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*Dalla stanza accanto*  
Vernon Lee e Firenze  
settant'anni dopo

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*A cura di*  
*Serena Cenni e Elisa Bizzotto*

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*Nicoletta Pireddu*

*"Satan the Waster": Peace and the Gift*

"I take off my hat to the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism, and salute her as the noblest Briton of them all. [...] The sooner we put Vernon Lee into the position occupied three hundred years ago by Queen Elizabeth the better."<sup>1</sup> With these words, a 1920 review by George Bernard Shaw in *The Nation* celebrates the author of *Satan the Waster*. An equally affected reply by Vernon Lee herself follows soon thereafter, thanking the exuberant cordiality of this "transparent Quixote of good sense"<sup>2</sup> who bravely dared the general hostility to her latest literary accomplishment, grasping the poignancy of its pacifist message. We know, however, that Shaw's enthusiasm did not succeed in giving enough visibility to Vernon Lee's drama, which was much criticized for the artificiality of its satire, its formal heterogeneity and its polemical moralism.

Little known and even less appreciated as much nowadays as at the time of its publication, *Satan the Waster* still appears as an anomaly within an already quite atypical production allegedly characterized by frequent contradictions.<sup>3</sup> Yet in fact, as I hope to show, *Satan the Waster* lends itself to a reading that can help reconcile many inconsistencies for which Vernon Lee is often indicted, and highlight the continuity with her previous works. I propose to interpret *Satan the Waster* as the culminating point of a problematic that emerges from Vernon Lee's *oeuvre* at the crossroads of aesthetics and anthropology, namely, the relationship between art and the gift which I have investigated more thoroughly elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> In this specific context I wish to concentrate on the question of the war, of destruction and of sacrifice in Vernon Lee's play, and on the crucial role of art and the artist as symbols of a pacifist ethics founded upon the reconceptualization of expenditure in non-utilitarian terms.

On the one hand, to be sure, Vernon Lee is far from lenient with anthropologists and with the world of primitive civilizations. In her works, despising comments abound on the persistence of savage costumes in civilized life, on primitive passions and on the horrible catalogues of "primaevial ferocities and madnesses"<sup>5</sup> collected in anthropology books. No less than metaphysics and philosophical exegesis, according to Vernon Lee, the study of primitive cultures perpetuates obscurantism because – as we read in the preface to *Vital Lies* – it reproduces those "religious truths"<sup>6</sup> that science had attempted to undermine.

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On the other hand, however, the ideology of cultural otherness and the influence of the symbolic in its strict anthropological sense turn out to be central to the reflections on art and beauty that inspire Vernon Lee's activity as an essayist. With her persistent references to such notions as expenditure, sacrifice, magic and the resacralization of human relationships, Vernon Lee recodifies the aesthetic realm by assimilating it to primitive and archaic forms of ritual exchange. From *Belcaro*, *Althea* and *Laurus Nobilis* to *Limbo* and *Gospels of Anarchy*, the redeeming power that Vernon Lee attributes to the beautiful derives from the interpretation of aesthetic activity as a ceremonial economy able to ennoble the individual and representation by transcending the restricted interests of *homo oeconomicus*. In the anthropological realm, these principles develop in the decades between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup>–centuries, precisely during the period of Vernon Lee's literary activity, with intellectuals like Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and such members of the French Collège de Sociologie as Georges Bataille. For her part, Vernon Lee will never abandon the faith in the rehumanizing force of beauty as a beneficial gift,<sup>7</sup> and it is in this aesthetic and ethical norm that she locates the remedy to the destructive expenditure entailed by the war. The pacifist message of *Satan the Waster* derives from the need to distinguish between those two antithetical forms of loss and wastefulness.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the aesthetic sphere that Vernon Lee has until now strenuously protected from moral, rational, and more widely utilitarian contaminations seems to be invited directly to participate in real life events. It is as though Vernon Lee now reinterpreted the purposelessness of the beautiful as a statement on the inefficacy and inadequacy of art vis-à-vis a human tragedy that is not only extraordinarily cruel but mainly “all about nothing at all [...]; needless and senseless”<sup>8</sup> (SW vii) itself. In order to comment on the appalling *mise en scène* of Europe at war, Vernon Lee resorts to a “symbolical war play” (SW xii) – *Satan the Waster*, an intentionally grotesque and heavily militant morality play alternating utopian and apocalyptic tones, in which Vernon Lee formulates her own standpoint on the war through extensive and detailed textual notes.<sup>9</sup> Yet, from what could at first appear as a regression with respect to Vernon Lee's earlier aesthetic positions even more crucial implications emerge for the role of ceremonial economy in the author's thought. Indeed, we now perceive an attempt to make this model of aesthetic expenditure relevant to the concrete historical and social reality, before any concern for an ideal aesthetic community. The artist's duty to give, therefore, appears here as a need to show her active role in the circle of symbolic exchange, as though trying to amend for her unacceptable detachment from historical events while others are participating in the war “with hand and heart” (SW xiii). At the same time, the importance of the

disinterestedness and generosity of the gift ritual as an aesthetic practice turns out to be all the more crucial to break the "circle of preposterous tragedies" (SW xlvi), injustices and retaliations created by the speculation of an "endless give-and-take" (SW xlvi). In other words, the mechanism of the gift that took shape in Vernon Lee's previous essays is here opposed not simply to material acquisition but, rather, to other forms of expenditure, namely, "self-sacrifice" and "waste". Not accidentally these are the very elements that propel the war, which Vernon Lee describes as the reverse double of a non – utilitarian ceremonial expenditure able to promote communitarian bonds.

Already in *Gospels of Anarchy*, overtly endorsing Nietzsche's standpoint, Vernon Lee had presented individual sacrifice as a gesture animated by personal interest more than by abnegation, and hence as a deed not at all alien to the "Ethics of Slaves"<sup>10</sup> (GOA 18) precisely because it counts on a larger future reward. The equation of violence and "wastefulness" (GOA 25) that Vernon Lee herself establishes already delineates the disruptive underpinnings of destruction and loss whenever they are coopted by or inadvertently oriented towards speculation and appropriation.

The eponymous protagonist of *Satan the Waster* – who is also the director of the "Ballet of the Nations", the dance of the Western powers participating in the war – incarnates such economic and moral calamities. Proudly defining himself as "*the Power that Wastes*" (SW 11), Satan is, in particular, "the Waster of Human Virtue" (SW 11) because, "taking no pleasure in fruition" (SW 11), he systematically annuls all the qualities and activities that mankind deems "precious, rare and sorely needed" (SW 11). Demanding "absolute oblation" (SW 14) and identifying sacrifice with "sheer loss" (SW 14),<sup>11</sup> he welds his reflections on sacrifice as a form of ritual expenditure with observations that pervert the aesthetic and ethical underpinnings so far discussed by Vernon Lee. Satan proudly introduces himself as a "full-fledged moral aesthete" (SW 25) who would never accept to warp "the beauty of self-sacrifice" (SW 25) with "base utility" (SW 25), and who, aristocratically disdaining any form of "gross and obvious" (SW 24) material destruction, rather squanders "Virtue for Virtue's own sake" (SW 25).

In the textual notes Vernon Lee reinforces the absence of finality underlying Satan's self-portrait, and in her turn negatively qualifies him as an "obscene aesthete" (SW 210).<sup>12</sup> Therefore we could hastily conclude that the author is here repudiating the revitalizing power of the relationship between gift and art, hence, consequently, the possibility of a moral economy based upon the non-utilitarian, aesthetic principle of unconditional expenditure. Not accidentally, while on the one hand Satan invites nations to interrupt the "fruitful give-and-take of life" (SW 45) to

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stage their own deadly dance as destructive dissipation, on the other hand Vernon Lee's concern is, rather, how "to minimize Waste" (SW L). We may then wonder whether Vernon Lee is endorsing a balance of equivalences paradoxically precisely when she is for the first time confronted with a concrete manifestation of that unproductive excess which she has so far extolled both in the realm of art as wasteful expenditure and in wastefulness as a form of art.

At first, therefore, Satan's representation of the first world conflict seemingly synthesizes not only the destructive impulse of the Nietzschean tragic god but even the subsequent characterization of the war that Georges Bataille will soon offer as an example of *dépense*, sumptuary dilapidation without return. In Bataille, indeed, the war manifests an exuberance of life due to a superabundance of resources – what Bataille defines as "la part maudite", the accursed share that a general economy does not subject to material necessity or to increase of wealth but rather devotes to conspicuous, spectacular consumption.<sup>13</sup> This conception of irrational expenditure culminates with death, which exasperates the principle of loss underlying the gift as an absolute form of total expenditure without return. In *Satan the Waster* Satan presents both the war and the aesthetic realm as instances of effervescent display of excess energy in terms that seem to foreshadow Bataille's examples of "general economy", namely, "œuvres improductives, dissipatrices d'une énergie qui ne peut être accumulée d'aucune façon."<sup>14</sup> Blending death and art, Satan makes them the hinges of a general moral economy in which Death, a character in Vernon Lee's drama, is the main agent, helped in its turn by Heroism, impersonated by a blind youth. Blindness further highlights the fact that, as Satan himself underlines, heroism "wastes away to no purpose" (SW 51), without a precise aim in its actions, hence once again strengthening the idea of unmotivated dissipation.

In fact, however, readers should not be misled by these initial impressions, which Vernon Lee strategically encourages only to produce yet another *coup de théâtre* in her argumentation. It is precisely thanks to Bataille's theory that we can better understand the complexity of the author's position, which is far from repudiating the disinterestedness of symbolic economy. Satan and his vision of war rather turn out to be caricatures of general economy, a grotesque double of the dynamics of non-utilitarian, ceremonial expenditure. The destruction that the diabolical stage director of "The Ballet of the Nations" extols does not function according to the premises that sustain sumptuary consumption. As emerges more clearly from the overall argument of *Satan the Waster*, the revitalizing function of expenditure without return survives unscathed in the text, and this redemptive option is once again offered precisely by art's power of giving and sharing, aimed at annihilating the predatory violence

of modern power and at restoring the harmony and the sacredness of non-alienated social relationships. Yet even for Bataille, who pushes the disposition to loss beyond the gift, hence even beyond the communitarian dimension that Marcel Mauss still pursues in his "Essai sur le don", the war can be an occasion for prodigality, hence a source of intoxication, only if it is not contaminated by rational intents and considerations on the economic implications of its outcome: "La gloire et le combat procurent l'ivresse, l'échéance d'un tribut ne la procure pas".<sup>15</sup> Unquestionably, the sort of war ethics that Bataille extols here is that of archaic societies, like the Aztec, for which the war allegedly implied consumption, ostentatious dissipation, pure violence without calculation, fight not accompanied by a sense of conquest.<sup>16</sup> For its part, the bourgeois world – the epitome of Western modernity and the protagonist on Vernon Lee's stage – cannot conform to destruction as profitless consumption, and rather subordinates glorious practices to utility.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the war shows its ambivalence precisely in the passage from pre-modern and prodigal communities to a materialist and speculative society ruled by those very tenets Vernon Lee harshly attacks. The sacred ritual power that assimilates war life<sup>18</sup> to religious life precisely for its absolute immolation of one's own life through sacrifice and death<sup>19</sup> also highlights its opposite, namely, the economic law of acquisition demanding a gain as the ultimate result of expenditure.

Therefore, when we examine the motivations that animate the "Ballet of the Nations" staged by Satan the Waster as an allegory of the first world war we realize that the principle of alleged destruction to which the entire spectacle seems to conform is anything but exempt from utilitarian preoccupations. On the one hand dance is itself an instance of general economy against productive forces: its ecstatic expenditure rather belongs to the kind of dissipation of the "économie de fête".<sup>20</sup> As a metaphor for war in Vernon Lee's text, dance should hence reinforce the lack of finality of the entire enterprise. On the other hand, however, the nations' performance, as Clio attests in person and through her live oral account, is in fact an exhibition of gratuitous violence finalized to a thirst for conquest and domination:

a Nation, who had long been forbidden to dance on its own account, because it had been made the slave of some of the others, was being danced across like a carpet by two of the great *vis-à-vis*, each of whom would point at it with gestures of pity and protection, but without ceasing to trample it, until the to-and-fros of their dance had pounded it out of all shape and almost out of existence (SW 49).

Furthermore, since Satan volunteers to disclose the plots and the real objectives of the chiefs of nations and manipulators of mankind's destiny

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(SW 64) behind the curtain, the war appears as less connected with the distinction and the acquisition of a superior rank through absolute loss, as the logic of Bataille's *dépense* would require. While, as Bataille claims, the prestige, glory and rank granted by the archaic practice of dilapidation in combat are not affected by power considerations precisely because they oppose forms of exchange finalized to profit or to material appropriation, the chiefs in Satan's representation unilaterally treat war as a predatory and lucrative event. Even among those who hold mankind's fate in their hands, "royal birth" (SW 64), hence high rank, begins to become rare, being displaced by the far more commonplace and "humble specimens of the Investor, the Homo Oeconomicus who sways the modern world" (SW 64). Likewise, war itself seems to lose the aura of nobility linked to the power of absolute loss and to become, precisely, prosaic, a terrible money-making machine. In the selection of events that Satan shows to Clio from the years preceding the outbreak of the war, it is not so much the sacred impulse of unproductive consumption as the profane speculation of complex networks of economic strategies that sustains the decision in favor of the conflict, from the loan and investment mechanisms at work right before the terrible event to the prospect of economic growth and wealth accumulation thanks to war-induced destruction (SW 69–80; 86). The archaic ecstasy and terror that in Bataille uphold the equivalence of war, ritual sacrifice and mystic life shade off into submission to materiality, to the cult of productivity and of accumulation.

Vernon Lee's extensive comments hence condemn the restricted economy of the "apocalyptic monster Capitalism" (SW 127), emphasizing how its alienating reification has contaminated not only politics but also science, which is now applied "to material problems only, and to those, above all, which *pay*" (SW 127–8). The war of the nations, therefore, is the result of a mechanical acquiescence (which is simultaneously a lack of beauty) that well illustrates what for Bataille is the only possible way (almost a caricature) in which the bourgeois world can conceive of loss, namely, asceticism finalized to the absorption of resources in view of growth.<sup>21</sup> In this automatism which supplants the organic conception of the individual, thought and will do not lead to a "saner and nobler life" (SW 129) but are rather instrumental – Vernon Lee claims – to the construction of myths and justifications in preparation for sacrifice as scarcity, that is, as a strategy for the production of "cheaper commodities and more expensive armaments" (SW 129). Furthermore, the degradation caused by this bad materialism<sup>22</sup> has crucial repercussions upon the symbolic activity of verbal exchange. Now almost indistinguishable from "paper currency and cheque books" (SW 169), words seem to have lost their creative value. Among so much "spiritual waste" (SW 168) disseminated by two other figures that Vernon Lee presents in allegorical

form – "Delusion" and "Confusion" – words seem now to lead to nothing more than to a "bankruptcy of meaning" (SW 169).

Reconsidered within this framework, Satan the Waster's aestheticism and self-reflexive dissipation take on a quite different connotation with respect to the gesture without finality illustrated by Satan's own opening statements. As Vernon Lee explains in one of the notes, indeed, "Waste presupposes purpose" (SW182), and hence does not transcend the homeostatic equilibrium of human values. In the more detailed definition that Vernon Lee gives us to underline the difference between the author's interpretation and the character's point of view, "Waste" occurs whenever "a certain expenditure of time, material wealth, attention or opportunity is implied in the production of something *less valuable* to us than either of these things" (SW 184. My emphasis). Vernon Lee does not only liken expenditure as "waste" to a commercial and speculative transaction. She even weighs its relative return against barter, in which, on the contrary, "each party to the exchange gets *something he wants more than what he gives for it*" (SW 184. My emphasis). Indeed, if Satan's distinctive feature is that of offering as immolation (a trait that the drama he directs further consolidates), Vernon Lee's comments concentrate on the ambivalence of that act of donation. They lay bare its harmful and perversely self-interested nature, since its supposed ceremonial and symbolic exchange results in more pain for the receiver – "a very bad bargain" (SW 184) for mankind – and in the victory of Satan himself, who triumphs "as the only party who scores" (SW 185). Significantly, Satan emphasizes isolation as the hallmark of his uniqueness, admitting he is incapable of loving and of taking delight (SW 10). In other words, being insensitive to beauty and pleasure, he resorts to uselessness not so much to consolidate disinterested relations as to take revenge, to deprive also the rest of society of the sense of community he cannot experience.<sup>23</sup>

Satan's "Waste" is hence a synonym for "True Sacrifice" (SW 184) taken as an intentionally utilitarian mechanism. In other words, the initial image of Satan as an aesthete devoted to expenditure for its own sake – apparently an example of general economy – in fact ends up substantiating the opposite principle, that of a restricted economy. Indeed, even more overtly than in *Gospels of Anarchy*, here Vernon Lee endorses the conception of sacrifice as a strategic and speculative move in view of a gain, a widespread interpretation in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropology from Edward Tylor onwards.<sup>24</sup> Although she recognizes the nobility of impulses and the "quite disinterested manner" (SW 204) demanded of sacrificial ritual, Vernon Lee admits that "sacrifice, and especially self-sacrifice, is a ransom for Man's commissions and omissions" (SW 205), a necessary payment required as a compensation for a debt contracted with mankind, God or nature. This contractual relationship binds not only

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the individual who deliberately accepts sacrifice and is directly involved in it. The additional risk is to transform the desire to sacrifice ourselves into “a willingness to sacrifice others to the same aims or standards” (SW 208). Therefore sacrifice in Vernon Lee’s argumentation problematizes not simply the difference between disinterestedness and personal interest but also that between selfishness and altruism, and, more extensively, between good and evil (SW 194–5; 208–10). The war confirms this inevitable escalation precisely on the basis of waste as sacrifice. In this respect, the blindness of Heroism in the drama staged by Satan illustrates not only destruction without finality but also the lack of moral references and the acritical abnegation of women who, despite their supposed innate aversion to violence, accept “without a shudder” (SW 156) and even with pride all the devastation of the war, totally subdued to their husbands’ absurd mirages of conquest and of valor.

How can mankind step outside the close circularity of this “scheme of compensation” (SW 191) exacerbated by the war, which has shown even too well the ugliness, the horror of a supposed good obtained “at the price of increased suffering” (SW 191)? On the one hand, a disenchanted Vernon Lee observes that even the gift of peace offered to future generations loses its value and its beauty once we understand that such a gift derives from the tragedy of the war, and is hence the result of a transaction founded upon evil and pain. On the other hand, however, while nothing seems to survive of this early 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural panorama except those diabolical forms of destruction that promote even more fiercely the violent instrumentality of a capitalist and imperialist ideology, Vernon Lee does not extinguish the flame of hope in a benign dissipation, and relies precisely on the producers of the raw material of this verbal exchange – namely, writers, the craftsmen of the word – to restore the conditions for its realization. When the destiny of humankind and of *humanitas* seems to be in the hands of a puppet master who stages a parody of restricted economy only to confirm and reinstate its normative power, it is to those who possess “the gift of words” (SW 135), and who, in their turn, can hence donate those words unconditionally to others, that Vernon Lee appeals in order to rekindle the possibility of an authentic disposition to purposeless loss.

Just as it devastated many other social practices, the moral bankruptcy of the war has brought to the foreground the “dangerous possibilities” (SW 134) of literature, making the writers’ integrity more permeable than usual to the superficiality of thought as well as to “inveterate prejudices and unrecognized semi-submerged passions” (SW 134). Nevertheless, far from a simple accusation, Vernon Lee’s emphasis on the “readjustment (and consequent falsifying) of all emotional and imaginative values” (SW 134) that literature undergoes in those circumstances is above all an

invitation to take on the responsibility of the ambivalence of the gift of words that the writer safeguards and bestows to others. The duplicity that Vernon Lee could not or did not want to underline about beauty in its analogical link with the gift now emerges in her discussion of literature, and highlights its ethical underpinnings. Literature, indeed, is a "dual art" (SW 135) not only because it is caught between passion and reason (SW 135) but also because, we could say, it is a *pharmakon*, endowed with mysterious powers that are both beneficial and harmful, no less than those of the symbolic "trade" (SW 134) to which it is assimilated.

This dualism clearly emerges when the initially metaphorical association between literature and the gift becomes more substantial in *Satan the Waster*. Indeed, Vernon Lee directly presents literary activity as a manifestation of the archaic world of rituals and enchantements. Showing not only knowledge of anthropological concepts but also a more favorable attitude towards them, Vernon Lee attributes interpersonal communication to the action of "*Mana*" and "*magic*" (SW 134),<sup>25</sup> equates the modern psyche to the conception of external reality typical of the savage, presenting words and images as vehicles of "strange influences and evil powers" (SW 134), and strongly emphasizes the need for the writer to be conscious and cautious in the manipulation of such dangerous verbal arts. With expressions and argumentations that surprisingly anticipate Bataille's discussion of the "apprenti sorcier",<sup>26</sup> Vernon Lee now talks about the writer in terms of a "magician's apprentice" (SW 134) who needs to learn how to "approach his work in a humble spirit and with a heart purified by self-scepticism" (SW 134) if s/he wants to promote "whatsoever forces for good may lie latent in our thoughts and emotions" (SW 134) rather than unshackling the terrible and "deceiving demons" (SW 134) hiding in the human spirit.

To give words is to release spells, hence to risk destruction (SW 134) if this gesture does not conform to a specific ritual. Here Marcel Mauss's warning about the fatal consequences deriving from an infraction of the obligations entailed by gift-giving<sup>27</sup> results all the more pertinent to this new turn in Vernon Lee's elaboration of the relationship between aesthetics and anthropology. Yet even when confronted with the dangers of the obscure and harmful facet of the gift, the author of *Satan the Waster* is not ready to erase the beneficial potential of this ritual, which remains her aesthetic and ethical reference point. We could rather claim that Vernon Lee here exposes the ethical import of giving as *largitio* – a gesture of liberality that confirms the importance and the authority of the person who performs it – inviting the literary writer to be such as "author" in the etymological sense of the term, that is, asking the writer to become *auctor*, the person who, being endowed with authority, respects and implements that value precisely by increasing the prosperity around him/herself

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through munificence, distributing unconditionally.

Paradoxically, precisely when Vernon Lee seems to criticize “primitive” and “savage” peoples even more harshly for their acritical and selfish violence (SW 210), for their tendency to bargain and speculate “with their neighbours for injuries done or received” (SW 202), hence for their inability to go beyond the restricted economy of “Retributive Justice” (SW 263),<sup>28</sup> *de facto* she relies with increasing evidence on a primitive principle, that of the gift ritual, as the exemplary model of her ideal society, one in which the positive power of *largitio*, be it material or symbolic, allows the individual to participate in the spontaneity of nature and of life. In order for this to happen, in order to avoid the harmfulness of the gift of words, the writer should not consider himself/herself the generator and the owner of truth but, rather, simply a person who looks for truth (SW 137). Writers, in other words, must share their quest for truth with others, participating in a sort of *potlatch* of ideas in which, far from “imparting eternal verities” (SW 137) and from detaining control over them, they rather deprive themselves of their own aesthetic production, treating it as a transient and alienable good, to be bestowed on somebody else.

Vernon Lee’s aesthetic and moral message hence comes full circle, anchoring itself to an ethical model alien to the dealings of servile consciousness, a model for which, once again, artists and intellectuals are responsible. Therefore, neither duty nor any categorical imperative can be the ultimate hinge of Vernon Lee’s moral philosophy in *Satan the Waster*, but, rather, an “aesthetic sanction” (SW 263) not weighed on the scales of retribution, an invitation to “happiness, bought at no price of suffering and entailing no debt thereof” (SW 210). Ultimately, it is Vernon Lee herself who offers us an example of this beautiful and almost magical coincidence of pure expenditure and non-exploitative fruition in those “joyful moments of leisurely comradeship” (SW 263), in which “giving himself [...] man shuffles off his little self, and receives in return a share of the inexhaustible living plenitude of things” (SW 261). This form of comradeship promoted by the non-productive principle of enjoyment through loss fosters appreciation and even love of “*otherness* for its own sake” (SW 241) against a simple “patriotic love” (SW 241) deriving from a sense of belonging to a country and from an identity reduced to ownership of national components. There can be “vital exchanges between nations” (SW xxxix) not based upon fight, and human relations not subject to the despotism of drives or to an arid, impersonal morality if an altruism prevails that promotes “respect for the other rather than renunciation of the self” (SW xlix) in the name of a subtler and hypocritical selfishness.

Therefore, it is not enough, according to Vernon Lee, to appeal to that generic notion of “*collective consciousness*” (SW 281) which in much anthropology of her time, Durkheim included, offers the pretext for

excluding individual differences and conferring power to an indistinct multitude leveled by "Unanimity" (SW 281), hence to "sameness of quality, volume and resonance and repetition of movement" (SW 281). In order to shift from "unison" (SW 283) to "harmony" (SW 283), from a conception of "we" as "magnified and blurred Ego" (SW 284) to a heterogeneous plurality of independent individualities ready to receive the *Alter* with its own diversity – in other words, in order to realize an organic community, not artificially and abstractly cohesive but rather able to reconcile the uniqueness of the individual with an emotional and creative communion spontaneously endorsed by the collectivity – it is necessary to adopt the non-utilitarian practice of equity that Vernon Lee finds in "*Fair Play*" (SW 263), a form of justice as "common recreation" (SW 263) that challenges the "mechanical poise of scales" (SW 264) quantifying guilt and innocence. This divinity that "pits only equal rivals against each other and watches that only skill and prowess, qualities useful to all, or even good luck coming by turns to everyone, should determine advantage" (SW 264), personifies an ideal of peace and of friendship that is inevitably aristocratic and inoperative, as also Alain Caillé has observed.<sup>29</sup> Fair play has not simply ethical implications (the collective respect for the rule, the agreement among competitors, the "sportsmanlike" acceptance of defeat that in competition confers prestige on the winner precisely as happens in games), but also non-instrumental and aesthetic underpinnings (the *good* player who is also a *beautiful* player, that is, a player characterized by style and elegance of behaviour). It is hence not accidental if generosity and the love for the beautiful synthesized in *fair play* resume the agonistic dynamics underlying the ceremonial exchange of gifts. Fair play can be considered the equivalent of *agon* in the domain of sport<sup>30</sup> precisely because it suspends the desire for victory and for a return, be it symbolic or material. Furthermore, it represents an elitist attitude, a sign of the nobility of soul.<sup>31</sup>

As she acknowledges the aristocratic nature of *fair play* – inevitably reserved to the few, or at least meant to elevate the individuals who successfully adhere to it – Vernon Lee also cherishes the prospect of its universalist extension. Only in this way can rivalries work for peace as a collective ethics detached from transcendent dictates, imperialistic forces or categorical imperatives, and rather resulting from the voluntary endorsement of communal values.<sup>32</sup>

With this ideal of disinterested altruism and pacifism which Vernon Lee symbolically *offers* to the new generations (SW 300) as the most extraordinary synthesis of gift and art, the "poor aesthete in moralist's garb" – as the author had modestly defined herself in *Gospels of Anarchy* (GOA 340) – says farewell to her audience. She is almost ready to exit the scene of a new century which, traumatized by destruction and

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annihilation rather than exasperated by Victorian abundance, attempts to recreate innocence where decadence wanted to disenchant, to provoke, to unmask. The author of *Satan the Waster* marks this shift by resorting to the element of continuity between those two moments, precisely the primitive paradigm of the gift and of ceremonial expenditure. She shows that, paradoxically, it is not by moving away from primitive cultures but rather by returning to them and by abandoning the sophistication of bourgeois artifices that authentic refinement and nobility of soul can be attained. In Vernon Lee's pronouncements we can already hear the no less utopian but equally incisive words with which, in just a few years, Marcel Mauss will conclude his essay in favor of reciprocal generosity, an essay that, just like *Satan the Waster*, was written in response to the devastation of the war, the culminating point of the appropriative logic and of the violent speculative power of the *homo oeconomicus* so much condemned by our author.

Therefore, *Satan the Waster* is by no means "almost unreadable"<sup>33</sup> albeit praiseworthy, as Gillian Beer has claimed. We could argue it is not simply readable but, above all, to be read and to be reread, not only as a peculiar synthesis of a late-Victorian intellectual climate but even as a pioneering standpoint from which the new century will recodify the meaning of *humanitas* and modernity.

## Endnotes

- 1 George Bernard Shaw, "A Political Contrast," *The Nation*, September 18, 1920, pp. 758; 760.
- 2 Unpublished letter by Vernon Lee dated September 26, 1920, now in the Colby College Library and quoted in Richard Cary, "Shaw Reviews *Satan the Waster*", *Colby College Quarterly*, Series IX, N.6, June 1971, p. 341.
- 3 As further evidence of the persisting difficulties encountered by critics in placing *Satan the Waster* within Vernon Lee's production, it is intriguing to notice that this work has not been discussed, either, in what is currently the most recent monograph on Vernon Lee's works, Christa Zorn's *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2003.
- 4 See Nicoletta Pireddu, "Utopie cerimoniali: Vernon Lee, 'apprendista stregone'", in *Antropologi alla corte della bellezza: Decadenza ed economia simbolica nell'Europa fin de siècle*, Verona, Fiorini, 2002, pp. 185–243.
- 5 Vernon Lee, *Althea: Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties*, London and New York, John Lane, 1910, p. 85.
- 6 Vernon Lee, *Vital Lies: Studies of Some Varieties of Recent Obscurantism*, London, John Lane, 1912, Vol. I, p. vii.
- 7 In other words, Vernon Lee tends to neglect the wicked, almost satanic, side of beauty that typically coexists with its angelic face especially in decadent aesthetics. Likewise, she does not address the perverse and poisonous effects of the act of donation, which in fact makes the gift a *vox media*, literally a *pharmakon*, as its etymology confirms.
- 8 Vernon Lee, *Satan the Waster*, New York, John Lane, 1920, p. vii. Future references will be given parenthetically in the text, and abbreviated as SW.
- 9 The notes can be considered the real protagonists of *Satan the Waster*. To a certain extent, it is as though the fictional text were a pretext thanks to which Vernon Lee could speak in the first person as an interpreter and an ideologue.
- 10 Vernon Lee, *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies*, London, T. Fisher Unwin; New York, Brentano, 1908, p. 18. Future references will be given parenthetically in the text, and abbreviated as GOA.
- 11 In *Satan the Waster* Vernon Lee further discusses the notion of sacrifice as "sheer loss" in the notes from p. 191 onwards, and contrasts Satan's "useless loss" with fruitful exchanges of goods (SW 117).
- 12 In this negative characterization of Satan in aestheticizing terms we can find an echo of Vernon Lee's earlier definition of Nietzsche as a "moral Beau Brummel" in *Gospels of Anarchy* (GOA 168).
- 13 Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970–1976, vol. VII, pp. 44–5.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 55; 60.
- 17 See Bataille, *ibid.*, p. 200: "Le monde bourgeois dédaigne les conduites glorieuses et les tient pour inférieures aux conduites utiles. Il n'admet les conduites glorieuses qu'à la condition qu'elles soient utiles".
- 18 Here "war life" refers to the idea of "vie guerrière" in the sense that, as explained above, Bataille attributes to the archaic war experience, hence not as the equivalent of "military".
- 19 We can interpret "Every and rarest and most needed virtue shall be wasted

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- as a burnt offering upon my altars" (SW 46) as a sort of parodic anticipation of Bataille's position on the "enchaînement de la guerre et du sacrifice." See Bataille, *op. cit.* p. 58.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 22 In other words, an alienating materialism, a reification that annihilates the individual as opposed to the "magical", ceremonial materialism that re-fetishizes social relationships according to the model of symbolic economy.
- 23 In Bataille's terms we could say that there is no communion. Satan is isolated and this is why his expenditure does not constitute an example of general economy. For instance, Bataille defines industrial society as a "foule composée d'existences isolées" (Bataille, *op. cit.*, p. 212) and presents capitalism as a system in which "chaque dépense improductive augmente la somme des forces produites" (*ibid.*, p. 230).
- 24 After E. B. Tylor's observations on sacrifice as a strategic renunciation animated by the sacrificer's self-interest (see *Primitive Culture*, London, John Murray, 1871, vol. II, pp. 479–82), which discusses in anthropological terms many underpinnings of sacrifice that Nietzsche highlights in his own works, the seminal text on that topic is that of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur la nature et la fonction sociale du sacrifice", *Année sociologique*, vol. II, 1899, pp. 29–138 (reprinted in Marcel Mauss, *Oeuvres* vol. I, Paris, Minuit, 1968).
- 25 *Mana*, a Maori term designating power and authority, and above all a superior natural force localized in specific beings and objects, was popularized in 1891 by English missionary and ethnologist R. H. Codrington through his volume *The Melanesians*, followed by H. Hubert's and M. Mauss's 1902–3 essay "Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie". This reference to *mana* in Vernon Lee is hence particularly important for the anthropological question that emerges from her texts. Even if Vernon Lee was not directly familiar with Hubert's and Mauss's work, the presence of that term in her writing attests to her awareness of elements related to the primitive and non-Western world that were beginning to circulate in that period.
- 26 Georges Bataille, "L'apprenti sorcier", *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 1922–1940, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp. 536–7. Vernon Lee is certainly far from the notion of excess, ecstasy and sacredness that Bataille associates with eroticism. However, apart from the different objectives and results that animate their respective standpoints, Vernon Lee's and Bataille's conceptions of the sorcerer's apprentice share interesting points. Bataille will insist upon a social degradation which, as in the case of the mankind depicted in *Satan the Waster*, reduces the individual to a servile entity instead of promoting its wholeness and integrity. Therefore, in the name of utility and of profit, the writer, just like the politician or the scientist, has repudiated a life of depth and has lied to his peers instead of revealing to them the dissociation and fragmentation that have turned the plenitude and the simplicity of existence into the exercise of a mere function. It is hence necessary to overcome also the state of isolation of the individual and simultaneously not to succumb to the "crowd" which, rather than risk, demands the security of a life based upon calculation and targeted decisions. According to Bataille, in order to attain totality, the true being, it is necessary to recreate myth, an approach to reality in which knowledge corresponds to a plenitude without the violence of possession, a condition that is typical of allegedly primordial civilizations. Here is where the sorcerer's apprentice enters the scene. The individual, and the artist in particular, has to learn how

- to recreate this mythical condition, to run risks and to retrieve archaic rituals while protecting them from the vulgarity of a disintegrating modern society. Bataille's point of arrival will be the ecstatic and heroic self-destruction of the "I". For her part, Vernon Lee clings to the communitarian dimension and to the author's responsibility in the realization of such an enchantment.
- 27 See Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, P.U.F., 1995, p. 163.
- 28 See also similar claims on savages and the primitive world in the play itself (SW 19; 38).
- 29 Alain Caillé, "En guise de prologue. Brèves remarques sur l'idée de *fair play*" in *Don, intérêt, désintéressement*, Paris, La Découverte/Mauss, 1994, p. 41.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.
- 31 In this context Friedrich Schiller's observations on art and play, which Vernon Lee had criticized despite substantially adhering to them (for instance, in *Althea, The Beautiful and Gospels of Anarchy*), are paramount. In *Satan the Waster*, in other words, *fair play* seems further to consolidate that coexistence of duty and inclination that regulates Schiller's aesthetic education, while at the same time it recalls the free circulation of the gift paradoxically ruled by total obligations.
- 32 These following observations by Alain Caillé about the Greek Olympic games as the founding example of *fair play* are equally central to the aesthetic, ethical and anthropological question of unconditional expenditure developed in Vernon Lee: "Les premières olympiades, les olympiades grecques, ont su mettre l'*agôn* et la rivalité au service de la paix. A l'échelle d'une culture entière, elles ont su inventer une logique de pacification qui n'était imposée ni par une religion transcendante ni par la force supérieure d'un empire, mais qui résultait d'un accord unanime sur des valeurs communes". See Caillé, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- 33 Gillian Beer, "The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: *Satan the Waster* and the Will to Believe", *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. by Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 128: "*Satan the Waster* is wasted: all its commitment to honesty, its play, its wit, its tussle with language, its experiment with genre. The desolate aloofness of its insight makes it almost unreadable."

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