteles displayed at the Capitoline Museum. Three of the foursome, “artists or connected with Art” agree that there is a striking resemblance in both body and character between Donatello, the fourth member of their party, and the subject of the statue – a

resemblance which might reveal itself to be even more exact if only Donatello would let them check and see if the thick mass of his curly hair conceals two pointy ears. They also agree that it is impossible to guess the age of their noble Tuscan friend “Twenty years, perhaps,” says Hilda “But [...]hardly so old, on second thoughts, or possibly older. *He has nothing to do with time [...]*” In *The Etruscan* not only is the farmhouse where Harriet lives a “*a house where time is not*” ( and this is exactly why, as she writes in her notebook, “[she] knew [she] must have it at all costs”[p.70], but her entire experience in Tuscia seems to have less and less to do with time or with daily reality. Harriet’s sojourn in Tuscia is marked by the perennial cycle of the seasons. She is a “moon” who lives for the light of her “sun” until her “rescuers” come from England and drag her back, against her will, into the painful time of history. She will re-enter *timelessness*, the realm in which her “Etruscan” dwells, only upon returning to Tuscia, when she dies with the vision of a tunnel, glimpsed through the viewfinder of her camera, where, at the end “she could just make out the figure of a man, squarely built, not too tall, reaching out his arm to her, brandishing an egg in the sunlight.” (p.233)

Moreover, the reader of *The Marble Faun* will remember that according to the legend he is apprised of when the action shifts to Tuscany, the Monte Beni family, of whom Donatello is the last descendent, originated

in the sylvan life of Etruria, while Italy was yet guiltless of Rome, [:::] from the Pelasgic race, [...] the same happy and poetic kindred who dwelt in Arcadia, and [...] enriched the world with dreams, at least, and fables, lovely, if unsubstantial, of a Golden Age.

Their forebears were “a being not altogether human, yet partaking largely of the gentlest human qualities” and a “mortal maiden,” whose union had ensured

their progeny for generations and generations the “bliss” of “an unsought harmony with Nature.” But if, as the narrator says at the end of Chapter 1, the idea of the Faun, a benign creature with a twofold nature, is the poetic vestige of “A period when man’s affinity with Nature was more strict, and his fellowship with every living thing more intimate and more dear,” nothing of that affinity and fellowship remains in the present. Donatello’s condition is the emblem of that lost Arcadia, for after committing murder, he has become somber, thoughtful, and penitential, living a reclusive life in his ancestral tower, withdrawn from the natural world whose sympathy he is no longer able to engage. Similarly, how could “the Etruscan” in Lappin’s novel satisfy in our own time what Lawrence perceived as [the Etruscans’] desire to preserve the natural humor of life [...] the natural flowering of life,” later snuffed out by their Roman conquerors? He leads Harriet to the holy bath, which, he tells her “[he has] loved ever since [he] was a child (p.104) but [t]he spring feeding the pool had dried up ages ago, [...n]ow the pool [is] full of stagnant rainwater, covered by a scum of algae, where dead leaves floa[t].” “ I come here,” he confesses to her before falling asleep, “to quiet the turbulence in my mind. So many voices, so many echoes,” Harriet observes him, “With his eyes closed, the energy and light had drained away from him. He looked grey and sad [...]”(p.105) His is the sad tiredness of those who have seen too many sad things, which makes him wish – as he says goodbye to Harriet “ [to] close [his] eyes and sleep a century or two, and wake up at last, refreshed for once” (p.184).

Ill appreciated, if at all, by anyone other than the woman who has fallen in love with him, not necessarily handsome or physically striking, but of subtle intelligence and refined culture, mysterious and unpredictable (for

example, the frustrating disappearances and the endless periods of waiting which run throughout Harriet's relationship with "Federigo del Re") -- these are some of the recurring traits in the characterization of the "irresistible Italian" found in English fiction, a character whose equivalent in dime store romances and movies is the "Latin Lover." But whether this is a case of literature fuelling the collective imagination or just the other way around, this is not a question for us to address in this essay.

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