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Who Was Vernon Lee?

By Burdett Gardner

Nearly sixty-eight years ago the Atlantic Monthly reviewed a work by Vernon Lee entitled Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy. The reviewer had obviously penetrated behind the pen-name of the author, for the review remarked that what "this young woman has accomplished would have been creditable to a mature man who had spent his life in the same line of research, and it is relatively as remarkable in its lesser way as the renowned precocities of production of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Keats." From an account of Vernon Lee which I have found in the November 1, 1884, issue of The Literary World (Boston), it is clear that there were, at that date, others in America who, like the Atlantic reviewer, knew that "Vernon Lee" was the pseudonym of a young English woman, born in France and resident in Italy, who had begun publishing when she was only thirteen and had been raised to the front rank of English essayists by the publication, in 1880, of the already-mentioned Studies of the Eighteenth Century.

Today, however, this same Vernon Lee has dropped into a curious time-hole and has all but vanished. Her fate is partially explained by her very obvious attempt to keep all facts about her private life from the public. Van Wyck Brooks remarks upon this trait in his brief essay, "Notes on Vernon Lee," in The Forum of April, 1911. Yet Vernon Lee was once widely known as a woman of distinction, and for many years she was a key figure in the literary circle of cosmopolitan, expatriate English writers in Italy. Her friend Maurice Baring once declared of her: "Vernon Lee was and is by far the cleverest person I ever met in my life, and the person possessed with the widest range of the rarest culture." But who was she?
When Vernon Lee died in 1935 at the age of seventy-eight, the London *Times* announced "the close of her long literary career" in an obituary article in which it was stated that "the death of Miss Violet Paget, long known to the world as 'Vernon Lee,' . . . removes a unique figure from the world of letters." From this article in the *Times* we learn that she was of British parentage, born into a family which seems "to have wandered up and down Europe during all her early years"; but she finally settled at Florence, Italy, with her parents and her half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, who had much to do with encouraging her literary tastes and ambitions. Thus she lived from her earliest years in a highly stimulating intellectual atmosphere, and when her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* appeared in 1880, when she was only twenty-four, a learned Italian review called her a "subtle and imaginative critic . . . who has profoundly studied a subject in which he takes passionate interest and who has written of Italy and Italian art with a wonderful artistic intuition comparable only with that shown in some of Robert Browning's Italian subjects."

Violet Paget, according to the *Times*, came to England for the first time on a summer visit in 1881, and her remarkable conversational gifts and her power of caustic repartee soon won for her a distinguished place in English literary circles. In 1884 "aesthetic" London society found itself not very kindly caricatured in Vernon Lee's novel, *Miss Brown*, and some of her friends were offended by the portraits she had painted of them. She showed a cold indifference, however, to what public opinion might say or think of her, and she maintained this attitude of indifference throughout her entire life.

During the Italian-Turkish War she made herself very unpopular in Italy by her strong and openly expressed sympathy with the Turks; and during World War I, she
estranged many of her friends in England by writing paci­
fist pamphlets and articles. Nationality and patriotism
were apparently completely outside her understanding,
and this fact has doubtless had something to do with the
public’s loss of interest in her books.

She did, however, have an appeal for the élite, and many
of her books went through two or three editions. Her long
life and her vigorous intellect enabled her to avoid the
“decadence” of the late-Victorian aesthetes with whom
she had at first been associated, and to make a tough­
minded adjustment to the new current of ideas in the
twentieth century. Her Vital Lies (1912) is an attack upon
pragmatism and indicates her arrival at a philosophical
position which is remarkably parallel to that of George
Santayana.

There is no complete bibliography of Vernon Lee’s
writings, but from what I already know of her books it
seems safe to say that, with the possible exception of Henry
James, no Yellow Book contributor had as interesting a
mind as Vernon Lee. The fact that she is relegated to an
appendix to a footnote in a recently published history of
English literature can only be regarded as a further in­
stance of the almost completely fortuitous manner in
which literary history is often written.

If the London Times may be allowed to play judge as
well as prophet, Vernon Lee’s Euphorion, published in
1884, contains some of her best work. These “Studies of
the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance” will
—in the opinion of the Times—“survive when much of her
later books will be forgotten.”

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