

## Eleonora Duse and the Poetic Debut of Sara Teasdale

Maria Pia PAGANI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes the impact of the figure of Eleonora Duse on the poetess Sara Teasdale, who included in her first collection a series of lyrics dedicated to her (Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems, 1907), and also considered her in the following collection (Helen of Troy and Other Poems, 1911). Teasdale never saw Duse acting, but the great Italian actress accompanied the young American poetess in her poetic debut, thanks to which she managed to overcome a difficult period due to health problems. Duse became her guide, helping her to develop an aesthetic as a poetess and to reveal her inner world. Some of these compositions were also taken up by the American press in 1922 and 1923, on the occasion of Duse's last tour in the United States. With her appreciated poetry, Teasdale helped to consolidate the myth of Duse in the Twentieth century.*

**Keywords:** *Eleonora Duse; Sara Teasdale; Gabriele d'Annunzio; poetry; theatre;*

### 1. Introduction

With her lyrics, the poetess Sara Teasdale (1884 - 1933) helped to consolidate the myth of Eleonora Duse (1858 - 1924) in the Twentieth century. With her charismatic personality, the famous Italian actress was able to conquer the audience, but also occasionally to generate new forms of creative expression: most of the poems dedicated to her are written by people who had effectively seen her performance, and who wanted to immortalize the emotions of that special moment<sup>2</sup>. In the case of Sara Teasdale, the singularity of the situation is that she had never seen her acting, nor she had ever seen her in the flesh. But she wrote 10 poems on Duse! It is a unique case, which testifies the *direct* and intense admiration of a young girl for the greatest artist of her time, although her personal approach was totally *indirect*.

In the first years of her life, Teasdale had health problems that prevented her from having many contacts with the outside world: in this austere life, she read a lot and developed a great imagination, which turned into a deep poetic sensitivity. In her problematic condition, the cult of Duse was a tender dream and a form of consolation. Or better, it was a true medicine.

How was Teasdale's admiration for Duse born? At first, we can consider her reading, in English translation, of the works by Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863 - 1938): in particular, the plays *The Dead City* (*La città morta*) and *Francesca da Rimini*, and the novel *The Flame of Life* (*Il fuoco*)<sup>3</sup>. An emblematic passage from the novel, *The Labyrinth*, was also published in 1906 in *The Garden Anthology*<sup>4</sup>.

Duse was on tour in the United States in 1902-1903; her repertoire included Suderman (*Magda*) and Dumas jr. (*Claudio's Wife*), but the absolute focus was on three plays by d'Annunzio: *La Gioconda*, *The Dead City*, *Francesca da Rimini*. She performed in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Humanities, University of Naples "Federico II", Italy, mariapia.pagani@unina.it

<sup>2</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2022. *Ammiratrici di Eleonora Duse*. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, pp. 93-101.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of the novel was published in 1900, a few months after its release in Italy.

<sup>4</sup> R. Gardner. 1906 (ed.). *The Garden Anthology*. London: Routledge, pp. 148-150.

<sup>5</sup> M. I. Biggi. 2010 (ed.). *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*. Milan: Skira, pp. 107-108.

Teasdale was born in St. Louis and was 18 years old. She wasn't at the Century Theater, but she certainly felt the uniqueness of that event in Missouri: in fact, Duse's tours were always accompanied by a lot of publicity, in order to attract the attention of the people.

In 1903 Teasdale graduated from Hosmer Hall. From 1903 to 1907 she became member of a young women group of St. Louis called the Potters, interested in art. Among their activities, they published the monthly magazine "The Potter's Wheel", which was very important for the development of her poetic talent.

One group of women who particularly attracted the Potters were the famous actresses of the day, some of whom had appeared in St. Louis. These actresses – Julia Marlowe, Olga Nethersole, Maude Adams, Alla Nazimova, and Eleonora Duse – filled a special niche whose appeal was based, first, on the fact that as artists, they translated the beauties of the plays in which they appeared with such intensity that often the distinction between the actress and her role was blurred<sup>6</sup>.

For Teasdale, Duse was the perfect feminine artist: she represented the embodiment of mystical and symbolic beauty, a sort of goddess who came from the Homeric past (*The Dead City*)<sup>7</sup> or the Pre-Raphaelite period (*Francesca da Rimini*). With her nomadic work, she was also a woman who traveled the world: probably, she also represented the free life that Teasdale dreamed during her sad illness<sup>8</sup>. The leading image of the cosmopolitan artist Eleonora was extraordinary for a provincial girl as Sara, exalting her fantasy life.

## 2. *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* (1907)

The first collection in which the American poetess paid homage to the Italian artist was published in Boston, by The Poet Lore Company, in Autumn 1907: *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*<sup>9</sup>. Teasdale was 23 years old and dedicated the book to her parents, who financed the printing. It is considered the highest result of her spontaneous tendency to idealize people, also unknown like in the case of Duse: the charming actress attracted her romantic and imaginative nature, and became a muse for the revelation of her poetic genius.

Teasdale was impressed by some pictures of Duse, and wrote five poems considering them. Usually, the photos in *The Dead City* and *Francesca da Rimini* had a promotional use for the audience: in this special case, they became an instrument of poetic inspiration<sup>10</sup>. This collection had a limited distribution, but its genesis is testified in 1905:

*Sonnets to Duse* (1907) is important today as the first step on the path that led to poetic fulfillment. Divided into two sections, it contains a group of poems to Eleonora Duse and a group of miscellaneous songs, lyrics, and sonnets. Reproductions of three of the pictures of the actress that Sara Teasdale received in 1905 and were examined so enthusiastically by the Potters are included in this

<sup>6</sup> C. Schoen. 1986. *Sara Teasdale*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> M. P. Pagani, 2018. "The Dead City. Eleonora Duse and the Archaeology of the Soul." in E. Dobson – G. Banks (ed). *Excavating Modernity. Physical, Temporal and Psychological Strata in Literature, 1900-1930*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 42-62.

<sup>8</sup> Teasdale named her kitten Fosca, in homage to the main female character of d'Annunzio's novel *The Flame of Life*. This is another sign of her fervent admiration, because Foscarina (also called Fosca) is the *alter ego* of Duse.

<sup>9</sup> S. Teasdale. 1907. *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*. Boston: The Poet Lore Company Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2014. "Un gioco di specchi per la Foscarina. Foto di Eleonora Duse al Vittoriale." In *Ricerche di S/Confine* 1, pp. 139-157.

little book. Most of the poems in it had appeared in “The Potter’s Wheel”<sup>11</sup>. None of them had ever appeared in any public periodical<sup>12</sup>.

Teasdale was able to promote her career with elegance and constancy, proving to be grateful and never aggressive. She sent a copy to the critic Arthur Symons (1865 - 1945), a fervent admirer of Duse, who translated in English the plays by d’Annunzio for Duse’s American tour in 1902-1903<sup>13</sup> and presented a chapter on her the volume *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906)<sup>14</sup>. Symons published a brief note on *Sonnets to Duse* in London newspaper “The Saturday Review” on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1907.

She mailed a copy, too, to the actress Julia Marlowe, a friend of Symons, who in return sent her the most recent picture of Duse she could find. And of course she tried to get one into the hands of the great Duse herself, through the American consul in Florence, who wrote that he had delivered the book to her home at 54 Via Robbia on November 30. Duse could not read English,<sup>15</sup> and Sara never received an acknowledgement<sup>16</sup>.

Teasdale’s idealized portraits of Duse are realistic in the impact of her acting on the audience, and this passionate devotion was absolutely sincere. Some of these sonnets were reprinted by the American press in 1923, on the occasion of Duse’s tour in the United States. A copy arrived at the Vittoriale, where it is still in the library of d’Annunzio.

### 3. *Helen of Troy and Other Poems* (1911)

In *Sonnets to Duse* there are nine lyrics in praise of the actress<sup>17</sup>. Teasdale had also written another poem for her, *Silence*, but it was not included in this collection. It went in her second collection, *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*<sup>18</sup>, whose publication of was a sort of miracle:

In mid-December 1910, everything Sara had waited for seemed to happen at once, and her illness and boredom were swiftly dispelled on a flood of excitement. *Helen of Troy*, after having been circulating for over a year in both England and America and rejected by half a dozen publishers, was accepted by Putnam’s, who did not require her to bear the expense. Her second book was not a hobby in which her wealthy parents indulged her, but a professional work manning its own way. Arriving almost at the same time was an invitation to join the Poetry Society of America and attended their first annual dinner meeting in New York on December 28 – a legitimate opportunity, at last, to break free of the stifling

<sup>11</sup> For ex. the sonnet *To a picture of Eleonora Duse in “The Dead City”* (incipit: Carved in the silence by the hand of Pain) was published in “The Potter’s Wheel”, in March 1906, with a reproduction of the photo. The last issue of the magazine was in October 1907.

<sup>12</sup> M. H. Carpenter. 1960. *Sara Teasdale. A Biography*. New York: The Schulte Publishing Company, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> Symons’ translations of *Francesca da Rimini*, *La Gioconda* and *The Dead City* were published in 1902 and reprinted several times.

<sup>14</sup> A. Symons. 1906. *Studies in Seven Arts*. New York: Dutton and Company, pp. 331-136.

<sup>15</sup> The poetess Amy Lowell (1874 - 1925) encouraged Sara to translate the poems into French, so that Duse could read them, but this never happened.

<sup>16</sup> W. Drake. 1979. *Sara Teasdale, Woman and Poet*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> In her early photographic portraits, Sara imitated the posture of Duse on the stage. This is another relevant element of her veneration for the actress.

<sup>18</sup> S. Teasdale. 1911. *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*. New York: Putnam.

atmosphere of her home. She immediately begged her parents for permission to go<sup>19</sup>.

This new collection appeared in October 1911 and was a step forward for Teasdale's poetical evolution, with benefits also in her private life. The book obtained a great success and her reputation became of a national importance: in fact, she had reached the status of the best young woman poet in America.

The Italian actress inspired the American poetess with the liberating vision of the feminine expressive power, and the strength of this ideal contact produced a result of high impact<sup>20</sup>. Silence had a great importance in Duse's acting, and Teasdale was able – even though she never knew it directly – to describe its empathic charge: the power of acting inspired creative imagination becoming power of the word, and then liveliness of the soul.

A new edition of *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*, with changes and revisions, was printed in 1922. Duse's tour in the United States started in October 1923, but she died in Pittsburgh on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1924<sup>21</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusions

Though Teasdale never saw Duse acting, the great Italian actress accompanied the young American poetess in her literary debut, thanks to which she managed to overcome a difficult period of her life. This is the effect of Duse's extraordinary personality: she became her ideal of beauty and guide, helping her to develop an aesthetic and to reveal her inner world.

Thanks to Duse, Teasdale discovered her literary vocation and persevered in it. Since the 1920s, the gift became mutual: with her appreciated poetry, Teasdale helped to consolidate the myth of Duse in the Twentieth century. Nowadays, Duse is celebrated as a pioneer of modern theatre, and Teasdale as a pioneer of modern poetry.

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<sup>19</sup> W. Drake. 1979. *Sara Teasdale, Woman and Poet*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2011. "The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse." In *World Literary Review* 1, pp. 84-93.

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## SONNETS TO DUSE

9

*To Eleonora Duse*

Oh beauty that is filled so full of tears,  
Where every passing anguish left its trace,  
I pray you grant to me this depth of grace:  
That I may see before it disappears,  
Blown through the gateway of our hopes and  
fears  
To death's insatiable last embrace,  
The glory and the sadness of your face,  
Its longing unappeased through all the years.  
No bitterness beneath your sorrow clings;  
Within the wild dark falling of your hair  
There lies a strength that ever soars and sings;  
Your mouth's mute weariness is not despair.  
Perhaps among us craven earth-born things  
God loves its silence better than a prayer.

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## 10 SONNETS TO DUSE

*To Eleonora Duse*

Your beauty lives in mystic melodies,  
And all the light about you breathes a song.  
Your voice awakes the dreaming airs that throng  
Within our music-haunted memories:  
The sirens' strain that sank within the seas  
When men forgot to listen, floats along  
Your voice's undercurrent soft and strong.  
Sicilian shepherds pipe beneath the trees;  
Along the purple hills of drifted sand,  
A lone Egyptian plays an ancient flute;  
At dawn the Memnon gives his old salute  
Beside the Nile, by desert breezes fanned.  
The music faints about you as you stand,  
And with the Orphean lay it trembles mute.

W. H. O. U.

AND OTHER POEMS II*To Eleonora Duse in "The Dead City"*

Were you a Greek when all the world was young,  
Before the weary years that pass and pass,  
Had scattered all the temples on the grass,  
Before the moss to marble columns clung?  
I think your snowy tunic must have hung  
As now your gown does — wave on wave a mass  
Of woven water. As within a glass  
I see your face when Homer's tales were sung.  
Alcaeus kissed your mouth and found it sweet,  
And Sappho's hand has lingered in your hand.  
You half remember Lesbos as you stand  
Where all the times and countries mix and meet,  
And lay your weight of beauty at our feet,  
A garland gathered in a distant land.

12

## SONNETS TO DUSE

*To a Picture of Eleonora Duse  
in "The Dead City"*

Your face is set against a fervent sky,  
Before the thirsty hills that sevenfold  
Return the sun's hot glory, gold on gold,  
Where Agamemnon and Cassandra lie.  
Your eyes are blind whose light shall never die,  
And all the tears the closed eyelids hold,  
And all the longing that the eyes have told,  
Is gathered in the lips that make no cry.  
Yea, like a flower within a desert place,  
Whose petals fold and fade for lack of rain,  
Are these, your eyes, where joy of sight was slain,  
And in the silence of your lifted face,  
The cloud is rent that hides a sleeping race,  
And vanished Grecian beauty lives again.

## AND OTHER POEMS

13

*To a Picture of Eleonora Duse  
in "The Dead City"*

Carved in the silence by the hand of Pain,  
And made more perfect by the gift of Peace,  
Than if Delight had bid your sorrow cease,  
And brought the dawn to where the dark has lain,  
And set a smile upon your lips again;  
Oh strong and noble! Tho' your woes increase,  
The gods shall hear no crying for release,  
Nor see the tremble that your lips restrain.  
Alone as all the chosen are alone,  
Yet one with all the beauty of the past;  
A sister to the noblest that we know,  
The Venus carved in Melos long ago,  
Yea, speak to her, and at your lightest tone,  
Her lips will part and words will come at last.

## 14 SONNETS TO DUSE

*To a Picture of Eleonora Duse as "Francesca  
da Rimini"*

Oh flower-sweet face and bended flower-like  
head!

Oh violet whose purple cannot pale,  
Or forest fragrance ever faint or fail,  
Or breath and beauty pass among the dead!

Yea, very truly has the poet said,  
No mist of years or might of death avail

To darken beauty — brighter thro' the veil  
We see the glimmer of its wings outspread.

Oh face embowered and shadowed by thy hair,  
Some lotus blossom on a darkened stream!

If ever I have pictured in a dream

My guardian angel, she is like to this,  
Her eyes know joy, yet sorrow lingers there,  
And on her lips the shadow of a kiss.

## AND OTHER POEMS

15

*To a Picture of Eleonora Duse*

Was ever any face like this before —  
So light a veiling for the soul within,  
So pure and yet so pitiful for sin?  
They say the soul will pass the Heavy Door,  
And yearning upward, learn creation's lore—  
The body buried 'neath the earthly din.  
But thine shall live forever, it hath been  
So near the soul, and shall be evermore.  
Oh eyes that see so far thro' misted tears,  
Oh Death, behold, these eyes can never die!  
Yea, tho' your kiss shall rob these lips of breath,  
Their faint, sad smile will still elude thee, Death.  
Behold the perfect flower this neck uprears,  
And bow thy head and pass the wonder by.

## 16 SONNETS TO DUSE

*To a Picture of Eleonora Duse with the Greek  
Fire, in "Francesca da Rimini"*

Francesca's life that was a limpid flame  
Agleam against the shimmer of a sword,  
Which falling, quenched the flame in blood  
outpoured  
To free the house of Rimino from shame —  
Francesca's death that blazed aloft her name  
In guilty fadeless glory, hurling toward  
The windy darkness where the tempest roared,  
Her spirit burdened by the weight of blame —  
Francesca's life and death are mirrored here  
Forever, on the face of her who stands  
Illumined and intent beside the blaze,  
Grown one with it, and reading without fear  
That they shall fare upon the selfsame ways,  
Plucked forth and cast away by bloody hands.

## AND OTHER POEMS 17

*A Song to Eleonora Duse in "Francesca da Rimini"*

Oh would I were the roses, that lie against her  
hands,  
The heavy burning roses she touches as she  
stands!

Dear hands that hold the roses, where mine  
would love to be,  
Oh leave, oh leave the roses, and hold the hands  
of me!

She draws the heart from out them, she draws  
away their breath,—  
Oh would that I might perish and find so sweet  
a death!

## SILENCE

(To Eleonora Duse)

**W**E are anhungered after solitude,  
Deep stillness pure of any speech or sound,  
Soft quiet hovering over pools profound,  
The silences that on the desert brood,  
Above a windless hush of empty seas,  
The broad unfurling banners of the dawn;  
A faëry forest where there sleeps a Faun;  
Our souls are fain of solitudes like these.  
O woman who divined our weariness,  
And set the crown of silence on your art,  
From what undreamed-of depth within your heart  
Have you sent forth the hush that makes us free  
To hear an instant, high above earth's stress,  
The silent music of infinity?