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Vernon Lee's Occult Beauty

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Throughout her career, the late-Victorian essayist, fiction writer, and aesthetic theorist Vernon Lee (1856-1935) sustained a critique of the Aesthetic movement to which she was nevertheless an important contributor. Finding that the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* sanctioned elitist self-absorption, irresponsible excess and intellectual vapidness, Lee sought to instead establish a connection between the worship of beauty and the development of ethics. One of the ways in which she achieved this divergent aestheticist project was, I wish to suggest, through occult theories of knowledge, learning, renunciation, and submission. My aim in this article is to approach the concept of beauty in Lee's work, considering how it energizes and challenges her interwoven concepts of desire, history, and ethics. Turning first to the occult underpinnings of her essays on aesthetics, I subsequently unearth the queer historiographical injunction embedded within her Gothic fiction, exploring, through a reading of 'Amour Dure', how the historian's encounter with occult beauty awakens affective and sexual investments in the feminist past.

First, I wish to offer a note on my use of the terminology of aestheticism, drawing on Lee's own definition. Lee suggests that the difference between aestheticism and decadence is less definitional than it is performative: she refers to 'persons styled by themselves aesthetes and by others decadents.'¹ 'Decadent' is, according to this schema, a word only used to describe someone else, whereas 'aesthete' is a word that some would choose to refer to themselves – although, notably, not Lee, who situates herself outside of both. Bearing in mind Lee's willingness to use the two terms to describe the same collection of people and texts, in this article, I draw upon them somewhat interchangeably, distinguishing between them on the occasions upon which Lee finds it important to do so.

Central to late-Victorian occultism is the figure of the initiate. In Theosophy, initiation refers to the process by which the disciple, guided by the Masters through escalating levels of direct spiritual experience, accesses new ways of seeing and sensing: ‘the man becomes conscious of a new world, as though some great new sense had been given to him.’²² The aesthete, a seeker of beauty, also strives to enter into a ‘new world’ of perceptual sensitivity, one that is opened up through the cultivation of a ‘new sense.’ Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) articulates the initiatory ideal as an imagined moment of awakening, in which ‘our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed, or have other secrets.’²³

The spiritual awakening envisioned by Wilde was difficult to uncouple from the cult of beauty’s cruder association with the mania for collecting, a trope that George du Maurier famously satirized in the pages of *Punch* with his depiction of a Wildean couple who aspire to live up to their teapot.²⁴ That Wilde’s vision of sensory rebirth is embedded within Chapter Eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which depicts Dorian’s decadent collecting-fugue, indicates the difficulty of separating the spiritual ideals of aestheticism from its extravagant material practices. Lee found an alternative to the apolitical, isolated mode of aestheticist collecting through Walter Pater’s idea of asceticism. Lee, who cites Pater’s *Marius The Epicurean* (1885) as her inspiration, insists that ‘our deepest aesthetic emotions are [...] connected with things which we do not, cannot possess.’²⁵ In order to come into contact with beauty, we must devote ourselves to the work of pursuing it, for ‘art cannot be enjoyed without initiation and training.’²⁶ Occult initiation begins with the practice of renunciation: an axiom in the inaugural issue of the Theosophical magazine, *Lucifer*, reads: ‘the first step (toward occultism) is sacrifice, the second, renunciation.’²⁷ Through the occult premise of initiation coupled with renunciation, Lee aligns herself with the spiritual possibilities of aesthetic awakening, while distancing herself from its materialistic dimensions.

Throughout Lee's art criticism, she resists the scholarly, accumulative model of knowledge – the idea of study *as* collecting, in which learned men in armchairs accrue facts toward the eventual cognitive mastery of a subject – in favour of an experiential mode, in which the curious, childlike initiate comes to grasp a concept intuitively through an act of enchantment. In her own recollections of her childhood education, Lee writes of her nanny imbuing her with an interest in folklore and fairy tales. Although, she admits, these are stories that one can find 'in the sixpenny books sold at the stations', for her, they were 'learned in some occult and direct manner', through a feminine oral practice.⁸ Similarly, in her parable of aesthetic education 'The Child in The Vatican' (1881), Lee imagines the ancient statues in the Vatican casting a spell upon a child visitor, such that the child learns directly 'the teachings of the statues themselves.'⁹ The statues, 'a very mixed company', which includes 'unspeakable ruffians and outcasts', hail from all levels of the social hierarchy.¹⁰ They speak in 'gibberish' and 'slang;' they 'have never read Winckelmann' and thus 'do not know all these wondrous classifications of schools of which [...] we are so justly proud.'¹¹ Yet they teach the child something more fundamental: 'a lesson of their own nature and kinship.'¹² In these examples of aesthetic education, Lee privileges a direct mode of learning that undermines existing discourse, such as the classificatory systems imposed by Winckelmann, in favour of the magic spell cast by feminine and working-class figures.

In *Laurus Nobilis* (1909) Lee again draws on occult language in order to present a notion of beauty as something that wields a significant and direct power over the initiate. She writes:

The Beautiful is in some manner one of the primordial and, so to speak, cosmic powers of the world. The theories of persons styled by themselves aesthetes and by others decadents have indeed attempted to reduce man's relations with the great world-power beauty to mere intellectual dilettantism or sensual superfiness. But the general intuition has not been shaken, the intuition which recognized in Beauty a superhuman, and, in that sense, a truly divine power.¹³

Lee critiques the collector's mode of aestheticism – 'intellectual dilettantism' – as a reductive approach to beauty. She rejects the highly refined or 'superfine' sensuality of the decadent, instead turning to a democratic ideal of common sense – the 'general intuition' – in order to

suggest that beauty is ‘primordial’, ‘cosmic’, a ‘superhuman and truly divine power.’ In keeping with its divine power, beauty works upon she who interacts with it. It is not subject to her; rather, she is subject to it. Drawing on the imagery of the occult, Lee writes, ‘We call in beauty as a servant, and see, like some strange daemon, it becomes the master; it may answer our call, but we have to do its bidding.’¹⁴ This domination by the ‘master’ beauty is an initiatory step on a spiritual path, a threshold the initiate must pass over in order to come into ethical relation to otherness. Beauty is pedagogical: it is a teacher. ‘Pleasure in the beautiful is essentially a spiritual phenomenon, one which (alters) the contents of our mind, while leaving the beautiful object itself intact and unaltered.’¹⁵ If we fully ‘give ourselves to it’, we increase our ‘spiritual activity’. We learn, finally, to ‘reject the lesser good for the greater’, in art and in life, meaning that, through the cultivation of aesthetic discernment, we also develop the capacity to judge between right and wrong in other areas of our lives.¹⁶ The cultivation of good judgement inevitably leads to renunciation: ‘The Beautiful teaches asceticism leading to a more complete and harmonious rhythm of individual existence.’¹⁷ Thus, counter to the tenets of *l’art pour l’art*, beauty is not autonomous *from* the political or ethical, but neither is it subject to political demands. Rather, it is a supernatural, all-possessing power that teaches its initiates the proper sensibility through which to engage ethically in the world around them.

Lee’s premise of beauty as a spiritual teacher is haunted by the problematic but important question of taste: particularly, the problem of individual taste that might be unhealthy. Lee holds this notion of dangerous beauty, which she introduces to curious effect in ‘Beauty and Sanity’ (1909), at arm’s length. How, she asks, can she even discuss it, without ‘introducing a sickly atmosphere of decadent art and literature into (her) valley of bay trees?’¹⁸ Grasping for an example, she conjures the Roman Emperor Tiberius, a ‘very subtle person’ who preferred to sleep on black sheets and take his meals on black tablecloths. In order to prefer black, she suggests, Tiberius had to forego the colour white, a shade universally accepted as good and pleasant, and by proxy, forego all purity, newness, and health. Mimicking the voice of the

imagined Decadent, Lee asks, ‘But what if we *do not care for white*? What if we are so constituted that its insipidity sickens *us* as much as the most poisonous and putrescent colours?’¹⁹ The notion of a taste for complexity and refinement leads, then, to a flipped aesthetic experience: that which to ordinary people is beautiful and good (‘the Antique and Outdoor Nature, and early Painters, and Mozart and Gluck, and all whitenesses physical and moral’) becomes ‘insipid’ and ‘sicken[ing]’, and that which is repulsive to most becomes pleasurable: ‘Other people’s poison is our meat.’²⁰ Decadent taste, described in phenomenological terms as an inversion – ‘the desire for the topsy-turvy’²¹ – undermines the supposed universality of ordinary beauty. Yet the ‘meat’ that it offers is still, at its heart, a poison. While for Lee Decadent art is not to be a target of public moral censure, it is dangerous on an individual scale: an ‘unwholesome aesthetic self-indulgence’ that leads to the ‘disintegration of the soul.’²² With this image of the endangered soul, Lee obliquely references an earlier piece of writing: the post-trial defence of Oscar Wilde that she embedded within a book review of Max Nordau’s anti-Decadent treatise *Degeneration* (1892; tr. 1895), where she reorients moral censure toward the social isolation that leads to ‘the deterioration of the soul’s faculties and habits.’²³ Thus, when, in 1909, she obliquely indexes the soul-disintegrating capacity of Decadence, she indexes queer sexuality. While Lee devotes a great deal of space in this volume to the contemplation of the spiritual possibilities inherent in aesthetic initiation, considering the relationship between beauty, vitality, sociality, and ethics, she is not quite able to engage the particularities of its spiritual dangers. Lee carefully stems the tide of a queer decadence that creeps in at the edges of the essay, threatening to overtake her explanation of safer, healthier beauties should she venture to describe it.

While Lee’s criticism published after the Wilde trials avoids fully addressing the question of decadence, the fictional tales included in her earlier 1890 volume, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, do offer fuller explorations of queer, decadent beauty as an occasion for aesthetic and erotic initiation. Each of the four stories collected in *Hauntings* is rich with Gothic eroticism. In ‘Dionea’, the reincarnated Venus causes sexual pandemonium in a seaside Italian town. The

composer-protagonist of 'A Wicked Voice' is haunted, in spite of himself, by the uncannily alluring voice of a Venetian castrato. In 'Oke of Okehurst', Alice Okehurst carries on a love affair with Lovelock, an ancestral ghost. In 'Amour Dure', Polish historian Spiridion Trepka, tasked with writing a history of Urbania, Italy, stalls his official research in order to pursue a Renaissance spectre.

In spite of the fact that each story circulates around problems of desire, Vineta Colby rejects queer readings of Vernon Lee's stories, arguing that 'to read them as unconscious revelations of her inner self – of her sexual frustration and repressed lesbianism [...] is unrewarding.'²⁴ As Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell suggest, Colby's claim is a legitimate defence against the 'crude Freudian analysis' of earlier critics like Burdett Gardner or, in other words, the reading of lesbian texts as symptomatic of the author's repressed desire for other women.²⁵ What conditions both the symptomatic queer reading and the foreclosure of queer readings in relation to Lee's work is the assumption that Lee and her oeuvre are not already queer: that Lee, in Colby's words, 'fail[ed] to come to terms with her own sexuality' and that, unable to recognize her sexuality in life, she was doomed to play it out unconsciously in her work.²⁶ Scholars like Kathy Psomiades, Joseph Bristow, Richard Dellamora, and Martha Vicinus have successfully explored the queer dynamics of Lee's writing with a nuanced understanding of lesbian aesthetics that is not contingent on the question of whether or not Lee successfully accomplished lesbian sex. As Psomiades observes, Lee was 'at the center of a remarkable community [...] in which women's romantic attachments to each other exist openly.'²⁷ Looking at Lee's mode of relationality, built around her cross-identificatory ties to a cosmopolitan community of sexual dissidents, as Dellamora has successfully done,²⁸ allows us to acknowledge that she realized a number of practices and commitments throughout her life that are legible as queer. With this in mind, we are able to turn to her stories as a model of queer late-Victorian historiographical and aesthetic practice.

The supernatural story poses a problem to literary form because, as Lee argues, the frightening object must never be fully revealed if it is to remain frightening: ‘the supernatural is necessarily vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist.’²⁹ As if to address the problem of form in her fantastic tales, Lee injects her descriptive passages with heavy doses of the word ‘vague.’ In ‘Oke of Okehurst’, for example, the reader encounters a ‘vague scent of rose-leaves and spices’, a ‘vague depression and irritation’, a ‘vague eccentricity of expression’, ‘a look of vague contempt’, a ‘vague, haunting something’, a ‘vague presence [...] of [a] murdered cavalier poet’, a ‘vague absent glance’, a ‘vague, permeating, continuous feeling’, and so on.³⁰ Even a bed is found ‘loom[ing] out vagu[ely].’³¹

If vagueness creates the fantastic atmosphere of ontological uncertainty, it also pries open the possibility of representing sexualities that have been rendered culturally impossible. In *Hauntings*, non-normative desire turns many of Lee’s characters into otherworldly and ethereal entities, causing them to withdraw from others and to lose their physical shape. As Terry Castle argues in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), ‘to love another woman’ in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, ‘is to lose one’s solidity in the world, to evanesce, and fade into the spectral.’³² While Castle reads the phantasm as a representation of lesbian invisibility, lesbian readers and writers like Lee also imagined this ghostly embodiment, the ability to vanish into thin air, as a means of increased freedom, mobility, and sexual agency. Indeed, if there is any one thing the uncanny women in *Hauntings* all seem to want, it is to be left alone. The central mystery of ‘Oke of Okehurst’ is Alice Okehurst’s indifference both to her husband, Mr. Oke, and to the amorous painter tasked with making her portrait. Mr. Oke, traumatized by the loss of a child, blandly pretends to enjoy his life, while Alice, erotically obsessed with the ghost of her ancestor Lovelock, goads her husband with relentless comments about the past. Alice becomes a shadow within her own house: thin, willowy, and clad in white, she grows ‘more diaphanous, strange, and faraway’, eventually appearing ‘incorporeal.’³³ Alice stages her withdrawal from family life, her indifference to patriarchal systems of reproduction and representation, as a gradual bodily

disappearance, a slippage into the fantasy of a lost past: loving a ghost, she becomes a ghost. Her withdrawal, accompanied by the proliferation of linguistically vague descriptions of the Okehurst estate and its residents, produces a Gothic household in which everything, down to the furniture, is queerly conditioned by uncertainty.

In 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' (1995), Jacques Derrida suggests that 'a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive.'³⁴ The archive, a collection of traces of a past that never fully manifests, calls to us, like Hamlet's ghost, with an injunction, a sense of 'something to be done.'³⁵ Yet, as Carla Freccero comments, the ethical response to the demands of the past cannot be an appropriation of the past, its re-entombment, in other words, under the weight of the present. Freccero proposes a queer approach, 'queer both in its uncanniness and in its engagement with desire', that responds to the spectral *arrivant* 'not to determine what is what – to know – but to be demanded of and to respond.'³⁶

For Lee, as for Freccero, the concept of the spectral is a way of negotiating an affective relationship to the archive, one based both in our need for the Past, and in the Past's need for us. In the preface to *Hauntings*, Lee insists 'the Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance – that is the place to get our ghosts from.'³⁷ The capital-P Past is not a particular era in history, but an imaginative and poetic space, conditioned by temporal 'distance', into which the modern subject, disenchanted with the prosaic and normative present, can travel. As Christa Zorn suggests, it is unclear whether Lee's scholarly protagonists 'desire a more glamorous past or an exquisite sexual experience, since both become interchangeable'.³⁸ This erotic desire for the past is embodied in what Lee calls the 'spurious ghost', the idea of the past that 'haunt(s) certain brains'.³⁹ The 'certain brain' suggests that the proclivity for being haunted is rarefied, attached to a particular kind of person. Lee attributes such capacity for being haunted to Arthur Lemon and Flora Priestley, the two friends to whom *Hauntings* is dedicated. In so doing, Lee suggests an affiliation between herself and others who longed for an alternative to what José Esteban Muñoz has called the 'stultifying heterosexual present.'⁴⁰ The ghosts that we create in our minds are a

necessary vehicle for this escape: they traverse the ‘borderland of the Past’ moving ‘perpetually to and fro’, and thus they ‘carr[y] us between it and the Present.’⁴¹

Lee’s ghosts are traces, fragments, the present/not present archive of partly obscured, forgotten, and marginalized histories. They are

[t]hings of the imagination [...] sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour [...] which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning.⁴²

The spurious ghost arises within the mind when the historian contemplates this eclectic archive of material traces, of ‘tatters’ and impressions. The archive that Lee imagines is liminal, with each thing being only half-there: ‘half-rubbish, half-treasure’, ‘half-faded’, ‘fragmentary’. It is not the space of official history, but coincidental, conditioned by neglect and disarray: an archive of the vague traces that accrue around the edges of official history, haunting, compelling, and frustrating because it is both there and not there.

Spiridion Trepka, the protagonist and narrator of ‘Amour Dure’, in some ways represents the official mechanisms of historical knowledge production. A Polish historian, Trepka has received a grant from the German government to write a history of the fictionalized Italian city of Urbania. He begins his account, staged as a series of diary entries, with a cynical awareness of the colonizing premise under which he has travelled to Italy. Rome, he comments, is already overrun with traveling Germans: ‘Munich vandals at [his] heels, telling [him] where the best beer and sauerkraut can be had.’⁴³ In referencing the Vandals, the Germanic people responsible for the plunder of Rome in 455 CE, Trepka indicates that his own scholarly mission reproduces the dynamics of the initial destruction of the Italian capital. ‘Am I not myself a product of modern, northern civilization; is not my coming to Italy due to this very modern scientific vandalism which has given me a traveling scholarship?’⁴⁴ In travelling south, Trepka suggests, he is participating in the ‘scientific vandalism’ of knowledge production, the plundering of older

cultures by ‘modern, northern’ countries. This colonizing effort takes place on a North/South axis, but it is also temporal, based on a presumption of history as linear progress:

We smile at what we choose to call the superstition of the past, forgetting that all our vaunted science of to-day may seem just such another superstition to the men of the future; but why should the present be right and the past wrong?⁴⁵

Calling into question the colonial assumption that progress is linear, and that therefore the present is more ‘right’ than the past, Trepka aligns his temperament not with the forward-thinking modern historian, but with the backward-looking queer subjects of Lee’s introduction to *Hauntings*. Open to occult practices and folk knowledge, he believes in horoscopes and chiromancy, predicting his death on the grounds that a ‘gypsy in Poland’ once told him that a line in his palm ‘signified a violent death.’⁴⁶ His romantic temperament is bolstered by a hereditary tendency toward insanity, suggested by the fate of an Uncle Ladislas who suffered from a nervous condition. Trepka, a Polish subject during the period of Germany’s colonization of Poland, claims a complex national identity: both colonizer and colonized, his identification with Germanness is contingent and ill-fitting. He describes himself as neither fully a scholar, nor fully German, instead the ‘semblance of a German pedant.’⁴⁷ Lee also thought of her own national identity as hybrid: an Englishwoman born abroad in France, she was raised by a German nanny and devoted herself to the study of Italian history. As Hilary Fraser has shown, Lee’s preoccupation with foreignness allowed her to express her gendered and sexual difference: through valuing her own sense of being from elsewhere, she ‘speak[s] [...] from difference’, making her ‘estrangement’ a ‘virtue’ rather than a disadvantage.⁴⁸ Like Lee, who published her first study of Italian history at the age of twenty-four, Trepka (also twenty-four) has received acclaim for his history of Italy, which he calls an ‘atrocious book of erudition and art criticism.’⁴⁹ With his paradoxical combination of scholarly accomplishments and outsider status, his blend of intellectual rigour and superstitious fancy, Trepka appears to mirror Lee.

When Trepka first comes to discover Medea da Carpi, the Renaissance *femme fatale* who will become his undoing, her story is an interesting diversion. The romance of a Renaissance woman

for whose love five men died reaches a particularly juicy dénouement when she watches a man who loves her being tortured on her behalf, then coolly throws down her handkerchief, which he kisses before he dies, proclaiming her innocence. Over time, this story becomes an obsession, and she begins to haunt Trepka, appearing as a ghost outside his window and in a long-abandoned church. Inspired by a burgeoning love for Medea, Trepka begins to enjoy his work anew, and to perform historical studies in a way that challenges its disciplinary boundaries. ‘Am I turning novelist instead of historian?’ he asks himself.⁵⁰ Using the archives perversely, unbeknownst to the Director or to the Government, he seeks the kinds of traces of the untold history intimated by the ‘fragmentary vivid impressions’ of Lee’s introduction to the volume. ‘I can imagine there hangs about these mouldering pieces of paper a scent as of a woman’s hair’, he muses, seeking meaning in scents and the other evanescent objects of Lee’s ghostly archive: dead flowers, letters, fragments.⁵¹

Trepka’s connection to the Past instantiates what Carolyn Dinshaw has discussed as the ‘queer desire for history’.⁵² ‘Amour Dure’, the story’s title, is taken from a pun inscribed on a necklace, which means, according to Trepka’s translation, both ‘love that lasts’ and ‘cruel love.’ The cruel, cold love of the *femme fatale* extends across three centuries, much like the immortal spirit of Pater’s *La Gioconda*. ‘Dure’ also translates to ‘hard’, ‘stony’, and ‘difficult’. The double meaning of ‘amour dure’ indicates a queer take on love (love that crosses time, love that is difficult or challenging) and duration, presenting an experience of time as difficulty – time experienced as a wall between the present and the past. Trepka’s relationship to history, like Lee’s, is one of desire for contact, of revelation: he writes, ‘I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past.’⁵³ As he travels the roads of Urbania, he imagines phantasmagoria of Renaissance horsemen, bedecked in armour; the villagers are like Madonnas in a painting, and the maiden sisters of his landlord are ‘the three Fates in person.’⁵⁴ Unlike ‘the Present’, which he lists as a series of prosaic duties (‘Four letters of introduction to deliver, and

an hour's polite conversation to endure with the Vice-Prefect, the Syndic, the Director of the Archives') the Past is infused with poetry and art.⁵⁵

Trepka's fanciful relationship to the Past manifests in his sexuality. As he reveals in his diary, 'I never could find a woman to go mad about. I am wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia.'⁵⁶ Medea incarnates the capital-P Past with which Trepka is enamoured. Her beauty is described as outdated, 'The type is that most admired by the late Renaissance.'⁵⁷ Everything about her strange physiognomy is somewhat excessive or wrong, just a little 'too' much: 'the nose a trifle over-aquiline and the cheek-bones a trifle too low'; her eyelids 'just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth 'a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth.'⁵⁸ She possesses 'a curious, at first rather conventional artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold.'⁵⁹ Her hard and 'cold' beauty, weighted down by so many jewels of seemingly contradictory descriptors, is fairly conventional in its strangeness. It echoes Walter Pater's famous ekphrasis of *La Gioconda*, as well as J.-K. Huysmans's ekphrasis of Gustave Moreau's *Salomé*. Attentive to the provenance of the *femme fatale* trope she conjures, Lee includes 'a picture of the daughter of Herodias dancing' in the church (named for 'John the Beheaded', or John the Baptist) where Trepka first sees Medea, referencing the narrative of Salomé that was much-loved by Decadent writers including Huysmans, Gustave Flaubert, and Wilde.

Medea's strange beauty does not inspire restful contemplation or pleasure, but rather, a maddening sensation that feels like fear. 'The more [her beauty] is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind', Trepka writes.⁶⁰ Medea's effect on Trepka develops into a decadent affect that might be either sexual fervour or nervous illness: a racing of the heart, a morbid feeling. The thought of her 'sets my blood in a whirl, not with horror, but with... I know not what to call it. The feeling terrifies me, but it is delicious.'⁶¹ Waiting to meet Medea, he feels a 'creeping terror, which only a violent action [can] dispel.'⁶² The 'whirl' of blood he describes is erotic desire, but he, naively, lacks the vocabulary to explain it. He can only call it something that is 'not' – but akin to – horror; his feeling of terror that must be 'dispel[led]' with a 'violent action'

suggests orgasm, but also foreshadows the act of destruction that will constitute the story's climax.

Because of Trepka's sexual desire for Medea, scholars have tended to read Trepka's historiography as an act of masculinist possession. For Zorn, Trepka's relationship to Medea is that of a deluded, obsessive narrator who enacts the fetishistic male gaze upon his historical object of inquiry. 'By sexualizing her narrator's perspective', Zorn argues, Lee 'shows the limitations of the "modern" mind whose time-transcending consciousness simply reproduces cultural relationships between subject and object.'⁶³ According to Zorn, the ethical problem of Trepka's project, indeed, of historical projects writ large, is that, because of the historian's 'possessive yearnings', he fails to recognize Medea's historical otherness.⁶⁴ Zorn's reading focuses on the way in which Trepka displaces his anxieties around his national identity onto the figure of Medea: 'Medea signifies Trepka's longing for all that is lacking in his frustrating reality as a Polish subject of the German empire: the at-home feeling of his Polish boyhood, [and] his national (and masculine) identity.'⁶⁵ In other words, in this reading, his displacement is a lack which he seeks to displace through his attraction to Medea.

However, when we attend to the multiple points of identification between Lee and her protagonist, it is hard to read him fully as an embodiment of heterosexual desire. Nowhere in the text does Trepka reveal himself to be invested in reinstating a masculinist national identity. Instead, I would suggest, his colonized subjectivity leads to a mode of queer affiliation with the subject of his historical inquiry whose story he attempts to recover. His aforementioned 'semblance' of being German links him to Lee's own 'semblance' of being male: both are liminal, if celebrated, figures on the edges of official historical discourse. Both engage with the Past as an aestheticized space of poetry and of potential revelation. If Trepka and Lee share a queer kinship, Trepka's relation to the archive can be read as a provocation toward lesbian historical practices. Trepka engages in a relationship to the past that is both political and sexual, an enactment of solidarity alongside and through desire. At the story's end, he enacts historical

rescue through a larger criticism of power that eventually ends in an anti-patriarchal act of property destruction.

Stalling his official project, Trepka devotes his energies instead to revealing a more sympathetic portrait of Medea, embedding within Lee's tale a feminist revision of the Decadent *femme fatale* story. Looking back at the eve of sixteen-year old Medea's marriage to the fifty-year old Orsini, Trepka identifies with her experience. 'It seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant', he writes, allowing himself to enter into the speculative mode in order to reflect upon marriage as a form of violence.⁶⁶ 'Reflect what [her marriage] means: it means that this imperious woman is soon to be treated like a chattel, made roughly to understand that her business is to give the Duke an heir, not advice.'⁶⁷ Trepka criticizes Renaissance and Victorian conventions of marriage, through which women become the property of men. Their voices, or 'advice', carry little value, while their worth is calculated through their reproductive capacity.

It is through her otherworldly beauty – excessive, odd, anachronistic – that Medea, an incarnation of the Past in all its otherness, resists being collected. She possesses in order to resist becoming a possession, a form of resistance which is not much a strategy or act of will, but is instead an objective effect of decadent beauty. Medea marries three times, each of her husbands meeting an early demise; with each remarriage, she increases her political power, eventually installing her son on the throne for a short time before her illegitimate reign is ended by papal decree. Medea builds her political power, Trepka speculates, on the basis of her beauty: 'It is perfectly marvellous how, without money or allies, she could so long keep her enemies at bay'. Such a feat can only be ascribed to her 'fatal fascinations.'⁶⁸ Drawing again on the language of enslavement, but flipping Medea's status from marital 'chattel' to an owner of slaves,

[h]er fate is, sooner or later, to triumph over her enemies, at all events to make their victory almost a defeat; her magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of her slaves to perish.⁶⁹

The fate of her doomed lovers seems to Trepka to be perfectly reasonable and fair: 'No man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right to her; it is a kind of sacrilege.'⁷⁰ In Lee's Gothic story, as in her aesthetic theory, decadent beauty resists becoming property because of its innate occult power to possess its viewer.

While engaged in feminist reinterpretation of Medea's story, Trepka comes across the letters of her nemesis, Duke Robert II. Trepka comments that Robert, whom he had initially thought to be a hero, appears in a new light in his letters, as a 'cunning, cold, but craven priest.'⁷¹ Robert had Medea strangled to death, but even after her death, took precautions against her power. He devised a means to protect his soul until the Day of Judgement by creating a silver effigy of it and burying it inside an equestrian monument to be built in his honour. Robert, who saw Medea as 'almost supernatural', would have 'enjoyed having her burnt as a witch.'⁷² He created the conditions for himself to go down in history as a hero, while Medea would be 'tarred and feathered.'⁷³ Indeed, Robert's project has been successful, as Medea has been taken up by the local lore as a witch. She is legend to the local children, who say that she 'used to ride through the air on a goat', and they attempt to burn an effigy of her, chanting, 'She is a witch! She must be burnt!'⁷⁴ Trepka is determined to rewrite this history and expose Duke Robert's true nature, thus 'defraud[ing]' the Government which has sent him to Urbania of the history they expected to receive.⁷⁵ The destruction of the male hero becomes an act of historical justice, a means of exonerating the woman who had been relegated to the position of a hunted witch. It is a disruption of official history, an act of intellectual vandalism.

Vandalism, in Lee's art historical writing, is not so much a way of talking about crimes against property, as it is a way of talking about misreading. In an early essay collected in *Juvenilia*, she observes that the architects of the previous centuries misinterpreted the edifices they were attempting to restore, resulting in the 'horrid disfigurement of historic buildings.' Lee called these botched renovations the 'Vandal work of the past.'⁷⁶ Vandalism is an aesthetic transgression, a 'horrid disfigurement', and to vandalize is to fail to do justice to the truth of a text or object, a

failure that, for Lee, becomes an ethical problem as well. Bad reading – which she calls ‘selling [one’s] soul to the most cunning of all fiends, the Demon of Theory’ – is the seductive tendency to only see in the object that which proves our preconceived notions, rather than allowing ourselves to truly engage with its reality. This associative or theoretical interpretive practice affords the possibility of the ‘maltreatment of others, vandalism, and wastefulness.’⁷⁷ Her use of ‘scientific vandalism’ to describe Trepka’s official historical project then accords with this critique. If vandalism is an ethical problem, it can also be a mode of ethical recovery: one can, after all, vandalize the vandals. Lee thus uses the word ‘vandal’ to signal her own irreverent departures from orthodoxy. When she offers an unpopular opinion about noses in Botticelli, for example, she acknowledges that ‘I shall be set down as an utter Vandal’⁷⁸ for asking a question. In capitalizing ‘Vandal’, Lee not only paints a portrait of herself as a bit of a rogue, but names her association with a particular national origin, the barbarian roots that associate the Vandal with the image of the foreign Other. Stepping into this outsider position, she adopts it as a gesture of defiance. ‘Feeling myself already a Vandal’, she goes on, ‘I am hardened to the accusation, and I put forward my suggestion.’⁷⁹ Being a vandal here means recognizing that one’s interpretations have been and will be seen as misreadings, and embracing that repeated experience of rejection as toughness, a being ‘hardened’ by repeated ‘accusation[s]’ in order to create a position from which to speak. Sara Ahmed has written of the vandal as a feminist subject position, arguing that ‘to be a vandal is to damage what you are supposed to revere, to bring to an end what you are supposed to reproduce.’⁸⁰ To identify as a vandal is to interrupt received narratives of history and of value, to *end* rather than to *reproduce*.

Trepka’s ultimate act is not simply a rewriting of history, but, perversely enough, the destruction of a historical object. Following Medea’s request, sent to him in a letter, he steals a hatchet and destroys Robert’s soul entombed within the rusted monument. He narrates the action abruptly, in short, staccato sentences that appear jarringly after a series of lyrical, reflective passages: ‘I did it. I cut open the bronze; I sawed it into a wider gash. I tore out the silver image,

and hacked it into innumerable pieces.⁸¹ The official history, recorded after Trepka's death by a 'stab to the heart, given by an unknown hand', is that the bronze statue was 'grievously mutilated.'⁸² Trepka, who begins his narrative with a discussion of German history as 'scientific vandalism', ends it with an act of anti-State vandalism.

Responding to recent anti-harassment movements in the academy, Ahmed comments on physical vandalism as a tactic of complaint:

We might need to use guerrilla tactics; you can write names of harassers on books; turn bodies into art; write graffiti on toilet doors or on walls. [...] Feminism becomes a message we send out, writing on the wall; we were here, we did not get used it.⁸³

These guerrilla tactics against gendered violence have found their corollary in the strategic destruction and defacement of monuments to white supremacy within the United States post-Charlottesville.⁸⁴ Lee's depiction of the destruction of the monument at the end of 'Amour Dure' takes on, in our moment, a special urgency. It suggests to us that sometimes, if we are to take seriously the demands of our revenants, historiography will become an act of vandalism, a destruction of monuments to our so-called national heroes. These monuments, like the histories they represent, are not invulnerable; they are full of holes, already 'hollow and worn away by rust'.⁸⁵ We must, in Trepka's words, 'defraud'⁸⁶ the institution of the future books we have promised to write; we must instead become vandals, tempted toward the blade of the stolen hatchet with which we cut open and remake history.

¹ Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 12.

² Annie Besant, *Initiation: The Perfecting of Man* (Chicago: The Theosophical Press, 1923), p. 91.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 112.

⁴ George Du Maurier, 'The Six Mark Tea-Pot', *Punch* (30 October, 1880), p. 194.

⁵ Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁷ H.P. Blavatsky and Mabel Collins, *Lucifer* 1 (1887), p. 7.

⁸ Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), p. 40.

⁹ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 68.

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- 15 Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 58.
- 16 Ibid., p. 59.
- 17 Ibid., p. 36.
- 18 Ibid., p. 132.
- 19 Ibid., p. 135.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., p. 131.
- 22 Ibid., p. 136.
- 23 Richard Dellamora, “‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought:’ Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde”, *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2004), 529-46 (p. 533).
- 24 Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 226.
- 25 Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Mississauga: Broadview, 2006), p. 25.
- 26 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 2.
- 27 Kathy Alexis Psomiades, ‘Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics’ in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-42 (p. 30).
- 28 See Dellamora, “‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought:’ Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde”, pp. 529-46.
- 29 Lee, *Hauntings*, p. 295.
- 30 Vernon Lee, ‘Oke of Okehurst’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. p. 112; p. 117; p. 118; p. 123; p. 130; p. 136; and p. 145.
- 31 Ibid., p. 113.
- 32 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 32.
- 33 Lee, ‘Oke of Okehurst’, pp. 105-53 (p. 141; p. 151).
- 34 Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’, *diacritics* 25 (1995), 9-63 (p. 27).
- 35 Carla Freccero, ‘Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past’, in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 195-213 (p. 200).
- 36 Freccero, ‘Queer Spectrality’, p. 201; p. 207.
- 37 Vernon Lee, ‘Preface’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 37-40 (p. 39).
- 38 Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 140.
- 39 Lee, ‘Preface’, p. 40.
- 40 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 49.
- 41 Lee, ‘Preface’, p. 39.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Vernon Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 41-76 (p. 41).
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid., p. 71.
- 46 Ibid., p. 73.
- 47 Ibid., p. 42.
- 48 Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 135.
- 49 Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, p. 41.
- 50 Ibid., p. 55.
- 51 Ibid., p. 58.
- 52 Carolyn Dinshaw, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ*, 13 (2007), 177-95 (p. 178).
- 53 Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, p. 41.
- 54 Ibid., p. 44.
- 55 Ibid., p. 43.
- 56 Ibid., p. 54.
- 57 Ibid., p. 51.
- 58 Ibid., p. 52.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., p. 69.
- 62 Ibid., p. 67.
- 63 Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, p. 158.
- 64 Ibid., p. 140.
- 65 Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁶ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 56.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁶ Lee, *Juvenilia*, p. 116.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁸⁰ Sara Ahmed, 'Refusal, Resignation, and Complaint' <<https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/06/28/refusal-resignation-and-complaint>> [Accessed 30 September 2018].

⁸¹ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 75.

⁸² Ibid., p. 76.

⁸³ Ahmed, 'Refusal, Resignation, and Complaint.'

⁸⁴ On 11 and 12 August 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia was the site of a white supremacist rally (known as 'Unite the Right'). Armed white nationalists responded violently to counter protestors, causing Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe to declare a state of emergency. Neo-Nazi James Alex Fields Junior drove his car through a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 40 others. The organizers of the rally stated that one of their goals was to oppose the government-sanctioned removal of confederate monuments, specifically a statue of Robert E. Lee that stood in Charlottesville's Emancipation Park. Within the week following the riots, anti-racist protestors defaced or toppled five other confederate statues in Arizona, Virginia, and North Carolina as an act of resistance against Donald Trump's presidency and against the increasing visibility of fascism within the United States.

⁸⁵ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 73.

⁸⁶ Ibid.