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Vernon Lee as a Critic of Aestheticism in Miss Brown

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W. P. Frith's painting, *The Private View of the Royal Academy* (1881), is not one of his best-known works, and, unlike *Derby Day* (1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862), it depicts a very narrow section of the Victorian community: High Society disporting itself on the first day of the Season. Frith spent three years on it, carefully completing portraits of celebrated men and women, among them Frederic Leighton, the president of the Royal Academy, Gladstone, Anthony Trollope, John Millais, Lily Langtry, the Archbishop of York, Baroness Burdett Coutts, Professor Huxley, and Miss Braddon. These are ranged against rows of accredited and popular works of art to form a splendid tribute to the well-known and well-to-do, a group portrait of those who had "made it" and could prove it simply by being there. For the historian of Victorian manners, however, the painting has an interest which it would not have possessed had it been done in 1876 or 1885. The private view of 1881 was indeed by the aesthetes, and it was they, not the fashionable parade of familiar faces, who attracted Frith to the subject: "The contrast between the really beautiful costumes of some of the lady habituées of our private view, and the eccentric garments of others, together with the opportunity offered for portraits of eminent persons, suggested a subject for a picture, and I hastened to avail myself of it."

In the foreground, Frith painted several aesthetic ladies, one group surrounding their idol and leader, Oscar Wilde. On the right, looking curiously at the Wilde circle, stands the earliest critic of aestheticism, the *Punch* cartoonist George Du Maurier.

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who had been making his readers laugh at the cult of beauty since the mid-1870s. Frith's treatment of the dress and mannerisms of Wilde and his followers closely resembles Du Maurier's work in *Punch*. The clothes of the single aesthete lady on the left, dressed in a long flowing garment, with a sunflower prominently displayed on her bosom, were based on those of Mrs. Cimabue Brown, the leader of Du Maurier's aesthetic circle. Anthony Trollope was placed next to her because his "homely figure affords a striking contrast to the eccentric forms near him." This lady and Wilde are the crucial figures in Frith's construction, isolated from the others by their unconventional dress, and, far more subtly, by their interest in the pictures, which all but one of the fashionable throng are characteristically ignoring. 1881 was the year of aestheticism's zenith. Five years before, when the movement was just gathering momentum, its adherents would not have been found at an Academy private view, or participating in the Season.

The search for the origins of aestheticism is fascinating but self-defeating: the art criticism of Walter Pater and Ruskin; the poetry of Rossetti, Swinburne, and Baudelaire; the unearthly women of Burne-Jones and Rossetti; Morris & Co. furniture; Whistler's passion for the Japanese — all these were important elements, but no single figure or influence was of overriding importance. Like the Beat cult of the early 1960s, the aesthetic movement had few strict adherents and no central body of leaders, but those whom it influenced wore the clothes and adopted what suited them of the philosophy. As aestheticism gained more followers, the principles of exclusiveness and high art became diffused. The upper classes generally became affected by the aesthetic craze for blue-and-white china and Morris fabrics, while Liberty's eastern bazaar was soon the haunt of the "best people," eagerly purchasing chintz and Japoneserie. At the same time, certain extreme aesthetes, of whom Oscar Wilde was the most obvious example, had begun to climb into Society simply because aestheticism had become the current Society game. George Du Maurier had foreseen this development in his prose satire, "The Rise and Fall of the Jack Spratts," written in 1878. Mrs. Jack Spratt, wife of an aesthetic

3 Wilde wears a large gardenia, with a floppy tie and velvet jacket.
painter, acquires notoriety by wearing medieval costume, but, once assured of material success, adopts the values of Society entirely:

Mrs. Spratt's deep-rooted dislike to the female dress of the present day did not last much longer than her life-long prejudice against the aristocracy. The very next morning after that, small and early, she discarded the mediaeval garments she had hitherto worn with such disdain for the eccentricities of modern fashion, and put herself into the hands of the best dress-maker in town.4

Du Maurier's prophecy was not entirely fulfilled, for the Mrs. Spratts of 1881 were not dressed in "the latest Paris mode," but in a compromise between high fashion and their own limp style. They had altered fashion quite as much as fashion had altered them. In a letter to his Punch editor Francis Burnand, dated July 1880, Du Maurier wrote:

of course since then [1878], the aesthetes have come more into society, especially Society — which has reacted upon them. Mrs. Cimabue Brown, who can't endure Grigsby's admirable comic songs, listens complacently to the vulgar trash of Lord Plantagenet Cadbury. The duchess comes to see her quite informally, takes tea out of the pretty handle-less china cups (& burns her fingers); praises all the pretty things, & takes precious good care not to ask her to her garden party, until she changes her attire — sage green coal-scuttle bonnet, yellow sack blouse with gigot sleeves, tied round the waist & & &.15

Du Maurier's cartoons had helped to popularize the movement. He antedated Oscar Wilde, who, as Whistler realized, may have used Punch as a guide: "Mr. Du Maurier and Mr. Wilde happening to meet in the rooms where Mr. Whistler was holding his first exhibition of Venice etchings, the latter brought the two face to face, and taking each by the arm, inquired: 'I say, which one of you two invented the other, eh?' "6

Du Maurier was amused by aestheticism but suspicious of the aesthetes' facile affectations and enthusiasms. From 1873 to 1882 he made it his particular subject, and it helped to make him popular. Two other satirists entered the field in 1881, W. S. Gilbert and Frank Burnand. Burnand's The Colonel opened in February and ran to packed houses. Patience, a far more intel-

4 Punch, LXXV (September 14, 1878), 111.
5 In Yale University Library.
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lignant satire, was first performed at the Opéra Comique in Lon-
don on April 23, 1881. These two plays marked the end of
the early aesthetic movement, for, by exposing it to a mass
audience, they undermined its exclusive character. Later fig-
ures, like Beardsley, Dowson, and Arthur Symons, were not
closely connected with the sunflower and blue-china lovers of
the 70s and 80s. The fun went out of aestheticism with the
"gaudy leonine" sunflower, for the unnatural green carnation
represented a desire to pervert, not to enjoy.

No intelligent newcomer arriving in London in 1881 could
possibly ignore aestheticism, and Violet Paget, the young wom-
an who wrote under the pseudonym Vernon Lee, was pro-
digiously intelligent and astute. She was also entirely fresh to
the London scene, coming for her first adult visit in June 1881.
She was, therefore, the only important critic of aestheticism who
had not lived through its early stages, and she found it flourish-
ing everywhere. Vernon Lee's home had been in Italy for most
of her life, and since adolescence she had impressed herself
upon various groups of intellectual expatriates. Tuscan Fairy
Tales, and her impressive Studies of the Eighteenth Century in
Italy had already been published, and she was anxious to find
a publisher for a third book, Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry
Aesthetical Questions. At twenty-five Vernon Lee was already
a formidable and ambitious bluestocking, and several influential
critics found themselves ruthlessly buttonholed by this short-
sighted and unfeminine visitor. She offered a startling contrast
to her close friend, Mary Robinson, with whom she stayed
during this first visit. Mary Agnes Robinson (later Madame
Duclaux) was also a prolific writer of some talent, but she had
an abundance of grace and charm, which overcame Victorian
prejudice against female authors. The Robinsons, Mary's
parents and her sister Mabel, had wide contacts in the literary
world, and through them Vernon Lee was launched into
cultural London, the Fitzroy Square set in particular. This
Victorian Bloomsbury Group deserves close investigation, for
little has been written about it, and its importance has never
been assessed. In the 1870s the group had been centered on
the Fitzroy Square home of the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Ford

7 Oscar Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," Miscellanies, edited by
Robert B. Ross (London, 1908), 276.
Madox Brown, whose married daughters Lucy, the wife of William Michael Rossetti, and Catherine, of Franz Hueffer, lived close by. Among those connected with the Brown family were the minor Pre-Raphaelite poet Alfred O'Shaughnessy, the Irish politician and writer Justin MacCarthy, his son "young Justin," William Sharp (Fiona MacLeod), Mathilde Blind, Henry Kingsley, William Black, Mrs. Humphry Ward and her husband, William Allingham, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Edmund Gosse, and Sir Charles Dilke. The circle's main preoccupation, like that of the later Bloomsbury Group, was talking. They were not devoted to any kind of common artistic or social policy but to the interchange of ideas, a loosely knit circle into which anyone of talent and intelligence was welcome. Although the close connection with the Madox Brown household was weakened in 1874 by the early death of the painter's brilliant son, Oliver, the circle remained much the same in the early 1880s, when the Robinson girls became part of it, as it had been in the 1870s. As Vernon Lee was quick to realize, this circle was comparatively powerful; members of the Fitzroy Square group were to be seen everywhere, and there were few important literary figures who were not in some way connected with them. Vernon Lee made extensive use of their contacts, but she was not wholeheartedly in sympathy with them. She detected elements of self-conscious artiness and affectation, of which she did not approve. Nevertheless, it was tactless to caricature so many of her friends as minor characters in her novel about aestheticism, *Miss Brown*, which was so obviously a roman à clef. Vernon Lee, with typical thoughtlessness, had no conception of the furore her book would cause until after it had happened.

Miss Irene Cooper Willis has published the letters which Vernon Lee wrote home on each of her London visits from 1881-1884, and there emerges from them a candid and often critical assessment of the Robinson circle. Vernon Lee had already discussed certain aspects of aestheticism in *Belcaro*, but her first contact with the devotees of the cult was during the summer of 1881. She went with Evelyn Pickering, the wife of William de Morgan, and an artist in the Burne-Jones tradition, to the same soirée at the Royal Academy which Frith later painted. Vernon Lee was not impressed:
All the exhibition rooms were thrown open & crammed with people more or less artistic or fashionable. I never saw so many shabby or insane dresses, & so few pretty women in my life. I was quite astounded, coming out, to see so many grand carriages. The dresses didn't look at all on a par with them. There were some most crazy looking creatures: one with crinkled gauze all tied close about her & visibly no under-clothing (& a gold laurel wreath); another with ivy leaves tied by each others' stalks, on short red hair; another with a trimming & necklace of marigolds & parsley fern on thread, a lot of insane slashing & stom-sachings. 8

Miss Brown was not published until three years after this soirée, but Vernon Lee had almost certainly begun to plan the aesthetic chapters of her novel during 1881 and 1882. A composite version of the description quoted above appears in the novel, where a character based on Lucy Rossetti has the same garland of parsley and leaves “in her handsome red hair.” 9

The basic outline of Miss Brown is fairly simple, and it is easily summarized. An “aesthetic” poet and painter, Walter Hamlin, is travelling in Italy when he comes upon an uneducated and statuesque servant girl, Anne Brown, who is half English and half Italian. He decides to adopt her and then educate her, intending to marry her eventually, but only if she wishes it. The decision which Anne Brown must make is the central theme of a very long book, and Vernon Lee was neither sufficiently gifted nor experienced as a novelist to maintain dramatic interest. After an excellent start with the Italian scenes, which describe Hamlin’s discovery of Miss Brown, the book abruptly shifts to aesthetic London. Here, because of her unusual appearance, Anne Brown becomes the idol of Hamlin’s set, which she herself despises. Hamlin, a likeable character in the first volume, becomes increasingly depraved, both as a result of his aesthetic preoccupations and the relationship between him and his melodramatic and sinister cousin, Madame Elaguine. Miss Brown, who has been training herself for social work, finally decides to renounce her career, so that she can save the man she now despises. The final paragraph, after she has agreed to marry him, is chilling: “Miss Brown suddenly shivered, as he put his arm round her shoulder. The flash of a

8 Vernon Lee’s Letters, edited by Irene Cooper Willis (Privately printed, 1987), 73.
9 Miss Brown (Edinburgh, 1884), I, 310. All subsequent page references to this novel are incorporated in the text.
street lamp as they passed quickly, had shown her Hamlin’s face close to her own, and radiant with the triumph of satisfied vanity” (III, 317). Most of Vernon Lee’s criticism of aestheticism is to be found in the London sections of the novel, although the subject is briefly mentioned in the opening chapters. The entirely contradictory character of these early and late passages can only be explained by a break in the composition, during which Vernon Lee’s attitude towards aestheticism hardened into positive dislike.

When the book opens, Walter Hamlin, who has come to Italy to recover his vitality, finds everything flat and dull. He is staying with an old Oxford friend, Melton Perry, and it is through Hamlin’s memories of their student days that we catch a glimpse of the hero as a young man:

the most brilliant and eccentric of that little knot of aesthetic undergraduates, at whose strange doings as Greek gods, and Provençal poets, and Norse heroes, Oxford had murmured in those philistine days, and which had welcomed young Hamlin, with his girlish beauty and pre-Raphaelite verses, as a sort of mixture of Apollo and Eros, sitting at the head of the supper-table dressed in green silk, with rose garlands on his head, while Perry led a chorus of praise, dressed in indigo velveteen, with peacocks’ feathers in his button-hole, and silver-gilt grasshoppers in his hair (I, 6).

Hamlin’s ironic amusement at his early follies, his description of present trends as “clique-and-shop shoddy aestheticism” (I, 7), his having come abroad out of “the dust and smoke, as it were, of the aesthetic factory” (I, 8), do not in any way prepare us for his unwavering adherence to aesthetic principles in the last part of the book. In this first volume he is Vernon Lee’s anti-aesthetic spokesman. His description of Melton Perry’s aesthetic wife, as “that lank, limp, lantern-jawed leering creature” (I, 9), is witty and dispassionate. When he asks Mrs. Perry if he may paint her servant Anne Brown, the girl is ordered to comply, but Hamlin, behaving with great delicacy, insists that the choice should be left to her. The pattern for a straightforward romance seems to be developing naturally.

Between 1881 and 1882, when she began the novel, and 1884, when she finished it, Vernon Lee evidently decided that aestheticism deserved more scathing treatment, and she continued her book in a quite different vein. On his return to
London, Hamlin becomes a typical aesthete and not the sympathetic and disillusioned character through whom the first part of her story is told. We see him through Anne Brown’s increasingly critical eyes. By this change of emphasis Vernon Lee was able to describe aesthetic London as it had first appeared to herself as a newcomer. Her ineptitude as a novelist seems to have been partly responsible for this sudden switch of viewpoint, but an increasingly neurotic attitude to the London scene also becomes evident. When the book was published, Cotter Morrison and Henry James both told her that she had not been in London long enough to judge it accurately, which in the event proved true. But, while a longer study of aestheticism would have made her less ready to equate it with evil and depravity, it would also have diminished the freshness of her vision. One of Vernon Lee’s great gifts as an essayist was capturing the essential features of a landscape. The account of the Umbrian hills in her essay “In Umbria,” is greatly superior to the philosophical discussion on Perugino which follows.

The best prose passages in Miss Brown are descriptions of the festival at Lucca and of a sunset in the fen country. Her descriptions of aesthetic interiors in London are as revealing as anything by more patient or long established observers.

Vernon Lee’s experience of aesthetic houses was fairly wide, and she retained a clear impression of their more typical features. Aesthetic theories of interior decoration were spread by little books like Mrs. Lucy Orrinsmith’s The Drawing Room (1878), which gave advice on furniture, fabrics, wallpapers, and colors, from an aesthetic standpoint. It is clear from Du Maurier’s cartoons that those who affected aestheticism might combine a floral wallpaper and a Sussex chair, with a selection of blue-and-white pots, half a dozen Japanese fans, a concave brass mirror, and several pieces of spindly art-furniture, but with no consistency. All the sources of aestheticism came together in the drawing room. According to Vernon Lee, dirt and gloom were other constituents. After visiting the William Michael Rossettis in 1882, she wrote: “Oh what a grimy, dingy, filthy aesthetic house! I shuddered to sit down in my white frock. They were very friendly.”

10 Belcaro (London, 1881).
11 Letters, 87.
the Fitzroy Square set, Mrs. Humphry Ward, had a house in Russell Square, "furnished the height of aesthetic desolation." The house to which Hamlin takes Anne Brown in the novel (she stays with his aunt) is on the Hammersmith Mall, where Vernon Lee had visited the William Morrises at Kelm-scott House: "a very sweet & beautiful position. The room was furnished rather like an extremely dingy sacristy with faded bits of old Italian furniture." On a later visit, in July 1882, she decided that "the house is beautiful & quite different, homely, artistic & rare, from any aesthetic house."

Vernon Lee herself was not entirely averse to aesthetic interior decoration. She visited both Liberty’s and Morris & Co., and noticed "how cheap even pretty aesthetical effects are — japanese chintz curtains, mats & twopenny Morris wallpapers, Queen Anne wicker chairs, rugs & so forth." "Liberty is the wonderful aesthetic shop, like an eastern shop, crammed with the most exquisite Indian & Chinese silks. It is really a pleasure to be in it." She even regretted that she and her mother had not furnished their house in Florence in this fashionable style, as it was surprisingly inexpensive. While she was at Morris & Co. she bought some wallpaper to cover a screen "a sort of 18th century rose trellis pattern . . . and some red chintz to cover chair cushions." These descriptions of aesthetic decoration in her letters are very short compared with the long passages in the novel, but they provide a revealing account of what Vernon Lee had actually seen in London in the early 1880s. In her lengthy accounts of the house which Hamlin furnishes for Anne Brown, Vernon Lee amalgamated much of her experience. Anne’s first impressions are of tapestries, soft dark carpets, and a diffused glow from an eastern lamp. When she wakes up on her first morning, she studies her surroundings closely:

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 70.
14 Ibid., 95-96.
15 Ibid., 77.
16 Ibid., 96.
17 Ibid.
fac-similes of drawings by Mantegna and Botticelli, and the coloured copies of famous Italian pictures which dotted the walls, the room might have been untouched since the days of the first Georges. She remembered that Hamlin had told her that the house was an old one; but she could not understand how everything came to look so very spick and span and new (I, 263-264).

Miss Brown has many similar descriptions, which reveal the acuteness and clarity of Vernon Lee's observation. Anne Brown discovers that the aesthetes live in "grim, smut-engrained houses in Bloomsbury, or rose-grown cottages at Hampstead, with just the same sort of weird furniture, partly Japanese, partly Queen Anne, partly medieval; with blue-and-white china and embroideredchasubles stuck upon the walls if they were rich, and twopenny screens and ninepenny pots if they were poor, but with no further differences" (I, 298). Vernon Lee had gone out of her way to discover material for her story. With Mary Robinson she went to visit the Henry Holidays in Hampstead, and her account of the occasion in a letter home is vivid if a little malicious:

you remember the funny little aesthetic painter who was at Florence, and who spent two years making a seamless jersey for the Venus de Medici . . . . Mary says the party was the last survival of the high art party of what she calls her youth. Mr. Holiday's studio, which is somehow made like a portable bath and turns into drawingroom music room etc., thanks to a complicated system of hinges,—with plaster casts draped in tissue paper and liberty silk all about, full of weird people, women in cotton frocks of faded hues, made wide at the hips & tight at the feet like Turkish trowsers—and lank draperies of all sorts . . . . Miss Holiday fiddled, and a youth with anaemic face & hair played the piano, & someone, in a nasal voice, sang a long, long pseudo mediaeval ballad about a King's daughter & a swineherd, with an idiotic & melancholy refrain. It felt so completely high art. 18

There is nothing as witty as this in her novel. Anne Brown's first impression of Hamlin's group of friends is brilliantly conveyed, but in a formal and didactic style. Book IV of the novel is perhaps the best short introduction to the aesthetic movement ever written. The violent antipathies which eventually ruin the book are less pronounced in this early section, though Vernon Lee's attitude to female aesthetic costume is already hostile. When she visited Mrs. Peter Pfeiffer in July 1881, she good-humoredly described her as "a tall, melancholy drooping crea-

18 Ibid., 124.
ture (like an aged lily, Mary says) in a dress of scantily embroidered flannel antimacassars." 19 Anne Brown’s horror at being thrust into such a dress is described more savagely:

It was of that Cretan silk, not much thicker than muslin, which is woven in minute wrinkles of palest yellow white; it was made, it seemed to her, more like a night-gown than anything else, shapeless and yet clinging with large and small folds, and creases like those of damp sculptor’s drapery, or the garments of Mantegna’s women . . . . Anne walked to the mirror. She was almost terrified at the figure that met her. That colossal woman, with wrinkled drapery clinging to her in half-antique, half-medieval guise, — that great solemn, theatrical creature, could that be herself? (I, 306-307)

The grotesqueness of this description prepares the way for Anne Brown’s discovery of the erotic paintings and poetry of the aesthetes, which shock her profoundly. Unlike Du Maurier and W. S. Gilbert, Vernon Lee lacked any sense of humor, a disastrous failing in a critic of aestheticism. Anxious to destroy the movement, she overstressed its importance, and to combat this she was forced to adopt the position of a militant Puritan. As one reviewer of her novel pointed out: “Pitch has been handled not altogether without its usual effect.” 20 Other critics of aestheticism refused to take the movement seriously. Vernon Lee had seen Patience in Oxford in 1881 and had much enjoyed it, though she remarked at the time that “aestheticism . . . has wellnigh died out in London.” 21 “There is in it a pseudo-medieval fleshly poet, an excessively thin, bilious creature with fuzzy hair & knee-breeches, who is perfectly delicious & was superbly acted by Grossmith.” 22 She made little use of Gilbert in Miss Brown, leaning much more heavily on Du Maurier’s Punch cartoons for source material. When Hamlin’s aunt, Mrs. Macgregor, is pointing out the evils of aestheticism to Anne, she refers her to Punch. “That’s the sort of thing. They’re all great beauties and great painters and great poets, every man and women of them. Wait till you see little Chough and young Postlethwaite (I forget his real name)” (I, 270). It was Du Maurier who had first drawn attention to the quality of “mutual admiration” in aestheticism, and Vernon Lee was quick

19 Ibid., 74.
20 Cosmo Monkhouse, The Academy, XXVII (January 3, 1885), 6.
21 Letters, 77.
22 Ibid., 77-78.
to take it up: "they were all intimately acquainted, and spoke of each other as being, or just having missed being, the most brill­liant or promising specimens of whatever they happened to be" (I, 298). Vernon Lee even used the name Postlethwaite for one of her characters. Like most of her contemporaries she assumed that he was straightforward caricature of Oscar Wilde, which was only partially true. She had first met Wilde in June 1881, and described the incident to her mother: "I must send you a caricature of him. He talked a sort of lyrico-sarcastic maudlin cultschah for half an hour. But I think the creature is clever, & that a good half of his absurdities are mere laughing at people. The English don't see that."23

In her novel, Vernon Lee gave Wilde little credit for intelligence, but she made the portrait of him unmistakable24 with references to his "unwieldy person — a Japanese lily bobbing out of the button-hole of his ancestral dress-coat," an "ele­phantine person" with a "flabby flat-cheeked face and mop of tow" (II, 8), and "a mellifluous fat voice" (II, 16). Her one epigram in the Wilde manner is mediocre, but may have been taken from something she had actually heard: "I never take up a paper, except to see which of my friends have left town" (II, 12).

Postlethwaite is a minor character in Miss Brown, and he plays little part in the plot. Many of the other minor figures are just as gratuitous. In a novel without a subplot, such characterizations merely become caricatures, presumably put there to give life to the group scenes. The best developed character is the poet Cosmo Chough, who was clearly modelled on Alfred O'Shaughnessy. The latter had died in January 1881, before Vernon Lee came to London, but she must have heard about him from Mary Robinson. The result is a balanced and sensi­tive portrait, warmer and more affectionate than the character­ization of people whom Vernon knew herself. The earliest references to Chough, with his "small hands" and his scheme for a long masque poem, "The Triumph of Womanhood," immediately suggest O'Shaughnessy, who was proud of his small hands and feet, and had written a long poem entitled "The Epic

23 Ibid., 65.
24 Albert J. Farmer mentions Miss Brown in his Le mouvement esthétique et décadent en Angleterre 1873-1900 (Paris, 1931), 126, but his identification of Postlethwaite as Whistler is obviously inaccurate.
of Women" (1870). Chough's poem concerns the wicked women of history, Imperia of Rome, in particular, just as O'Shaughnessy wrote about Cleopatra, Helen, and Salome. Vernon Lee draws a pronounced contrast between Chough's evil poems and his relatively virtuous life, suggesting how feebly Hamlin and his set live up to their pretensions:

On other evenings Anne would usually go to the house of one of the set, where literature and art, and the faults of friends, and the wrong-headedness of the public, were largely discussed; music was made, young long-haired Germans on the loose performing; and poets, especially the inexhaustible Chough, would recite their compositions... descriptions of the kisses of cruel, blossom-mouthed women, who sucked out their lovers' hearts, bit their lips, and strewed their apartments with coral-like drops of blood. Most of these poets, as Anne speedily discovered, were young men of harmless lives, and altogether unacquainted with the beautiful, baleful ladies they represented as sucking at their vitals; and none was more utterly harmless than Cosmo Chough (II, 23-24).

Despite his veneer of Parisian decadence, Chough works "with a whole band of other poets" in an "inferior Government office" (I, 288). From 1863 O'Shaughnessy was an assistant in the Zoological department of the British Museum, where several other poets were employed. A letter of July 1881 shows that Vernon Lee was surprised, but rather scornful, when she discovered this: "By the way, most of the poetico-journalistic creatures here are something else besides. Gosse in the Board of Trade, W. Rossetti in some other office, several in the Museum."25

A modern reader of Miss Brown might easily suppose that Chough’s original was Swinburne. This is not surprising, as O'Shaughnessy had modelled himself on the older poet. Vernon Lee had not met Swinburne, or she might have realized to what extent O'Shaughnessy’s outrageous epigrams, related to her by Mary Robinson, were plagiarized. When Chough shows Anne Brown a lock of Lucretia Borgia's hair, he tells her: "Why, her blood ran with evil as the Pactolus does with gold. All women that have ever been, except Sappho and Vittoria Accoramboni, and perhaps Faustina, were lifeless shadows by her side" (I, 289). Exactly twenty years before the publication of Miss Brown Swinburne had proclaimed the same doctrine at

25 Letters, 78.
a soirée given by Simeon Solomon. George Du Maurier, a newcomer to the group, was shocked but secretly impressed: “he has an utterly perverted moral sense, and ranks Lucrezia Borgia with Jesus Christ; indeed says she’s far greater.” Cough is credited with an interest in minor Elizabethan drama, and, in particular, with “the unmentionable play of Ford” (II, 26), an interest shared by Swinburne. Vernon Lee must have recognized O'Shaughnessy's debt to Swinburne, so far as his poetry was concerned. It was Swinburne who had started the vogue for cruel, vampire women in his Poems and Ballads of 1866. O'Shaughnessy's work is a pale reflection, although he attempted to outdo Swinburne in horrific subject matter. “Bisclarvet,” his poem about a werewolf, is particularly relevant to Miss Brown, with its Swinburnian references to “strange” lusts and evils:

We hold high orgies of the things,
Strange and accursed of all flesh,
Whereunto the quick sense ever brings
The sharp forbidden thrill afresh.

Another poet of the aesthetic school mentioned in Miss Brown is Dennistoun, the “little rickety poet, who had to be carried up and down stairs, and who wrote, while slowly sinking inch by inch into the grave, about carrying off lovely girls, and throttling them in the fierceness of his love” (II, 75). Dennistoun seems to have had no single prototype but is rather a synthesis of the later poets of the “fleshly school” whom Vernon Lee had met in Fitzroy Square. His physical weakness perhaps refers to William Sharp, who suffered from a weakness of the lungs, or Philip Marston, who was blind. Both wrote poems in the style of Dennistoun:

Beside my bed I saw a man's form stand;
His brows were wasted as by wasting fire,
Madness was in his gaze,
Pain, with fierce lips, fed on his haggard face,
A gleaming serpent twined about his hand,
Pale victim of desire!

27 An Epic of Women and Other Poems (London, 1870), 63.
She, brooding ever, dwells amidst the hills;  
Her Kingdom is call’d Solitude; her name—  
More terrible than desolating flame—  
Is Silence; and her soul is Pain.  

Vernon Lee’s invective against these poets had some justification, but the appearance of the William Michael Rossettis and Ford Madox Brown among the aesthetic personnel of her novel is entirely gratuitous. They appear unmistakably as Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, and Mrs. Spencer’s father, the elderly Pre-Raphaelite painter, Andrew Saunders. The portrait of Madox Brown is comparatively complimentary. He is turned into a Scot, and gifted with strong northern common sense, a half-skeptical elder statesman of the movement. William Michael Rossetti had never impressed Vernon Lee, who described him in a letter as “the type of the stodgy reviewer,” and, in her novel, he is dismissed as “the most timid of aesthetical persons” (II, 103), a nonentity beside his wife. Lucy Rossetti was a great favorite with Vernon Lee, but this did not save her from a forthright description: “a lovable and laughable little woman, whose soul was divided between her babies and fierce rancours against all enemies of pre-Raphaelitism” (I, 310). Mrs. Spencer’s references to her father as the only arbiter of taste were only too accurate.

Vernon Lee’s cavalier treatment of her friends inevitably aroused their hostility. It did not matter whether she was complimentary or critical. She had betrayed their confidence by using them at all, besides ridiculing their circle generally. To mix art and life in this way was an unforgivable sin. Vernon Lee, with her blithe self-confidence and insensitivity to other people’s feelings, could never understand this attitude. After she savagely reviewed a book on the Renaissance by her great friend Professor Villari, she was hurt and puzzled when he and his wife refused to have anything further to do with her. Work was one thing and friendship another, and they should be kept in separate compartments. Understandably, few of her friends were able to do this, and her life was marked by a succession of such quarrels.

30 *Letters*, 64.
31 The most complimentary portraits were those of Marjory and Mary Leigh, philanthropic sisters based on the Robinson girls.
Not all the portraits came from the Fitzroy Square group or aesthetic circles generally. Mrs. Charles Tennant, the famous society hostess, had asked Vernon Lee to a party given in her house in June 1882:

Mrs. T. goes in for being the intellectual dowager, a salon or rather a salle of nothing but rank, beauty & genius . . . . A magnificent house at Whitehall, & fine rooms, crammed with lords . . . . Some pretty French actresses behind the piano, behind a moral cordon sanitaire, only Miss Dolly penetrating to them. They recited, and Coquelin recited some comic scenes most magnificently.32

In the novel Mrs. Tennant (later Lady Tennant) becomes Mrs. Argiropoulo, carrying the suggestion that Vernon Lee was also satirizing the wealthy hostesses of the Greek community in London, possibly Mrs. Spartali. Mrs. Tennant, who congratulated Vernon Lee warmly on the book, clearly failed to recognize herself "in old lace and diamonds, and withal excessively vulgar" (II, 1):

You see, Miss Brown, how perfectly true it is that we are to meet them. They are taking their place behind the piano. Yes, that is Madame Gauffre with the diamond butterfly. You perceive how we are to have the pleasure of making their acquaintance. Do you remark the vacant space round the piano? Miss Euphrosyne Argiropoulo and her sister are alone privileged to enter it, and the waiters also . . . . It is what I call a moral cordon sanitaire, separating these artistes from the highly respectable company all round (II, 6).

Vernon Lee did try to disguise her roman à clef. Her use of names is particularly obvious and yet misleading: Edmund Lewis from Edmund Gosse, Thaddeus O'Reilly from Thaddeus Jones, Walter Hamlin from Walter Pater and from Vernon Lee's own West Indian Hamlin relatives, Anne Brown from Ford Madox Brown, and Cosmo Chough from Cosmo Monkhouse. Monkhouse, who reviewed the novel in The Academy, was quick to appreciate this change of names:

Nor can I entirely approve of the method, clever though it be, which Vernon Lee had adopted to satirise a small but well-known section of society. Vernon Lee has dealt with it much in the same fashion as the Oriental robber, who, after plundering a caravan, stripped all his victims naked, threw all their clothes into a heap, and then amused himself with watching them struggle for shoes and turbans, shawls and bur-

32 Letters, 92.
nouses. By first separating and then mixing haphazard the christian and surnames, the places of residence, the elements of character, and domestic conditions, appertaining to a number of more or less well-known persons, the author has, indeed, effectually confused their identities, but has nevertheless ridiculed them individually as well as collectively.  

Monkhouse went on to warn Vernon Lee that those people who knew the group only by their clothes would take her attacks seriously and attach them to those whom they seemed to represent. This was, of course, her intention. At least one of her friends, Mrs. Stillman (née Marie Spartali), wrote to chastise her about her pen-portraits and caricatures:

Your novel has been very much read and I heard it on all sides severely criticized, I cannot say how painful it has been to hear many of the comments, all the more so that it was impossible to feel or to say that you were altogether unjustly treated. There are several characters too easily recognizable, they will naturally object to be held up to ridicule and their friends are indignant. I am sure Miss Brown will cause you many “dispiaceri” and altho’ I know you love polemics and are indifferent to criticism I feel that you have done yourself great injustice and you will one day regret this work. 

Among those who remained cold towards Vernon Lee after the publication of her novel were Watts Dunton, the Rossettis and Madox Brown, the Humphry Wards, Oscar Wilde, and Mathilde Blind. As time passed most of them ceased to cut her, but she was always regarded with suspicion and distaste.

Repetition is one of the novel’s chief weaknesses, and there are far too many word-portraits of Anne Brown, each of them underlining the same qualities. She is tall, apparently self-absorbed, and “strange”: “large wide-opened eyes of strange dark-greyish blue, beneath heavy masses of dark lustreless hair, crimped naturally like so much delicate black iron wire, on her narrow white brow” (I, 15). Henry James’s account of Jane Morris, when he first saw her in 1869, shows from what source Vernon Lee took her material. James speaks of Mrs. Morris’ “mass of crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each of her temples, a thin pale face, a pair of strange, sad, deep, dark, Swinburnian eyes, with great thick black oblique brows, joined in the middle and tucking themselves away under

33 XXVII (January 3, 1885), 7.
34 December 27, 1884; in Colby College Library.
her hair, a mouth like the ‘Oriana’ in our illustrated Tennyson.”35 Vernon had herself described Mrs. Morris in a letter of July 1881: “Mrs. M. had on the usual crinkled white garb with a gold string round her waist or absence of waist; more beautiful & grand perhaps than in Florence.”36

It was not just Miss Brown’s appearance which Vernon Lee took from Mrs. Morris. Like so many artists of the day, Morris had married an intellectual inferior, whom he tried to educate after marriage. Ford Madox Brown, G. F. Watts, and Frederick Shields all married young girls of inferior status. The only distinction between Hamlin and these actual painters was that he attempted to “improve” his fiancée before and not after marriage. Vernon Lee was intrigued by this type of relationship, writing of Edmund Gurney, the music critic, whom she met during the summer of 1882: “Mrs. Gurney . . . a gardener’s daughter whom he had educated, Morris fashion, is a very fine beautiful young woman, big, blonde, like some of Rubens’ younger types, with fine manners.”37 Jane Morris recognized herself in Miss Brown. In 1886 the Robinsons were asked not to take Vernon Lee to a party as her presence could only give pain to Mrs. Morris. Mrs. Stillman (Marie Spartali), a friend of both parties, was even more explicit in a letter to Vernon Lee: “I was so very sorry you had so accurately described Mrs. Morris because I am sure she will feel much pain in being en evidence for every one must recognize her and she has suffered so much from being stared at and remarked and now she is so sensitive and suffering that she will feel it all the more.”38

In spite of the parallels between Anne Brown and Mrs. Morris, Hamlin was not based on William Morris. Vernon Lee had met Morris in 1881: “A thickset shockhaired, bearded man, powerful, common, rather like a railway porter or bargee.”39 Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a far more obvious candidate for Hamlin, although Vernon Lee never had the chance of meeting

36 *Letters*, 70.
38 Mrs. Stillman to Vernon Lee, December 12, 1884; in Colby College Library. I am grateful to Miss Sybille Pantazzi for sending me the two quotations from Mrs. Stillman’s letters.
39 *Letters*, 70.
him. He had only recently died and interest in his life and work was intense. Hamlin's role as poet and painter, the actual descriptions of his writing and art, and the respect with which he is treated by the younger generation, all point to Rossetti. Vernon Lee had often discussed his poetry with her brother. Her account of Hamlin is a mixture of her own impressions of Rossetti's style and those aspects of his life and character which were common knowledge:

Walter Hamlin had never been your splash-of-scarlet and dash-of-orange-and-skyblue, lust-and-terror kind of lyrist; but he had begun his poetical career with a quiet concentration of colour, physical and moral, which had made his earliest verses affect one like so many old church windows, deep flecks of jewel lustre set in quaint stiff little frames, with a great deal of lead between, and supreme indifference to anatomy and perspective. And as a painter (perhaps just because, despite his own contrary opinion) — he certainly had less original genius as painter than as poet — he had continued in this habit of gemlike harmonies of colour (I, 4-5).

The titles of Hamlin's pictures are all based on subjects which Rossetti had painted, or might have painted: The Witch of Atlas, Lady Guenevere, The Lady of the Lake, The Queen of Night, Venus Mystica, Circe, and the child Comus. The description of Venus Victrix, Hamlin's painting in which Anne Brown is the model, might be applied verbatim to Rossetti's late paintings of idealized and melancholy ladies. The title comes from one of the sonnets in The House of Life, and the suggestion that the painting is technically inadequate voices a familiar criticism of Rossetti's work:

It was called Venus Victrix; and the strangeness, the mysteriousness which gave a charm to his beautiful church-window-like pictures, and made one forget for a minute the uncertainty of drawing and the weakness of flesh-painting; — this essential quality of the pictorial riddle depended very much upon the fact that his Venus Victrix was entirely unlike any other Venus Victrix which the mind of man could conceive. Instead of the naked goddess triumphing over the apple of Paris, whom such a name would lead you to expect, Hamlin made a sketch of a lady in a dress of sad-coloured green and gold brocade, seated in a melancholy landscape of distant barren peaks, suffused with the grey and yellow tints of a late sunset; behind her was a bower of sear-coloured palms, knotting their boughs into a kind of canopy for her head, and in her hand she held, dragged despondingly on the ground, a broken palm-branch. The expression of the goddess of Love, since such she was, was one of intense melancholy. It was one of those pictures which go to
the head with a perfectly unintelligible mystery, and which absolutely preclude all possibility of inquiring into their exact meaning (I, 128-129).

Vernon Lee had seen the famous Leyland collection in Princes' Gate in 1883, and she wrote home describing the Rossettis there:

They are half lengths of women: one a vile caricature, with goitry throat, red hair & German housemaid sentiment, of Mrs. Stillman, called "Veronica Veronese" — the others mainly of Mrs. Morris, making her look as if her face were covered with illshaven stubble, & altogether repulsive . . . The pictures seem to me not merely ill painted & worse modelled, but coarse & repulsive; & to make mere painted diseased harlots of women like Mrs. Stillman & Mrs. Morris requires a good deal.40

The pejorative tone of these descriptions is interesting, when one remembers that Vernon Lee was destined to achieve a reputation as an aesthetician, not as a novelist. In her insistence on the formal values of a work of art, divorced from its moral or narrative content, she echoed the aesthetic credo.41 Evil, Vernon Lee believed, could work with good towards the creation of the perfect work of art. In an essay in Belcaro she described the life of Perugino, who created some of the most gentle and spiritual works of the Italian renaissance, but who was activated primarily by motives of greed. This led her to refute the idea that the life of an artist should bear some relation to his work. Vernon Lee did recognize the problems implicit in such a belief, and she attempted to argue them out in "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality," the last essay in Belcaro, and a work of crucial importance to an understanding of Hamlin's role in Miss Brown. The essay is cast in a form which Vernon Lee often exploited later, a fictional argument between two or more people representing different attitudes. In "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality," Baldwin is the wise and sensitive observer (he appears in later books), while Cyril is the bored but talented poet. The Apennine setting, near Lucca, is exactly that of the opening of Miss Brown. Cyril, who has recently burnt all his poems, is accused by Baldwin of making a

40 Ibid., 126.
41 Her essay on "Ruskinism" contains the following statement: "Beauty in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad: it is aesthetically good, even as virtue is neither aesthetically good nor aesthetically bad, but morally good. Beauty is pure, complete, egotistic: it has no other value than its being beautiful." Belcaro, 210.
theatrical gesture. Cyril defends himself by decrying poetry as a form of escapism: "paradisiac mysticism sung to golden lutes, or of imaginary amourous hysterics, or of symphonies in alliteration. And this when there is so much error, so much doubt, so much suffering, when all our forces are required to push away a corner of the load of evil still weighing on the world."42 Baldwin counterattacks by telling Cyril that the artist is "a creator of good for the whole world — is simply failing in his duty by becoming a practical worker; that is to say, an amateur destroyer of evil."43 The theme of this essay is repeated in the early chapters of Miss Brown, where Hamlin discovers the perfect model, and decides that he must paint her and not concern himself with the world outside.

Vernon Lee's belief in the uncommitted artist underwent a violent change during the writing of her novel. Her growing knowledge of aesthetic literature, and of the writers themselves, revealed the decadent and erotic strain latent in aestheticism, and it disgusted her. Vernon Lee was not a prude of the conventional Victorian type. She was personally repelled and obsessed by the whole idea of the love relationship, and particularly its physical side, and this distaste colored her whole attitude to life and art. When she found certain writers exploiting sexual themes in a perverted and profoundly sensual spirit, she became neurotic in her denouncement. While she had previously argued that a poem or painting must be judged solely in terms of its quality as art, she was now castigating the literary endeavors of Hamlin and his friends because they were morally evil and corrupt. This astonishing change of attitude was entirely the result of her own peculiar psychological make-up, and her inability to remain intellectually dispassionate. Henry James, to whom the book was dedicated, was appalled by Vernon Lee's lack of proportion, and privately described the novel as "(to me at least) painfully disagreeable in tone."44 When he wrote to Vernon Lee herself, however, James did not have the courage to take her to task for caricaturing their common friends, but he commented on the hysteria of her approach:

42 Ibid., 236.
43 Ibid., 243.
It will probably already have been repeated to you to satiety that you take the aesthetic business too seriously, too tragically, and above all with too great an implication of sexual motives. There is a certain want of perspective and proportion . . . you have impregnated all those people too much with the sexual, the basely erotic preoccupation: your hand was over violent, the touch of life is lighter.45

In the first half of the novel Vernon Lee had written sympathetically of Hamlin’s decision to follow his imagination, if necessary, in defiance of conventional morality. Under Anne’s influence he completes a poem entitled “The Ballad of the Fens” which is in a new naturalistic style, but he destroys it when his sophisticated friends deride his healthy approach to the subject. Through the Leigh sisters Anne discovers a village, Cold Fremley, where cramped conditions have made incest rife. She tries to persuade Hamlin, who owns the village, to build a factory there, but he angrily rejects any idea of interfering with the natural beauty of the place, preferring to revel in the fascinating perversions which she has brought to light. He rewrites “The Ballad of the Fens” in his old style, incorporating all that she has told him about Cold Fremley, and publishes it in a new book of poems, with a sonnet sequence on “Desire”: “She [Anne] felt giddy and sick as she read them; mysterious and mystical hankerings, mysterious half-longing repentance, and half-repentant longings after untold shameful things” (II, 88). Hamlin’s subsequent moral degradation is closely linked with his “false, emasculate, diseased” poetry (II, 83) and his lack of enthusiasm for social reform. Almost in spite of herself, Vernon Lee is forced to adopt the conventional philistine view of the aesthetes, for which essentially she had little sympathy. Her humorless, savage, and unrestrained attack on the aesthetic movement is greatly exaggerated, and seriously undermines the second half of the novel. The plot no longer possesses plausibility, the motives of the characters appear melodramatic, cast in crude black and white, and the whole ambiance of the novel suggests a loss of proportion and understanding, which is fatal. Vernon Lee ends her book as a moral tract.

Marriage forms the central theme of Miss Brown. Vernon Lee’s remark to Irene Cooper Willis: “From my friends’ matrimonial adventures I avert my eyes, and say: ‘There goes some-
thing primeval,' "'46 is echoed by Mrs. Macdonald in the novel. "Marriage without love is a terrible thing . . . and in so far love is a mitigation of evil; but at the best it is only delusion. People must marry, but it is the misfortune of their lives" (I, 261-262). Three years after the publication of Miss Brown, Mary Robinson, to whom Vernon Lee was passionately devoted, married Professor James Darmester, and it took Vernon Lee a further three years to recover from the blow. Any reliance on a man seemed to her repulsive. By accepting Hamlin's financial support, Anne Brown had "sold her soul into bondage, and must accept the isolation and silence and uselessness of a slave" (II, 267). Miss Brown is no longer free to choose between a worthwhile life as a scholar and reformer (the path Vernon Lee herself chose) and the sacrifice of herself to one of two varieties of masculinity. Richard Brown is the straightforward physical male, Hamlin is the decadent artist, but the physical advances of either will inevitably degrade her. The characterization of Brown is crude and inadequate — "Richard Brown bit his black beard, and looked at Anne from beneath his beetle brows" (II, 227) — but the unfolding relationship with Hamlin reveals a little more insight and understanding.

Throughout the novel, Vernon expounds the idea of the single woman battling in a man's world:

Some few women seem to be born to have been men . . . . They are indeed sent into the world . . . to be its Joan of Arc — to kindle from their pure passion a fire of enthusiasm as passionate, but purer than it is given to men to kindle: they are not intended to be, except as a utilisation of what is fatally wasted, either wives or mothers. Masculine women, mere men in disguise, they are not . . . but women without women's instincts and wants, sexless — women made not for man but for humankind. Anne Brown was one of these (II, 307-309).

Coupled with this idealistic feminism went the idea of platonic love. Vernon Lee formed several intimate relationships with women throughout her life, and in these she found affection and companionship, without the complications and horrors of the male-female relationship. Anne Brown's tragedy is that she cannot choose the life which Vernon Lee advocates, but feels bound to marry a corrupt and worthless man. Marriage to anyone was bad enough.

46 Irene Cooper Willis, "Vernon Lee," Colby Library Quarterly, V (June 1960), 114.
Most of the reviewers of the book did not share Vernon Lee’s attitude to marriage, and considered her view of the climax to be rather warped. Julia Wedgewood went to the heart of the problem:

But the account of Anne’s sacrifice when she claims her lover’s promise to marry her, in order to save him from the solicitations of the temptress, at the time when he has begun to fill her with loathing, throws back a shadow of discredit on the earlier pages of the story, we feel as if there must have been something morally wanting in any dramatic development which has issued in so revolting a dénouement. Vernon Lee thinks, evidently, that in painting a marriage impressing the reader as a kind of prostitution she is describing the loftiest self-sacrifice.\footnote{47 “Contemporary Records,” \textit{Contemporary Review}, XLVII (May 1885), 750.}

\textbf{JOHN SINGER SARGENT AND VERNON LEE}

\textit{By Richard Ormond}

SARGENT’S FRIENDSHIP with Vernon Lee is well known in outline but it has never been the subject of an individual study. The recent rediscovery of nearly thirty early letters from Sargent to Vernon Lee,\footnote{1 Recently discovered in a cupboard by Mrs. Reine Pitman, a niece of the artist, and given by her to the present author. He is indebted to her for making this article possible.} which were returned by her to his family shortly after his death, together with those still among her papers at Colby College, provides an opportunity for examining their relationship in some detail. Emily Sargent’s letters to Vernon Lee, which are now similarly divided, and Vernon Lee’s own letters to her family, help to fill out the story. Unfortunately none of Vernon Lee’s letters to Sargent survive; Sargent never bothered to keep correspondence, and most of the few private papers found at the time of his death appear to have been destroyed. His letters to Vernon Lee are more informative and revealing than the terse notes he scrawled illegibly to his friends in later life. They contain a good deal of new biographical material, and they help to establish a more concrete image of his youthful personality. Certain passages from the letters were quoted by his biographer Evan Charteris,