



VERNON LEE (1856-1935)

Vernon Lee (née Violet Paget), only daughter of Matilda and Henry Ferguson Paget, was born in Chateau St Léonard, near Boulogne-sur-Mer on 14 October 1856. Respectable, though by no means rich, the family led a peripatetic existence in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, before settling in Florence in 1873. They moved into Lee's final home, Villa Il Palmerino in Maiano, in 1889.

While Lee's early education was irregular, the family's nomadic lifestyle cultivated her fluency in European languages. Swiss and German governesses played their part, but it was her mother and only brother, the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, who became her most influential tutors. She received instruction based on textbooks from Matilda's own youth and contemporary reading, and her introduction to music was equally dependent on her mother's tastes, determining Lee's later investment in the opera and musical traditions of the eighteenth century. Eugene also took a significant interest in his younger sister's tuition. Letters exchanged in the 1860s and 70s show that Lee's essay-like missives were carefully corrected by Eugene, and that he frequently advised his mother on her academic development.

Vernon Lee's cultural imagination blossomed in Rome during the winter of 1868-69 when the Pagets became friends with the family of American artist John Singer Sargent. Accompanied by Sargent's mother, Mary, Lee visited museums and the opera; heard music in the Papal chapel; and experienced a new social world. For Lee, Mary Sargent was the "high priestess" of that "Spirit of Localities" (Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller*, 20). Her affinity with the historical and mythic qualities of place became a significant

feature of the travel writing Lee returned to throughout her life; one sees this in works such as *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (1899), *The Enchanted Woods* (1905), *The Spirit of Rome* (1906), *The Sentimental Traveller* (1908), *The Tower of Mirrors* (1914), and *The Golden Keys* (1925). Most of these travel volumes were published by John Lane at the Bodley Head with whom Lee developed a longstanding professional relationship that began in 1904 with the publication of *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* and ended in 1929 with *A Vernon Lee Anthology*.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the idiosyncratic nature of Vernon Lee's formal education, Matilda Paget had high expectations for her daughter. Precocious and gifted, Lee did not disappoint. At the age of 13 she published a short story, "Les aventures d'une pièce de monnaie," in *La famille*, a Lausanne periodical, and in 1875 she published a series of critical articles on women novelists in *La Rivista Europea*. It is in the late 1870s that she adopted the androgynous pseudonym "Vernon Lee" under which she came to public attention in 1880 with *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, a highly acclaimed discussion of the Italian literature, music, and drama of the period and its place in European culture.

It is also in 1880 that Lee first met the poet Mary Robinson with whom she developed a romantic friendship that lasted until Mary married in 1887. Writing of her visit to Lee's home in Florence, Mary comments on the range of visitors to "Casa Paget" (Robinson, 935); they included writers, artists, and diplomats from a variety of countries including Britain, France, Russia, Spain, and Italy, providing a flavour of the cosmopolitan circles in which the family moved. In 1881, Lee in turn visited Mary in London. Here she met many of the Robinsons' friends and acquaintances including the Burne-Joneses, Edmund Gosse, the Morrises, the Rossettis, and Oscar Wilde. That same year she met Walter Pater, with whom she became friends and corresponded until he died in 1894. The impact of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) on Lee's work is evident in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (1884), of which he is the dedicatee, and in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), which includes her valedictory to him. Nevertheless, her admiration for Pater did not prevent her from satirising those coteries of aesthetes inspired in part by his *Studies*, members of which were only thinly disguised in Lee's roman à clef *Miss Brown* (1884). Pater reserved judgement, but the novel's dedicatee, Henry James, wrote

some months after its publication to express his consternation at her ferocious critique of perceived immorality. Although Lee maintained a polite correspondence with James and sent him a copy of her first collection of supernatural tales, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), he would later find himself satirised as the author Jervase Marion in “Lady Tal,” published in *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (1892). It was an act that led James to cool his friendship with Lee and to classify her as fiercely intelligent, but dangerous. His short story “The Death of the Lion” (1894), published in the first issue of *The Yellow Book*, can be read in part as a response to “Lady Tal.”

While Lee distanced herself from what she saw as the excesses of late-Victorian aestheticism, her supernatural fiction is redolent of the decadence from which she ostensibly recoiled. In addition to *Hauntings*, she published two further volumes, *Pope Jacynth, and Other Fantastic Tales* (1904) and *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), both of which include material printed earlier in various periodicals. Among these is “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” which appeared in Volume 10 of *The Yellow Book* in July 1896. While the story takes place in a “rich” and “exotic” realm in keeping with the aesthetic excesses of *The Yellow Book* (Colby, 227), its Wildean resonances suggest Lee’s sympathy for her disgraced fellow aesthete now serving out his sentence in Reading gaol (Stetz, 113). Furthermore, Vernon Lee’s early interest in Pater’s impressionist aestheticism continued to evolve and re-emerged transformed in her theory of “psychological aesthetics.” She explores this empirical analysis of aesthetic response in *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) and *The Beautiful* (1913). The former was co-written with Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson, who replaced Mary Robinson as Lee’s close companion from 1887 to 1900.

Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s collaborative experiments were informed by Robert Vischer’s theory of *Einfühlung*, or “feeling oneself into” an object or place. The term was propagated by Theodor Lipps and later translated by Edward Titchener in 1909 as “empathy.” An early article on this topic, “Beauty and Ugliness,” published in the *Contemporary Review* in October 1897, led to an unexpected charge of plagiarism from Lee’s friend and neighbour, the American scholar Bernard Berenson. Following an awkward correspondence between Berenson, his wife Mary, and Lee, he eventually retracted his accusation. In the years following Anstruther-Thomson’s departure from Il Palmerino, Lee became preoccupied by other concerns, but in 1924 she returned to

psychological aesthetics to write a substantial introduction to Anstruther-Thomson's *Art and Man* (1924), a tribute to Kit who died in 1921. Lee's important contribution to the study of aesthetics was acknowledged during a convocation held at Durham University on 20 September 1924, at which she was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Although Lee emerged as a significant writer in the 1880s and 1890s, she continued to publish extensively throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, producing a diverse array of works including a musical drama, *Ariadne in Mantua* (1903); the novels *Penelope Brandling* (1903) and *Louis Norbert* (1914); and two works of literary criticism, *The Handling of Words* (1923) and *The Poet's Eye* (1926). As the new century dawned, she also became increasingly politically active. Letters to her friend Ethel Smyth show that Lee was not supportive of militant suffragism, but she recognised the value of feminist thought as expressed in *Women and Economics* (1898) by Charlotte Perkins Stetson (later Gilman), which she appraised for *The North American Review*. In this review, "The Economic Dependence of Women," she acknowledged that Stetson had opened her eyes to the importance of the Woman Question. A revised version appears as a chapter entitled "The Economic Parasitism of Women" in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908).

As the first World War loomed, Lee penned several articles questioning the patriotic fervour that was leading Britain towards conflict with Germany. Her pacifist stance resulted in the loss of many friends. *The New Statesman*, the *Nation*, and the *Labour Leader* were among the few British periodicals that continued to publish her political views. When war broke out in 1914, Lee found herself exiled in Britain, unable to return to her Italian home. Alarmed by the escalating violence, she joined the Union for Democratic Control, a pacifist group that included Isabella Ford, James Ramsay MacDonald, Ottoline Morrell, and Bertrand Russell. British by birth, but cosmopolitan by nature, Lee's pacifism was underscored by her understanding of empathy and her belief in the value of mutual respect among nations. The unacceptability of such beliefs in times of war led Lee to write *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915), a visceral anti-war allegory, illustrated by Maxwell Armfield. In 1919, Lee was finally able to return to Il Palmerino, where her war experiences found expression in *Satan the Waster* (1920). This text includes an embellished version of the *Ballet* bordered by a prologue, an

epilogue, and her philosophical meditations on the dangers of that group-emotion which had supported nationalist agendas.

Her continuing efforts to comprehend the complexities of emotion are evident in her final book, *Music and Its Lovers* (1932), a study of imaginative responses to music. But it is perhaps *Proteus; or the Future of Intelligence* (1925) that highlights the enduring agility of Lee's mind. Published in Kegan Paul's "Today and Tomorrow" series, and written when Lee was almost 70, it considers a future she will never experience. In "Lore of the Ego" – unpublished notes amassed between 1931 and 1934 – Lee writes that she was born too early into a world too young. Nearing the end of a rich intellectual life, her voracious curiosity remained insatiate. Vernon Lee died at Il Palmerino on 13 February 1935.

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