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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.47

47 “Contemporary Records,” Contemporary Review, XLVII (May 1885), 750.

John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee

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,1 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,

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.
but in an isolated context. The present study attempts to relate the letters more specifically to Sargent's friendship with Vernon Lee, and the story of their two lives.

John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee, or Violet Paget, to give her her correct name, had known each other since childhood, drawn together in the expatriate world to which their respective parents had condemned them. Mrs. Sargent, bored by the prospect of American domesticity, had in 1854 persuaded her husband to exchange his promising medical career in Philadelphia for the vagaries of a European existence. They spent the rest of their lives there, migrating from one fashionable center to another as the spirit moved them. It seems in retrospect to have been a purposeless and rather forlorn existence, but, for Mrs. Sargent at least, travel was an elixir that never failed to intoxicate. Her husband, an austere New Engander, was more conscious of the sacrifice they had made, and wrote plaintively to friends and relations at home of the economies and harassments to which they were subject. The Pagets, on the other hand, were English, living in Europe because neither of them liked England or had any reason to remain there. Mrs. Paget was a dominating personality, who had married the tutor of her only son on the death of her first husband. Neither marriage was a success for, as Vernon Lee wrote later, "Her two husbands bored her and she gave them their liberty after having a child by each." Vernon Lee's half-brother, the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, who was considerably older, became bedridden in 1873 with a form of neurasthenic paralysis.

Sargent and Vernon Lee were both born in 1856 and, after a varied experience of European cities, they first met in Nice in the early 1860s. Both families were living there in 1862, so that Vernon Lee's dating of their first meeting as 1866-1867 is probably erroneous:

I have a vivid recollection of gruesome, historical charades in our rez-de-Chausée, whose steps into the garden were set with those dwarf rose-bushes aridly and artificially blooming at a season when I longed for ice and slides in gutters. Now, in these tragic representations there was always a boy, either decapitating Mary Queen of Scots with the fire shovel, or himself offering a bared neck on a footstool in the character

of the Earl of Essex, myself figuring as Queen Elizabeth; but whether that boy was always or ever John Sargent, or some other of the small Americans of the Maison Corinaldi, I dare not affirm, though, as Gibbon remarks, I wish to believe.  

Their friendship ripened at Nice during the next winter: “Then was established a regular coming and going between us; weekly, or more frequent, afternoons spent together in our respective abodes . . . . Together, in the sense that we consumed refreshments and paints in company, and conversed the while on elevated topics.” While Vernon Lee used painting as an extension of her literary imagination, Sargent was already fascinated by the visible world, and his ability to transcribe it: “At Nice, in 1867-68, John Sargent, in furtive use of his mother’s paints, or long afternoons with my preposterous and horribly messy boxes, was already a painter. In spirit and in fact.”

It was probably due to Mrs. Sargent’s persuasive arguments that both families spent the following winter in Rome. This was a crucial event in Vernon Lee’s life, for she responded to the subtle atmosphere of the city as she had never done before. Mrs. Paget, in spite of her literary and intellectual interests, was quite insensitive to landscape and cityscape: “We never saw any sights. We moved ourselves and our luggage regularly, as already stated, and, obeying some mysterious financial or educational ebb and flow, backwards and forwards between the same two places, and every now and then between a new couple of places in a different part of the globe. But we were careful to see nothing on the way.”

Mrs. Sargent was quite different. Sightseeing was the raison d’être of her life in Europe, and she gobbled up cities and countrysides with a voracious appetite possible only in an American. To her, the “inspired votary of the spirit of Localities,” Vernon Lee acknowledged an incalculable debt. On previous visits to Rome, the city had struck her as vast, bleak, and squalid, but under Mrs. Sargent’s tutelage she experienced a “slow, far-reaching, passionate change of mind and heart.” She remembered the exact moment in St. Peter’s when the decaying splendor of 19th-century Rome first captured her imagination, “and there became visible, moving

4 Ibid., 239, 240.
above the heads, above the sheen of the bayonets and the hal­berts, the great fans of ostrich feathers, the golden tassels of the gently swaying throne, the white splendour of the pontifical robes and jewels. The trumpets shrilled through the cupola, the incense rose in great blue wreaths.” From that moment, “I was wild to be taken to all the ruins . . . into those dark, damp little churches, resplendent with magic garlands and pyramids of lights . . . . to those chilly galleries, where, while the icy water splashed in the shells of the Tritons in the garden, the winter sunshine, white, cold, and brilliant, made the salt-like marble sparkle.” It was during this memorable winter in Rome that Vernon Lee decided on her vocation as a writer.

Considering the lives of these two intelligent expatriate children, detached in the main from the society of their contemporaries and literally spoon-fed on European culture, it is not surprising to find that Sargent and Vernon Lee were both sophisticated and precocious. Together with Sargent’s little sister Emily, born in 1860, they formed an inseparable trio. They bombarded the pigs outside Porta del Popolo, dug out bits of antique marble from the pavement of the forum, made hurried, forbidden sketches in the Vatican, wandered in and out of churches and palaces, and followed dusty roads into the campagna. They read Ampère’s *Histoire Romaine à Rome*, Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, Murray’s *Guide to Rome*, and Smith’s *Smaller Classical Dictionary of Antiquities*. They polished old verdigrised coins, discussed the dates of emperors and the names of places, and argued incessantly about what they had seen and read. In the evenings Vernon Lee would listen with rapt attention to Mrs. Sargent, who created in her imagination “dim outlines of other parts of the world, with magic Alhambras and Tempes of Paestum and Alpine forests; a Europe occupying other dimensions than that network of railways robbed with hotels and custom-houses across which I was periodically hurried from inventory to inventory.” Sometimes, when Vernon Lee had climbed the steps that divided her mother’s house in the Piazza Mignanelli from the Sargents’ on the Trinità dei Monti, she would find a dinner party in progress,

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7 *The Sentimental Traveller*, 13-14.
and "we children would eat downstairs," while above "there were being entertained some of those legendary artists: Harriet Hosmer, Randolph Rogers, W. W. Story, and so forth."8

The following winter, 1869-1870, the Pagets returned to Rome alone, while the Sargents moved to Florence: "Into this magic world so separate from ours the S---- family speedily vanished, as ghosts into the Fourth Dimension; only occasional juvenile epistles, postmarked Prague or Seville or Bruges or Chamonix, marking its unclutchable tracks."9 Sargent and Vernon Lee never quite recaptured the camaraderie of that winter in Rome. Admittedly they rarely met until the 1880s, but their sympathies and interests increasingly diverged until only a residue of old affection remained. Separation, in fact, probably helped to prolong the friendship by establishing an imaginary fellowship based on the past, which continued intimacy would have more rapidly dispelled.

The earliest of Sargent's surviving letters to Vernon Lee, written from Florence, is dated April 23, 1870. It is couched in rather self-conscious language, but its tone is disconcertingly mature for a fourteen-year-old:

I am reading Milton . . . I think Satan is an altogether different character from what we sinners imagine. So far I rather admire the hero of Paradise Lost, but "we'll see" as the blind man said . . . On the piano (which I am getting to hate) I am playing Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Schubert etc (superb isn't it!). I am playing two or three of Mendelssohn's Songs without words arranged as duets and very prettily arranged.10

Music was a powerful bond between Sargent and Vernon Lee, though characteristically the interest of the one was largely as a performer and of the other chiefly intellectual. At Bologna, where they met briefly in 1872, they explored the old music school together. While Vernon Lee pored over old and illegible music scores, Sargent copied the portraits of famous composers and musicians for her in water color. Vernon Lee's passion for 18th-century music was to find expression in her pioneering Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy. Bologna not only roused her intellectually. The old music school was alive with echoes, and she and Sargent peopled it with "the (I now think)

8 Charteris, 243.
9 The Sentimental Traveller, 14.
10 In Colby College Library. Hereafter indicated as (CC) in the text.
This elaborate fantasy provided Vernon Lee with the theme for a short story, “A Culture Ghost: or, Winthrop’s Adventure,” where the hero listens in a deserted villa to the voice of a famous castrati singer who had been murdered there a hundred years earlier. Sargent was not a silent participant in these “fancies.” However reserved he might appear to be on the surface, he nurtured a profound love for the outlandish and exotic. The words “strange,” “weird,” and “fantastic” were already part of his vocabulary, and it was he who transformed Vernon Lee’s “priggish historical sentimentalities” into something more sinister and astringent.

The intensive cultural education to which Sargent had been exposed throughout his formative years left an indelible mark on his personality. His knowledge and critical appreciation of European art, music, and literature was deep and extensive. Absorption in his own creative talent never led to any diminishment of his early interests and enthusiasms. His detachment and his lack of any profound vision as a painter can partly be explained by reference to his cosmopolitan background and upbringing. He was too conscious of the validity of a multiplicity of traditions to commit himself to any one all-embracing aesthetic credo. Throughout his career he continued to borrow ideas from a variety of traditional and contemporary sources. His early letters abound with descriptions of works of art, which reveal a remarkable objectivity and range. His sensitive analysis of a Greek bust in this letter to Vernon Lee (Pontresina, August 12, 1873) is a characteristic example:

It has not I think the beauty of some of their heads, but perhaps more expression. In these Greek heads I so much admire the splendid cheek, the beautiful transition of the cheek into the chin, and the line of the jaw, and the straight oblique line of the hair. The cheek and chin are of exquisite beauty in Tintoretto’s heads of women, those beautiful combinations of snowy skins, golden braided hair, and strings of pearls.... But I long for the time when I can show you, in Rome, some drawings of particularly beautiful bits of Tintoretto that I did this spring, and try to convert you to at least some of my intense admiration for that great master (CC).

The quality of the critical appraisal is surprisingly close to that of Vernon Lee in her early essays on aesthetics, and suggests a

11 Charteris, 248.
Sargent had some authority to speak on artistic questions. He was already training for a career as a professional painter and, although he had temporarily to content himself with the hopelessly inadequate Accademia delli Belle Arte in Florence, his serious studies were to begin in Paris the following year. The decision had not been an easy one for his parents. Dr. Sargent had always hoped that his son would join the United States navy, and he was worried by the uncertain prospects and dubious status of an art career. He could not, however, ignore Sargent's talent and evident vocation, and he overcame his scruples and sacrificed his secret ambitions with a New England sense of duty. Accordingly, in the summer of 1874 Sargent entered the studio of the fashionable French portraitist, Carolus-Duran, and applied himself to passing the exam for the École des Beaux Arts; work at the École was considered as an essential corollary to work in the atelier. Sargent's letter of September 4, 1874 to Vernon Lee, written from 52 rue Abbatrice in Paris, refers to their meeting in Bologna and, in particular, to their mutual fascination before a portrait of Farinelli:

Dear Violet:

Many, many thanks for your kind and interesting letter which I have not answered sooner being busied by preparing for the examination in which I am now plunged.

That part especially of your letter which related to the “serpent, sphinx, wizard” interested me intensely. I hope you have not entirely put down the thought of writing on such a curious subject. Would it be too much trouble for you to send me a copy of that wild enumeration of the picture's peculiarities that we both scratched off one day while driving at Bologna . . .

Well, we have decided to spend the winter here. I am sorry to leave Italy— that is to say, Venice, but on the other hand I am persuaded that Paris is the place to learn painting in. When I can paint, then away for Venice!

Please remember me to your brother and give me news of his health, and with best love from all to all, believe me ever,

Yrs. very truly
John S. Sargent

12 In the possession of the author. Hereafter indicated as (Au) in the text. A small number of these are quoted in Charteris.
No other letters from Sargent to Vernon Lee survive until 1880, but eighteen from Emily Sargent, covering this period, help to bridge the gap. They describe the nomadic existence which Emily and her family continued to lead, and they express vague and recurrent hopes of a reunion. The Sargents, however, rarely returned to Italy, spending their winters in Nice and their summers in French or Swiss watering places, while the Pagets remained in Florence. Emily wrote characteristically to Vernon Lee from Switzerland on July 29, 1877: “How I wish we could be with you in Florence next winter, for it seems fated, since our last winter in Rome that we should not be together. But it is farther away from John than we would like to be so I think we shall go to the Riviera” (CC). Emily adored her brother (“I miss him so very much”), and her letters to Vernon always contain news of him. They provide interesting sidelights on his career as a student, and they trace his progress from the atelier to his first successes at the Salon. During this same period, Vernon Lee was laying the foundations for her career as a professional writer, and Sargent and his sister watched the unfolding of her literary genius with a mixture of admiration and incredulity. On June 5, 1877, Emily wrote to her: “You must have lost, or rather never received the letter in which I told you how much I enjoyed reading your article on Tuscan Peasant Plays. The others I have not yet read, but will as soon as I have the opportunity. You are a wonder, dear Violet, which however is no news to you” (CC).

Once he had settled down in Carolus-Duran’s atelier and overcome the initial problems of the beginner, Sargent began to develop rapidly as a painter. In the summer of 1877 he was sketching out-of-doors at Cancale on the Brittany coast and preparing studies for his first big subject picture, Oyster Gatherers of Cancale, with which he won a medal at the Salon of 1878. Emily described the problems which he had encountered (letter of July 29, 1877):

It has great difficulty in finding people willing to pose, the married women never will, and they dislike their children to be painted, and the young girls rarely will consent. When he does find anyone willing, the crowd around him is so great, that he cannot work, so he has to make friends with some old woman, and get her to let him paint in her court (CC).
Sketching by the seaside was a summer holiday occupation. In Paris Sargent was still undergoing the rigorous atelier training which would result in the technical virtuosity of his mature style. His industry and talent already marked him out from most of his contemporaries. Emily wrote to Vernon Lee in October 1877 that “he works like a dog from morning till night. Part of the time last winter we would breakfast together between 7 & eight o’clock, & he would only return for a hasty dinner & be off again to the Life School till after ten. Afterwards he would still leave us early, but would go to the Beaux Arts before dinner” (CC).

There were tangible rewards for Sargent’s dedication to his work. In 1877 he was awarded a medal for ornament drawing at the École des Beaux Arts: “The Jury were so well satisfied with his drawing that they asked if they could not give a higher award than the usual silver medal, but were answered in the negative.” In the same year Sargent was selected by Carolus-Duran to help him with his large ceiling decoration for the Louvre, illustrating the Triumph of Marie de Medici. The ceiling is mentioned by Emily in a letter of July 24, 1878 to Vernon Lee:

The Salon was not as good as usual this year. Duran’s plafond for the Luxembourg, on which John has been working, looks fine, but of course the perspective is extraordinary . . . . Duran made an excellent portrait of John in it, & John made one of him which so delighted Duran, that he told John he would sit for his portrait, & John has begun it but expects to go to Capri in a few days, so will not be able to finish it now . . . . His picture of the beach at Cancale was very well hung in the Salon and is bought by our old friend Admiral Case (Au).

Sargent’s formal easel portrait of Carolus-Duran is one of his most distinguished early works, capturing in a pose of nervous elegance and deceptive informality the style and panache of this fashionable dandy and artist. The success of the portrait led to several commissions which mark the beginning of Sargent’s independent career.

During the winter of 1879-1880 Sargent paid an extended visit to Spain, primarily in order to study the work of Velasquez, who had been a presiding deity of Carolus-Duran’s studio. Around the New Year, he crossed over to North Africa, paint-

13 Letter from Emily Sargent to Vernon Lee, June 5, 1877 (CC).
Colby Library Quarterly

ing a mysterious Eastern subject on the patio of a little house he had taken as a studio in Tangiers. He sent a water color sketch to his family, which Emily duly described to Vernon Lee (March 18, 1880): "It is a figure all draped in white, against a white background, & standing on a rug of rich colour . . . . She is standing with her arms raised & holding her head-dress over the smoke of an incense burner" (CC). Sargent himself mentions the picture, *Fumée d’Ambre Gris*, in a letter to Vernon Lee written soon after his return from North Africa, which marks the resumption of their surviving correspondence. Most of the letter, significantly, is concerned with a critical appraisal of Spanish singing:

Dear Violet:

I shall send you a photograph of a little picture I perpetrated in Tangiers. It is very unsatisfactory because the only interest of the thing was the colour; but still it will give you a general idea of what your "twin" is about.

My compliments, most illustrious twin, for what you are achieving.

If I had the opportunity I should so enjoy running down to Florence and meeting you again & your circle.

You wished some Spanish songs. I could not find any good ones. The best are what one hears in Andalucia, the half African Malagueñas & Soleás, dismal, restless chants that it is impossible to note. They are something between a Hungarian Czardas and the chant of the Italian peasant in the fields, and are generally composed of five strophes and end stormily on the dominant the theme quite lost in strange fiorituras and guttural roulades. The gitano voices are marvellously supple.

If you have heard something of the kind you will not consider this mere jargon . . .

Yours sincerely

John S. Sargent (Au)

Sargent’s “twin” had not been idle while he was establishing a reputation for himself as a painter. Restless and ambitious, Vernon Lee relentlessly bombarded magazine editors and publishers with her fiction and essays. In 1870 a Lausanne newspaper published her first short story, describing the adventures of an antique coin through history. In 1875 she contributed a series of articles on English novelists to an Italian periodical, *Rivista Europa*. An article on “Tuscan Peasant Plays” in *Fraser’s* two years later marked her advent on the English literary scene. This was followed by further articles in English magazines on a variety of subjects. Her reputation was cement-
ed by the publication of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in 1880. Devised as three essays on various aspects of Italian 18th-century literature, music, and theatre, the book was the result of nearly ten years of intensive reading and research. Only twenty-four when the book was published, and much younger when most of it was written, Vernon Lee brought to this unusual subject an extraordinary grasp, insight, and critical acumen. Poring over old and forgotten scores and librettos, she resurrected, in her most successful piece, the achievements of Italian opera, which had led the world in the mid-18th century, in a lively, sustained, and often brilliant narrative.

Sargent wrote to thank Vernon Lee for sending him a copy of *Studies* in August 1880, remarking to her mother that he was “much interested in her quaint book”;14 it lay wholly outside his range of interests and sympathies. The two friends had not met for nearly nine years, but the strength of their affection and admiration for one another had survived the interval. In 1880 they were planning a reunion in Venice, but Vernon Lee cancelled her visit at the last minute. Sargent wrote to Mrs. Paget on September 27, 1880 that he and his family were “all very disappointed that Violet could not come here” (Au), and Emily wrote that her absence left “an aching void.” Emily’s remark in the same letter to Vernon Lee (September 22, 1880) that “seeing pictures through John’s eyes is much like seeing them through yours” (Au) is interesting in view of Sargent’s later disagreements with Vernon Lee on aesthetic questions. It testifies to their close intellectual rapprochement as adolescents. Sargent spent most of his time in Venice working on a new series of figure and subject paintings, replying to an invitation from Mrs. Paget on September 27, 1880:

Much as I would like to see you and your son again and renew my old bonne camaraderie with Violet I am forced to consider that there may be only a few more weeks of pleasant season here and I must make the most of them. I am crazy to see Florence and Rome and before very long must devote a few months to them. But not this winter. I must do something for the Salon and have determined to stay as late as possible in Venice (Au).

A month later he wrote to Vernon Lee (October 22): “There is plenty of work to be done here and the only thing I fear is the

14 Letter, September 27, 1880 (Au).
ennui of living almost alone in a wet and changed Venice. All of my friends are leaving” (Au).

Sargent’s reunion with Vernon Lee finally took place in London in June 1881. He had come over to see the exhibition of his first picture at the Royal Academy, while she was staying with the family of her close friend Mary Robinson in Gower Street. From here Vernon Lee issued forth to survey and conquer the literary world of London. Her letters to her family in Italy provide a vivid picture of the personalities and activities of the various circles, largely avant-garde, in which she moved. Her first meeting with Sargent is recorded with characteristic aplomb (June 16, 1881):

When we returned home, the maid said there were visitors in the drawing room, Mr Sargent — so I rushed up to John & past two others, one sitting very quiet, small, pale; with a scrappy beard, sickly looking; the other a great tall smirk blond shopmanny young man. They were Mr Marston & Mr Sharp. John is very stiff, a sort of completely accentless mongrel, not at all like Curtis or Newman; rather French, faubourg sort of manners. Ugly, not at all changed in feature, except for a beard. He was very shy, having I suppose a vague sense that there were poets about.15

The two expatriates had several friends in common, and they met regularly during the early weeks of the summer. Their tenuous friendship, preserved by an infrequent correspondence, blossomed again, although the old intimacy of Rome did not revive. Together they visited the studios of several artists, including that of Burne-Jones:

Some of Burne Jones pictures, especially a set of unfinished things of the Sleeping Beauty, I admired extremely, & so did John; I think John is singularly unprejudiced, almost too amiably candid in his judgements. He remained to tea. I like him now. He is just what he was, only much more serious, without spirits or humour. He talked art and literature, just as formerly, and then, quite unbidden, sat down to the piano & played all sorts of bits of things, ends & middles of things, just as when he was a boy.16

Sargent’s personality had in many ways changed more than Vernon Lee’s in the interval since their last meeting. The reserve and seriousness, which were partly the result of his

15 Vernon Lee’s Letters, edited by Irene Cooper Willis (Privately printed, 1937), 61.
16 Vernon Lee to her mother, June 21, 1881. Ibid., 63.
Sargent’s portrait of Vernon Lee, 1881

Sargent’s portrait of Mary Robinson, 1881

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rootless childhood and New England inheritance, became more marked as he grew older. He was less open to impressions, emotions, and ideas than his exuberant companion, who responded to every experience with a passionate intensity. This difference in temperature, both personal and intellectual, largely explains the growing distance between them in their subsequent relationship. One should, however, be wary of accepting Vernon Lee’s evidence uncritically. It is clear from other sources that Sargent could, in a sympathetic milieu, prove to be an amusing and entertaining companion. He had a fund of high spirits, a gift as a raconteur and mimic, and an engaging simplicity, which are not included in Vernon Lee’s picture of him. This in itself suggests that he did not feel entirely easy in her company.

One tangible result of their first meeting was Sargent’s sketch portrait of Vernon Lee. Painted in a few blurred strokes, it succinctly captures her mobile features and expressive personality. Eyes peering out sharply from behind glinting spectacles, lips parted, neck twisted, it is “the portrait of a most sensitive intelligence, in which keenness and whimsy joined in style.”

Vernon Lee herself describes the single sitting in which the portrait was painted in a letter to her mother, June 25, 1881:

He came the day before yesterday to do my likeness; about three hours’ sitting, with Mabel [Robinson] looking on; I enjoyed it very much; John talking the whole time & strumming the piano between whiles. I like him. The sketch is, by everyone’s admission, extraordinarily clever & characteristic; it is of course mere dabs & blurs & considerably caricatured, but certainly more like me than I expected anything — rather fierce & cantankerous. John said he wd. like to do a real portrait of me someday. He says I sit very well; the goodness of my sitting seems to consist in never staying quiet a single moment.

No sooner had Sargent finished Vernon Lee’s sketch than he mysteriously disappeared to Paris, writing to her from there about her proposed trip to France.

My dear Violet

I was delighted to get your letter and to hear of your approach.

So you are going to Grez! How did you ever hear of the place. It is very pretty but a very nest of bohemians, English bohemians, who will

16th. Aug. [1881]

My dear Violet

18 Letters, 65.
swoop down upon you. Tel le vautour. You will meet the irresistible O'Meara and my very good friend Arthur Heseltine. You will probably be introduced to these gentlemen's heads bobbing about with hats on, for they are all the time bathing from your garden. There are two inns at Grez, the disreputable and the semi-reputable, the former is called chez Chévilion, the latter chez Laurent, or Lambert. And now Heaven protect you!

Perhaps I may take a holiday and swoop down upon you at Grez.

I shall be delighted to see Miss Robinson again and to make you a sketch of her. She is the most immaterial concept I ever saw, with her quite too large eyes.

If you stop in Paris on your way to Grez, the jaws of death, let me know, or at any rate write me from there. During the days you spend in Paris I shall be very much at your disposition. Kind messages to Miss Robinson if she is with you, and believe me,

Your sincere friend

John S. Sargent (Au)

Sargent had discovered Grez in 1875, in company with his fellow students from Carolus-Duran's atelier. It was an idyllic and unfrequented village, deep in the Forest of Fontainebleau, and it provided the setting for that excited and warm-blooded fellowship possible only in very young men. The visit was commemorated by Robert Louis Stevenson, whose cousin was one of the leading lights of the atelier, in an article entitled "Forest Notes."19

Vernon Lee eventually abandoned her plans of going to Grez, travelling instead to Brittany to stay with relatives, and then returning to Italy. Mary Robinson joined her in Florence in the autumn, and it was probably while Mary was passing through Paris on her way there that Sargent executed the portrait sketch of her, which he gave to Vernon Lee as a pendant to her own. Both sketches are mentioned in a letter from Sargent of September or October 1881, written to congratulate Vernon Lee on her short story, "A Culture Ghost: or, Winthrop's Adventure," which was based on their visit to the old music school in Bologna in 1872:

Dear Violet

Many thanks for sending me your story. I like its Italian colour very much and the delicate observation throughout. So much indeed that the local atmosphere so to speak strikes me as real "raison d'être" of the thing, and the ghost story a pretext. But this is prying behind the scenes.

19 Cornhill Magazine, XXXIII (May 1876), 545-561.
You were quite right in not allowing your hero to indulge in analysing and labelling all his thrills, as we did in rather a vainglorious way probably, when we used to walk with the cold shivers under the arcades of Bologna. We were not really awed enough not to take a great deal of pride and enjoyment in making the little catalogue of all the uncanny qualities of the portrait of Farinelli.

You have treated the story very well.

My kindest messages to your brother; I should like very much to read his book.

As for the sketches having arrived "en compote" I should think they could easily be cured, by Heath Wilson if he will take the trouble. I am convinced that the likeness of Miss Robinson is horrid and that she hates me and will never allow me to make amends. If it is really hideous let Heath Wilson retouch it with a hot poker or put an umbrella into it, and open the umbrella (Au).

Mary Robinson had evidently aroused romantic feelings in Sargent, if only temporarily. Vernon Lee had written to her mother earlier in the summer: "He was much struck & charmed with her, and asked leave, when he returns to London next spring, to do her likeness."20 Unlike Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson was entirely feminine, with her slight, graceful figure, and her "quite too large eyes." Already launched on a prolific career as poet, essayist, novelist, and biographer, she had qualities of intelligence and beauty which made her immediately attractive. When she finally married, in 1887, it took Vernon Lee some time to recover from the emotional shock of this betrayal. Mary returned to England from Florence in the late autumn of 1881, and Sargent once more took care of her in Paris, writing to Vernon Lee that she was looking better than I expected, from all accounts, and not exhausted by her journey. She was going on a Thursday with a lady friend and I promised to be at the station which I did not reach in time owing to a miscalculation of distance & cabhorse power . . . . Your book Belcaro has at last arrived. I have been expecting it for weeks and it only came yesterday. I am going to read it at once. Tell me what you think of Pater's Essays. I like one or two of them very much (Au).

*Belcaro,* Vernon Lee’s second major book, is a series of essays on various aesthetic questions, combining philosophical speculation with a very personal response to particular works of art and certain artistic phenomena. The evocative and

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slightly rambling style partially disguises the coherent intellectual purpose of the book. Vernon Lee's central thesis is to define the distinction between form and subject, to isolate the particular quality of a painting or a piece of music from the mass of associations, preconceptions, emotions, and moral ideas which the spectator or listener brings to it, and which subtly distort his view. Her book is an early statement of the nature of pure form, and she is an important precursor of Berenson and Roger Fry. Vernon Lee is concerned with the significance of the work of art in and for itself. The statue of Niobe in the Vatican is a perfect realization of plastic form, but it is thoroughly inadequate as a representation of this classical story. Its excellence is dependent on purely artistic criteria. Similarly the music of Bach or Mozart is dictated by intellectually conceived and perceived forms. The mysterious emotions released in the mind of the listener will inevitably obscure the formal significance of the music. As a corollary to this Vernon Lee insists on the divorce between art and morality. She criticizes Ruskin for passing moral judgments on works of art, and in her essay on Perugino, "In Umbria," argues that there is no necessary relation between the character of the artist and the character of the work of art which he produces.

Sargent's own ideas at this period correspond very closely to Vernon Lee's, though his attitude to art was less theoretical and abstruse. He was a practicing artist, trained in a realistic tradition, who described himself to her as "an impressionist and an 'intransigent,' entirely given up to the faithful reproduction of 'les valeurs.'" Nevertheless, Sargent had absorbed and was influenced by many of the avant-garde aesthetic ideas of the period. The photograph of him taken in the early 1880s suggests a certain affectation and dandified nonchalance. He was friendly with Paul Bourget and Count Robert de Montesquiou, and he is known to have read and admired the poetry of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and other so-called decadents. Several of his paintings, like Fumée d'Ambre Gris and Dans les Oliviers à Capri, capture a mood of poetic mystery and strangeness which has parallels in contemporary French literature. Vernon Lee remarked of this quality in Sargent's imagination that "It may also have been connected with the Parnassian, the

21 Charteris, 251.
Heredia and Leconte de Lisle movement in literature. I can conceive that at any other time than the eighties or nineties, and with any other surroundings than the expensive and traditionless ‘tastefulness’ of the worldly people who sat for him this bizarre element might have vanished from Sargent’s work.”

The subject of his later subject painting, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, was partly inspired by the aesthetic cult of the *japonais*, and he is known to have admired and collected Japanese prints and porcelain. Soon after meeting him in 1881, Vernon Lee wrote to her mother:

John is extremely serious, a great maker of theories; he goes in for art for art’s sake, says that the subject of a picture is something not always in the way etc. He is quite emancipated from all religious ideas. He speaks English without accent but has to help himself out with French words.

Vernon Lee’s attitude to the current theory of art for art’s sake was ambivalent. While she had exposed the fallacy of confusing art with morality in *Belcaro*, she felt an instinctive antipathy for the work of the “aesthetes,” who had interpreted this idea as a license for unrestricted immorality and decadence.

Sargent held the premises of *Belcaro* to be self-evidently true. He responded deeply to works of art, but his sympathies were instinctive, and he felt no need to justify his tastes on philosophical and psychological grounds. To this extent, the polemical tone of Vernon Lee’s book had no appeal for him personally, but he admired her ideas and her integrity.

**March 24th. [1882]**

My dear Violet

I have put off writing to you till I had read your book and lately I have had very little time.

I am quite delighted with it and I think it is a book that would do a great deal of good and hope it is very much read. For your view of art is the only true one.

Of course your book is addressed to a public entirely different from me, for instance. To me the conclusions you come to or the feeling you start from are altogether natural and self-evident and need no debating; and the chief interest of the book to me is to know that you possess the right ideas. The arguments you use and the process of convincing I watch as an outsider, not having any doubts myself.

I think your theory of the all-importance of beauty and its independence of or hostility to sentiments applies admirably to the antique and to the short great period of art in Italy. It is certain that at certain times talent entirely overcame thought or poetry. In decadence this occurred to an outrageous extent. It is another question & I suppose a matter of personal feeling whether that state of things is more interesting than another; whether Raphael in his cartoons at Hampton Court is more admirable than in the Sposalizio, or whether he is more admirable at all than Botticelli. There are some like Durer & Rembrandt & the French Millet who are very "inquiétants" for one who thinks as you do.

For their talent is enormous too, and they have intimité.

Perhaps we will have a chance to skirmish together for I think very likely I will go to Florence this summer.

With love to all your circle

Your old friend
John S. Sargent (Au)

Sargent’s practical sense had immediately exposed one of the flaws in Vernon Lee’s too well-rounded theory. Certain artists simply could not be analyzed in terms of pure form. In a letter written sometime later (dated 1884 at the top in another hand) he expanded the point:

I am rather surprised you did not speak of the medals, Pisano’s things, portraits of the Este, Malatesta etc. They would be rather difficult to fit into one of your two categories very definitely, but can one be very definite? Where would you class Bronzino or Holbein?

You are quite right in going out of Italy, to Spain and Holland for that quality which the French call aspect and that the Italian painters never dreamt of. Not even the Venetians.

Thank God you do not assert that one thing is better than the other. But it seems to me that it would be well to tell the Philistine positively that human tenderness or elevation and the love of things for themselves are of the idealistic, really artistic organization means the other kind of thing. And then once every thousand years comes a genius who unites the two.

And for every painter with eyes that see, there will always be a hundred well-meaning irrepressible poets who will make pictures, God bless them . . . Not that I am in a rage or prefer one thing to the other. But some day you must assert that the only painters were Velasquez, Franz Hals, Rembrandt and Van der Meer of Delft, a tremendous man (CC).24

Vernon Lee’s visits to London became an annual event, allowing her to keep in touch with editors, publishers, and the literary world in general. She needed the stimulation of a more

24 The Vernon Lee article referred to by Sargent is probably “The Portrait Art,” reprinted in Euphorion (London, 1884).
competitive and cosmopolitan environment than existed in the restricted ambit of Florence. On her journeys to England, she invariably visited Paris, where Sargent entertained and escorted her about. In June 1882 she wrote home:

John I found much aged & shd. say fatigued, but very nice. He is going to Italy for the whole summer and autumn, first to Venice; he will be at Perugia, Siena etc. in September . . . . I went to the Salon today with Emily and John & was quite astounded at the number of bad pictures. John’s Spanish things [El Jaleo] really very fine, striking, original; but there is a portrait of his of a girl in black [Isabel Valle] which is simply superb & like an old master . . . . It appears that he is at present the victim of fresh matrimonial cabals on the part of Mrs Burckhardt, whose daughter he painted [Lady with the Rose]. The girl is handsome, but Emily says very empty, & the mother detestable; she says she thinks they have fairly disgusted John already.25

Emily was clearly the spokesman for the views of Sargent’s possessive mother. When Vernon Lee finally met Louise Burckhardt, she was charmed by her and considered that she would make an excellent wife for him. There was not, however, much danger of that, for Sargent was already developing into a hardened bachelor.

While Vernon Lee continued her journey to London, Sargent packed his bags for Venice. The city had fired his imagination, and he was anxious to go back to the themes which he had first developed there two years earlier. It was a productive trip, resulting in a whole series of sensitive interiors and street scenes. Once again the Pagets tried to lure him down to their summer retreat. In August he replied to Mrs. Paget’s invitation from the Palazzo Barbaro, where he was staying with the Daniel Curtises, to whom he later introduced Vernon Lee:

The time is nearing when, if my work were done, I might avail myself of your kind invitation to Siena. But I am afraid I shall only see you in Florence later on, for I am really bound to stay another month or better two in this place so as not to return to Paris with empty hands. The last month has been so warm that I have hardly done anything but make projects for work (Au).

In October he was still doubtful about breaking the thread of his work, writing to Vernon Lee on the 6th: “The truth is, it is most likely I shall not get to Florence. An unlucky procedure

25 Letters, 84, 96.
makes it necessary for me to be in Paris by the 1st November, and my work here is not done. That is the situation. It really all depends on the weather" (Au). The weather must have deteriorated, for Sargent did apparently visit the Pagets in Florence that autumn. He came back to Paris clutching a box with Vernon Lee’s portrait inside it.

2nd November [1882]

Dear Violet

It is an astonishing fact that not the slightest notice was taken of my box at the Italian custom house. The octroi man at Paris said: “Pas de cigars?” “Non.” “Debarassez moi ça.”

I wish it had been a Botticelli. So the journey was entirely without incident.

I read Democracy [by Henry Adams] & the Cornhill. Your article [on Botticelli’s frescoes at the Villa Lemmi] is very good indeed, but there are two points that I object to. I think on the whole it is best not to put white roses on broken old statues. And I object to your hinting at a superiority in that canting commonplace impersonal Perugino over the decidedly greater artist Botticelli. I am not too tooing or posing.

Please give my love to your kind people and believe me

Your good friend

John S. Sargent (Au)

The portrait was exhibited at the Société Internationale de Peintres et Sculpteurs in the Rue de Sèze, and Sargent wrote to Vernon Lee on February 10, 1883 to say that it had “consternated many people.” The Gazette des Beaux-Arts spoke appreciatively of the portrait: “M. Sargent se montre là un impressioniste de premier ordre.”

During the winter of 1882-1883, both Sargent and Vernon Lee were deep in projects which were to mark a climax in their respective careers. Sargent had begun work on his famous portrait of Madame Gautreau, which was to cause a furore at the Salon of 1884, while Vernon Lee was collecting material for her equally provocative novel, Miss Brown. Sargent wrote to her from Nice on February 10, 1883:

I have been here over two weeks paying my people the usual winter visit and going on with my Salon portrait [probably Mrs. Henry White] for the original who was obliged to leave Paris before the portrait was half done fortunately went to Cannes . . . . In a few days I shall be back in
Paris tackling my other "envoi," the portrait of a great beauty. Do you object to people who are fardées to the extent of being a uniform lavender or blotting-paper colour all over. If so you would not care for my paper colour all over. If so you would not care for my sitter. But she has the most beautiful lines and if the lavender or chlorate-of-potash-lozenge colour be pretty in itself I shall be more than pleased (Au).

Four months later Vernon Lee was in Paris, describing Sargent's elegant new studio at 41 Boulevard Berthier in a letter of June 23, 1883 to her mother: "He has taken a whole tiny house, so extremely pretty, quite aesthetic and English, with a splendid big studio and a pretty garden with roses and all done up with Morris papers & rugs and matting. From his having invested in this house I presume Miss Burckhardt is gone off the horizon." 27

Sargent did not finish his portrait of Madame Gautreau in time for the Salon of 1883. The difficulties of getting his sitter to pose and of fixing on a satisfactory composition were proving more formidable than he had anticipated. The picture had been consciously planned as a chef d'oeuvre, which would finally establish his reputation. He went to stay in the country house of the Gautreaus in Brittany, from where he wrote to Vernon Lee in late August or September 1883:

Your letter has just reached me, still in this country house struggling with the unpaintable beauty and hopeless laziness of Mme G. I am not yet through and will probably be here two weeks longer so that allowing two or three days for Paris and the time necessary for breaking through the lines of my family and friends fortified in Lombardy, I may be in Florence in 3 weeks and a few hours (Au).

Sargent must have left for Italy with a feeling of relief. He spent a relaxing holiday there, writing to his sister on November 20, 1883: "After leaving Florence I had an agreeable visit to Siena where Violet came with Mrs Stillman & spent several days in sightseeing & driving about & going to the Circus" (Au).

It is difficult to know the factors which determine the success or failure of a contemporary work of art, but Sargent's portrait of Madame Gautreau proved to be a sensational flop at the Salon of 1884. Madame Gautreau's décolletage, the cool and brazen way in which she displayed her body, and the acute
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stylization of the picture, all offended against contemporary proprieties. A hostile campaign was launched in the press, and the portrait became the scandalous centerpiece of the exhibition. Sargent was bitterly disappointed, but after the initial shock of hearing his picture held up to public ridicule, he became resigned and stoical. Vernon Lee, who saw him soon after the debacle, wrote home in June 1884:

Mrs Barstow & I lunched at John’s house. Had we announced ourselves the previous day we should have had the honour of lunching with Paul Bourget and Oscar Wilde & his bride . . . . John was very nice. His picture of Madame Gotreau [sic] is a solemn fiasco in the eyes of the world: you see it surrounded by shoals of astonished & jibing women. When it was first seen, the outcry was such that Madame Gotreau went into crises and her mother rushed to John & said “Vous avez perdu ma fille!”—Still he is prouder of it than of the Jaleo, & I think it is, though bizarre & even unpleasant, a very grand work. He is tending entirely towards a return to 15th century ideas.28

It is often assumed that Sargent left Paris as soon as the scandal broke with his tail between his legs. This is not true. His visit to England during the summer of 1884 had been planned long in advance, and he had several commissions to fulfill there. He had written to Vernon Lee earlier in the year: “Will you be in England next summer? If so I shall see you there for I am to paint several portraits in the country & three ugly young women at Sheffield [The Misses Vickers], dingy hole . . . . It will take me probably from the 15th July to 15th September” (CC). In the spring of 1884 Sargent had paid a brief visit to London to see his new friend, Henry James. They went to the Reynolds exhibition and visited several studios, including that of Burne-Jones who, according to James, was adorable but “suffers from a constitutional incapacity to enjoy Sargent’s [pictures]—finding in them ‘such a want of finish.’ ”29 Sargent, on the other hand, was an admirer of the work of Burne-Jones and Rossetti, and later owned a painting by Ford Madox Brown. Ralph Curtis wrote to his family: “I fear là bas he will fall into Pre-R. influence wh. has got a strange hold of him he says since Siena.”30 This was a groundless fear, for Sargent was too aware of the real nature of his talent to allow

28 Ibid., 143.
29 Leon Edel, Henry James: the Middle Years (Philadelphia, 1963), 111.
30 Charteris, 62.
his admiration for the Pre-Raphaelites to develop into emulation. Curtis’ evidence, like that of Vernon Lee, reveals, however, the depth and range of Sargent’s sympathies.

Sargent returned to England early in June 1884, taking a studio near the Albert Hall. He spent much of his time in the company of Vernon Lee. On June 16 she noted a tea party at Mrs. Stillman’s house, “sitting on grass, discussions, fantastic, weird, curious, cigarettes, bonbons, Baudelaire,” and ten days later described Sargent and Arthur Lemon seated passionately at Mrs. Callander’s feet, “all trying to tell her fortune.”

Early in July Vernon Lee and Mary Robinson persuaded Sargent to give a tea party for his friends, inviting most of the guests themselves:

Mary Robinson & Mabel in pretty white frocks, myself in high black brocade, the two Miss Peters in fantastic applegreen Kate Greenaway dresses, Mrs Barstow, were wandering up & down stairs from the tea table to the easel with John’s unfinished portrait of Lady Playfair, with Pater limping about for gout and Henry James wrinkling his forehead as usual for tight boots, & a lot of artists buzzing about.

In late July Sargent gave a farewell studio party, which Vernon Lee attended, and then departed to the country to paint various members of the Vickers family. In November he painted Robert Louis Stevenson at BournemOUTH, and in December he was back in London, from where he wrote to Vernon Lee:

4th Dec. [1884]

Dear Violet

“What is Mrs Stillman’s address?”

Yours truly

John S. Sargent

This is the form of a letter that I have been intending posting to you ever since hearing your piétre allusions to me in a letter to Henry James. However your book came this morning & I have sat for four hours, hungry & with cold feet, and am tremendously reconciled and offer you the homage of my growing admiration. I have just finished Book I and look forward to the rest with the greatest expectation of pleasure. It seems to me very “big”; and delightfully written (isn’t it more simple and flowing than your writing usually is, and independently of the fact of its being a story?) and it is a study so far of questions that interest me of course very much. Many thanks for sending it to me.

31 Letters, 144, 150.
32 Vernon Lee to her brother, July 4, 1884, Letters, 152.
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Comyns Carr told me that he was extremely sorry at having to refuse your Media de Carpi on account of its length. He admires it very much. Please tell me in what periodical it will eventually appear.

You see I am still in England and have not quite got through my English work. One of my portraits Miss Robinson & Mrs. Stillman both like very much. I shall send you a photo as soon as I have one.

Mrs. Stillman's casi have not altered her sweetness and her beauty and I fancy she must be admirable just now to those who know her well. She naturally enough does not feel inclined or is perhaps absolutely prevented from granting me my request to paint her portrait, for which I would have stopped in London all winter if necessary. I am very sorry as I may not soon again have such a good chance. She looked most beautiful the other day in my studio, in large folds of black, with her pale face.

I am sure you will have a great great success with your book. May all publishers, readers and writers pat you on the back till you are a shapeless pulp. Amen.

Ever your friend
John S. Sargent (Au)

Miss Brown is a clever, slightly neurotic attack on aesthetic culture and attitudes, its melodrama redeemed by brilliant descriptive passages, which bring the whole period to life. It landed Vernon Lee in deep water, however, for she had taken much of her copy from those literary and artistic friends whom she had met in London, and who felt that their confidence had been betrayed. Mrs. William Morris was so angry about her own caricature in the book that she refused ever to see or speak to Vernon Lee again. The Oscar Wildes, the William Rossettis, the Ford Madox Browns, the Humphry Wards, and other members of the old Fitzroy Square set, all remained cool to Vernon Lee for several years. To Henry James fell the difficult and distasteful task of telling Vernon Lee how much he disapproved of her novel, while thanking her for the dedication of it to himself. Miss Brown was in its way as much a disaster for Vernon Lee as Madame Gautreau was for Sargent.

After 1884 Sargent's relationship with Vernon Lee settled down into mutual tolerance and affection, but they had increasingly few interests, and attitudes in common, and little to say to one another. Sargent was irritated and affronted by Vernon Lee's intellectual pugnacity, and her intrusion into artistic questions which he regarded as the preserve of the painter. His appreciation of art was relatively simple and instinctive, and
he distrusted her high-flown psychological theories. His own painting was devoted to the accurate representation of the real world, and he refused to admit “that seeing is a business of the mind, the memory and the heart, quite as much as of the eye.”

He even overcame his own personal reserve “to the extent of admonishing me, in a deliberate and emphatic tête-à-tête, to confine myself to literature and give up once for all such studies in empirical aesthetics as were later published in my volume ’Beauty and Ugliness.’ In his eyes all this was preposterous and, I suspect, vaguely sacrilegious. Now, as I declined to yield to my dear old playfellow’s dictation on this subject, and also failed to make him recognize that art could afford to other folk problems quite apart from those dealt with by the artist and the art-critic; as, moreover, Sargent did not like opposition nor I dogmatism, a tacit understanding henceforth kept us off anything which might lead to either. So our conversation turned more and more exclusively on books, music and people, about all of which John Sargent was a delightful talker and I an often delighted listener.”

They continued to see each other and to correspond, but on a conventional and stilted level. Vernon Lee really remained closer to Emily Sargent with whom she often stayed in her later years. She summed up her relationship with Sargent in the closing lines of her memoir on him:

As regards our friendship, I have sometimes regretted that, having started with such early intimacy, I did not get, or try, to know John Sargent better. But after all, what can be better than knowing a great man, not in the details of his common personal existence, but in the impersonal feelings and thoughts special to his greatness, and which he enabled us to share with him?

33 Charteris, 251.
34 Ibid., 250.
35 Ibid., 255.