

Robert Louis Stevenson and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Vampire “Olalla” (1885) as ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’

Angelo Riccioni
Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope, Italia

Abstract “Olalla” (1885) by Robert Louis Stevenson has usually been neglected by critics interested in late-Victorian culture. Preceding of just a few weeks the publication of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), this novella has been judged as a derivative work, a story whose interest lies in its different sources, ranging from Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *A Strange Story* to E.A. Poe’s tales. My analysis aims to prove that in writing this work, Stevenson is probably drawing inspiration from the imagery exploited by some members of the Aesthetic Movement, among them Walter Pater and Edward Burne-Jones.

Keywords Robert Louis Stevenson. Olalla. Aesthetic culture. The ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’.

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Peer review

Submitted	2020-11-06
Accepted	2020-12-12
Published	2020-12-21

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Citation Riccioni, A. (2020). “Robert Louis Stevenson and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Vampire. “Olalla” (1885) as ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’”. *English Literature*, 7, 91-108.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2021/01/004

1 Introduction

Usually regarded as a vampire story set in nineteenth-century Spain, "Olalla" (1885) by Robert Louis Stevenson has often been neglected by critics interested in late-Victorian culture. The plot, focused on the tragic romance between a nameless British officer (the narrator of the story) and Olalla, an enigmatic woman living with her mysterious family in a secluded, ancient Spanish house, offers similarities with the later Gothic fiction of Oscar Wilde and Arthur Machen, Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. While these authors have been studied extensively in search of definitions for the late-Victorian Gothic genre, "Olalla" has been mostly overlooked by scholars, even deemed "a complete failure" by David Daiches (1957, 15) and "false" by the author himself (Stevenson 1995, 365). Given the peculiar position of this piece in Stevenson's literary career,¹ it is rather surprising that "Olalla" should be read too often as a derivative work, a story overly reliant upon its sources, ranging from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1862) to Théophile Gautier's "La morte amoureuse" (1836), from E.A. Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842) to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" (1844). This ambiguity in terms of literary genres has also put into question the label of 'vampire story' attributed to the tale. As a matter of fact, the reader is often puzzled by the inscrutable relationship between the homodiegetic narrator and the other characters living in the *residencia*: among them, Felipe, an idiotic boy with a passion for gardening and singing, and his enigmatic mother, who finally bites the narrator's hand at the sight of a blood-dripping wound.

I will argue here that in building a story based on different artistic sources, Stevenson is actually coming very close to the imagery exploited by some members of the Aesthetic Movement, such as Walter Pater and Edward Burne-Jones. "Olalla" could be easily associated with later works, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Vernon Lee's ghost-stories collected in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), which are narratives that belong to the 'Aesthetic Fantastic' (Bizzotto 2016, 39-54). By analysing the recurrence of descriptive sections that seem to be inspired by Walter Pater's essays and late pre-Raphaelite pictures, this study aims to place Stevenson's cryptic Gothic tale at the crossroads of different late-Victorian literary trends.

¹ "Olalla" has been recently rediscovered by Hillary J. Beattie as a story "organically connected" with Stevenson's most celebrated work, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) (Beattie 2005, 11).

2 “Olalla” and Aesthetic Culture

Originally published in *The Court and Society Review* in 1885, and later collected in *The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables* (1887), “Olalla” is a supernatural story haunted by shadows that are never really defined or even directly described. If in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the line between the fantastic and the real is purposely blurred in order to create a powerful plot finally turning into “psychological horror” (Harman 2005, 303), “Olalla” is commonly considered to be a vampire story curiously deprived of a clear-cut vampire figure. Critics and readers alike have failed in recognising who the monster in the plot is. Is Olalla the vampire? Or is it her mother? The episode alluding to the vampiric nature of this woman is at least unclear, and it occurs after a self-inflicted wound, a primitive resurgence “showing that the narrator is not a rational onlooker” (Reid 2006, 85):

And then, like one in a dream, I moved to the window, put forth my hand to open the casement, and thrust it through the pane. (Stevenson 2002, 123)

Moreover, when the beautiful Señora, Olalla’s mother, bites the hero’s hand, at the sight of his blood the reader wonders whether this is due either to her supernatural nature, or rather to her problematic character:

And as I still stood, marvelling a little at her disturbance, she came swiftly up to me, and stooped and caught me by the hand; and the next moment my hand was at her mouth, and she had bitten me to the bone. [...] Her strength was like that of madness; mine was rapidly ebbing with the loss of blood; my mind besides was whirling with the abhorrent strangeness of the onslaught, and I was already forced against the wall, when Olalla ran betwixt us, and Felipe, following at a bound, pinned down his mother on the floor.

A trance-like weakness fell upon me; I saw, heard, and felt, but I was incapable of movement. (Stevenson 2002, 124)

What is striking in these lines is the dream-like quality of the accident; this aspect is further corroborated by Stevenson’s choice of using a “far from objective” narrator (Reid 2006, 85) in order to emphasise the Gothic shadows of Olalla’s house. It is significant, though, that this characteristic is indeed hinted at from the very beginning of the story. Even if “Olalla” is told from the perspective of the hero and narrator, the first words that the reader encounters on the page are those of a doctor, who seems to allude to a psychological burden affecting the soldier:

'Now,' said the doctor, 'my part is done, and, I may say, with some vanity, well done. It remains only to get you out of this cold and poisonous city, and to give you two months of a pure air and an easy conscience. The last is your affair. (Stevenson 2002, 95)

Even before joining the company of a family afflicted by Galtonian degeneration, the narrator is aptly described as a character who needs to get rest. There is, indeed, a clear allusion to an "uneasy conscience", and it is probably for this reason that the doctor suggests that the Scottish officer should find repose in the countryside. Significantly, the nature of this 'uneasiness' will never be fully clarified, especially since the hero's narrative is interspersed with dramatic events: first some uncanny cries, keeping him awake during a windy night, then his obsession with Olalla, the beautiful, intelligent "daughter of the house" (113), and finally a self-mutilation that appears as sudden and shocking as the reaction it inspires in his hostess, the seductive and aggressive Señora. Since these events will be related by a narrator increasingly haunted by the characteristics of the family he is living with, as well as by his passion for Olalla, it is telling that from the first paragraph the doctor should refer to the disturbed soul of the hero. It is therefore likely that Stevenson chose to insert traces of the narrator's unreliability right from the beginning, as has been argued by Julia Reid (2006, 83-9).

This way of recounting the story, from the point of view of a non-objective narrator, shows intriguing parallels with Vernon Lee's ghost stories collected in *Hauntings*, while also seeming to anticipate the technique employed by Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898. One of Lee's stories that is most reminiscent of "Olalla" is "Amour Dure", a supernatural tale told by Spiridion Trepka, a Polish academic interested in Italian Renaissance culture. While researching the history of Urbania, a fictional Italian city probably inspired by Urbino, he falls in love with the ghost of a Renaissance *femme fatale*, Medea da Carpi. He quickly becomes obsessed with her portrait, finally claiming to see her ghost draped in a cloak. According to his diary, presented at the very end of the story, before getting stabbed to death, he waits in his rooms for the final encounter with Medea.

Similarly, in "Olalla" the hero is clearly troubled by a spectral presence, which, as in "Amour Dure", is first seen as represented in a portrait:

After I had supped I drew up the table nearer to the bed and began to prepare for rest; but in the new position of the light, I was struck by a picture on the wall. It represented a woman, still young. To judge by her costume and the mellow unity which reigned over the canvas, she had long been dead; to judge by the vivacity of the at-

titude, the eyes and the features, I might have been beholding in a mirror the image of life. Her figure was very slim and strong, and of just proportion; red tresses lay like a crown over her brow; her eyes, of a very golden brown, held mine with a look; and her face, which was perfectly shaped, was yet marred by a cruel, sullen, and sensual expression. Something in both face and figure, something exquisitely intangible, like the echo of an echo, suggested the features and bearing of my guide [Felipe]; and I stood awhile, unpleasantly attracted and wondering at the oddity of the resemblance. (Stevenson 2002, 101)

The woman in the picture arouses the imagination of the narrator, who falls in love with her straightaway, as does Spiridion in Lee's story:

and while I knew that to love such a woman were to sign and seal one's own sentence of degeneration, I still knew that, if she were alive, I should love her. (101-2)

If the motif of a character nurturing a love for a painting would be later in the century notoriously adopted by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is significant that almost a decade before "Olalla", Walter Pater's description of *La Gioconda* in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) as a vampire travelling through the centuries was circulating among the aesthetes. Pater's work, thus, presented to English readers a text featuring a connection between portraits and historical characters endowed with supernatural powers:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. [...] All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. (Pater 1986, 150)

According to Robert Mighall, it is likely that this paragraph might have inspired Stevenson for Olalla's representation as an 'atavistic vampire':

She is 'atavistic' in as far as her character and condition appear to derive from her distant ancestors (*atavus* mean ancestors), and therefore like a vampire she, or her ancestors, has lived and died many times. There is an echo [...] of Walter Pater's famous description of Da Vinci's 'La Gioconda' (known as Mona Lisa), which offered a template for prose stylists and a model for femmes fatales at the end of the nineteenth century. (Mighall 2002, XXXV)

This connection seems more evident if one considers the self-description Olalla herself gives to the narrator:

Have your eyes never rested on that picture that hangs by your bed? She who sat for it died ages ago; and she did evil in her life. But, look again; there is my hand to the least line, there are my eyes and my hair. What is mine, then, and what am I? [...] Others, ages dead, have wooed other men with my eyes; other men have heard the pleading of the same voice that now sounds in your ears. The hands of the dead are in my bosom; they move me, they pluck me, they guide me; I am a puppet at their command; and I but reinform features and attributes that have long been laid aside from evil in the quiet of the grave. Is it me you love, friend? or the race that made me? The girl who does not know and cannot answer for the least portion of herself? Or the stream of which she is a transitory eddy, the tree of which she is the passing fruit? (Stevenson 2002, 126-7)

Indeed, both Pater's and Stevenson's descriptions share similar linguistic features, with an emphasis on repetitions and the recurrent use of the semicolon. In Pater, the female character is frequently alluded to through the use of the pronoun 'she', while in Stevenson the use of this same word (referring to the woman in the portrait) gives way to a second subject (the past generations of men) who is stressed in the anaphoric refrain "they move me, they pluck me, they guide me". Moreover, both paragraphs tend to be circular in presenting characters that disappear through different generations, to finally return, at the end of this eerie time-travelling, in their own flesh. The resemblance is striking, confirming Mighall's view that Stevenson and Pater made similar stylistic choices.

This opinion is shared by other scholars too. Although it is not clear whether and to what extent Pater's works have influenced Stevenson's stylistic and narrative choices, their names have, nevertheless, been frequently associated by both their contemporaries and modern scholars. Arthur Wing Pinero compared Stevenson's theatrical

style to Pater's writing, for they both aimed at "the absolute beauty of words" (Pinero 1903, 26). If Mighall has found a resemblance between Olalla's portrait and the elaborate descriptions of female figures to be found in *The Renaissance*, Richard Ambrosini and Richard Drury have defined Stevenson "along with Walter Pater, [...] the supreme prose stylist of his age" (Ambrosini, Dury 2006, xiii). Furthermore, Peter Costello has traced the influence of Pater on Stevenson's writing, mediated by the work of George Moore (Costello 1996, 127-38), and Penny Fielding has interpreted Stevenson's poetry in terms of Pater's aesthetic principles (Fielding 2010, 102-17). The Scottish writer was obviously familiar with the Aesthetic Movement, both in literature and in the arts: his friendship with Sidney Colvin, who knew Rossetti, Ruskin and Burne-Jones (Gray 2004, 7-22), his way of combining "a Paterian attention to the intricacies of style and form with blood-and-thunder celebrations of male adventure" (Arata 2005, 199), even his habit of "dressing and behaving like a 'yellow yite'" (Harman 2005, 211) have been interpreted by critics and biographers as evidence of his interest in the poetics of Aestheticism. "Olalla" thus reveals, perhaps more than other, better-known works by Stevenson, an interest in historical portraiture and oneritic effects that were being exploited by decadent authors and artists.

This influence is apparently not limited to these features: if one takes into consideration some details in the story, ranging from descriptions of clothes and jewels² to allusions to fairy tales, it is possible to understand how close the atmospheres in "Olalla" are to those conveyed by the artists of the Aesthetic Movement. It is perhaps useful, then, to underscore that "Olalla" lingers between different genres, showing not only the characteristics of a Gothic tale but those of a dark fairy tale too, as Giorgio Manganelli has suggested in describing it as a romance featuring modern knights, princesses and spells (1974, v-x). In these terms, it is no wonder that the hero compares the *residencia* to "the sleeping palace of the legend" (Stevenson 2002, 105), with a hidden and far from unintentional reference to the story of Briar Rose. In the courtyard of this enchanted castle, described as "the very home of slumber" (105), Olalla's mother is first met, dozing "with animal sensuality against the wall" (Beattie 2005, 19), a posture which is reminiscent of the princess in the fairy tale, asleep for eternity until a knight saves her through a kiss. If the English officer is playing the part of the "paladin" - "un paladino" as Manganelli puts it (Manganelli 1974, v) - it is Stevenson's

² Clothes and jewels are mentioned more than once in the story. Olalla's mother, for instance, is depicted wearing a "dress that struck me first of all, for it was rich and brightly coloured, and shone out in that dusty courtyard with something of the same relief as the flowers of the pomegranates" (Stevenson 2002, 105-6). Olalla, moreover, is frequently adorned with a golden coin hovering "on her breasts" (125).

ironic twist that the kiss is a deadly one, delivered, moreover, not by him but by Olalla's mother. As already seen, it is probably a vampiric kiss, a bite that almost kills the narrator.

Interestingly, in almost the same years during which Stevenson was working on "Olalla", Edward Burne-Jones was under the spell of the Briar Rose tale too, dedicating much of his talent in the 1880s to a series of panels depicting scenes taken from the story. Teeming with figures that are represented completely asleep, as plunged in a deathly trance, the whole series exudes, as M. Clark Hillard has written, "a melancholy, if not threatening, sense of eternal stasis" (Hillard 2014, 110). This is the same impression evoked by "Olalla": a relevant part of the story is devoted to the description of the hero's wanderings through the *residencia* in a kind of repetitive, circular pattern. It should be noted, in this regard, that in "Olalla" the characters are almost exclusively absorbed in lazy activities: Olalla's mother is constantly watching the fire or dozing, her son Felipe is always intent on gardening, his favourite pastime, and the narrator is very fond of loitering in the halls of the castle, lost in his speculations on Olalla and on the woman depicted in the portrait. This kind of slothful life resembles the one led by the author a few years before, described in a letter to Edmund Gosse in which he expressed a connection between idleness and aesthetic pleasure through a reference to Burne-Jones's art itself:

I have fallen altogether into a hollow-eyed, yawning way of life, like the parties in Burne-Jones's pictures. (Harman 2005, 170)

Again, as in the case of Pater, it is not clear to what extent Stevenson was familiar with Burne-Jones's work. His friendship with Sidney Colvin, who dedicated a chapter of his *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places* (1921) to the painter, seems to have been instrumental in making him acquainted with his work. In his essay Colvin quotes a letter in which Burne-Jones declares his intention of illustrating Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) and reports on having met Stevenson himself:

It was a lovely evening with L.S. and I loved him. I wish he was fat and well and like a bull and lived here. (Colvin 1921, 57)

The reference to the 'yawning parties' in the aforementioned letter seems to suggest that Burne-Jones's pictures were likely to have been in Stevenson's mind while writing "Olalla". The description of the Señora as a "gaily dressed and somnolent woman" (Stevenson 2002, 114), stretching herself "in the bright close of pomegranates", keenly reminds the reader of pictures such as *Green Summer* (1868) and *Cupid Delivering Psyche* (1871) by Burne-Jones, equally featuring women surrounded by enchanted gardens and blossoming trees.

Another revealing detail of Stevenson's interest in Aesthetic culture seems to be Olalla's attire, and especially her pendant's description:

After the fashion of that country, besides, her bodice stood open in the middle, in a long slit, and here, in spite of the poverty of the house, a gold coin, hanging by a ribbon, lay on her brown bosom. These were proofs, had any been needed, of her inborn delight in life and her own loveliness. (Stevenson 2002, 118)

Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century coins were much used as decorations; modern and ancient specimens were mounted as brooches and pendants after the 'archeological fashion' launched by the Castellani firm in Rome, becoming a sign for the purchaser of refined taste. An almost contemporary portrait by Kate Carr, representing Mrs. George Henry Boughton (1877), shows how this kind of coin-set jewellery was worn, the attention of the beholder (as that of Stevenson's character) being caught by "the large gold circular pendant with heavy loop in the manner of an ancient bulla, worn on a ribbon" (Gere et al. 1984, 141).

These golden jewels in classical style were "a particular favourite in 'Aesthetic' society" (Gere, Munn 1996, 61). As his letters seem to show, Stevenson was actually not at all uninformed about the matter of fashion and jewellery: he paid attention to his friend Walter Ferrier's "coral waistcoat studs" (Harman 2005, 257) and succinctly evokes Fanny's clothes and the ghostly quality of one of her "wild" dresses (Stevenson 1995, 137). An attentiveness to brilliancy and precious stones can frequently be detected in his stories: descriptions of diamonds play an important role, for instance, in the *New Arabian Nights* (1882), in which these gems, the favourite precious stones of the *fin de siècle*, are stolen and owned by different characters.

What is striking, then, is the consonance between the atmospheres usually cherished by Aesthetic writers and Stevenson's short story, a longing for tropes such as enchanted portraits, jewellery descriptions and references to fairy tales that are usually regarded as characteristics of the fantastic fiction of authors such as Vernon Lee, Wilde and Pater. Both fairy tales and jewels are mentioned in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in the section devoted to Sybil Vane's love story, which frequently features Dorian as an equivocal 'Prince Charming', and in chapter XI, in which ancient adornments are described as a "taste that enthralled him for years and, indeed, may be said never to have left him" (Wilde 1989, 148). Besides, in Lee's *A Phantom Lover* (1886) a locket containing "some very dark auburn hair" (Lee 2006, 153) becomes a symbol of the whole ghost-story, "in which the reader is led to doubt seriously whether the protagonists have actually come into contact with the supernatural at all" (Kandola 2010,

24). Since both these authors have been studied by Bizzotto as relevant writers of the ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’, it seems appropriate to adapt the theoretical framework exposed in her essay. My aim, then, in the following section will be to compare the peculiarities that Bizzotto has found in works by Wilde and Lee³ with those of “Olalla” – a story written by an author rarely associated with the Aesthetic Movement – in order to claim for this narrative a specific category in the *fin-de-siècle* literary market, that of the ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’.

3 “Olalla” and the ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’

Elaborating upon theories by, among the others, Remo Ceserani (1996) and Rosemary Jackson (1981), Bizzotto writes that at the turn of the nineteenth century there “existed a specific submode of fantastic literature associated with the poetics of the Aesthetic Movement” (2016, 40). Walter Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, Vernon Lee’s ghost stories, and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been analysed by Bizzotto in order to find common features revealing “an urgency to redefine the nature and role of art and the artist” (40), along with the use of the fantastic mode. Among the characteristics that she deems typical of this fiction is the adoption in the plot of the motif of the “mediating object”, an object of art functioning “as catalyst to dimensions other than the *hic et nunc*” (44). Such is the case with Dorian’s portrait in Wilde’s novel, allowing the main character to gain supernatural powers and elaborate his own life as a personal work of art. In “Olalla”, as I have already discussed, the portrait of the beautiful female ancestor seems to have a similar function. While in Wilde’s work the fantastic dimension is directly asserted (the picture is described as changing from one chapter to the other), in “Olalla” it is instead suggested with a certain hesitancy:

to judge by the vivacity of the attitude, the eyes and the features, I might have been beholding in a mirror the image of life. (Stevenson 2002, 101)

Almost a living portrait, the picture seems endowed even with magic:

The first light of the morning shone full upon the portrait, and, as I lay awake, my eyes continued to dwell upon it with growing complacency; its beauty crept about my heart insidiously, silencing my

3 The list also includes Falkner’s *The Lost Stradivarius* and Beardsley’s *Under the Hill*, not to mention Merimée’s and Poe’s short stories as specimens taken as sources of inspiration by the writers of the ‘Aesthetic Fantastic’.

scruples one after another [...]. Day after day the double knowledge of her wickedness and of my weakness grew clearer. She came to be the heroine of many day-dreams, in which her eyes led on to, and sufficiently rewarded, crimes. She cast a dark shadow on my fancy; and when I was out in the free air of heaven, taking vigorous exercise and healthily renewing the current of my blood, it was often a glad thought to me that my enchantress was safe in the grave, her wand of beauty broken, her lips closed in silence, her philtre spilt. And yet I had a half-lingering terror that she might not be dead after all, but re-arisen in the body of some descendant. (101-2)

The immaterial and intoxicating presence of the portrait, corrupting the mind and the health of the narrator, is brilliantly evoked through the use of images pertaining to magic, hence the reference to the wand and the philter. Since Stevenson had planned the story in such a way as to leave unclear whether Olalla is actually a vampire or rather the descendant of a declining race, the paragraph seems to have been purposefully inserted in the narrative in order to stress this ambiguity: is the British officer burdened from the beginning by just a gloomy state of mind, or is Olalla actually a demon and the portrait (probably her portrait)⁴ wicked? As in the case of Lee's "Amour Dure", or of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the question is almost impossible to answer, thus confirming the story's belonging to that group of fantastic texts that "sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e. even beyond the narrative itself" (Todorov 1975, 43). As such, the portrait convincingly fits in with Bizzotto's definition of the mediating object in the 'Aesthetic Fantastic', an item duplicating "a beautiful body or a talented temperament" and manifesting "an overwhelming capacity to create and propagate beauty, and, at the same time, to show the dangers of unconditional artistic devotion" (Bizzotto 2016, 45).

This concerns not only the portrait, which, as already seen, awakens an erotic obsession in the mind of the hero - a longing for an encounter with the real model that will take place only halfway through the tale - but also the other fragment/mediating object to be found in the story: a devotional poem in Olalla's chamber. Focused on the rhetorical dyad of pleasure and pain, found amid ancient treatises

⁴ Critics have tried to single out who the woman represented in the portrait is by elaborating upon her closeness to Olalla, or rather to her mother. Ornella De Zordo, for instance, inclines towards the former (De Zordo 1994, 102), while Julia Reid towards the latter (Reid 2006, 87). It is likely, however, that the portrait is a symbol of the whole family, therefore being representative not only of the two women but of Felipe too. It cannot be denied, nevertheless, that the painted woman is strikingly redolent of Olalla; otherwise, the narrator would not look at the portrait later in the story proclaiming the female ancestor's inconsistency as compared with Olalla's beauty (thus implying a strong resemblance between the woman in the painting and her beloved).

in Latin, the composition seems to show that Olalla is not only beautiful but well-read enough to write religious verses:

Pleasure approached with pain and shame,
 Grief with a wreath of lilies came.
 Pleasure showed the lovely sun;
 Jesu dear, how sweet it shone!
 Grief with her worn hand pointed on,
 Jesu dear, to thee!
 (Stevenson 2002, 113)

As for the portrait, the poem is met by the narrator as the proof of Olalla's superior nature, a woman "whom now I conceived as of a saint" (114). In Stevenson's story a worshipful attitude towards beauty – represented by the picture and the poem – that is typical of the 'Aesthetic Fantastic' can be detected; the circumstances here described are reminiscent not only of *Dorian Gray's* first chapter, in which the character of Basil Hallward falls in love with Dorian's portrait, but also of many of Lee's short stories. Nearly every tale collected in Lee's *Hauntings* introduces characters that become obsessed with artistic representations of dead people: a portrait of a Renaissance *femme fatale* in "Amour Dure", as already mentioned; an eighteenth-century aria driving the composer Magnus to madness in "A Wicked Voice"; another portrait, this time of a sixteenth-century ancestress, exercising its peculiar influence on the mind of a Victorian noblewoman in *A Phantom Lover*.

This insistence on the peculiarities of fragments belonging to an ancient past, able to awaken the latent desires of contemporary characters, is aptly mirrored in "Olalla". The hero is, after all, quite fascinated by the Gothic pedigree of the *residencia*, "a rich house, on which Time had breathed his tarnish and dust has scattered disillusion" (Stevenson 2002, 112). It is here, among the walls that are set "with the portraits of the dead" (112), that he comes across antique images and artistic fragments in which Olalla's figure is curiously mixed with a dead past: first the portrait and then the poem, probably redolent of a religious literature inspired by her books "of a great age and in the Latin tongue" (113). Shortly after, the narrator meets Olalla herself, who is curiously depicted as if she is frozen, a statue gleaming in the darkness of the gallery, her eyes moving in the darkness:

My foot was on the topmost round, when a door opened, and I found myself face to face with Olalla. Surprise transfixed me; her loveliness struck to my heart; she glowed in the deep shadow of the gallery, a gem of colour; her eyes took hold upon mine and clung there, and bound us together like the joining of hands; and the moments we thus stood face to face, drinking each other in, were sacramental and the wedding of souls. I know not how long it was be-

fore I awoke out of a deep trance, and, hastily bowing, passed on into the upper stair. She did not move, but followed me with her great, thirsting eyes; and as I passed out of sight it seemed to me as if she paled and faded. (116)

This meeting will prove to be crucial for the plot: after this "wedding of souls" the narrator will devote his life to the pursuit of Olalla's affection, not fulfilling his goal due to her love's final refusal, motivated by her "fear that the hereditary taint will afflict their offspring" (Mighall 2002, xii).

There is an episode, though, occurring before this momentous encounter, in which the hero is seen examining the portraits hanging on the walls. While brooding on the decadence of the race that for centuries has owned the castle, he casts his eyes on a mirror and sees his own face:

And an ancient mirror falling opportunely in my way, I stood and read my own features a long while, tracing out on either hand the filaments of descent and the bonds that knit me with my family. (Stevenson 2002, 112)

If considered in connection with Stevenson's family history, dominated both by nervous breakdowns and ambitious aspirations, this scene seems to have been at least in part inspired by autobiographical considerations. According to Ornella De Zordo (De Zordo 1994, 101), Stevenson is here probably thinking of his ill health, very likely to have been passed on by his grandfather to him; as a consequence, this brief passage could represent an overt sign of his anxieties about his family taint, aptly inserted in a story that is focused on the issue of hereditary degeneration, as most of the critics have highlighted (Mighall 2002, x-xiv; Reid 2006, 83-8; Harman 2005, 308-9). Since he is transposing memories of his problematic family inheritance on narrative terms, it is likely that Stevenson has thus created a story in which his ambivalent relationship with his family is equally reflected in the narrator's analysis of Olalla's peculiar lineage.

In this respect, it is revealing that the narrator is utterly fascinated both by the ancient, past-sodden *residencia* and by its eccentric dwellers, in the same way as Stevenson, the descendant of moody Scottish engineers, was fascinated by the dangers and joys of storytelling, imagination and literary creation: in one word, of aesthetic pleasure. Claire Harman has thus condensed the issues lying at the heart of Stevenson's notorious quarrels with his father:

Robert Louis Stevenson judged himself by the same family standards, which venerated professionalism, inventiveness, hard work and money-making and thought little of self-expression and art.

He came to feel that he was a very inadequate heir to these active men, a mere 'slinger of ink', sunk in comparative idleness. (2005, 9)

Given this dichotomy between 'professionalism', 'hard-work', and 'money-making' on one side, and 'art' on the other,⁵ it would not be preposterous to argue that what is haunting the ancient manor is not madness or vampirism, but rather the risk of plunging oneself into aesthetic activities, in "comparative idleness". By creating a story in which a male character falls under the spell of two beautiful, dangerous women, dressed in an updated aesthetic fashion, Stevenson is likely giving voice to his dilemmas about an artistic career that in the mid-1880s was still met with covert disappointment by his father, and was not always able to provide him with a decent living. From this perspective, "Olalla" also becomes an allegory of Stevenson's efforts at making a living out of a purely artistic vocation, a battle that he shared with most of other late-Victorian writers, and that, for personal reasons, he wanted to win to prove himself worthy of his ancestors, not just a "slinger of ink" aiming at the "comparative idleness" of writing books. As a consequence, the portrait featured in "Olalla", not to mention the poem, the golden pendant and the other symbols above analysed, become a powerful emblem of the dangers of beauty (or rather of the pursuit of beauty), for all these features are bound in Olalla's world to decay and desperation.

4 Conclusion

It is in order to save his hero that Stevenson makes the British officer painfully renounce Olalla's beauty: by leaving the wicked building, the main character saves his life. But even if the events occurred in that odd place have been told through the disturbed perspective of the narrator, the portrait (at this point, it is of no importance whether it is enchanted or not) has proved to exert a lasting influence on his mind. As in Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, in "Olalla" art seems always to retain its enchanted powers, regardless of the fate of those who are subjugated by it; they can die like Dorian Gray or they can survive; beauty is, nevertheless, eternal. At the end of the story, the portrait of Olalla's ancestor still hangs in one of the *residencia's* rooms, waiting perhaps for another victim that will be prone to nurture impossible dreams about the woman depicted on the canvas.

For these reasons, "Olalla" well fits in with the mode of the 'Aesthetic Fantastic', though not always confirming to Bizzotto's charac-

⁵ For a stimulating book on how these categories overlap in the works of Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater see Freedman 1990.

teristics.⁶ The story provides an example of an 'Aesthetic Stevenson' that is, perhaps, a different writer from the "leisured aesthete" of the first essays (Abrahamson et al. Thomson 2018, xxxviii) and the "elegant stylist" showing in *Prince Otto* (1885) his "purple vein" (Harmann 2005, 251). "Olalla" seems to reveal how Aestheticism was deeply rooted not only in Stevenson's personal anxieties about the role of the artist at the end of the nineteenth century, but also in his 'romantic' imagination. By describing a 'palace of the art' fallen into decay and haunted by fascinating female demons, he has managed to create a powerful parable of the risks inherent in the translation of strange dreams into art, and of the dangers of escaping from reality in search of an absolute beauty, well represented by the handsome features of Olalla. It is perhaps on this account that fairy gardens and vampire women do not feature in Stevenson's nearly contemporaneous work, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Dr Jekyll's London is indeed almost an exclusively male world; the supernatural employed in the novella being an emblem of the uncanniest Gothic of the soul. It is as if Stevenson was not interested anymore in creating stories about haunting portraits and romantic intoxications. Perhaps for him, as for his hero, the enchanted courtyard of the *residencia* was precluded, the gay dresses and the brilliant tropes of the 'Aesthetic Fantastic' were not so irresistible after all. The hero will probably return to a gloomy English city, as his author did, at least figuratively, by creating the shocking tale of *doppelgängers*, set within the dark fabric and nightmarish urban landscapes, that is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

⁶ For instance, the idea of the 'god in exile', which Pater borrowed from Heinrich Heine and used in some of his short-stories, seems absent from "Olalla". Bizzotto devotes a part of her analysis to this feature, emphasising a "homosocial teacher/disciple relationship which appears as yet another *risqué idéal* of the Aesthetic Movement suggested through the fantastic" (Bizzotto 2016, 46).

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