

## The Prophetess and the Vampire The Duet Between Past and Future in Dana Gioia's Opera Libretto *Nosferatu*

Chiara Grilli  
(Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italia)

**Abstract** In 2001 the renowned American poet Dana Gioia brought to life a work in which the centuries-old myth of the vampire, the richness of the operatic phrase, and the vague echoes of the poet's Italian heritage dialogued with the modern taste of the American public. The aim of this paper is to investigate the dialogue between past and future, which is innovatively expressed in both the content and form of *Nosferatu*. Inspired by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Gioia's work merges the Gothic with Opera, thus renovating and giving new strength to the art of the Opera libretto. Moreover, Gioia's vampire eludes Hollywood's unforgettable stereotypes and is endowed with an emotional and psychological insight that the German movie lacked. Line after line, the poet develops the drama of the undead creature, whose humanity is enhanced by the controversial confrontation with the libretto's female protagonist. No longer a victim, Gioia's heroine recalls the omniscient figure of the prophetess, dear to both classical and Christian heritages. Further, in the play between the immortal past of the vampire and the visionary future of the prophetess, lies the dramatic present of the first Italian immigrants, the nightmare of misery, the hope for a better life, and the ever-present traces left by Catholicism.

**Keywords** Dana Gioia. *Nosferatu*. Libretto. Sibyl.

Published in 2001 and set to music by composer Alvar Henderson, Dana Gioia's *Nosferatu. An Opera Libretto* is a compelling work that describes the dramatic struggle between individuals and time by means of a symbolical *tenzone* (a conflict in verse) involving a gruesome vampire and the prophetic figure of the heroine. The questions raised by Gioia's libretto do not only address the meaning of the past and the future, but also evoke the role his Italian heritage still plays in his own work, while proposing, at the same time, an innovative dialogue between two different genres: the opera and the Gothic. Why do we crave to know the future and, at the same time, why does our personal or collective past represent such a weighty burden? Can opera live a new epoch of fertility through the influence of other contemporary media and genres? *Nosferatu* insightfully investigates these complex and intertwined issues by offering the reader an analysis of the dual inflection that characterises the past (as both heritage and/or eternal return) and the future (as both fate and/or innovation). Therefore, both *Nosferatu's* form and contents will be considered and analysed on the basis of, on the one hand, the dialectic relationship between the opera and the Gothic and, on the other, the intriguing development of *Nosferatu's* plot and characters.

Since the very beginning of its success in the XVII century, opera has been associated with Italy as the expression *par excellence* of its culture (Coletti 2012, 17). The cultural impact of the Italian *bel canto* has been of incomparable importance and has induced some of the greatest European composers to take advantage of the mastery of Italian librettists (Paldi 1985, 89). The virtuosity of Italian opera was not only acknowledged within the European (and later also the American) musical scenario, but was highly praised by intellectuals and philosophers too, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau overtly expressed in his "Letter on French Music":

Italian Music has no enemies, even among us, except those who know nothing about it; and all the Frenchmen who have tried to study it with the sole design of criticizing it with knowledge have soon become its most zealous admirers. (1998, 164)

However, Italian opera has gradually become the symbol of Italianness not only within the boundaries of the newborn Italian nation, but also among the densely populated communities of immigrants founded in the New World between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. On the one hand, the operatic words and *mise-en-scène* – as the worldwide famous work of Giuseppe Verdi, the *Nabucco*, suggests – embodied the desire for national unity, thus turning opera into one of the most vibrant expressions of the Italian national 'spirit' (Brera 2012). On the other hand, opera became the symbol of a newborn identity, rising within the Italian communities in the United States, and gradually overcoming the *campanilismo* that had characterised the culture and the life of the small villages of the peninsula for centuries.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, opera represented an essential factor in the process of construction of a more cohesive collective Italian identity even in the New World.

After the successful inauguration of the Academy of Music of New York in 1854, the popularity of Italian opera incessantly grew among the members of the American upper class (D'Acerno 1999, 392). At the end of the XIX century, however, the general opinion of the American audience and press was gradually changing, moulded by the worrisome declarations of pseudo-scientific studies, concerned with and by the seemingly terrible consequences of mass migration. As both Lawrence Levine and Joseph Cosco suggest, opera in Italian came to trigger some very differ-

1 In his famous book *Blood of my Blood*, the Italian American academic and writer Richard Gambino explains the Italian word *campanilismo* by emphasising its connection to the word *campana* (bell) – or, I would suggest, *campanile* (bell tower). In this sense, *campanilismo* means that "whatever 'national' affinity the people feel is limited to those who live within hearing range of their village's church bell" (71). A possible English translation of term could be 'parochialism'.

ent feelings among Americans, who saw it as the representation of the “Old World pretensions and effete snobberies” and, at the same time, as a further example of Italian, almost infantile, sentimentalism (Levine 1988, 94; Cosco 2003, 184).

The relationship Italian immigrants had with opera, however, was totally different. Opera reached their homes thanks to the radio and the gramophone, it was sung in the crowded streets of the American Little Italies and, fostered by the incessant work of Italian American associations and political groups, was often performed during the celebrations of the community (Bencivenni 2014). A great number of Italian American authors, from Helen Barolini to Pascal D’Angelo and Robert Viscusi, recall in their works the constant presence of Italian opera in their life, underscoring its value as a tool of cultural and psychological integration (see Barolini 1999; D’Angelo 2003; Viscusi 2006).

How has opera developed since then and, in particular, how has it been received in the United States? As Theodor Adorno already pointed out during the Seventies, opera seems to have lost the wide cultural impact that characterised it in the previous centuries, so much so that “Benjamin’s word about the decay of the aura suits opera more exactly than any other form [of art]” (Adorno 1976, 77). In his caustic criticism against opera, the philosopher underlined the sterility and the pretentiousness of opera, along with the immense distance separating it from its audience:

The dawning insight, rather, was that in style, in substance, and in attitude the opera had nothing to do anymore with the people it had to appeal to if its outwardly pretentious form was to justify the prodigal extravagance required. (70-1)

Since it is impossible in this article to analyse the controversial debate over an alleged “death of the opera” in all its ramifications, I am going to consider the state of this form of art only from the point of view of contemporary America, by making reference to the analysis of opera that Dana Gioia himself provides in “Sottovoce. The Libretto as Literary Form”. Here, the poet briefly points out that, despite having been very popular for almost two centuries, opera in the United States “remains a foreign art form”, as confirmed by the fact that even today “there are still no American operas established in the international repertory” (2001, 78). Likewise, continues Gioia, “for the general reader the libretto remains synonymous with bad poetry and stilted drama” (67). The author addresses the problematic condition of the opera libretto by stating that, notwithstanding the undeniable importance of a fruitful collaboration between music, word and recitative, “the best operatic music depends on being called into existence by the right words”, since it is only through the ambitiousness of text that music can reach innovative forms and always new ways of expressing human emotions (68).

As already outlined, *Nosferatu's* most innovative element is the dialogue that Gioia successfully builds between opera and the Gothic. This special connection is made possible by the emotional power that characterises both genres. Thus, it is worth considering Anne Williams' foreword to the libretto, in which, while discussing *Nosferatu* and its influences, she offers two main reasons why the Gothic genre has almost never inspired operatic works. First, according to the author, Gothic works themselves are characterised by such an emotional force that opera could hardly succeed in intensifying its pathos. Second, despite the "plethora of operas based on Sir Walter Scott's novels", the fact that the Gothic flourished more vividly in the Anglo-American world, where opera did not have much success, could have interfered with the creation of a fruitful collaboration between the two genres (2001, xviii). However, if Williams claims that Gioia succeeded in mixing the two genres 'despite' these two reasons, I would suggest that he did it specifically 'because' of the sentiments and the emotions that both of them express.

The connection of opera and emotional pathos is unequivocal. The difficulty found in writing a successful opera libretto, Gioia explains, lies not only in the complex dialogue between word and music, in the "immense narrative compression" required by the genre, or in the construction of the story itself, but also (and, I would add, more significantly) in the presentation of "peak moments of human emotions" and in the lyric pathos of the narration and the dialogues (2001, 72-3). The words must erupt with all their power during the performance, so as to create indelible characters and situations. Merged with such words, the dramatic force of music provides the audience with an unforgettable experience, allowing them to feel the words "not intellectually but physically, emotionally, and indeed unconsciously" (82).

The emotional tension of the opera has been emphasised more than once in novels and movies by Italian immigrants and their descendants. One of the most significant examples is represented by Pascal D'Angelo's autobiography *Son of Italy* (1921), in which the author narrates the story of his migration to the United States and the myriad of obstacles he had to face in order to find his own freer identity. The epiphanic discovery of the self occurs precisely during his first operatic experience, when he has the chance to see a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. Moved by the words, the music and the god-like characters, the author recalls the emotional impact the Italian opera had on him:

And all at once I felt myself being driven toward a goal. For there was revealed to me beauty, which I had been instinctively following [...] There were parts of such overwhelming loveliness that they tore my soul apart. ([1921] 2003, 137)

Opera intensely conveys the emotional grandeur of human feelings, expressed by “voices of such size and power they could only belong to superhuman beings” (Viscusi 2006, 16).

While the best adjective describing opera is ‘grandiose’, Gothic’s essence is undoubtedly enshrined in the word ‘sublime’, to be intended not as *sub-limine* – namely something that reaches the upper jamb of a door, as some etymological dictionaries assert – but as coming from the Latin word *limus*, oblique, thus indicating something that goes up, ascends (Alessio, Battisti 1957). Noticeably, the concept of ‘sublime’ blends together two opposite spiritual extremes, namely the High and the Low, the ‘elevated’ and the abyss (*Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana* [online]). In this sense, by mediating between these two polarities, the sublime conveys the ambiguousness of Gothic’s pleasurable horror, i.e. the fear that is spiritually elevating. To better understand this point, it is worth considering Friedrich Schiller’s discussion on the sublime. The feeling of sublimity, the philosopher suggests, is “mingled”:

It is a composition of *wofulness*, which in its highest degree appears as horror, and of *joyfulness*, which can amount to transport. (1845, 246)

Human greatness lies within the individual’s capacity to understand that s/he is not a mere sensible being nor is s/he doomed to a limited existence; rather, thanks to the experience of the sublime, s/he recognises his/her own will and s/he is thus elevated, sublimated (248). In this sense, continues Schiller, what looks terribly great and overwhelming in the external world can reflect the “internal, absolute greatness” of human beings (253). The Gothic, with its supernatural forces and immortal creatures, is the perfect embodiment of the sublime, for it enables us to sense the boundaries of our mortal, weak existence, while at the same time allowing us to break that boundary. In other words, human beings are given the chance to rationally acknowledge their superiority and independence from Nature, since facing Nature and its perils contributes to the elevation of the individual’s innermost will. According to Schiller, however, there are two forms of sublime, the contemplative and the pathetic. While in the former the feeling of fear is totally in our power, for it is triggered by fantasy and imagination, Gothic works evoke more specifically the latter form. The pathetic sublime is based, on the one hand, on an “animated conceptualization of suffering”, namely a pain that does not affect us in the first person, but that is born from a sympathetic sentiment aroused by seeing the affliction of another; on the other hand, to experience the pathetic sublime it is necessary to “differentiate ourselves from the self-suffering subject”, so as to recognise our free will and spirit (Schiller 1986). Gothic inspires the great emotions of the sublime, its terror, its fear and suffering but, at the same time, enables the reader to experience the high pathos of these feelings from the reas-

asuring distance of self-consciousness. In this very point the Gothic meets the opera, namely in their shared exaltation of emotions, as well as in that detachment that enables the individual not to succumb to the power of those feelings and, rather, helps him/her to be spiritually elevated by them.

But what do Gothic themes and symbols add to Gioia's opera libretto? According to the English writer Patrick McGrath, the Gothic

is capable of infinite renewal, as its diverse themes and rich stock of symbols are gathered up and reinvested with meaning by successive generations of artists. (1997, 153)

Indeed, from its first appearance in the XVIII century, this genre has been undergoing a process of continuous transformation that has allowed its monsters to change together with the changing of the human condition and its always diverse fears. Thanks to its mercurial nature, the Gothic has been able to reach the XXI century with no diminished aesthetical and emotional force. While opera seems to have lost its grip on the shimmering nature of society, the Gothic has been able to successfully adapt itself to any new technological, social or cultural development, as well as to any newborn media, be they literature, figurative art, theatre or cinema. Therefore, the Gothic's contribution to opera is crucial, since it does not only introduce new themes and images, but also enables it to preserve its grandiose emotions, while at the same time dragging its arias towards the present. In doing so, the Gothic helps the words and music of opera to adapt to the incessant transformation of society. What the Gothic does, in other words, is to grab, blend, and attune the great past of the opera in order to re-introduce it into our present and, maybe, into our future.

Because of its mercurial nature, the Gothic has been able to bring to life new monsters, while at the same time keeping alive the founding creatures of the genre, among which vampires are without any doubt the most popular. Even though the vampire's first appearance in literature is conventionally found in John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) or in Lord Byron's narrative poem *The Giour* (1813), it is Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* that has become "the reference point to which the characteristics of other vampires are judged to have adhered, or to have departed from" (Hughes 2000, 143). The fascination with *Dracula* lies, according to McGrath, in his supernatural ability to transgress any boundary imposed by nature (1997, 157). The vampire has no temporal, spatial or bodily limits: he can change himself into multiple forms and blend among human beings and, most of all, he has vanquished death. However, what has most dramatically shaped *Dracula*'s figure and its collective imaginary is Hollywood cinema. As Fabio Giovannini underlines, movies have not simply turned monstrosity into something credible and watchable, enabling the audience to identify with the creature; rather, after Tod Browning's version of *Dracula*, and,

in particular, thanks to the impressive interpretation of Bela Lugosi, a new set of symbols, signs and features has been attached to Stoker's Dracula, adding charm and seduction to his monstrous figure. In doing so, the terrible vampire has been transformed into something (or someone) we all would like to be: immortal, powerful, seductive (1999, 7, 20-1).

Dana Gioia's work, however, is not based on Stoker's novel, nor on its Hollywood's adaptation. On the contrary, the poet has brought on the stage Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu. Eine Symphonie des Grauens*. First shown in 1922, the movie represents, along with other German masterpieces like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of the Dr. Caligari*, the origin of the horror genre in cinema (Rosenheim 1997, 64). The differences between the German and the American vampire are evident. Not only are *Nosferatu's* rat-like features deformed, but there is no sexual meaning hiding in his bites. Instead of transforming his victims into vampires, his 'kisses' represent plain death (Perez 1998, 126). *Nosferatu* is, as a matter of fact, nothing more than a monster. Moreover, there are two main elements distinguishing Murnau's movie from the cinema versions that came after. Firstly, neither science nor religion play such an important role as they did in Stoker's novel or in many American movies. Secondly, the female protagonist facing *Nosferatu* is no longer an object of sexual attention, passive in front of the peril, but she is both an "existentially authentic human being" and the vampire's nemesis (147). Gioia's choice, thus, treasures Murnau's ability to simplify "the story in ways that made it dramatically stronger and more resonantly symbolic", thus providing the audience not only with a convincing plot, but also with "strong characters, and vivid, indeed often unforgettable, images" (Gioia 2001, 84).

Apart from its contents and form, Murnau's *Nosferatu* evokes some vivid childhood memories, linked to Gioia's working-class and Catholic early years, as the poet himself argues in "Sotto Voce":

I had never written about any of these early experiences before. But the new form invited new subjects, and I could disguise my life as part of someone else's story since the underlying myth was big enough to hold it all. (2001, 84)

As I will discuss, despite not having a major impact on the plot and on the development of the libretto, Gioia's childhood memories, along with some elements of his Italian heritage, often surface throughout his work in the form of resounding symbols and intriguing literary choices. Past, present, and future, heritage and innovation, intermingle again within the text, but this time from an autobiographical point of view.

Probably because of the influence of these personal memories, there are some differences between Gioia's and Murnau's plot development. Apart from the importance given to Christian symbols throughout the work - a

direct consequence of the Italian Catholic education received by the author during his youth – Nosferatu has lost the dreadful appearance of the German creature and is described as “a tall, thin man in his late sixties” (Gioia 2001, 26). The monster is thus ‘humanized’ in both his body and his personality. Likewise, the mystic aura of the female protagonist of the libretto is stronger and more evident than in the movie: the heroine does not simply choose her own destiny but, in the struggle against darkness and death, she represents the redeeming guardian of light and life.

However, the core element of the libretto does not lie – or, at least, not primarily – in this. Rather, what every aspect of *Nosferatu* seems to evoke is the previously outlined relationship between past, present and future. In particular, while Count Orlok (Nosferatu) represents, following the typical patterns of the Gothic genre, all that is past, the female protagonist, Ellen, embodies the mystic figure of the ancient prophetess, whose voice takes the form of dreams and premonitions. In other words, she is the being through whom the future speaks. Between these two supernatural forces Ellen’s husband (Eric) is caged by the oppressing presence of his past poverty and the anxiety for the uncertainties of his and his wife’s future. In doing so, Gioia represents time as “tension”, intended here not as tension of the unconscious, as Augustine had stressed in his *Confessions* (*Confessions*, 11, 36; Boulding 1997, 356). Augustine’s conception of time is completely subjective and is grounded on the idea that time is not ‘a thing’, but a relationship between things that are passing and the mind:

The mind expects, and attends, and remembers, so that what it expects passes by way of what it attends to into what it remembers. (361)

Consequently, time is perceived subjectively and its three tenses can be assimilated into one: the present. Indeed,

it is inaccurate to say, “There are three tenses or times: past, present, and future”, though it might properly be said “There are three tenses or times: the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things”. (*Confessions*, 11, 26; Boulding 1997, 350)

Unlike the time analysed by Augustine, Gioia’s time is not perceived, but endured. Despite being connected to his past and future, Eric’s anxieties are not due to an internalisation of the temporal tension, as described by the philosopher; rather, those feelings of inadequacy and confusion are caused by outside factors, for both past and future seem to have been incarnated into two concrete, external forces. While he remembers that “my life has been a struggle from the first”, he confesses that he is still burning with the desire to change his own life, “to wake at night | And never feel | The future pressing» (Gioia 2001, 9). It is only by considering

the complementary elements of necessity and desire that Eric's tragic story and the whole plot can be understood.

The old Heinrich Skuller is offering the young man an allegedly miraculous job, one that will solve all of his problems. A rich Hungarian nobleman, Count Orlock, wants to buy a house in town and has asked for someone to go to his castle in Hungary with a contract ready to be signed. This, confesses Skuller, will certainly be the greatest opportunity of Eric's life. The following dialogue is built on a constant repetition of bright and auspicious words: chance, happiness, dreams, future. Skuller's proposition becomes the offer America made to immigrants at the turn of the XIX century, while Eric's drama becomes inevitably the drama of the immigrant. In fact, Gioia's words choices, along with the particular emphasis put on certain expressions and images, have turned what on the screen was thought to be the misadventure of a young man into the misadventure of a young immigrant. Like the Italian immigrants of the Great Migration, Eric is ready to face a difficult journey to provide for his family and start to built a better future. If he joined his firm and faced that journey, the old man explains, he could help Eric to follow his path towards success, for "no dream's too grand" (Gioia 2001, 9). Skuller, however, is not offering a dream, but concrete opportunities, grounded on "the safety and freedom that money buys" (12). Thanks to this journey, the old man seems to imply, the American story of the self-made man could be accomplished:

But what will you do when the times turn mean,  
Your wife wears rags and your children grow lean?  
Provide for your love or your love will be lost.  
A man must be strong whatever the cost. (11)

The choices Gioia made to represent the troublesome past and future of the young man are directly connected to the autobiographical memories that the poet confessed had influenced part of his work. "Working on the libretto touched other childhood memories of religion, family and poverty", memories that are associated with his first viewing of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (2001, 84). The images of the constant financial problems of his family "intermingled naturally with my first sighting of Max Schreck's shadow climbing the stairways toward his shuddering victim" (84). As a consequence, in the libretto all of these memories are elaborated and embodied in the terrible figure of Count Orlock. Therefore, in the character of *Nosferatu* the autobiographical meets the literary. In particular, the symbolism of the past heritage associated with Count Orlock reflects not only Gioia's memory, but also some of the main elements characterising the Gothic as a genre. As McGrath explains, ruined castles, haunted houses, and forgotten cemeteries connote the power of ancestry, the influence of traditions, and the constant presence in one's life of the deeds of one's

forefathers (1997). In other words, the Gothic “evokes the weight of the past”, a past that, however, is buried in darkness and triggers only feelings of fear (127). Similarly, Nosferatu is constantly referring to his own connection with the past. Actually, as he himself declares, he *is* the past:

I am the past that feeds upon the present.  
I am the sins you must inherit -  
The final truth in a world full of lies.  
(Gioia 2001, 35)

Metaphorically, Gioia’s vampire sucks life out of the present. He represents a whole repertoire of traditions, customs, myths and folkloric elements that, using Roland Barthes’ words, “stifles the man in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world”, thus turning into “a prohibition for man against inventing himself” (1991, 156).

After signing the contract and seeing Ellen’s portrait kept in Eric’s locket, Nosferatu embarks on his sea journey towards Eric’s German town along with a plague of rats and the deadly disease they bring with them. Unlike Murnau, however, Gioia offers the audience a more psychological - and, thus, a more human - reason for his decision to leave his own country. As the vampire himself states, he is a “traveler” whose purpose is not only to create “a mandate worthy of my ancestors”, but to finally escape his own burdening past: “here is the future - not the barren past” (Gioia 2001, 42-3). Just like Eric and Ellen, the vampire is trapped by his own - even though noble - past:

You cannot understand how heavily the past  
Weights down on me. [...]  
How ancient deeds imprison us forever.  
(29)

From Nosferatu’s point of view this journey represents a chance to be re-born, to build a future far from the ghostly “ancient deeds” and completely projected towards the future. The vampire is leaving his Gothic land, where “the towns are empty and the roads| untravelled and overgrown”, behind (29). The journey of the vampire is thus grounded on necessity and desire: “I rule a kingdom of the dead | I perish or move on” (29-30).

The humanisation of Nosferatu gives the creature a double nature. On the one hand, the god-like characteristics of the Count cannot be denied and, indeed, they emerge throughout the text, thus following the patterns of traditional Gothic literature and cinema. On the other hand, due to the affliction affecting his existence and, most of all, due to the overtly romantic relationship tying him and his eternal bride Ellen, Nosferatu loses

some of his numinous aura to become more human. To better understand his complexity, however, it is of the uttermost importance to analyse in the first place the impressive, operatic figure of Ellen, without whom Nosferatu's character could not be understood in all its facets.

Gioia introduces Ellen to the audience (or the reader) indirectly, through the worried dialogue between Dr. Harding and Ellen's sister, Marthe, at the very beginning of act 1, scene 2. The simple opening questions the doctor asks Marthe provide the first clues necessary to understand Ellen's character: "how often does your sister have these spells - / the vivid dreams, the sleepwalking, the fevers?" (Gioia 2001, 13). What the noun 'spell' indicates is not only an 'indeterminate period of time'; rather, it evokes the mystic field of sorcery and witchcraft. Thus, the choice to immediately describe Ellen's symptoms (the dreams, the sleepwalking, the feverishness) suggests that the condition of the woman is somehow connected to the supernatural. Despite the fact that Marthe herself is convinced of her sister's ability to predict the future, Dr. Harding (in this story taking the place of the more famous Dr. Van Helsing from Stoker's novel) tries to explain Ellen's disturbance with the aid of psychology, in order to "push aside the superstition" (15).<sup>2</sup> According to the doctor, her dreams are due to her difficult financial situation, to the anxiety caused by the uncertainties of her future. Nonetheless, he cannot deny that Ellen is «unnaturally lucid», that she can hear, see, feel "more vividly than any other people do", and that "she can relive a moment merely by | Recalling it" (14). Along with somnambulism, "a halfway state between a dream and trance", Ellen gathers all the features typically associated with ancient Classic prophetesses: the Pythia, priestess of the Oracle of Delphi, and the Sibyl, whose cult is thought to have its roots in ancient Oriental rituals, which started to spread throughout the Mediterranean area in the following centuries (Gioia 2001, 15; Iannoni 1996, 13).

Like the vampire, the prophetess is a figure of the frontier, a mediator between the divine and the human, dream and reality, between present and future and, lately, between Christian and pagan. In their ambiguity, however, their relationship with the divine always represented the essence of their being. Not only were these women believed to receive the vital breath of their god, usually Apollo, but it was also thought that they were possessed by him and led to a state of painful mania, induced by the water of certain wells or by the fumes exhaled inside certain caves (Iannoni 1996, 17). As a matter of fact, the idea of ecstasy was not linked to beatitude until the advent of Christianity. Rather, it evoked a state of *furor*, of mad frenzy taking hold of

2 Dr. Harding here, like Professor Bulwer in Murnau's movie, loses the distinctive knowledge of the occult that, instead, Dr. Van Helsing has in both Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and in many American horror movies. Actually, Dr. Harding almost completely disappears in the libretto and never even faces the vampire, unlike Dr. Van Helsing, who plays the role of vampire slayer in both Stoker's novel and, generally, in films.

both the body and the mind (18). One of the most emblematic prophetesses of Western culture is Cassandra, priestess of Apollo and daughter of Priam, king of Troy. In Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, the prophetess is described as a mad maid, "by the breath of God made wild" (*The Trojan Women*, 6; Murray 2009, 39). In the aftermath of the Trojan war, Cassandra, after being raped by Ajax the Lesser, is about to be given as a concubine to Agamemnon. Mad with desperation and vengeance, the woman enters the scene

white-robed and wreathed like a Priestess, a great torch in her hand. She is singing softly to herself and does not see the Herlad or the scene before her. (39)

Her disordered, bewildered traits, as well as her loose hair and wild eyes, have become distinguishing features of the Dionysian figure of Cassandra and traits that are not only associated with the mystic world of magic, but also with a state of bacchanalian madness (De Paco Serrano 2010, 8). Gioia's Ellen absorbs these elements, thus becoming not only a prophetess, but the unheard priestess Cassandra. Ellen's appearance on the stage surprisingly recalls the entrance of Priam's daughter on the scene:

her hair is loose and disordered. She is dressed in an open white robe that does not hide her long, white nightgown. She has the intense but disoriented appearance of someone startled from sleep who does not yet entirely comprehend her surroundings. She seems oblivious to Marthe and Dr. Harding. (17)

The feverish predictions, the white robe, the disordered appearance and the incapacity to see and understand what is happening around her turn Ellen into a virgin Cassandra of the Gothic genre. The heroine speaks for the first time during the aria "Ellen's Dream", in which the woman foretells her husband's terrible fate through the ambiguous symbols of her dream, thus anticipating, with a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, the plot of *Nosferatu*. During the aria, Ellen sings of a "bolted door", whose lock she can open just by touching it and, beyond the door, a candle-lit chapel, with a cross broken in two and a priest holding "a chalice of blood in his hands"; on the altar, as a sacrificial victim, lies Eric (Gioia 2001, 18). Thanks to her supernatural powers, Ellen is the only one who can open the door leading to *Nosferatu*, the high priest, the anti-god. The dream of the woman, thus, introduces an aspect essential to the analysis of the libretto, namely the relationship between Christian and Pagan symbolism.

The figure of the prophetess, like the vampire, is one that has successfully maintained its vividness and mercurial adaptability over the centuries. Her narrative immortality has been strongly fostered by the influence of Christian tradition that reinterpreted her image in order to adapt it to the

new faith. In fact, the prophetess was no longer represented as a woman wildly possessed by a god, but as a purified virgin, who was said to have predicted the advent of Christ (Iannoni 1996). Likewise significant is the connection of the prophetess to the world of the dead. In particular, the cult of the Italian Cumaean Sibyl was linked to the afterlife, not only because the cave where she used to give her prophecies was thought to be near the entrance to the Underworld, but also because it was Virgil himself who, in the *Aeneid*, chose the Cumaean Sibyl as Aeneas's guide during his descent to Hades (Iannoni 1996, 41). In this sense, the prophetess is turned into a psychopomp, a mediator between the living and the dead, a guide for the lost souls of the deceased. This syncretism between Christian and pagan, between death and prophecy, is strongly emphasised in the construction of Ellen's character, in particular after she is discovered to be telepathically in contact with Count Orlock. The woman, says Nosferatu, is the promised one, his bride, "one of us":

Because you know the darkness in yourself.  
 Because you see the future in your dreams.  
 (Gioia 2001, 36)

In doing so, the vampire confirms what Dr. Harding had denied at the beginning of the opera, namely that Ellen possesses supernatural powers. After this first, long-distance confrontation, Ellen becomes aware of the sacrificial role she must accept to save her husband and the whole world. Desperate, she draws comfort from religion. It is in her very relationship with the divine, represented by both Venus and the Virgin Mary, that the conjunction of the pagan and the Christian becomes evident. While in the aria "Ellen's Serenade" the woman turns to the evening star, "planet of love" and, hence, to Venus "goddess bright", in the final scene, aware of her fate, the woman prays the *Salve Regina* in a mixture of Latin and English, personally re-elaborating its words (39; 55). Lost in a state of "trance, as if she were in communion with some unseen and disturbing presence", Ellen starts "mistranslating" the words of the prayer "in a way that reflects her state of mind" (55-6).

*Salve, Regina,*  
 Queen of the heavens -  
 Star of the evening,  
 Star of the sea.  
 (56)

In the opera, the overlapping of Venus and Mary represents the overlapping of the pagan and the Christian and is thus directly connected to the religious and cultural legacy of the poet. Likewise, the star of the evening (another name for the planet Venus or morning star) and the star of

the sea (*stella maris*, representing both the pole star and the Mother of Christ) are made to coincide to become a single bright light, guiding the woman through darkness. Furthermore, the connection to the myth of the falling angel is quite appealing, since Lucifer represents the second name of the star of the evening, from the Latin 'light bringer'. In this sense, Venus (the morning star) coincides with the star of Lucifer. Consequently, Ellen and Nosferatu, love/light and death/darkness, future and past are not to be seen only as opposing forces, but as complementary elements constituting the universe as a whole. Likewise, while being the symbol of love against death, Ellen herself conceals something mysterious, magical and supernatural: she is, to use Nosferatu's words again, "one of us" (36). Gioia does not conceive life as a Manichean struggle between good and evil, past and future; rather, he accepts an existence made of contrasting but interdependent forces, since, as Count Orlock underlines, "only the darkness | Makes the moon bright" (60).

Ambiguity characterises both Ellen and Nosferatu, her nemesis. As previously outlined, Gioia portrays a more humanised version of the classic Gothic vampire and he does this by using Ellen's influence to identify his vulnerability. In fact, his relationship to the Gothic prophetess is enriched with the passionate spirit of Romanticism. In the last duet, in which the two are finally facing each other, Ellen accuses the vampire of being godless and loveless. At this point, the creature opens his heart to his promised bride, showing for the first time all his fragility:

Do you not understand, my love,  
That I, too, am afraid?  
I have imagined you for centuries  
And yet tonight the hand  
I offer you is trembling.  
There's nothing in the world  
That can destroy me - except you.  
(59)

Nosferatu's love is not merely erotic, but involves both the sexual and the romantic spheres. "How long I've ached to touch | your arms, your lips, your hair", he confesses, rejoicing for the eternity they will have to "taste each other's flesh | To know each other's soul" (61). Unlike Murnau's vampire, Gioia's Nosferatu is sketched as a complete and complex creature, no longer limited by the boundaries of monstrosity and evilness, but projected beyond them, towards human emotions, needs and frailties. In this sense, Gioia's vampire recalls less Bram Stoker's Dracula than Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster.

In the last scene, the iconic shadow of Nosferatu has already entered the room, the two have faced each other in a dialectic duel, and the vampire

finally tries to seduce his lover. However, Ellen knows the only way to defeat Nosferatu is to make him stay until day breaks, when the sun rays will “transfix” him to death (63). By deceiving him and making him believe that “I am yours – | yours forever”, the victim becomes the hero of the narrative, and the feminine escapes her condition of passivity absorbing the active role generally linked to masculinity (63). In this sense, *Nosferatu* follows the path of the long history of women’s empowerment perpetrated by the Gothic genre. Indeed, as Patrick McGrath observes, this genre tends to replace the ‘I’ of the narrator, which is supposed to be male, with a female one, thus allowing the reader to assume a female point of view and to “see hero and villain alike as relative to *her*” (1997, 122-4). For Gioia, however, it is not just a simple shift in the narrative point of view, but the female acquiring authority and agency: Ellen acts, chooses and sacrifices herself voluntarily. Likewise, in Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*, Cassandra is no longer a victim, but the real executioner. After being told she was to become Agamemnon’s concubine, she comforts her mother, wildly anticipating her revenge:

A bloodier wife than ever Helen was  
 Go I to Agamemnon, Lord most high  
 Of Hellas!... I shall kill him, mother; I  
 Shall kill him, and lay waste his house with fire  
 As he laid ours.

(*The Trojan Women*, 7; Murray 2009, 43)

Unlike Cassandra, however, Ellen is not becoming mad; on the contrary, she reaches the highest peak of self-consciousness in that struggle towards the sublime that Schiller had piercingly described:

Calmly, and with a pleasing fear, he now approaches these bugbears of his imagination, and purposely summons the whole strength of this faculty, to set forth the sensuo-infinite, in order that, even if it succumbs in the attempt, he may feel more vividly the superiority of his ideas over the highest that sensuous can afford. (Schiller 1845, 253)

Schiller’s words perfectly define Ellen’s final act, the difference being that the ‘he’ used by the philosopher is now replaced by a ‘she’. Her marriage to Nosferatu represents the ultimate sacrifice determining the powerful wilfulness of the female hero over her masculine counterpart. Therefore, it is Ellen and not the male vampire that stands as the true protagonist of the drama. While the woman drops dead after Nosferatu’s kiss, the vampire is mortally transfixed by the sun-light. However, instead of trying to save himself, he “deliberately turns back to face the window and is slowly destroyed” (63). Faithful to the Romantic sentiment emphasised throughout the libretto, the monster makes the ultimate and most complete statement

of humanity: he willingly chooses death over his burdening immortality and finally finds relief in suicide.

In Dana Gioia's libretto the old and the new, past and future are attuned in a complex, multi-faceted dialogue, which, thanks to the influence of the Gothic genre, merges together a fresh representation of the grandiosity of opera, vivid autobiographical memories, and newly elaborated iconic images. Moreover, past and future face each other in a titanic, mythic struggle, in which these two instances of time are presented as two wilful and powerful forces, whose confrontation has enabled not only an innovative emotional representation of the vampire's figure, but has also allowed the construction of a more authentic and heroic feminine character.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. (1976). *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Boulding, Maria (transl.) (1997). *Saint Augustine: The Confessions*. New York: New York City Press.
- Barolini, Helen (1999). "How I Learned to Speak Italian". *Chiaroscuro. Essays of Identity*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 25-37.
- Barthes, Roland (1991). *Mythologies*. New York: The Nooday Press.
- Alessio, Giovanni; Battisti, Carlo (1957). s.v. "Sublime". *Dizionario Etimologico Italiano*. Firenze: Barbera.
- Bencivenni, Marcella (2014). "Radical Visions and Consumption. Culture and Leisure Among Early Twentieth-Century Italian American Left". Cintonotto, Simone (ed.), *Making Italian American. Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities*. New York: Fordham University, 117-33.
- Brera, Matteo (2012). "Le ali 'dorate' della libertà. Il coro di ebrei in Nabucco e la ricerca della 'Patria [...] bella e perduta'". *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, 7, 139-53.
- Coletti, Vittorio (2012). "Italiano d'esportazione". Mattarucco, Giada (a cura di), *Italiano per il mondo. Banca, commerci, arti, tradizioni*. Firenze: Accademia della Crusca, 13-21.
- Cosco, Joseph (2003). *Imagining Italians. The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910*. New York: SUNY Press.
- D'Acierno, Pellegrino (1999). *The Italian American Heritage. A Companion to Literature and Arts*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- D'Angelo, Pascal [1921] (2003). *Son of Italy*. Montreal: Guernica.
- De Paco Serrano, Diana M. (2010). "Cassandra e le donne tragiche" [online]. GRIMM, Gruppo triestino di ricerca sul mito e la mitografia. URL [http://grmito.units.it/sites/default/files/dePaco\\_Cassandra\\_1.pdf](http://grmito.units.it/sites/default/files/dePaco_Cassandra_1.pdf) (2017-02-20).

- Gioia, Dana (2001). *Nosferatu. An Opera Libretto*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- Giovannini, Fabio (1999). *Mostri. Protagonisti dell'immaginario del Novecento*. Roma: Castelveccchi.
- Hughes, William (2000). "Fictional Vampires in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries". Punter, David (ed.), *A Companion to the Gothic*. Hoboken: Wiley, 143-54.
- Iannoni, Gesino (1996). *Un mito mediterraneo. La Sibilla*. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.
- Levine, Lawrence (1988). *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Memory in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- McGrath, Patrick (1997). «Transgression and Decay». Grunenberg, Christoph (ed.), *Gothic. Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. Boston; Cambridge: Institute of Contemporary Art; The MIT Press, 119-58.
- Murray, Gilbert (transl.) (2009). *Euripides: The Trojan Women*. Auckland: The Floating Press.
- Paldi, Cesare (1985). *Le grandi opere liriche di Mozart*. Roma: Fratelli Palombi.
- Perez, Gilberto (1998). "The Deadly Space Within". *The Material Ghost. Films and their Medium*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 123-48.
- Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana*. s.v. "Sublime" [online]. URL <http://www.etimo.it/?term=sublime> (2017-02-10).
- Rosenheim, Shawn (1997). "Shivers". Grunenberg, Christoph (ed.), *Gothic. Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. Boston; Cambridge (MA): Institute of Contemporary Art; The MIT Press, 51-64.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1998). "Letter on French Music". Scott, John T. (transl.), *Rousseau, Jean Jacques: Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 141-74.
- Schiller, Friedrich (1845). "Upon the Sublime". *The Aesthetic Letters, Essays, and the Philosophical Letters of Schiller*. Transl. by John Weiss. Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 239-63. Transl. from: "Über das Erhabene". *Kleine prosaische Schriften*. Leipzig: Crusius, 1801, 2-44. URL [https://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans\\_of\\_sublime.html](https://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans_of_sublime.html) (2017-02-10).
- Schiller, Friedrich (1986). "Of the Sublime. Toward the Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas" [online]. *The Schiller Institute*. Transl. by Daniel Platt. Transl. from: *Vom Erhabenen*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1900.
- Viscusi, Robert (2006). *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Williams, Anne (2001). "Listening to the Children of the Night. The Vampire and the Romantic Mythology". Gioia 2001, ix-xx.

