A Critical Look at Post-First World War England: Annie Vivanti's *Naja Tripudians*, from Reality to Fiction

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Abstract
Annie Vivanti published her book *Naja Tripudians* in Italian in 1920. At this time the English press was circulating news which astonished the general public and caused such widespread panic that parliament was forced to introduce legislation concerning the sale and consumption of drugs as well as child prostitution related to white slavery. An explicit condemnation of these social and political issues is evident in much of Vivanti's work, from newspaper articles to this very novel set in post-war England. In this essay I will analyse the reality of these events in English society throughout the Great War and their shift into the realm of fiction in Annie Vivanti's novel.
Keywords: Annie Vivanti, drugs, white slavery.

1. Annie Vivanti

"A multicultural polyglot, immune to any kind of prejudice, well-accustomed to confronting diversity and to flourishing in the face of difference […] transgressive, modern" (Ricaldone 2008: 33)[1]. These words describe to us the writer Annie Vivanti (1866-1842), known by the English public as Annie Charles Vivanti and in the United States as Anita Vivanti Chartres or simply Anita Chartres.

The author, born in England to an Italian father and a German mother, grew up in Switzerland, England, the United States and Italy, spoke and wrote in several languages (though predominantly in English and Italian), and was a poet, dramatist, journalist, political activist and writer of stories, novels, children's fiction and works of travel. A rare woman in the European literary landscape

[1] All of the translations of Italian quotations that appear in this article, including those taken from the novel *Naja Tripudians*, are my own.

of these early decades of the twentieth century: "Multilingual and multicultural, she challenged the notions of gendered sexuality and of ethnicity. Vivanti disdained conceptions decorum and social respectability" (Wood and Moretti 2016: ix).

She was a writer of great success, praised by her public but also by English and Italian critics alike. A true literary phenomenon: she published her commentaries in important newspapers and magazines in England, North America, France and Italy and her books were printed by the leading publishers of the age, providing her with a substantial gain. She had only one failed attempt, the dramatic work *La rosa azzurra* of 1898. However, as was the case with the majority of her peers, this flop would be relegated to oblivion after her death, into this "submerged galaxy" whence Arslan and Chemottie (2008) present her to us.

Vivanti is a decidedly difficult writer to define, in fact, "[Annie Vivanti] knew very well from the start what she was writing and how she wanted to write it. She felt it entirely unnecessary to align herself with a particular style or movement" (Vivanti 2006: 133). It is for this very reason that critics[2] have always encountered difficulty when approaching her work: it is "a free and jovial force amidst our Italian academic decrepitude" (Giusso 1929: 45ff). Fundamentally, a major focus of discussion has revolved around whether or not her work falls under the definition of popular literature, specifically the romance novel, rather than that of serious and committed writing. This uncertainty arises despite the ever-present attention she gives to the reality of the time and to the inclusion of themes both social and political (not to mention critical); an attention which is always coated in a fine layer of irony and which appears in her works, which are normally denied a reassuring happy ending.

This interest in what goes on in the world around her and which is reflected in almost every example of her writing cannot be ignored when approaching her work with a critical eye, especially if one takes into account the important journalistic[3] facet of her life

[2] In Italy Benedetto Croce, Borgese, Carducci, Pancrazi, Russo and others all dealt with her work.

[3] She collaborated, among others, with *The Times, Westminster Gazette, L'idea nazionale, Il popolo d'Italia* and *Il Corriere della Sera*. For her activities as a journalist see Urbancic (2016) and Moretti (2016).

and the "profound cross-pollination between Vivanti's journalism and literary writings" (Moretti 2016: 129f). In this sense she does differentiate herself from other writers of her time, such as Matilde Serao, who found in the current affairs they studied for their articles a source of important inspiration for their fiction. The Anglo-Italian writer would take very current and fashionable themes and figures in the society of the age as a point of departure for her works, which frequently proved to be difficult for her society and critical audience to digest.

This clear step from the real to the fictional, characterised by a strong criticism of particular societal situations and by a very marked anti-British slant, especially following the outbreak of the First World War, is apparent in the 1920 work analysed here, *Naja Tripudians*.

It is during these post-war years that Annie Vivanti confronted two social themes in particular, which gave rise to a situation of panic in English society, namely the consumption of drugs and the prostitution of young girls, both of which were prevalent in big cities like London. The general social alarm elicited during this period, aided by the megaphone of the media but also by literature and the arts, would impel a major change in British legislation regarding these matters.

Vivanti's novel would also contribute to this trend. Parliament could no longer continue to feign ignorance of what was happening and had to be held accountable in the public domain. Therefore, in *Naja Tripudians* the author does not shy away from detailed descriptions of unsavoury situations; she does not spare the reader the horror that grips the protagonists and, above all, she does not give them a happy ending. On the other hand, these two issues also permit the writer to place Great Britain's profound moral crisis under a scrutinising spotlight, a crisis towards which she demonstrates herself to be plainly unsympathetic.

2. Use and Abuse of Drugs

The years following the First World War bore witness to a polemical debate surrounding the use of drugs which was the primary focus of the mass media and which would gradually contribute to the development of restrictive laws.

In his book *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Undergrounds* (1992) Marek Kohn notes that the use of cocaine, morphine and opium before[4], during and after the First World War was fairly commonplace and hardly controlled by the Government before 1916 and he recounts the famous cases that occupied the front pages of newspapers for months and months and spread fear through society.

During the Great War, among the troops the demand for cocaine was very high (see Kamieński 2016), not only as a form of medication but primarily as a means of escape, if only temporary, from the terrible reality of the conflict the soldiers faced. This consumption was already established among the bohemian artists, but the war? strengthened the market and allowed it to spread to new sections of the population.

The Great War brought with it a collective hysteria, which was generated in large part by politicians, military leaders and the media. The problem arose from the drug abuse perpetuated by the Canadian troops which in turn intensified the demand for drugs within the United Kingdom and threw into sharp relief the Government's lack of control in this area. In 1916 the public were made aware of a cocaine black market in London's West End which used prostitutes to spread the drug among the soldiers. The seeds of contention had been sown: the use of narcotics was linked inextricably to moral decadence, to prostitution, to homosexuality, to the threat posed by certain races (particularly black and oriental peoples), and also to the fear of enemy subversion.

But it is ultimately after the end of the Great War, in a period of disillusionment and uncertainty in all areas of life, that this issue, now no longer the reserve of the troops, became a national problem, linked to immorality and a national threat.

It was in this climate of collective hysteria that a number of laws were introduced, echoing those in other countries during these years, which complied with the instructions laid out in the Treaty of Versailles: *Regulation 40B* of 1916 and in the *Dangerous Drugs Act* of 1920. These limited the production, importation, exportation and

[4] At the beginning of the century scientific newspapers like the *British Medical Journal* highlighted the existence of "morphine parties" frequented by aristocratic women and jewellers selling boxes with silver and gold syringes.

sale of opium, cocaine and heroin and penalised the use of narcotics outside medical application or the military.

Without doubt it was the case of Billie Carleton's death by overdose in 1918 that caused this volatile climate in Great Britain to explode. The investigation into the death of this young and popular comedy actress shed light on the use of cocaine and barbital and on the existence of opium parties in the artistic world of the West End. The scandal that was exposed here and the rivers of ink that flowed from serious journalism as much as from the literary world at this time were key contributors to the introduction of the *Dangerous Drugs Act* of 1920.

Such a dramatic and rampant issue could not be restricted to the remit of the media and quickly spilled into the world of literature. 1919 saw the publication of Sax Rohmer's novel *Dope*, set in the Limehouse area of London and based on Billie Carleton's story. This story also served as the inspiration for Noël Coward's play *The Vortex,* released in 1924. In 1922 Alistair Crowley published *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, based, as he himself states in the work, on a true story and in fact probably his own relationship with drugs. Also drawing from the situation in Limehouse, Thomas Burke published *Limehouse Nights* in 1916 and H. V. Morton wrote *The Nights of London* in 1926.

This topic made its way into Italian literature and became the subject of many works including Dino Segre 'Pitigrilli"s *Cocaina*, 1921, and Luciano Zuccoli's popular novel *Divina fanciulla* of 1920 (see Arslan 1986).

As we have seen, this issue was the focus of public attention in all spheres of life, from the media to literature to films, and Annie Vivanti's work was no exception. In her study on the *femme fatale'*s role in the writer's production, Julie Dashwood (2016: 41) comments on a letter written by Vivanti to the Italian writer and journalist Barbara Allanson in 1921 in which she states that "it has become very fashionable to talk about cocaine". In 1919 she wrote an article for *La Donna* entitled "La corsa all'Estasi e all'Oblio", again based on the scandalous death of Carleton, the English actress, and in which she warns against the use of drugs[5]. However, Vivanti was

[5] She also made use of this article to criticise the "usurped fame of morality" of the British who were far from prim and proper in their orgies of lurid luxury.

already well acquainted with the topic in question, as in 1912 she had published *Circe* (entitled *Maria Tarnovska* when it reached Britain in 1915) in which the protagonist is a morphine addict. In addition to *Naja Tripudians*, the British author returned to the same subject matter in 1932 with *Salvate le nostre anime*.

3. White Slavery

With regards to the topic of prostitution, primarily of children and connected with the trafficking of people, we can assert that, like the drug epidemic (with which there are many shared aspects), this was also a theme widely dealt with in the media and in literature in the years in which *Naja Tripudians* was written and published.

The primary source of information regarding this topic comes from Urbancic (2003) in an article in which she attempts to respond to the possibility that Vivanti had committed plagiarism by copying Elizabeth Robins' work *Where Are You Going To…?*, later published under the title *My Little Sister*, 1913. The scholar concludes using substantial evidence that from the end of the eighteenth century onwards there was a great public fascination with the topic of "white slavery":

> various congresses had been held throughout Europe to discuss the matter. Not surprisingly, numerous cases of kidnapping for procurement or White slavery were brought to light, either to police stations, or to social workers, or by letter through the Letters to Editor pages of various newspapers. (Urbancic 2003: 29)

The story narrated by Robins is, it must be admitted, very similar in many ways to that narrated by Vivanti in her novel of 1920. They could very easily have both been based on the same incident, one of the many involving young people – sometimes almost children – being abducted or sold by their families into prostitution.

Urbancic presents us with a number of published works of authors in Robins' circle – and surely this extends to our author – such as the poet Masefield (*Docet Umbra,* 1909), the suffragette Teresa Billington-Greig (*The Truth about White Slavery*, 1913) or the journalist William Thomas Stead, who, in 1885, had published in *The Pall Mall Magazine* "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon"[6], a

[6] This was a series of controversial newspaper articles about child prostitution and

series of articles that plunged London into a state of moral panic and forced the creation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, by which the age of consent for girls was raised from 13 to 16 years of age.

To understand the enormous circulation of and interest in this matter one need only be aware, as Urbancic notes, of the fact that between 1913 and 1920 more than 20 films concerning prostitution and people trafficking were produced in Hollywood.

London, once again the centre of child prostitution scandals, was the perfect city setting for literary intrigues, with Thomas Burke choosing Chinatown in the East End as the perfect location for a series of sordid tales comprised in his work *Limehouse Nights*, 1916. The first of these tales, *The Chink and the Child*, deals with precisely this topic.

4. *Naja Tripudians*

In *Naja Tripudians*, 1920, Annie Vivanti tells the story of two innocent young sisters whose upbringing and education in a rural village, cut off from the rest of the world, has left them ill-prepared to confront the harsh reality of post-war England. Their life is interrupted by the entrance of Lady Randolph Grey, who, playing the role of the charitable and kind aristocratic woman, lays a trap which leads them to her house in London. Upon arrival they are abruptly struck by crude reality: kidnapped and at the service of refined but vicious clients they become engulfed in a world of drugs and sex. Myosotis, the elder of the two, is able to escape but Leslie remains trapped forever.

Right from the introduction the author declares that the novel is not purely the product of her imagination[7]: "I have not invented this story: it is Reality, that terrible author, who conceived and created it. It was Reality who weaved the first threads, and Reality who

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the sale of virgins with such provocative titles as "The Violation of Virgins", "The Confessions of a Brothel-Keeper", "The London Slave Market", "How Girls Were Bought and Ruined" or "A Child of Thirteen Bought for £5".

[7] Despite the author's declarations, some critics, such as Venturi, point out that this novel "uses reality as more of a pretext, transforming it into literature" (Venturi 1994: 306).

dictated the black pages of the final draft" (Vivanti 2013: 19). The story is based on truth, as are many similar ones, and its aim is to denounce the corrupt English society, left debauched and depraved following the Great War[8].

The theme of vice, whether it be in the context of the use of drugs or the prostitution of the girls and young women, is approached with much specific detail and with the use of two *leitmotifs* which appear long before the arrival of the two young women from their provincial world to London: leprosy and the snake Naja Tripudians[9].

In the first part of the work Vivanti devotes great detail to the theme of leprosy and right from the outset this disease is referred to as "a moral as well as a physical affliction" (Vivanti 2013: 17). In fact, when the clients of Lady Randolf appear on the scene, Vivanti uses one of them, Neversol, as a mouthpiece to describe their condition.

> We are all sick […] sick from life; sick from pain, sick from pleasure. Within all of us are savage beasts, roaring and howling, gnawing away at our entrails, destroying our nerves, sucking our veins. And you have to silence them and make them sleep. (p. 103)

Clearly this is about a psychological illness, about a soul corrupted by uncontrollable thirst for pleasure above all and everyone[10]:

> The possibilities of enjoyment lie beyond our thirst for pleasure. And so the intellectuals, the refined people, have endeavoured to search beyond life, beyond reality, for the filter that can calm the ardour of their indistinguishable desires… […]. The opium smoker, the morphine addict, the cocaine and marijuana taker holds in his hand the cup of all intoxication. […] The truth does not deter him, reality is no obstacle; everything is

[8] After the First World War, Vivanti's social and political perspective (one that comprised a decidedly anti-British sentiment founded on its dominion over other nations and their desire for independence) was taking hold. In *Naja Tripudians* this is evident when broaching, with heavy irony, the formal education of the two protagonists (Vivanti 2013: 14).

[9] These two symbols always appear in relation to the father of the two protagonists, Dr Harding, a specialist in tropical diseases, leprosy and the cure of venomous snake bites.

[10] These protagonists, refined aristocrats, who use drugs in their perennial search for something exceptional, as well as the figure of the *femme fatale*, are typical of the European Decadent movement, of which our author has partaken.

possible for him […]. He finds himself free of all human misery, free of all human connection. He has defeated both God and nature! (p. 104)

But, in addition to this, it is about known illnesses that express a clear wish to infect the other: "We, the depraved, to neither enjoy alone nor suffer alone; we love to share our vices with others …with *all* others!" (pp. 97f).

In this context of moral depravation Lady Randolph is identified with the Naja Tripudians: through her voluptuous, sinuous form she entices and enchants her victims before killing them with her deadly venom. Annie Vivanti presents this serpent to us as a symbol of a world in which evil triumphs, where innocence is wiped out and where values are sacrificed. This is the leprosy of the current society, against which nothing is being done.

A mental infirmity has been unleashed in our cities. It is spreading a moral infection which infects and corrupts all that surrounds us […]. I was thinking about the social "nagas" of our great cities for whom their triumph is to contaminate and corrupt all that is still pure, healthy and sacred in this world… […]. We live today surrounded by this moral leprosy and we are not afraid to catch it […]. We search for cures to all other ills: to physical illnesses, to poverty, to social revolutions, to all physical and material problems… But who will cure the contamination of the spirit, the gangrene of the soul which is taking us over in this infamous era? (pp. 73f)

Thus, the two young women come to know these people who are sick with life, with pain and with pleasure, clients of the house of Lady Randolph, drug addicts searching sensory satisfaction, for something new, for something different. Myosotis and Leslie are locked in a chamber of perdition which Vivanti illustrates for us in all its detail: the provocative outfits, the strong cocktails, the story of Moses the cat with his morphine addiction, that of Daphne Howard, half man, half woman, the consumption of opium and of white powder, and the presence of very young girls, practically children like Leslie, there to entertain men like Toto "who by virtue of having indulged so much now found no enjoyment in anything" (p. 38). In this perpetual search for pleasure and novelty at any cost young Leslie will remain trapped, "caught in the coils of a monstrous white snake" (p. 114).

Thus concludes Anni Vivanti's novel. An end which brings no consolation, that leaves the reader, like the protagonist, with a lump in the throat and filled with horror before the vice-ridden and depraved situation in which poor Leslie has been abandoned; an adolescent, barely fifteen years old, who just previously, having read Jane Eyre and seen that the life of the protagonist was so full, had concluded that her own by contrast so colourless and empty (p. 30). A young girl, fresh and gullible, innocent and pure, swept along by corruption and vice by a state of immorality and decadence into which English has sunk after the Great War.

Naja Tripudians is a story which must have certainly moved a wide readership. It is true that the facts were already known to this readership or in any case they would not have differed much from what they had been reading in the press, but the novelist names these two young girls, places them in a pure and healthy environment, sheds light on the disaster of an education which does not prepare one for understanding or survival in today's world, reveals the tricks of the depraved to carry away their captives and finally describes in detail those corrupt surroundings. As a result, the readers were not only moved and identified with the pure and vulnerable innocence of the two young girls but they also experienced rage and impotence, which also led them to demand legislation capable of halting this state of affairs.

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