



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 5, Issue 2

Autumn/Winter 2022

Vernon Lee: Decadence, Morality, and Interart Aestheticism

Patricia Pulham and Sally Blackburn-Daniels

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 September 2022

Date of Publication: 23 January 2023

Citation: Patricia Pulham and Sally Blackburn-Daniels, 'Vernon Lee: Decadence, Morality and Interart Aestheticism', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 5.2 (2022), ii-viii.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v5i2.1662.g1775

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Vernon Lee: Decadence, Morality, and Interart Aestheticism

Patricia Pulham and Sally Blackburn-Daniels

University of Surrey and Teesside University

This collection of essays ensued from ‘Vernon Lee 2019’, an international conference held to mark the centenary of Lee’s return to her Italian home, Villa Il Palmerino, after enforced exile during World War I.¹ While Lee emerged as a significant writer in the heady atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism and decadence, she continued to publish extensively throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and her death in 1935, she produced a wealth of new material in a variety of genres including travel writing, novels, philosophical and aesthetic treatises, and compilations of supernatural fiction. As the new century dawned, she also became politically active; in the years leading up to World War I, her polemical pacifist articles appeared in the periodical press and she wrote an important anti-war morality play, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915). In *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) and *The Beautiful* (1913), she took criticism in exciting new directions, focusing on the developing field of ‘psychological aesthetics’; experimented with literary analysis in *The Handling of Words* (1923); and consolidated a lifelong interest in musicology in *Music and its Lovers* (1932).

Writing in 2003, Vineta Colby, one of Lee’s biographers, commented that only ‘a small company’ read the work of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935). In the two decades that have elapsed there has been a major expansion of academic interest in Lee’s oeuvre. Since then, access to Lee’s work in published and digitized form has increased dramatically, introducing her to a whole new generation of readers and students and prompting scholarship not only on her fiction but on other genres in which she wrote, as well as fictionalized versions of Lee in contemporary writing.² This has generated immensely valuable and exciting new research; new editions of her letters (no longer abridged); and several international conferences, including two in 2022: ‘Vernon Lee, Aesthetics and Empathy’ held in September at Churchill College, Cambridge, and ‘Vernon

Lee et le fantastique' held in October at the Université de la Côte d'Opale, Boulogne-sur-Mer, the French city in which Lee was born. Despite this surge in critical responses, however, many of the works Lee published in the twentieth century remain underexplored, and there is more to be discovered not only by examining her influences, but also by juxtaposing her ideas with those of theorists and artists who were her contemporaries in the latter decades of her life.

This special issue of *Volupté* focuses primarily on works produced or reprinted post-1900. However, given the strands of interest that recur in Lee's writings, authors also revisit earlier works to rethink and reconsider how aspects of them might be read differently in the light of developments in her own thoughts on ethical Aestheticism, phenomenology, and political activism, or in relation to psychoanalytic theory, anthropology, musicology, and orientalism. For example, in 'Musical under the touch of the Universe: Aesthetic Liberalism, Music, and Vernon Lee's Essayistic Art of Resonance', Fraser Riddell brings Lee's exploration of phenomenology into dialogue with Hartmut Rosa's theory of 'resonance'; from Rosa's sociological perspective, the quality of human life depends on one's open relationship with the world, beyond the pragmatic measurements of resources or fleeting moments of happiness. First tracing Vernon Lee's 'affective modes' (p. 8) spanning *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) to 'Out of Venice at Last' (1925), Riddell then analyses Lee's essay, 'Signor Curiazio: A Musical Medley', first published in *Juvenilia* (1887), to examine the connections between the ethical values evident in her writings on music and her stylistic experimentation with the essay form in the broader contexts of nineteenth-century liberalism.

Music, morality, and phenomenology are similarly at the heart of Michael Craske's essay, 'Lying Down or Standing Up for Music: Hearing and Listening in Vernon Lee's *Music and its Lovers*'. As Craske illustrates, in the questionnaire that Lee included in this text, she is not only preoccupied by questions of sensory and emotional engagement but also with one that asks for a value judgement, encouraging her respondents to comment on the moral or immoral aspect of music with specific reference to Wagner. Craske further shows that Lee's focus on music's modes of

reception – making distinctions between hearing, listening, and overhearing – must be understood in the context of nineteenth-century debates surrounding the meaning, usage, and function of music. Like Riddell's, Craske's analysis moves backwards and forwards in time, juxtaposing Lee's 'A Wicked Voice', first published in 1887 as 'Voix maudite', with *Music and its Lovers* to provide a rich reading of Lee's longstanding investment in the sensory capacity of 'hearing'.

Patricia Pulham's essay, 'Orientalist Aestheticism: Vernon Lee, Carlo Gozzi, and the Venetian Fairy Comedy' similarly engages in literary time-travelling. Beginning with Lee's early works: *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* and *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* (1883), Pulham explores the orientalism of Carlo Gozzi's fiabe teatrali: *La donna serpente* and *Turandot* (both performed in Venice in 1762) and its impact on Vernon Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896) and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' (1897). Establishing these critical connections, Pulham demonstrates how Lee's writings participate in the late-Victorian orientalist zeitgeist and how this orientalism has implications for Lee's own later thoughts on the question of 'nation' in works such as *The Ballet of the Nations* and *Satan the Waster* (1920). Pulham argues that the reprinting of 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Tales* (1927), published the year after the premiere of Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, in April 1926, encourages a re-examination of this tale and its explanatory preface in the context of Italian politics and Lee's own post-war meditations on the permeability of national boundaries.

As their titles suggest, the two remaining essays in this special issue, Sally Blackburn-Daniels's 'From Crystal Palace to the *Grand Guignol*: Vernon Lee and the Great War' and Marco Canani's 'Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*: A Modern Morality, an Intermedial Mosaic', both centre, like the closing sections of Pulham's essay, on Lee's responses to World War I, but in very different ways. Blackburn-Daniels's article considers how Lee marries dance, anthropology, and drama in *The Ballet of the Nations* and *Satan the Waster*. Using as her starting point Lee's experience of seeing a war dance by the Dahomey people – specifically Amazon warriors – at the Crystal Palace exhibition in Sydenham in July 1893, Blackburn-Daniels highlights how the anthropological

and ethnological discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are discernible in both Lee's essays and her fiction. Furthermore, she demonstrates how the anthropological study of these women and other warriors, along with the faux barbarity of the Parisian Grand Guignol, influenced the dramatic and stylistic techniques Lee deployed in *The Ballet of the Nations*.

Like Blackburn-Daniels's essay, Canani's discusses *The Ballet of the Nations*. In his wide-ranging study, Canani considers the play an 'intermedial mosaic', a form of 'interart imbrication' and traces the explicit and implicit allusions that contribute to its complexity.³ He argues that alongside the influence of medieval morality plays, Lee's drama engages with different art forms drawn from Italian, German, and French culture, inspired not only by Andrea Orcagna's frescoes at Pisa's Campo Santo and Baroque *Trauerspiel*, but also by the work of Giovanni Battista Lulli, the French-naturalized composer about whom she writes in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*.

While focusing on *The Ballet of the Nations*, Canani is attentive to the interart aesthetic that characterizes much of Lee's work and highlights the ways in which we might think of it as a form of bricolage, constructed artfully from her influences, reading, recollections, knowledge, and experience. Indeed, the motif of 'lumber' is one that recurs in her writings and appears early in the new preface to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* that accompanied the 1887 edition where she describes her Italy of the period as one born of a 'remote lumber-room full of discarded mysteries and lurking ghosts'.⁴ Yet, the interart aesthetic Canani identifies in Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations* also resonates more broadly with the ways in which the arts function in her works and point to the legacy of Pater's own decadent Aestheticism.

In their introduction to *Decadence and the Senses*, Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé recognize the 'Decadent preoccupation with synaesthesia and the interrelationship of different art forms'.⁵ In 'The School of Giorgione', the essay in which Pater meditates on the sensuous nature of the arts, he initially challenges what he refers to as the popular misapprehension that the various arts – poetry, music, and painting – are simply 'translations into different languages of one and the

same fixed quantity of imaginative thought'; instead, he claims that 'all true aesthetic criticism' begins with the recognition of each art's individual beauty'.⁶ 'But', he argues:

although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what the Germans term an *Anders-streben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.⁷

As this issue of *Volupté* shows, this is a view of the arts that Lee embraced throughout her writing career and it is one that emerged in fledgling form in an early essay, 'The Child in the Vatican' where she invents a 'fairy tale' in which the 'Statue-demons' in the Vatican galleries cast a spell on a visiting child. This spell makes it love not only Rome, but beauty and the arts, a love that becomes ever stronger as it grows, and elicits unexpected emotions until, once grown, the child realises that 'it had been learning something which others did not know'.⁸ This secret knowledge allows it to hear in a Mozart symphony 'unintelligible words' and to recognize that bars of music are 'the brethren, the sounding ones of the statues', that all who are brethren 'whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word', will always speak to it, and that it will 'believe only in them and in their kin'.⁹ There is little doubt that the child in Lee's fairy tale is none other than Lee herself, and it is in Rome where, accompanied by Mary Newbold Sargent and her son, John Singer-Sargent, the young Lee develops a taste for the arts in their myriad forms, an experience supplemented elsewhere by the teachings and advice of her brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton, and early mentors, Henrietta Jenkin and Cornelia Turner.¹⁰

This 'brotherhood' of the arts and the various ways in which one art might enhance another is evident in the works discussed in this volume: in Riddell's essay, the aesthetics of music and the essay form enrich one another; in Pulham's Gozzi's *commedie dell'arte* transform into supernatural fiction; in Blackburn-Daniels's article dance, drama, and political polemics coalesce. But, as Stefano Evangelista has argued, in her later work Lee attempted to distance herself from decadent Aestheticism. In his analysis of 'Valedictory', he argues that this closing essay in

Renaissance Fancies and Studies (1895) ‘marks a shift’ in her thinking ‘from abstract aestheticism to an ethics of sympathy and usefulness’ and he notes Lee’s attempt to move pleasure in the arts from the body to the soul.¹¹ This concern with ethical Aestheticism is especially identifiable in the musicological analyses provided by Riddell and Craske in this collection, and is equally evident in Vernon Lee’s stance on nationalism, patriotism, and World War I in *The Ballet of the Nations* and *Satan the Waster*. Yet the notion of ‘empathy’ that informs her psychological aesthetics and ethical responses to the Other in her political polemics requires a permeable membrane between body and soul, self and the world that makes it almost impossible to maintain those distinctions. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Lee ventured to rewrite ‘the history of aestheticism’ and revise her own contributions to it.¹² Yet, as is evident from the essays in this issue, her efforts were not entirely successful; the lure of the arts and her attraction to the less wholesome aspects of decadence and Aestheticism continued to haunt her thought in later life. They remain discernible in the dense, layered allusiveness that marks her work and offers such fertile, productive ground for new scholarship.

¹ ‘Vernon Lee, 2019’ was organised by the University of Surrey and the University of Oxford in collaboration with the Associazione Culturale Il Palmerino and the British Institute in Florence.

²² See Paula Marantz Cohen, *What Alice Knew: A Most Curious Tale of Henry James and Jack the Ripper* (2010); Mary F. Burns’s *Portraits of an Artist* (2013) and her series of detective novels by the same author featuring Violet Paget and John Singer-Sargent as sleuths; and Melissa Pritchard, *Palmerino* (2014).

³ Elisa Bizzotto, ‘Blurring the Confines of Art and Gender: Aubrey Beardsley’s Legend of *Venus and Tannhäuser*, “The Fragment of a Story”’, in *Strange Sisters: Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Francesca Orestano and Francesca Frigerio (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 213-32 (p. 218).

⁴ Vernon Lee, Preface to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), pp. xiii-xlix (p. xxvi).

⁵ Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé, ‘Introduction’, *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 1-14 (p. 7).

⁶ Walter Pater, *Studies of the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2010), p. 122.

⁷ Pater, p. 124.

⁸ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1881), p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 38.

Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Lee’s half-brother, initially entered the British diplomatic service which he left due to ill health, becoming a published poet. Among his most recognised collections are *The New Medusa* (1882) and *Sonnets of the Wingless Hours* (1894). Henrietta Camilla Jackson Jenkin (1807–1885) was a Paris-based writer of popular fiction whose works include an anti-slavery novel, *Cousin Stella: Or, Conflict* (1859) and *Jupiter’s Daughters* (1874). Cornelia Boinville de Chastel Turner (1793–1874) authored two novels, both of which were published anonymously: *Angelo Sanmartino: A Tale of Lombardy* (1859) and *Charity: A Tale* (1862).

¹¹ Stefano Evangelista, 'Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism', in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aestheticism*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 91-111 (p. 108).

¹² Evangelista, p. 109.