Sensational Artists in Italy: Mid-Victorian Variations of the *Künstlerroman* Plot

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Before the nineteenth century, the Grand Tour had been 'an indispensable form of education for young men in the higher ranks of society'[1]—a traditional rite of passage for all those who wished to complete their *Bildung*. Upper- and middle-class Victorians still held this conviction. The Mediterranean, in particular, was a favourite destination for their journeys. Both the common traveller and the budding artist were encouraged to visit Southern lands, whose natural beauties and artistic heritage were expected to widen their cultural horizon. The most popular destination for artists was Italy. Cities like Rome, Florence and Naples offered precious opportunities to study Classical and Renaissance architecture, sculpture and painting. The close link between Italy and artistic initiation is suggested, among others, by Attilio Brilli, who mentions Giacomo Barri's *Viaggio pittorico* (1671) and its English equivalent, *The Painter's Voyage to Italy* by William Lodge (1679), as compulsory readings for the Grand Tourist.[2]

Additionally, the intense chromatism of Italian landscapes impressed the painter's eye, fostering creativity. In comparison with the dismal English landscapes, the nature of the South was viewed as a main source

1. William Edward Mead, *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1972, p. 3.
2. Attilio Brilli, *Quando viaggiare era un'arte. Il romanzo del Grand Tour*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1995, p. 93.

of pictorial inspiration by painters and art lovers. 'It was no accident, they thought, that the rich glories of Renaissance painting had developed under Italy's brilliantly blue skies. It seemed evident that in that favored country, nature herself provided a visual education.'[3]

Yet, the Mediterranean was also a place of contrasts for Victorian travellers, who idealized its beauties while magnifying its flaws through the lenses of preconception. As John Pemble claims, the South (and Italy in particular) was a world invented by the Grand Tourists—a world in which splendour coexisted with 'moral decay' and with 'intimations of peril and treachery' that fleshed out Northern prejudices.[4] The aesthetic appreciation of the artists of previous generations (namely, the Romantic poets and the picturesque painters), had bequeathed powerful views of the South to the Victorians. But the latter brought their own scale of values to bear upon inherited values. Ruskin's wavering between art and evangelicalism, aesthetic sensitivity and mistrust of pleasures,[5] well exemplifies the Victorians' divided approach to a world that both attracted and repelled them.

A particular interpretation of the Grand Tour was offered, around the mid-nineteenth century, by some representatives of the so-called 'sensation school' who shocked orthodox Victorians with their scandalous, thrilling narratives. Two novelists in particular, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, represent the South as a crucial destination for artists who need to find a balance between romanticism and pragmatism. Italy, most notably, is portrayed as a land that offers many chances for social and professional development. Besides its art treasures and glorious landscapes, *il Bel Paese* provides an ample range of cultural experiences that are supposed to enlarge the traveller's views of class, behaviour, morality and professional development. What marks the distinction of these novelists' pictures from Italy is the *dialectic* nature of the effects produced by sojourns and artistic trainings in the South. In their view, the artist in Italy does not dither over irreconcilable responses. He is, rather, initiated into a culture made of lights and shadows, one in which passion and temperance, individualism and egalitarianism, merge in a synthesis that offers new possibilities for learning and growth.

Such a coexistence of opposites was appealing to Victorian sensationalists who searched for alternatives to their rigid, highly

3. Paula Gillett, *The Victorian Painter's World*, Gloucester, Alan Sutton, 1990, p. 1.
4. John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion. Victorians and Edwardians in the South*, London, Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 167 ff.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 206–208 ff.

normative society. Critical though they are of the negative aspects of Italy, these novelists nonetheless depict its culture as a catalyst for the socio-professional growth of young artists. Rather than being enthralled or frightened, these figures learn from the ambivalences of the South and develop complex personalities that enable them to become the rising men of their age. On a purely artistic plane, moreover, Italy favours the acquisition of a specific ability: that of reproducing the 'chiaroscuro' nature of the world, of giving flesh to the shadows of reality which, as Roland Barthes contends, makes a text fecundly subversive.[6] If the interest in what is hidden and unorthodox is at the core of sensation fiction, a similar interest animates those painters and sculptors who, through an Italian education, learn to draw creative energies from ambivalences.

Such ideas are expressed in works published by sensation novelists around the middle of the century. An early example is Wilkie Collins's biography of his father William, a Royal Academician specialized in rustic-life paintings. Largely set in Italy, where the Collinses spent two years, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins* (1848) records the artistic experiences that William made in the South—especially in Rome and Naples—where he spent his days studying and sketching. At the same time, however, this work reveals the strong impact that Italian culture had on the imagination of the young Wilkie, who was impressed in ways different from his father.

The Grand Tour of the Collinses is presented as a main stage of formation for William. As the biographer observes, his father was encouraged to go to Italy by his friend and fellow-painter David Wilkie, who recommended the tour as a way of enlarging his views.[7] This idea is shared by his son, who retrospectively defines the Italian sojourn as an important phase in William's career. It was a successful effort 'to attain to greater things' by 'setting forth to study for new attainments in another land' (II, pp. 72–73), comments Wilkie, who provides details on the good sales of William's Italian paintings and their favourable reception at the Royal Academy after their return to England (II, pp. 162–165, 199 ff).

6. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), trans. by Richard Miller, with a note by Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 32.

7. Wilkie Collins, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, 2 vols, East Ardsley, EP Publishing, 1978, I, p. 260. Further references will be given in the text, citing volume and page number.

Still, there is in *Memoirs* an underlying critical discourse that transcends the biography's celebratory aim. A first element to consider is the idealizing, almost naïve, valences attached to William's approach to Italy. When he reaches Rome at the end of an exhausting journey, the painter is immediately conquered by the beauty of the Eternal City which, in his eyes, is enfolded in an aesthetically sacred aura:

> All the privations, disappointments, and delays of the route were, however, forgotten when the cupola of St. Peter's first rose into view; and the painter felt that he had at last reached the shrine of his pilgrimage, and begun a new era in his study of the Art (II, p. 88).

Not much different is his unswerving admiration for the masterpieces of Italian art. His enthusiastic response to some Roman frescoes by Raphael and Michael Angelo is significant in this regard. Before leaving for Italy, William had received a letter from Rome by David Wilkie who, after visiting these works, had expressed his disappointment in noticing signs of decay. 'I was all expectation to see, on coming to Rome, the works of Raphael and Michael Angelo' writes Wilkie in an 1825 missive, before giving details of 'the grayness of the frescoes' and of their incompleteness: 'they are less finished, and a little more damaged than I expected.' Even though he confesses to having been 'overpowered' by the pictorial strength of the famous works, he offers a realistic description of their deterioration to his correspondent (I, pp. 257–258). Unlike him, William sees no blemish in the frescoes he admires one decade later, as evidenced by a letter embedded in *Memoirs*:

> [...] the Raffaelles in the Vatican, and the frescoes of Michael Angelo, so far from disappointing me, surpassed, not only all I have ever seen, but all I had ever conceived, of these truly inspired men (II, p. 89).

Veiled though it is, this expression of disagreement with David Wilkie is further proof of William's idealized approach to Rome and its art treasures.

If art is a magnet for William, other aspects of Italy confirm his almost childish attraction for his Southern dreamland. *Memoirs* bears full evidence of this attraction. During his stay in Sorrento, for instance, William refuses to stop sketching in the hottest hours of the day and gets a sunstroke. As his biographer asserts, the painter's health is seriously affected by the illness. Soon afterwards he starts to be afflicted by the first rheumatic symptoms of a fatal disease that would kill him some

years later. On a symbolic plane, the sunstroke demonstrates William's obstinate determination to view only the sunny sides of Italy and his parallel refusal to see its shadowy aspects.[8]

Unlike him, his son is struck by the cultural ambiguities noticed during their stay. Despite his young age, Wilkie becomes aware of, and is fascinated by the dark aspects of Italy, which later resurface in his thought-provoking representations of human nature. A case in point is the deeply ironic description of William's hired models at the Spanish Steps, one of whom—a twelve-year old rascal—poses for a sketch later reworked into a painting of Christ:

> Another of his models was a beautiful boy, with features dazzling perfect, who had sat to every one for cupids, angels, and whatever else was lovely and refined; and who was in 'private life' one of the most consummate rascals in Rome—a gambler, a thief, and a '*stiletto*'-wearer, at twelve years of age! (II, p. 94)
>
> The model for the face of our Saviour, in the picture now under review, was the beautiful Italian boy, mentioned in the notices of Mr. Collins's first sojourn at Rome. Although the expression of his countenance is refined and elevated from the original, in the painter's work, the features retain the resemblance to the first study of Nature—thus mingling, in the personation of Christ, the human with the Divine, in a singularly eloquent and attractive manner (II, pp. 167–168).

The biographer's reference to the 'singularly eloquent and attractive manner' in which the little rascal embodies Christ betrays a deep curiosity for the contradictions of local culture—a curiosity that confirms the singularity of Wilkie's Italian formation.

His amused interest in the chiaroscuro figure of the model is, indeed, quite different from the half-enthralled, half-stigmatizing attitude of Ruskin, who overdramatized his relation to Italy. Similarly, Wilkie's approach is at odds with his father's idealizing and culturally myopic approach. A Tory attracted by rustic subjects both in England and abroad, William tended, in fact, to transfigure the misery of English peasants and Neapolitan fishermen into a blissful state of nature. His restricted perception is revealed by the biographer who, despite his filial affection, suggests his own distance from the paternal ideology. '[His taste] led him intuitively

8. For details of the episode, see Collins, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins,* II, pp. 111–112.

to the contemplation of all in Nature that was pure, tranquil, tender, harmonious; and to the rejection of all that was coarse, violent, revolting, fearful' (II, p. 311). Enriched though he is by the *aesthetic* enjoyment of Italy, the father is fundamentally unchanged by the South *culturally* and *ideologically*. From this perspective, William incarnates an attitude that was recurrent among English travellers, many of whom applied pre-arranged (and prejudiced) categories to the Mediterranean. As Pemble notices: 'Travel did not broaden their minds. Too often their mental horizon contracted as their physical horizon widened, and they returned home settled rather than disturbed in their views about life and art, God and man, good and evil.'[9]

The reverse is true of the author of *Memoirs*, who thrives on his Southern experiences. The socio-political awareness he reached during his youthful stay abroad re-emerges some years later in his sensational portrayals of amiable villains and amoral heroes, whose subversive conduct is sympathetically represented in his narrative.

The generational gap emerging in *Memoirs* is just one signal of Collins's peculiar interiorizing of the tour made as a boy. In his adulthood, he returned to Italy on several occasions, thereby confirming his never-abated curiosity about the Southern land.[10] He also continued to view it as a perfect setting for the artist's *Bildung* which, like his own, could draw nourishment from Italian non-disjunctive culture.[11] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one decade after publishing William's biography, Collins composed *The Yellow Mask* (1855), a *novella with a frame* embedding a *Künstler*-story set in Pisa. Although the characters of the embedded story are Italians living in their native country, the role of listener played by an English painter in the *frame* implies that Collins's vision of the South could exert a formative influence on Northern artists.

The *frame* is, indeed, artistically self-reflexive, being set in a painter's studio in England. While posing for his portrait, the Italian Professor

9. Pemble, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

10. On Collins's particular response to, and fictionalization of, Italy see, among others, Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'A Land of Angels with *Stilettos*: Travel Experiences and Literary Representations of Italy in Wilkie Collins', *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, 10 (2007), pp. 13–33; and Mariaconcetta Costantini, '"This Extraordinary Apathy": Wilkie Collins, Italy and the Contradictions of the Risorgimento', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, 12 (2013), pp. 95–110.

11. For the notion of 'non-disjunction' see Julia Kristeva, 'Problèmes de la structuration du texte', in *Tel Quel: Théorie d'ensemble*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1968, pp. 297–316.

Tizzi narrates to the painter the interpolated story of a group of sculptors living in Pisa one century earlier. The choice of Pisa as the main setting adds a further shade of darkness to the non-disjunctive picture drawn in the text. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Tuscan town was in fact viewed as 'desolately beautiful' or 'decadent' by English travellers, including the Collinses as witnessed by *Memoirs*.[12]

The protagonists of *The Yellow Mask* are three Pisan sculptors: Luca Lomi, a hard-working artist with a penchant for pagan art; his brother Father Rocco, an ambiguous priest endowed with some artistic talent; and the enthusiastic Fabio d'Ascoli, a young nobleman who practises sculpting amateurishly. Their first introduction, which is made through a dialogue between two women, reveals significant differences among them. 'The master sculptor, Luca Lomi' is said to be a talented artist belonging to 'an old family, once noble but down in the world now'. Owing to his financial difficulties, Luca is obliged to sculpture to 'get a living for his daughter and himself.'[13] Unlike him, Father Rocco 'is a good sculptor in his way' who devotes all his energies to the Church, while Fabio d'Ascoli incarnates a third artistic type: 'He is rich, young, handsome, an only child, and little better than a fool. Fancy his working at sculpture, as if he had his bread to get by it—and thinking that an amusement! Imagine a man belonging to one of the best families in Pisa mad enough to want to make a reputation as an artist' (p. 14).

Further aspects of the men's personalities are revealed in the successive pages. Luca Lomi, for example, is shown to have 'a violent temper' betrayed by 'some sinister lines about his mouth and forehead which suggest anything rather than an open disposition' (p. 20). His dark look and wild temper are inherited by his daughter Maddalena who, like her father, influences people with her 'strong passions' (p. 20). Capable of love yet rude and governed by impulses, Luca is a non-disjunctive figure that hardly offers an imitable model. His unresolved contradictions are turbulently expressed by his despair at hearing of Maddalena's imminent death: 'Sordid and coarse as his nature was, he really loved his daughter. All the heart he had was in his statues and in her' (p. 55).

12. The Collinses spent only one day in Pisa, which is described as a 'desolately beautiful town' in *Memoirs* (II, p. 86). For other references to English responses to the Tuscan town, see Pemble, *op. cit*, p. 175; and Mead, *op. cit.*, pp. 307–308.

13. Wilkie Collins, 'The Yellow Mask', in *The Yellow Mask and Other Stories*, Gloucester, Alan Sutton, 1987, p. 14. Further references will be given in the text, citing page number.

If unrestrained passions and mercenariness cast a shadow onto Luca's personality, the characterization of Father Rocco is even more ambiguous. The opposite of his brother in his demeanour, the priest looks 'like the personification of absolute calmness and invincible moderation' (p. 20); but he conceals dangerous leanings under his mask of perfect equanimity. A keen observer of the human nature, Rocco in fact spies on family and acquaintances, has no scruples in manipulating people and is driven to action by a secret obsession: that of gaining riches and power for the Church. Almost maniac in pursuing this latter objective, he attaches sacrificial valences to his mission which he opposes to the self-interested greed of people like Luca. His obsessive idea of militancy is evident in the reproaching tone he adopts in addressing his brother:

> 'You soldiers of the world, brother, fight for your pay—I am a soldier of the church, and I fight for my cause' (p. 28).

Whereas Rocco embodies a disquieting combination of self-control, cunning and fixation, Fabio d'Ascoli is explicitly said to possess flaws that obscure his endowments. '[...] his face expressed the defects as well as the merits of his character, showing that *he wanted resolution and perseverance* just as plainly as it showed also that he possessed amiability and intelligence' (p. 19, emphasis mine). His character is significantly devoid of two essential qualities pertaining to all Victorian models of self-help, including those 'workers in art' who, in Samuel Smiles's view, rise in the social ladder by 'painstaking labour', 'sheer industry and hard work.'[14] Defective as an aspiring artist, Fabio proves also hesitant in making decisions and, owing to his irresolution, becomes an easy prey for the manipulative figures surrounding him.

The relations among the three artists are complicated by the presence of some female models (family members and acquaintances) who become objects of conflicting desires and transactions. Driven by sexual desire, jealousy, envy and greed, the protagonists are involved in a chain of sensational events, culminating in a gothic episode that sees Father Rocco in the role of persecutor. The priest, who wishes to get possession of d'Ascoli's riches on behalf of the Church, makes a cast of the nobleman's dead wife's face immortalized in a sculpture. The copy of the art

14. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help. With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance* (1859), Peter W. Sinnema (ed.), Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 137–138.

piece is secretly used to prepare a mask for his accomplice who wears it to frighten d'Ascoli and prevent his re-marriage.[15] After being discovered, the priest confesses his criminal plan but justifies it in Machiavellian terms by iterating 'in the strongest language his conviction, that whatever might be thought of the means employed, the end he had proposed to himself was a most righteous one' (p. 107).

Worthy of notice, here, is the implication that even a churchman like Rocco is capable of adopting all means to achieve a goal justified in terms of zealotry. The grey morality of the priest is complicated by his artistic leanings. Secretly manufactured in the studio, which is thus turned into a crime scene, the mask that almost kills d'Ascoli is modelled on a statue that becomes a dangerous weapon: 'the idea of taking the wax mask from his brother's statue flashed upon him on a sudden, [...] he made the wax mask in a plaster mould taken from the face of his brother's statue' (p. 106). Quite revealing, in this sense, is the comparison between his manufacturing of the mask and a previous action he performs in the studio: that of 'taking a cast from a statuette of the Madonna' (p. 19). In both cases, Father Rocco does not create an original artwork but, rather, copies an effigy made by someone else. Equally distorted is the aim he strives to achieve by taking the mould and the cast. Neither performed for aesthetic reasons, such as the creation of beautiful objects, the two actions are instead the results of his increasing fixation for his mission, which drives him to violate legal and moral laws.

Despite its criminalization, however, art remains an occupation through which the three protagonists make significant experiences. If Rocco uses it to assert his religious and Machiavellian convictions, Lomi provides an interesting figure of a sculptor who, in ways similar to Collins, combines artistic passion with professional zeal and an eye for profit. For his part, d'Ascoli achieves a more democratic view of society through his amateur sculpturing, which brings him into contact with admirable lower-class people, such as the indigent model he weds in a second marriage. In the main, the novella's ending conveys the idea of a socio-professional growth achieved through the practice of art *in Italy*—an idea which, though diegetically referred to Italians, could influence English artists travelling to the South.

15. Fabio d'Ascoli's wife is Maddalena Lomi, the priest's nephew who had often sat for her father before her marriage. After her premature death, Father Rocco makes a cast of one of the statues for which she had posed to pursue his cruel plan against her widower.

Analogous meanings are found in a novel Braddon wrote eight years later, *Eleanor's Victory* (1863). Although it pivots around a revenge theme, this work includes a *Künstlerroman* subplot centred on the figure of a villainous aspiring painter, Launcelot Darrell. His very name anticipates the romantic undertones of his characterization as a Byronic hero, which is confirmed by his dark physiognomy and deviant behaviour. His first appearance on the scene is significantly made through art. Described by his mother as 'an artist' endowed with many talents, he is first viewed by the heroine through his portrait, which evidences a non-disjunctive combination of beauty, life experience and arrogance:

> It was the portrait of a young man, with dark hair clustering about a handsome forehead, regular features, a pale complexion, and black eyes. The face was very handsome, very aristocratic, but there was a want of youthfulness, an absence of the fresh, eager spirit of boyhood in its expression. A look of listless hauteur hung like a cloud over the almost faultless features.[16]

On his unexpected return from abroad, Darrell confirms his chiaroscuro nature. After knocking at the door in a moonless night, he makes his entrance as a handsome, darkly mysterious young man compared to 'the hero of a novel' by the romantic Laura Mason: '"He just looks like the hero of a novel, doesn't he, Nell? dark and pale, and tall and slender"' (p. 117). In the course of the narration, he is discovered to have led a secret dissolute life in Paris where he committed crimes for pecuniary advantage. A deviant bohemian, Darrell is also responsible for the suicide of the heroine's father, who kills himself after being cheated out of his last money at cards.

The Parisian lifestyle adopted by Darrell seems to validate certain stereotypes of the French capital as a place that 'enthralled [the] imagination' of English artists but also offered them opportunities to live immorally and viciously.[17] Yet, the main setting of his degradation is England where he willfully commits another crime: the forging of his uncle's will. As is often the case in her sensation novels, Braddon challenges at this juncture the bourgeois trust in appearances to unveil the potential for corruption ingrained in Victorian culture. Apparently a member of the

16. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Eleanor's Victory*, Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1996, p. 107. Further references will be given in the text, citing page number.
17. Bo Jeffares, *The Artist in Nineteenth Century English Fiction*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press, 1979, pp. 40–41.

well-to-do classes, Darrell undergoes a degrading experience which cancels his gentlemanly traits and turns him into a delinquent.

Quite interestingly, Darrell's degradation is anticipated by the Byronic traits of his figure which attracts the romantic Laura: '"I like him to be a little wicked; like the Giaour, or Manfred. [...] I never asked him to be good"' (p. 297). In imitation of his Romantic prototypes, moreover, Darrell considers himself a victim of society[18] and has confused dreams of a future in which he alternatively embodies the roles of great painter and 'itinerant portrait-painter' (p. 123). Yet, he also betrays specific attitudes of Victorian professionalism in the arts, such as the tendency to valorize paintings in purely commercial terms.[19]

A tentative study in artistic professionalism, Darrell is a strange figure that incarnates some contradictions of the Victorian conceptualization of the artist. In particular, he reveals Braddon's effort to rethink the artist's mission in the light of current views, which made Byronism obsolete but also questioned the status of market-oriented professionals. Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that, after being unmasked and condemned by his countrymen, the deviant painter leaves for a journey to Italy, where he finds new career opportunities and succeeds in redeeming himself. His sojourn in the South, where he studies the classics and develops his talents, enables him to become a protagonist of the 'golden age' of painting on his return to England:

> [...] and *though it was not in him to become a great painter*, he became *a popular painter*; *a great man* for the Royal Academy, and the West-End engravers, if only *a small man* for future generations, who will choose the real gems out of the prodigal wealth of the present (p. 382, emphasis mine).

In addition to its art treasures, Italy thus offers Darrell a chance to learn the Victorian gospel of work, since he achieves fame and wealth by 'work[ing] very hard and with enthusiasm' (p. 382) abroad.

Rather than confirming dominant views, Braddon reconfigures a number of spatial and travel stereotypes in this novel. If England is tainted by greed and deviance, the function of the Grand Tour is revised in interesting ways. On the one hand, the corruptive function of France

18. He particularly blames his rich uncle for trying to force 'a commercial career upon [him]' (p. 123).

19. While commenting on the critics' tendency to disparage artists, Darrell defiantly observes: '"[...] the best picture, to my mind, is the picture that sells best"' (p. 144).

seems to confirm post-revolutionary anxieties that persisted in Victorian society; on the other, the frequently stigmatized Italy is connoted as a congenial place for self-development—one in which the painter can be cured of his Byronic weaknesses and turned into a rising professional. Even though he is not supposed to 'become a great artist', Darrell is indeed rewarded with public and financial success for his first picture. The latter, which resembles his *partly* cleansed dark soul, exercises a 'strange weird attraction' with its 'ugl[iness]' (p. 382), thereby confirming the novel's provocative revalorizing of an Italian *Bildung*.

The strengths of an Italian education for the aspiring artist are repeatedly underscored in the novel. When he first learns of his ward's attraction for Darrell, for example, Gilbert Monckton thinks that the young man 'might marry Laura and go to Italy, where he could devote a few years to the cultivation of his art' (p. 194). The same idea is iterated when the probable date of the marriage is settled and when Darrell's prospects to inherit money from his uncle appear less probable:

> 'I will try and develop his talent—his genius, perhaps', Gilbert Monckton thought; 'he shall go to Italy, and study the old masters' (p. 205).
>
> '[...] He may be all the better for being a poor man. He may be all the better for having to go to Italy and work at his art for a few years' (p. 228).

All expressed before the discovery of Darrell's crimes, these views nonetheless bear witness to the new function that Italy was coming to fulfill around the middle of the century. In the eyes of a middle-class professional like Monckton—a pragmatic, career-oriented solicitor embodying Smiles's credo—*Il Bel Paese* no longer appears as a stereotyped land of the imagination. It is, rather, a training place for aspiring artists who, in ways similar to other professional categories, should reject a life of wealthy laziness and learn the bourgeois virtues of work and perseverance.[20]

This role does not change significantly after the unmasking of Darrell's guilt. Instead of concocting a melodramatic punishment for her villain, Braddon allows her protagonist to leave for Italy and become a thriving painter. While studying and sketching abroad, the young man learns the ethic of work but retains some shadows of his former self:

20. On the Victorian professionalization of artists and their representation in sensation fiction, see Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2015, Chapter Four.

> And although the artist did not become a good man all in a moment, like the repentant villain of a stage play, he did take to heart the lesson of his youth. He was tenderly affectionate to the mother who had suffered so much by reason of his errors; and he made a very tolerable husband to a most devoted little wife (p. 382).

As the text suggests through negation and ironic qualifiers, Darrell does not become a perfect man and mate; but he nonetheless develops social and professional qualities that improve his status. A *neither/nor* figure significantly altered by his Southern experience, he demonstrates the new role played by Italy in sensation fiction, which provocatively reconfigures the Mediterranean land as a place of useful training in life ambiguities.

In contrast with other forms, the sensation genre launched by Collins and Braddon challenged clichés that were still attached to the Grand Tour in the mid-nineteenth century. What changed, in the works of sensationalists, were the dark sides of the Southern country which had been the destination of numberless tourists. Still a place of jarring contrasts, Italy was less frequently represented as a land of idle past-times and corruption which could infect young Englishmen. Although its inhabitants continued to be associated with laziness and strong passions, *il Bel Paese* came to be viewed as an important place of formation for the English middle class and for aspiring artists who, in addition to the value of toiling, were encouraged to learn some chiaroscuro aspects of their hosting land's culture.

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