
Collection Permanent Link: [http://hdl.handle.net/10822/559548](http://hdl.handle.net/10822/559548)

© 2000 Cisalpino, Istituto Editoriale Universitario

This material is made available online with the permission of the author, and in accordance with publisher policies. No further reproduction or distribution of this copy is permitted by electronic transmission or any other means.
ATHENA'S SHUTTLE
MYTH RELIGION IDEOLOGY
FROM ROMANTICISM TO MODERNISM

Edited by Franco Marucci and Emma Sdegno
VERNON LEE: AESTHETIC EXPENDITURE,
NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Nicoletta Piroddu

I am certainly not the first one who calls attention to the many contradictions in the work of Vernon Lee.\footnote{In addition to inconsistencies highlighted by Vernon Lee's contemporaries, and summarized in the annotated bibliography by C. Markgraf in vol. XXVI of *English Literature in Transition*, see, for instance, Wellek, "Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson and Aesthetics"; Caballero, "A Wicked Voice"; Small, "Vernon Lee, Association and Impressionist Criticism"; Sinha, "Vernon Lee: Some Aspects of Theory and Practical Criticism of Fiction"; Robbins, "Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman".} Indebted to Pater, yet avowedly hostile to the tenets of aestheticism, a disciple of Ruskin's and simultaneously critical of his pessimism and theological bias; faithful to the lawfulness without law of Kant's judgment of taste but ready to dismiss it in favour of practical aesthetic emotion, Vernon Lee is quite difficult to accommodate in the intellectual panorama of turn-of-the-century Britain. And, indeed, if we combine her heterogeneous poetics with her transnational,\footnote{I adopt the term "transnational" according to the definition given by J. Jonassaint in "Migration et études littéraires" to refer to the condition of a migrant writer who partakes of more than one national space and literary tradition, and who, as such, produces in, and is received by, more than one literature (often, but not necessarily always, in different languages). In the light of Jonassaint's argument, Vernon Lee's cultural activity in at least three national literatures and their respective languages — English, French and...} crosscultural, experience, the portrait of Vernon Lee becomes ever...
more eclectic. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons for Vernon Lee’s unjust marginalization in the current discussions of fin-de-siècle culture. Born in France, close to Boulogne, of a father who was brought up in Russia and Poland, and of an English-speaking mother who came from an old colonial family established in Barbados, Violet Paget—this is the real name masked under the pseudonym Vernon Lee—soon has her share in the endless wanderings of her own parents all over Europe. A nomadic life like hers, from France to Germany, Switzerland, England, and finally Italy, where she ultimately settles for good in 1873 without ever renouncing travels, secures her an extraordinarily cosmopolitan education, always filtered through “a foreign element” responsible for her polemical attitude and for the spatial and chronological dislocation in many of her works.

Her struggle against much Victorian pragmatism and moral obsessions goes hand in hand with a fascination, for instance, with the mysteries and wonders of eighteenth-century Italian arts. However, it is a deep knowledge of her enlarged, European, cultural milieu that makes Vernon Lee a provocative first-rate participant in the debates of her age, throughout her long literary career, approximately from 1880 to 1920. How to cope, then, with the claim of her biographer, Peter Gunn, that Vernon Lee was born a Victorian and remained a Victorian all her life (Vernon Lee 1), partaking of the widespread cult of modernity as progress?

It is possible, in my view, to propose a more articulated profile of Vernon Lee, who can, in fact, be fully appreciated as an innovative thinker precisely through her apparently anarchistic and contradictory standpoint. I will try to underscore how the aporiae in the thought of Vernon

Lee map a fascinating continuity in her work which allows us to reexamine the transition from Victorian to modernist ideologies in the light of the objectives pursued by a certain cultural, and in particular anthropological, discourse on non-Western civilizations that develops along with decadent aesthetics and evolves out of it. My discussion, however, can be sketched as follows: 1) despite being the negation of nature par excellence, Vernon Lee’s interpretation of the disinterestedness and autonomy of art questions modernity’s material and moral economy of scarcity, self-preservation and accumulation by taking up the non-calculating, hence allegedly more “natural”, quality attributed by anthropologists to primitive ceremonial rituals; 2) this intersection of aesthetic and anthropological concerns is grounded in something more solid than simply thematic analogies. Indeed, disinterestedness provides the formal structure and the philosophical principle of their joint anti-modern project; 3) in that project, the primitivity of the aesthetic over the social persists not only in the domain of art but also on the side of anthropology, which transfers to primitive ceremonies the utopian and elitist ideology underlying the decadent representation of beauty.

We may be intrigued to notice that while Vernon Lee does not spare contemptuous comments about the persistence of savage customs in civilized life, primitive passions, and the awful catalogues of “primaeval ferocities and madnesses” (Albea 85) collected in books of anthropology, it is precisely the ideology of cultural otherness that moulds her reflections on beauty and art. Far from accidental, in my view, recurring references and discussions around such notions as gifts, expenditure, waste, re-sacralization of collective relationships in her essays recodify the aesthetic domain in primitive terms, assimilating it to the ceremonial, symbolic economies of archaic communities. In other words, embedded in her vision of art as a purposeless, non-productive yet spontaneously regulated activity—which I will explore more in detail—we can recognize the structure of those primitive and non-utilitarian ritual practices in which European intellectuals, increasingly disaffected by the rationality of modernity, begin to locate a source of reenchantment. And, of course, referring, among others, to Durkheim’s turn-of-the-century work on the religious and disinterested primitive mind, offering to the modern world the principles of an original state of collective and creative effervescence retrievable through the exercise of the sacred (Formes élémentaires).
primitive tribes, a commerce propelled not so much by utility as by a magical logic that equates "possessing" to "giving for the sake of giving" (suggesting intriguing links with "art-for-art's-sake") — works that prepare the ground for Bataille’s "general economy", a destabilizing regime of unproductive, sacred squandering (or dépense) having no end beyond itself. Or, even before the explosion of the High Modernist anthropological temerity, to E.B. Tylor, whose bent towards the advancement of civilization in his Primitif Culture (1870) does not hinder him from attributing to religious gift-giving ceremonies a free and unpredictable character, alien to a strictly regulated economy of good and evil, as well as to any calculating relationship between the worshipper and the deity. More vastly, however, this discourse on cultural otherness, that explores and interrogates non-Western native customs to reaffirm the preponderance of instrumentality in life and representation can be located at the crossroads of various disciplines and, as such, allows us to renegotiate the significance of decadent aesthetics in this debate.

To be sure — beyond ritual in general terms, which is at the roots of religion and aesthetics in the 19th century, as

Hilary Fraser has skillfully shown in her Beauty and Belief — the more specific principle of wasteful and irrational dissipation can already be found in the ephemeral and intoxicating beauty celebrated by Baudelaire’s Constantin Guy's” or, indeed, in the coincidence of poetic passion and purposeless consumption of Peter’s “quickened consciousness” (Renaissance 190). Yet, nobody like Vernon Lee muses on the conception of art as ritual squandering, and on beauty as unconditional giving, so systematically and persistently, presenting ceremonial expenditure — we could say — as the elementary structure of a revived human consciousness able to transcend the narrow interests of the homo oeconomicus. And no wonder if her participation in more than one national space multiplies sources and acquaintances that facilitate her extremely interesting synthesis of aesthetic and anthropological issues, looking both back and ahead: readings of Kant, Schiller, Emerson, Guyau and Nietzsche; contacts with various British intellectuals who gravitated around Tylor — like Andrew Lang and Herbert Spencer; and, later, with a philosopher like Bertrand Russell; a life in Florence in the very years in which Paolo Mantegazza is compiling his ethnographic studies on primitive people; and a long friendship with the historian Pasquale Villari, equally committed to the emerging folkloric and anthropological studies.

Since one of her earliest works, Belcaro (1881), Vernon Lee invites us to appreciate a work of art in itself, independently of anything that is "accidentally or arbitrarily connected" (62) with it through the laws of comparison and association. Art for art’s sake, in other words, means, uniquely,
enjoyment of the pleasure that derives from contemplation of the lines,)
(colours or modulations of a work of art, hence of its form. It is then rather
predictable that Lee's argument should proceed by claiming, even more
assertively than in Pater and earlier than the Wildean preface to The Pict-
ture of Dorian Gray, that "Beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor
morally bad: it is aesthetically good" just as "virtue is neither aesthetically
good nor aesthetically bad, but morally good" (210). Indeed, her definition
of beauty as having "no other value than its being beautiful" (210),
defines the ground of her objection to Ruskin, who tries in vain to pur-
tue two mutually exclusive missions: "the creation of beauty and the de-
struction of evil" (211), with the unfortunate result of making "morality
sterile and art base" (225). Yet, while Vernon Lee rejects the Ruskinian
remodeling of aesthetics upon a moral basis, she is far from dismissing
the question of the morality of art tout court. Aesthetic enjoyment – while
devoid of moral meaning – does have "a moral value of its own: the value
of being, in the lives of others, absolute pleasure, the giving of which is posi-
tive good" (228). Even more synthetically, "Art is happiness, and to be:
happiness is to create good" (229). It is here worthwhile lingering on what
in my view are pivotal implications in Vernon Lee's claims. Contrary to
Ruskin's moral meaning arbitrarily attached to art, the morality intrinsic
to the creation and the experience of the beautiful is, for its part, non nor-
mative, noncategorical. It is, we could say, not only embedded in beauty it-
selves, but also spontaneously transmitted, communicated as such, without
depending on an external system of rules. Aesthetic activity, in other words,
is assimilated to a gratuitous, non-calculating event in which innocent,
value-free pleasure – the pleasure of beauty for its own sake – is produced,
distributed, and received neither as a moral nor as a rational transaction
but rather as an act of donation.

Here we already find the most relevant premises of an aesthetics and
ethics of unconditional expenditure that subsequent texts, like the essays
collected in Limbo (1897), posit precisely as the privileged conception of
the realm of art. Limbo, the "Kingdom of Might-have-been" (18), stores
the bulk of happiness, charm and desires that the hypocrisy of modern life
has replaced with "more useful qualities" (16) such as "readiness to snatch
opportunity" and "inflexible self-righteousness" (16). And, indeed, among
the myriad sensations and dispositions hosted in Limbo, hence neglected
in actuality, Leisure occupies a special place for Vernon Lee, because it
allows us to "feel free to do what we like" (140), and simultaneously pre-
disposes us to "perpetually giving ourselves from sheer love instinct" (141).

Yet in an instrumental world that fosters hasty production and cheap ma-
teriality, the capacity to "feel aesthetically" (144) has atrophied. What
modern civilization has sent to Limbo is precisely that "sacramental view
of life" (145) which, drawn from the religious world and extended to all
human manifestations (with an interesting anticipation of Durkheim's ar-
gument), could convert a mechanical and acquisitive experience of time
back to an emotional and creative ritual (149), restoring the "symbolic or
commemorative meaning" (146) of habits and deeds.

Furthermore, Vernon Lee's apparently moralistic formulation results
all the more compelling and insightful when we linger on its aesthetic un-
derpinnings. Indeed, the pragmatic impulse to produce is also respon-
sible for the destruction of charm, the "most valuable possession" (149)
precisely because alien to quantifiable exchange. This is tantamount to clai-
m resulting in the commonsensical basis upon instrumentality and profitability
is not only satisfying but above all ugly. By contrast, leisure and charn
authenticate the equation of purposelessness and beauty on the basis of
the positive principle of loss which, as in Bataille's notion of dispens, does
not compensate consumption with acquisition, but rather "implies a su-
perabundance [...] of the energy needed to spend time pleasantly" (153).
The gratuitous nature of this "finest activity" (Limbo 153) is, above all,
explicitly associated with an ethics of spontaneity rather than with an in-
junction of any kind. Neither completely amoral nor anchored to that "so-
plicated sense of duty" (222) which defined Ruskin's standpoint in Bel-
cano, the practice of Leisure means, in other words, "being active from an
inner impulse instead of a necessity" (153), making "the soul [...] free to grow
by its own laws [...] inwardly organized and harmonious" (150). As the
offspring of Leisure, Charm expresses "mere inborn needs" (150) and
"pleasure within ourselves" (150), while being "the great giver of pleasure
to others" (150).

The kind of "natural" collective cohesiveness promoted by leisure in
her essay, indeed, brings Vernon Lee's argument even closer to that para-
doxal dynamics of freedom and accountability that, in Marcel Mauss's
"Essai sur le don", will weld together the members of archaic communi-
ties practicing ceremonial exchange, which we now need to examine in
more detail. As Mauss describes it, the gift is the catalyst of a system of
"total prestations" (Gift 3:5; "Essai" 149-153) in which individuals, fam-
ilies, and whole clans are bound, at once religiously, morally, legally, and
economically, by the very circulation of the object. To be sure, ritual ex-
penditure is far from random or whimsical. Rather, it obeys three all-en-
compassing obligations – giving, receiving, repaying. The breach of any of them has fatal results. However, what allows Mauss to underscore the difference between those primitive patterns of reciprocity and the ethical and social laws of modern civilization is the fact that the members of the community created through the perpetual exchange of services and counter-services are engaged among themselves not so much by utilitarian transactions or rational concerns as by “a pattern of spiritual bonds” (Gift 11; “Essai” 163). Although we are told that there exist rigorous and inflexible rules at the foundation of gift-giving ceremonies, and that, by all means, they generate antagonism and rivalry among the participants, Mauss’s discussion reabsorbs those rules within a global phenomenon, which, significantly, is without stipulation (Gift 8; “Essai” 158), and has an emotional and aesthetic aspect, unquestionably far more pivotal in archaic rituals than in contemporary “prosaic” economic transactions (Gift 1; 22; 70; 77). In this framework, obligations rather appear as manifestations of an almost magical force – the hau, the spirit of the thing given – that keeps the ceremonial object in motion, and, precisely through its circulation, consolidates an organic communion of people and things, alien to material economic principles: “one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (Gift 10; “Essai” 161).

If now we go back to Vernon Lee’s description of leisure – hence of charm – as a form of personal expenditure of “joyful energy” (Linbo 154) which implies simultaneously giving one’s own essential intrinsic qualities to others, putting an end to the mechanical “pull and push, the rough-and-ready reciprocity of man and circumstance” (150), we can hence further appreciate how allusive her reflections are of this anthropological discourse. In Vernon Lee we find no trace of the duplicity of the Maussian bestowal as both beneficial and harmful – and for this reason her argument might sound naïve, or simplistic with respect to subsequent anthropological theories. Yet it is precisely her insistence on the (almost utopian) positivity of that charming act of giving that turns out to be relevant to aesthetics. In Vernon Lee’s essay, the equivalent of the Maussian magical force that propels symbolic exchange can be located in the laws of the aesthetic experience because of the supposedly alogical, non-calculating, and rather emotional connection they establish between the individual and the collective sensibility. Indeed, this emerges quite well in the images and reflections that Vernon Lee chooses to further substantiate her claim on the “inner”, hence not “necessary”, impulse that animates the state of leisure. It amounts to “moving like a dancer or skater for the sake of one’s inner rhythm instead of moving, like a ploughman or an errand-boy, for the sake of the wages you get for it. Indeed, for this reason, the type of all Leisure is art” (153).

We could say that Vernon Lee’s equation of leisure and art thus works in two directions: it invites us to see art as a form of symbolic expenditure, and simultaneously proposes to treat expenditure of excess, unproductive energy as an aesthetic activity, hence as a source of beauty. Yet, we should note that Vernon Lee’s conception of aesthetic activity in terms of dépense refers to the act of making art as well as to the moment of its reception. This is what emerges, for instance, to a smaller or larger extent, from the overall argument of Linbo and Laura Nobile, as well as from “The Riddle of Music”, where Vernon Lee’s discussion about the aesthetic emotion generated by the appreciation of music emphasizes the selfless expenditure of energy entailed by the perception of form (“Riddle” 225-226).

Significantly, the equation of beauty and expenditure in Vernon Lee’s essays allows us further to validate the considerations about the totally positive character of erect consumption emerging from “Leisure”. Just as Vernon Lee’s argument on expenditure is not tainted by the Janis-like nature of the act of giving that will be central to Mauss, we could say that the beauty extolled in Vernon Lee’s essays does not retain the tension inherent to the more complex mystical and sensual aesthetics of authors like Baudelaire, Swinburne and Rossetti. Indeed, the comments of Baldwin, one of the characters in Vernon Lee’s series of dialogues Baldwin and Balcar, for instance, sound as a radical condemnation of what for him is just an abominable literature of carnal desire disguised as passion and spiritual love, and, for her part, Vernon Lee herself disseminates similar remarks throughout her works. However, contrary to her theoretical discussions, it is in fact a beauty simultaneously mortal and celestial, perverse and divine, that we find in several of her fictional works, together with significant allusions to those very authors the officially criticizes. Thus, for instance, in the story “Lady Tal” (Daughters of Discord, ed. Showalter), the imposing and vigorous stature of the eponymous character, the ambiguity of her almost masculine mien, and the mythological figure evoked by her nickname suggest a link with Swinburne’s Atlantida in Calydon, as J. de Palacio has observed (“Y a-t-il une écriture...”). The gothic and decadent tones of other fantastic tales,
what kind of beauty, what idea of the beautiful, does Vernon Lee have in mind when she posits that equivalence? An answer to this question will hopefully also underscore what ethical and social implications we can draw from her standpoint, and understand, at the same time, the ideology animating the anthropological discourse soon to follow.

To be sure, the pattern traced so far brings to the foreground the strong Kantian echoes of this autonomous and purposeless aesthetic realm providing and following norms immanent to the individual and yet shared by the collectivity. Indeed, the Kantian judgment of taste is neither cognitive, nor logical; it is devoid of all interest in the object’s existence (that is, it is formal, independent of the material qualities of the object or of the charm and emotion it produces, saturating no lack and fulfilling no wish); it is subjective but simultaneously made communicable, universal, and necessary through the unanimous assent of sensus communis. Never-

like “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” or “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers” (Haunting), encourage similar remarks. Not accidentally, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out in the Aesthete on April 12, 1890, at the centre of Vernon Lee’s stories there is often a “lure-woman,” who draws her lovers to death or madness” (Markgraf, 295). I am grateful to Professor Jerome McGann for his remarks about the influence of Swinburne upon Vernon Lee’s aesthetics, which invited me to dwell more on this parallel.

10 See Kant, Critique of Judgment, §§ 18–22. 10. We should not overlook here the complexity of Kant’s notion of sensus communis, which has generated conflicting interpretations. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard insists on the total lack of connection between the sensus communis and an actual historical or social community sharing the pleasure of the beautiful. What is at stake remains within the mind: sensus communis is the mind’s capacity to feel the internal euphony of reason and imagination—hence it is a community of faculties, not of individuals. According to Lyotard, the scattered anthropological references (for instance in § 10 of the Critique of Judgment) are merely for the sake of explaining a concept which however is transcendental (“Sensus communis” 1–23). Gilles Deleuze warns as strongly as Lyotard against an empirical interpretation of sensus communis: with it Kant designates the result of an a priori accord of faculties, which is the subjective condition of communicability (Kant’s Critical Philosophy). For his part, Luc Ferry sustains the humanism of Kant’s Third Critique, and consequently emphasizes the anthropological implications of the sensus communis. The latter allows the shift from an individual feeling to a universal idea but in so doing it also establishes a direct communication between individuals, that is, a communication not mediated by concepts (Histoire Aesthetique 128–135). Similarly, Salim Kemal sees agreement from other subjects as the necessary confirmation for a particular experience of pleasure. Sensus communis, hence, extends the harmonious relation of faculties within the subject to the social sphere (“Kant, Community and the Evil Poem” 42–38). Without attempting to erase the specificity of those standpoints, we can however underline that they all accept at least the

theless, in Vernon Lee, aesthetic formalism and disinterestedness go hand in hand with an attention to such feelings as pleasure, charm, joy, in fact implying an emotional participation far more material than a mental reaction to abstract processes of representation. The natural, inner, spontaneous laws that appear to govern non-utilitarian manifestations, be they aesthetic or more widely social, seem to promote a comprehensive harmony, a peaceful, organic accord not only of individual faculties, à la Kant, but rather of both form and content, both senses and intellect, as the character of Baldwin, in Althea, eloquently declares: “Great is the art of the artist […] who connects the single work, the single art, with life, intertwining it with all life’s nerves and arteries” (Althea 103).

Paradoxically, her overall argument is rather closer to a re-reading of Kant through the lenses of that very Schiller whom at times she claims not to appreciate that much (although curiously, it is a quote from Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man that opens her volume Laurus Nobilis). Her attempt to reconcile the absolute pleasure and happiness conferred by beauty and the universal formal structure corresponding to its contemplative nature recalls indeed the Schillerian aesthetic education resulting from a free play of the individual will between duty and inclination (Letters 31) as a way of going beyond Kant. Why? Because for Schiller the freedom of the Kantian beautiful results, we could say, from the others’ lack of freedom in taste.11 It takes on the form of an imposed uniformity, a universal formal coercion that, while supposedly guaranteeing the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, in fact foreshadows the “ought to” of the moral categorical imperative.

For its part, Schiller’s recuperation of phenomenal reality and of its sensitive side aims at a harmony—a beautiful communication (Letters 90)

idea of a harmonic or unifying principle bringing together diverse functions, hence bridging the gap between singularity and collectivity (be it an actual communal human dimension or simply an aggregate of faculties).

11 The following passage from Kant’s Critique of Judgment, indeed, seems particularly appropriate to substantiate Schiller’s interpretation: “Whenever we make a judgment declaring something to be beautiful, we permit no one to hold a different opinion (my emphasis), even though we base our judgment only on our feeling rather than on concepts; hence we regard this underlying feeling as a common rather than as a private feeling. But if we are to use this common sense in such a way, we cannot base it on experience, for it seeks to justify us in making judgments that contain an ought: it does not say that everyone will agree with my judgment, but that he ought to” (Critique § 22, 89).
— in the individual, hence in society, that is still entrusted to taste, hence to aesthetic judgment, but conceived as a free and happy synthesis of sense and intellect. This aesthetic freedom does have laws. However, since they do not find any opposition, those laws do not appear as a constraint (Letters 99). Rather, they delineate a "joyful state" (Letters 124) in a "blessed zone where activity alone leads to enjoyment and enjoyment alone to activity" (Letters 124). We should not be surprised then, if, far from a universal state of nature, the sacred order of Schiller's aesthetic civilization is reserved to an elite of beautiful souls, endowed with fine feelings, who will be able to raise above the violence of rational and moral imperatives, and enjoy the beautiful lawfulness without law of their educated sensuality, with "eager simplicity and tranquil innocence" (Letters 143).

Hopefully, this detour through the Kantian and Schillerian roots of Vernon Lee's art theory has begun to highlight how, by prompting ideas like the need to "feel aesthetically" as a way of undermining the forces of instrumentalism; the liberation of art from moral dogmas; the superior value of time spent non productively in strictly utilitarian terms, that is, not finalized to commerce and accumulation but rather "beautifully" given away, Vernon Lee synthesizes two apparently distinct discourses on symbolism (that of art, at the apex of sophistication, and that of archeic social customs, at the roots of civilization) exemplifying and validating essential points about the analogy between aesthetic activity and ceremonial economy, but also showing how a certain aesthetic utopia is still inscribed in the representation of cultural otherness as the repository of non-alienerd symbolic forms. First of all, these two forms of symbolism, as we can perceive them in Vernon Lee, express the same aspiration to (or nostalgia for) a plenitude of life, to be found, respectively, in the ideal of the organic totality promoted by the harmonious and immanent rules of aesthetic form and feeling, and, on the side of anthropology, in the notion of total prestation, which, as we saw in Mauss, depicts archeaic gift-giving ceremonies as all-encompassing phenomena rigorously structured yet experienced (in Mauss's view) as non-mechanical, non-rational practices, requesting compliance yet in a "natural", unforced way. Ritual, both aesthetic and more widely social, hence promotes a mystical cohesion binding individuals in a community opposed to the speculative objectives and the dogmatic morality of the extended society. Significantly, such ideal nucleus becomes the repository of an ideology of the sacred that would like to overcome the alienation and reification of modern human behaviour through a process of re fetischization: just as the magic impulse of primitive exchange endows ceremonial objects with a soul and creates authentic connections between persons and things, beauty is for Vernon Lee a special and mysterious force, a magical, noble, object that infuses in its turn a vitalizing touch in the life of each individual (Laurus 11-12).

Yet we can also begin to see how the alleged disinterestedness shared by sumptuous expenditure and the "luxury" experience of art works not simply as the guarantor of reciprocity and stability but, above all, as the source of distinction and as the sign of aristocracy. Already visible in Kant's judgment of taste and further reinforced by Schiller's aesthetic elite, the superiority of a non-utilitarian order of things is further magnified by sacred exchange and consumption, where it explicitly takes on the value of a higher, heroic, morality. The example of the Kula ring — the intertribal giving and receiving among the primitive people of Melanesia — discussed by Mauss on the basis of Malinowski's work, underscores indeed the aristocratic nature of symbolic trade: it is reserved to tribal chiefs, it is "carried out in noble fashion" (Mauss 20), although apparently disinterested and modest, and distinct from a simple economic trade of useful merchandise. While "the donor affects an exaggerated modesty" (20), he does his best to show not only his "freedom and autonomy" but also his "magnanimity" (20).

It is precisely this transition from the nobility of purposeless emotional squandering, to the nobility of soul and rank, and ultimately to a superior morality of prestige and power, that later works by Vernon Lee delineate in a more decisive way. And, in this respect, I argue, the influence of Nietzsche on Vernon Lee (documented as early as 1894) deserves particular attention.

In volumes like Laurus Nobilis and Gospels of Anarchy, the junction of a purposeless aesthetic activity and a gratuitous act of giving offers a more disenchanting answer to questions which reemerge incessantly, even today, in the debates on the status of symbolic economy. Why do we give? Why art as gift? Vernon Lee's essays, as we will see, anticipate and well substantiate the formula soon to be exposed by Malinowski and Mauss to

---

12 Significantly, in terms that are almost diametrically opposite to Kant's, here the world of the senses is the happy symbol of how the moral world ought to be. Instead of representing, as in the Critique of Judgment, an idea of the beautiful that conforms to the moral law, Schiller rather delineates a moral structure which, ideally — hence in the aesthetic state — should conform to beauty.
synthesize the dynamics of the gift — *noblesse oblige* — and recently revived by Maurice Godlert to underscore the double bind between solidarity and superiority, and the violence it disguises: "ce qui oblige à donner c'est que donner oblige" (*L'énigme du don* 20). They hence invite us to rethink the status of disinterestedness in both the aesthetic and the social sphere. Is it possible to conceive of an act completely alien to a return, to a counter-gift? Is there a symbolic form able to exceed intentionality and indebtedness? Ultimately, where to find a cultural otherness, be it aesthetic or geographical, representational or material, able to embody absolute innocence prior to rational and moral accounts?

Surprisingly, it is a new portrait of Ruskin, the one in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), that suggests the instability and ambivalence of the act of donation, and of its aesthetic morality. No longer a moral fanatic as in *Elements*, Ruskin now deserves to be extolled precisely for being “a giver of great gifts” (302), since he has lavished on future generations aesthetic and imaginative pleasures (302). His “detachment from material possession” (303), and his disgust with “narrow utilitarianism” (303) are the guarantee of a “noble life” (307) which, by making “the highest ethical use” of art’s “sharable enjoyments” (316), allows to rise above the “ceaseless jostle of capacities” (321) and to promote “a virtuous circle of virtuous efficacy” (309). In this circle that effectively evokes the enchanted space of symbolic exchange, Ruskin abolishes, in perfectly anthropological terms, the difference between person and thing, becoming a ritual, magical object himself, a *fetish*: in Vernon Lee’s words, he is ultimately “the greatest of his own gifts” (320), since “he has given us himself”, and with the “ecstasy” (320) of his spirit (let’s think of the *hat* in Mauss) he has “made all noble things alive” (320).

A kind of tribal chief in this sophisticated and yet primaevae aesthetic community. Ruskin is here described as achieving greatness of soul pre-

11 As Nietzsche claims, Zarathustra goes through a veritable “noviciate of purifications […] for the simple gratification of his own fine gentleman’s taste” (*Zarathustra* 168).

12 These elements, in addition to confirming the direct influence of the German philosopher on Vernon Lee, also invite us to explore the role played by their common precursor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose reflections on gifts and generosity hover in the background of both. As for Vernon Lee’s first acquaintance with Nietzsche’s works, René Wellek underscores the mediating role played by Karl Hillebrand, one of the earliest admirers and reviewers of Nietzsche (*“Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson and Aesthetics”* 238). Yet he also hints at a far less exploited but equally relevant figure who influenced Vernon Lee, namely, Jean-Marie Gayau, whose vitalistic hedonism in fact anticipates Nietzsche in many ways. While it is now clear from Wellek’s claim whether he implies a direct connection between Gayau and Nietzsche as well as a possible debt of Vernon Lee to Gayau, I would like to add that in fact Nietzsche himself drew a great deal from Gayau, and that Vernon Lee explicitly refers to Gayau, for instance, in *Laurel Nobilis*, in her discussion about beautiful things as oblations, and the tendency of art to replace religion (*Laurel* 272).
Yet, we should not overlook an important difference here: while the Nietzschean noble soul “gives as it takes”, expending itself out of an accidental, almost mechanical overflowing instinct of plenitude and profusion, and is attributed, malgré lui, a master morality. Vernon Lee strategically presents such passionate instinct not simply as the result of a superabundance in the conditions of life, but rather as the pre-requisite for the deliberate affirmation of a nobility of consciousness. A quick look at the collection Lanus Nobilit (1909), and in particular at Vernon Lee’s explanation of the title, is enough to validate these considerations. A sacred tree, and a symbol of all poetic and artistic vision and emotion” (Lanus 4), the laurel branch is nobilit, “of the noblest utility” (5) since “it averred lightening from the dwellings it surrounded” (50) just as “disinterested love of beauty averts from our mind” the dangers of covetousness and vanity. Only the “mysterious” (4), “superhuman” (12) and “truly divine” (12) power of the beautiful, by invalidating the order of personal ownership (53) and by requiring “that one should give oneself” (23), can redeem us from the “coarser enjoyments” (26) of the majority, and the “worthless ways” (39) of expending our “surplus energy” (39). Not accidentally, it is the “altruristic pleasure” (51) of this aesthetic ceremonial economy that should become for Vernon Lee “the mark of Nature’s aristocracy, a sign of liberality of spiritual birth and breeding, a question of noblesse oblige” (49). In Nietzschean terms we could say that this allegedly unrestricted generosity is in fact the by-product of the egotism of the strong, who elevate themselves above the greedy selfishness of the weak and sick. Distinction is the symbolic revenue reserved for the practitioner of symbolic economy—distinction that confers power on the noble soul.

Examples and nuances articulating beauty in terms of sumptuary expenditure in Vernon Lee’s writings are still numerous and revealing.16 But as a concluding remark, I propose to get back, for a second, to Marcel Mauss. Confronted with the social hierarchies that primitive forms of sym-

16 On this occasion, for the sake of conciseness, I have decided not to discuss the gender and social implications of aesthetic expenditure in Vernon Lee’s works, which, however—as Professor Hilary Fraser also pointed out during our debate—are paramount. This essay is part of a larger forthcoming project on decadent aesthetics and symbolic economy, in which I explicitly tackle the issue of difference in such works as Goddess of Anarchy, Satan the Waster, and The Ballet of the Nations, pointing out its relevance for Vernon Lee’s politics of femininity and her longing for a non-calculating and non-violent collective ethos especially after the disasters of the First World War.


Praz, Mario, La casa della vita, Milano 1995.

Praz, Mario, Voce dietro la scena. Un’antologia personale, Milano 1980.


