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Vernon Lee's Vignettes of Literary Acquaintances

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IN NO PREDICTABLE PATTERN, Vernon Lee's mother was tyrannical and tender, intensely subjective, coldly remote, idealistic and cynical, heterodox and compliant. From this "unmistakable individuality which recognized no law but its own," the young girl derived an odd set of attributes: intellectual arrogance, puritanic moralism, and a tendency to be "passionately personal in all her judgments." Particularly, one must add, in those judgments having to do with friends and acquaintances. In this area she is invariably forthright, often immoderate, sometimes vindictive, and frequently amusing. She forms opinions impulsively on first sight and articulates them with an air of omniscient disdain.

Irene Cooper Willis, confidante of Vernon Lee's last years, suggests that "The wish to entertain, as well as the hurry and tiredness in which she often wrote, partly account, perhaps, for the ruthlessness of some of her judgments of people." Miss Willis takes the kindlier perspective here. Others will accede that Miss Lee does some of her most effective sniping when she is neither hurried nor tired. The crux of the matter lies in her "wish to entertain." Besides her mercurial mother, the household included Miss Lee's half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton, a bright, bored, romantic poet of considerable skill, who was also a chronic psychosomatic invalid. It is primarily to impress and divert these two that Miss Lee composes her devastating vignettes of the great and near-great whose trajectories cross hers in the literary bazaars of London.

Pure egoism cannot be overlooked as a factor — she so obviously enjoys rendering verdicts on the appearance and worthiness of anyone who wanders into her ken. Frank Swinnerton finds her "over apt to attribute to any opponent either incurable stupidity or malignant dishonesty." To be fair to Vernon Lee,

1 Vernor Lee, The Handling of Words (London, 1923), 300.
2 Ibid.
3 Irene Cooper Willis, editor, Vernon Lee's Letters (Privately printed, 1937), i.
it must be recorded that she lays about impartially, friend or foe. She has a grim pride of her self-centrism. "I am hard and I am cold," she says to her executrix; "I can do without anyone," she assures her most devoted crony. And Max Beerbohm, shrewdly, succinctly, provides another insight into her motivation. "Poor dreadful little lady!" he cooed, "Always having a crow to pick." Insecurity, her father's portion in a matriarchal nest, plays no small part in Miss Lee's unappeasable belligerence.

Her appetite for the quick, cruel profile was a precocious phenomenon. Not yet fourteen, she informs her father that "Yesterday Mrs. Jenkin . . . brought a bird-like, or rather parrot-like personage, with little sense I should think, much vanity and great difficulty of enunciation, in short a vulgar, puffing out bore, with her. This person is her husband."5 Her subject, Captain (and Professor) Fleeming Jenkin, was a cherished companion of William Ernest Henley and Robert Louis Stevenson.

This knack for the prussic line she develops early and uses throughout her career. She characterizes a minor lady novelist as "terribly black and earnest," speaks of another's "stupid book," puts down a third as "grubby and literary," a fourth female as "an acrimonious spinster," a fifth as a "general lion huntress," a sixth "dishevelled and gushing as usual." Men fare no better. One appears a "little insipid monster," and Whistler "a mean, nagging, spiteful, sniggering little black thing, giving no indication of genius." At times Miss Lee is gratuitously vicious. She flees at a young man taking "his fat sister" for a row; dubs George Augustus Sala "Disgustus," and marks him "a red, bloated, bottle-nosed creature." One woman whose hospitality she frequently accepts "looks as unhealthy as her betrothed smells"; another, "a rumpled, scrunched little brown paper woman . . . a sort of King Charles dog of the neighbouring studios."

Miss Lee's talent in this unlovely art comes of age in her twenty-fifth year. After nomadic sojourns in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, she arrives in London in 1881 for the

5 All quotations from Vernon Lee's letters are transcribed from the manuscript files in Colby College Library. Some appear in the fairly inaccessible 50-copy edition of Vernon Lee's Letters (op. cit.) and a few in part in Peter Gunn's Vernon Lee (London, 1964).
first of many protracted visits. She had already published notable essays in the *British Quarterly*, *Cornhill*, the *New Quarterly*, *Fraser’s*, and the *Contemporary Review*. Her third book, *Belcaro*, was going through press. Doubtless, she was drawn to the literary capital to further her writings and to mingle with authors and artists whose work she had come to know. She had not long to wait. To the home of Mary Robinson, where Miss Lee put up, gravitated “an odd medley” comprising Henry James, Browning, Wilde, George Moore, Hardy, Henley, John Sargent, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Richard Garnett, Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, Leslie Stephen, Walter Pater and his sisters, the Humphry Wards, William Rossetts, and William Sharps—interlaced by the inevitable patrons, dilettantes, and social tinsel. Over the years in London, Vernon Lee reports a myriad of luncheons, dinners, teas, tertullas, soirées, garden parties; theatre, salon, and gallery meetings—an incessant round of essentially the same people reassembling in variable combinations. Into this kaleidoscopic swirl Vernon Lee plunges her sharpened pen and extracts a treasury of images and impressions. These take shape in her letters as cameo portraits, brusque and biased, tumid with recriminations and reconciliations.

Caught up in this circuit of egomanes she habitually distorts simple intentions, exaggerates emotional reactions, and becomes incapable of discriminating between professional and personal relations. Illustrative of this kind of myopia is her unconscionable confusing of Andrew Lang’s literary opinions with his wife’s social criteria. On July 25, 1885 Miss Lee tells her mother that Mrs. Lang is “a charming young woman, pretty, prettily dressed, intelligent & thank goodness not at all Wardish or Cliffordian.”6 Two days later having learned of Lang’s adverse criticism of her novel *Miss Brown* in *St. James’s Gazette*, Miss Lee informs Mrs. Lang that she had “intended as arranged, calling on her” but did not, as her husband’s “words about Miss B. made it plain he cd not wish me to visit at his house.” “It is sad,” she adds regretfully to her mother, “as I had taken a great fancy to his nice little wife.” Two more days later, in receipt of a “very nice & frank” note from Mrs. Lang, Miss Lee discovers that she has badly misjudged both the man

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6 The lady novelists Mrs. Humphry Ward and Mrs. Lucy Lane Clifford, both of whom Miss Lee considered mediocre and overrated.
and his wife. "Of course I refused to let him write to the
St. James's about the matter. But I think both their behaviour
has been remarkably nice." She repeatedly misinterprets peo­
ple's purposes, always obtuse toward her own culpability, sel­
dom with this redeeming grace of forgiveness.

The vignettes in Miss Lee's letters traverse the whole range
of her acquaintanceship. This essay, however, restricts itself to
her pronouncements on personalities of some literary note. Adduced first are those about whom she chose to say least. In
Rome, Paul Bourget strikes her as "cordial, thickened, without
charm. Talks prices of books tremendously"; in Florence,
Richard LeGallienne, "a curious person got up with a 15th
century head of hair." Another foreigner, Gabriele D'Annunzio,
asks to see her in the Venice hotel they are both staying at.
"He is rather a blackguard," she asserts before meeting him,
and is not altogether unconvinced afterward. "D'Annunzio is
a little blond chap, looking not more than 22 or 23, rather like
an inferior Boutourline. He is not at all coming on, & has
good manners . . . . His wife has been staying here & they have
3 children. Still I suspect him rather of being — well — a
Neapolitan." Her first response to Richard Garnett, who was
to interest her in astrology and to serve as her literary agent,
occurs in London, 1881: "Imagine a younger & less besotten
Gortschakoff whose arms & legs have been stretched and made
limp with a glove stretcher; blinking, smirking, constantly rub­
ing his hands, which are supposed to be lovely; moreover
extremely dilapidated in garment. He was very obsequiously &
shyly civil." Later she decries his integrity as book reviewer
("maker of determined puffs") and daintily holds her nose
when he approaches "with horoscope & very dirty."

Four men whose surnames coincidentally begin with H re­
ceive the back of her ready hand. She depicts Thomas Henry
Huxley at the center of an attentive group, "a little apish
creature, grimacing with a huge mouth, talking atheism sixteen
to a dozen, & regretting that modern science could not revive
the belief in hell in order to make people attend his lectures."

7 Count Peter Boutourline, a young Russian friend of Miss Lee whose aid
she acknowledged in composing The Countess of Albany, and to whom she
dedicated "Oke of Okehurst; or, The Phantom Lover."
8 Prince and Princess Gortschakoff were part of the heterogeneous group
of diplomats and litterateurs that frequented Casa Paget in Florence.

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She contends on uneven terms with Ford Madox Hueffer, “an insolent insupportable huge Oberkellner, [who] came & tried to patronize me. I tried to snub him, but who could snub an Oberkellner with any success?” Frank Harris comes off as shabbily in her view as G. B. Shaw does in Harris’: “The Editor of the *Fortnightly*, a strange sort of cad of genius called Harris, has asked for an article by me for the 16th of this month [August 1887]. I confess it seems to me rather too impudent. Of course I say no. I should do so even if there were time & possibility, for I think it’s insolent to trouble people like that.” True to her temper, she does not write for the *Fortnightly* before April of 1890. Last in this class, William Ernest Henley turns out rather a peculiar master of fate — “a curious, wild looking cripple, with a head like an orange turned inside out.” She never scruples to exploit deformity in the service of caricature.

Miss Lee is obliquely resentful and blatantly crude about Thackeray’s daughter Anne Isabella Ritchie, an author in her own right. “Then there were Mr & Mrs Richmond Ritchie — she is Miss Thackeray the novelist, he her godson & twenty years younger, & she is the thin, sentimental, leering, fleshy, idealistic old person who would marry her godson, & who seems quite brimming over at the idea of having babies at an age when she ought to be ashamed of it.” By 1882 Mrs. Ritchie had published a dozen titles, all agreeably noticed in both England and America. It could have been this, rather than Mrs. Ritchie’s unseemly maternal yearnings at forty-five, that piqued Miss Lee. Another kind of resentment issues in her estimate of Justin McCarthy the younger, whom she had recently lampooned as Thaddeus O’Reilly in *Miss Brown*. “Little Justin impressed me painfully,” she writes home. “I don’t know when I have seen so young a man so envious & flétrissant. He ran down simply everyone, from Ruskin to Lady A. Campbell. It was so palpable malignance about the latter that I said I felt sure he had been snubbed by her; I couldn’t resist it. He took it in his clever malignant way, saying, ‘Yes — she offended my family. She refused to marry my great grandfather.’” Reputed a clever malignant wit herself, Miss Lee found it hard to condone competition.

The last of those she mentions but once in the Colby letters is Charles Algernon Swinburne. The rasp is off her tongue in
this instance, yielding to the unalloyed compassion of Swinburne toward the Ranee Brooke of Sarawak's son, "the one with the bad spine, who has had another operation." "Swinburne is very kind to him. He comes three times a week from Putney to read Dickens & Thackeray to the boy, and also quantities of acrostics in verse, of which he is very proud, and which nearly all turn upon his own scrapes and canings at school!"

After designating *A Modern Lover* "a beastly production of that cad George Moore," (June 30, 1883) Miss Lee elaborates on his congenital wickedness (July 23, 1885) and the well-meant equivocation of her friend Mary Robinson:

Tuesday I met at the Robinsons that young Irishman George Moore with the orange lock, who has written a very successful (5 editions) realistic novel of the Zola sort. It appears that this cad, furious with Mudie's having refused on grounds of impropriety, to take any of his novel, had made a pamphlet containing the worst passages of his novel and an anthology of the most improper passages of all the novels Mudie has ever taken. You can imagine that such a speculation would be a good one! Into this charming collection he put various fragments of *Miss Brown*. The thing was in type & he requested Mary to revise the *Miss B.* parts. She immediately insisted on his withdrawing all quotations from *Miss B.* which he did quite amiably. Then she kept it dark from me. I don't think her proceeding was quite fair. It was unjust to the other unfortunates gathered into G. Moore's dirty collection who had no Mary to help them, and it put me in a disagreeable sort of position towards G. Moore; as owing to his obligingness towards me personally, I can't treat him as the cad he is.

Another controversial Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, manages to surmount her irrepressible distaste and, indeed, rise to admiration. In 1893 she first meets this "young socialist who despite (I think) his socialism, is one of the most really brilliant writers & thinkers we have, paradoxical wrongheaded & perhaps a little caddish, but original. He has written a little book on Ibsen, round whom a little group of young thinkers are doing some very subversive but very useful thinking, getting rid of much cant, pharisaisism & false morality which has remained from more theological times: thinkers decidedly exaggerated, but in a necessary direction." Hearing him lecture a year thence, she concludes he is "very personal & caddish, but delightfully suggestive." In his review of her *Satan the Waster* (1920) Shaw plays the real gallant, flourishing such superlatives as "[I] salute her as the noblest Briton of them all," and
"the sooner we put Vernon Lee into the position occupied three hundred years ago by Queen Elizabeth the better." The rough draft of her letter in return opens: "It would take a truly Elizabethan (since you mention Elizabeth!) splendour & spread of skirts to drop you, even in metaphor, the curtsey as should answer the hyperbolic magnificence of your greeting in the Nation." Farther down she admits delight in his "cordiality toward a co-religionary (or co-infidel)."

In March 1904, H. G. Wells thanked Miss Lee by mail for her compliments on his writings. "Do you ever come to England by way of Folkestone? We live not one mile from the pier & we shall be very glad if you will give us a chance of intercepting with supper & a bed as you go or come." The warmth of this invitation induced her to stop by, and they nourished over the next decade a most congenial relationship which terminated in a sharp public quarrel over World War I. In the interim she sent Wells her treasured portrait done by John Singer Sargent and dedicated Gospels of Anarchy (1908) to him; Wells on his part addressed her as "Dear Sister in Utopia." Following her first visit to Sandgate, she sent this sketch to Clementine Anstruther-Thomson:

He & his little wife are really delightful, living with two babies in a very plain pretty house on the cliff (so very empty & dainty it seemed after French things!). He is in appearance, & a little in voice, (told me he had begun as a draper & shopman) like the plumber; but with excellent real manners, & quite the easiest & most interesting — most easily inflamed — conversation I have ever met in an Englishman. So that coming from France one seemed, in a way, not to have left it. We talked the whole time in his Anticipations line — economics, social arrangements, psychology etc. everything thank goodness! (for I am a little sick of my shop) except art. I believe the very word was never mentioned, was'nt it odd! The man is wonderfully impersonal, modest, yet with a bluff strenuousness. I am most delighted to have been.

In an access of rueful whimsy she invokes Wells's penchant for scrambling realities, in the vein of The Invisible Man and The Time Machine. Suffering from what may have been gout, and barely able to walk, she pictures herself "obliged to go

about in slippers — not my own even, but exact copies of some
Mr Wells lent me at Folkestone, & which, naturally, made me
expect to become invisible or imponderable, or to step, as soon
as I had slipped them on, into the dim past or dimmer future.”

Another who snared Miss Lee’s overall approval is Robert
Louis Stevenson. Despite the advantage of a close mutual
friend, Fleeming Jenkin, it would appear that she and Steven­
son never met. She expresses prime regard for him (which she
corroborates in print in The Handling of Words, 1923 — “A
humane, many-sided, well-compacted, singularly active, willing
and un-egoistic personality”) in a spirited answer to a bland
statement by Miss Anstruther-Thomson:

It was’nt Stevenson’s “serenity & good spirits through misfortunes,”
as you say, that made him charming. That may be the result of lack of
fibre . . . . What makes Stevenson such excellent company is the prefer­
ences of his nature. (I am getting to believe this is the chief mark of
caste in human beings.) It is where his heart is, what his treasure is.
Living with him one feels a possibility of life infinitely more free, high,
sunny, no cinders or kitchen refuse anywhere. Poor, with that immense
family, & yet see how he treats the commercial questions with his pub­
lishers! He, yet repining mainly at being deprived of the happiness —
the cheap happiness — of air & walks & looking about. I feel I could
write chapters about him. He beggars our beastly civilization, & makes
those who live for its objects mere navvies necessary perhaps to keep
the high road open for a better posterity. A charming fellow! Why
Kit, the man was a sort of saint & paladin mixed — remember his
scheme about taking that boycotted farm — and there are the two
letters, one to his wife, one to Colvin, about Molokai, which, while they
are superb literature, are quite viperish as personality.

These tributes she renders after his death. A year before that
occasion she advises her mother that “There are some rather
wonderful South Sea stories” in his Island Nights Entertain­
ments. Only when a critic compares her fantastic tale A Phan­
tom Lover (1886) with Stevenson’s “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”
does she bristle, and then momentarily. “Personally I consider
mine very much better, but that is perhaps because I have no
sympathy with the prosaic, unpicturesque kind of supernatural.”

In Miss Brown Vernon Lee derides the tenets of the Pre­
Raphaelite Brotherhood and pillories several of its members,
whom she transparently disguises. In her letters she consistently
scores them and a number of their satellites. William Morris, so
intent upon his manual projects that he virtually fails to notice
her, comes out "A thickset shockhaired, bearded man, powerful, common rather like a railway porter or bargee." On first meeting the blind poet Philip Bourke Marston she finds him "very quiet, small, pale; with a scrappy beard, sickly looking." After he calls on her, she grumbles, "He distinctly bores me, is dull & morbid & weakheaded." In summation, "a wretched critic & creature, tho' a fine poet."

The Rossetti clan she damns in general as "poeticules." At the William Rossettis in particular she lets fly sharper barbs, deflected occasionally by almost comic ambivalence. Upon being introduced to William she classifies him as "the type of the stodgy reviewer," noting in afterthought that "Quite the nicest person is Mrs Wm. Rossetti; I like her extremely." At tea, some three weeks later, he appeals to her as "pompous, shy & dull"; and a year thereafter, having been there to dine, she exclaims: "Oh what a grimy, dingy, filthy aesthetic house! I shuddered to sit down in my white frock. They were very friendly." In the summer of 1887 she convulses over the antics of The Fleshy School:

I never was at anything quite so funny as that party of the Rossettis. The room was crammed with chairs so that you could'nt stir, and for an hour & a half a string of songs & choruses to words of Shelley's was performed without one half minute's interruption — about 20 I should think, & one more boring than the other. And the extraordinary frowsty ghosts of the great aesthetic movement that constituted the audience! You shd have seen!

Her travesty on the Pre-Raphaelites in Miss Brown had the immediate effect of estranging those who recognized themselves in it. Their choler soon wore off and, in truly human fashion, they came to enjoy the slight sensation that attached to them. In September 1885 Miss Lee declares "that excepting the Rossettis everyone has got over Miss Brown." As in the altercation with the Andrew Langs, much of the presumed hostility may have been the product of Miss Lee's overactive sensitivity. She speaks of "the relenting Mrs Rossetti, who, despite Miss Brown, had asked me to tea" in 1886; William invites her to call in 1888 before she goes abroad; yet in 1893 she writes that she is "glad of a rapprochement" and will call on Mrs. Rossetti.

William Sharp ("Fiona MacLeod") may well have excited Vernon Lee's disfavor because of his epistolary courage — "He
is much more timid & desirous of patronage in the flesh than per letter.” Early in their acquaintance with Miss Lee, his wife Elizabeth Amelia wrote her: “I quite agree with you that friends and silence of opinions are not compatible.” It was one thing for Miss Lee to enunciate such a credo; it was another for her to live by it. William, taking her at her full word, roasted Miss Brown to a turn and said of her essay “Art and Life” — “you have a very strong tendency to dogmatise upon every subject that turns up whether you are intimately acquainted with it or only partially so. I know you will not take this unpleasantly.” He should have known better than to expect veracity, gratitude, or admiration for his stand. At first brush she portrays him to her mother as “a great tall smirk blond shopmanny young man,” expanding this within the week to “Young Sharp, with his pink fleshy, or rather meaty face & his prominent eyes, his whole linen draper’s sleekness & prettiness, is quite repulsive to me . . . . He looks the incarnation of underbredness to me. I quite understand his poems now. In conversation very dull.” She bandies a widespread complaint about his “gossiping & mischief making” and imputes it to his “want of sense,” but the theme of his lack of breeding engrosses her. At a grand tertulla given by the Sharps she sniffs at the “very common, dull people; & an ugly, shabby little house.” Returning home one day she finds him at her door. “He is better bred than last year, but always the same patronising shy creature.” And at the house-warming party of Augusta Webster: “Sharp was bitter, spiteful & rather snobbish about Thaddeus Jones. Saying that Jones ‘isn’t a gentleman & had no manners’ while he, Sharp, has the misfortune of being born a gentleman etc. A misfortune the consequence of which I think, are now no longer to be dreaded.” His biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti prompts a malefic thrust: “It is impossible to tell whether Sharp’s book has succeeded: if it has, it is a very quiet success.” She relents only when he is recovering from a serious illness. “He has greatly improved in looks, partly owing to comparative thinness, and partly owing to wearing his beard.”

In Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton — solicitor turned literary critic, great friend of Swinburne and the Rossettis— Vernon Lee meets one who can hold his own at her game. She recognizes and, with rare objectivity, denounces his modus
"Theodore Watts goes telling every one in private that he or she has some quality or qualities more or less immortal; then when he has written a review more or less reducing them to nothing, he turns round & explains that one criticism was private, the other professional." His reputation and condescension grates against her vanity — "the great & dreaded Theodore Watts. Everyone seemed much awed by him . . . [and] much honored by his notice . . . . To me he was extremely civil & banal" but only because he mistook her for "a sort of demi-semi fashionable sculptor." In person, she sees him "a little figure, black coat, pearl grey trousers, white gaiters & white hat, & fierce moustaches — a matador out for a Sunday"; "a little scrubby, eyeglassy, caddish imitation of Giminez." The graph of Miss Lee's association with Watts-Dunton is perhaps her most jagged. One summer "Watts is very friendly"; the next, he "virtually cut me"; the following, he "wrote me a delightful letter"; the fourth, coming after Miss Brown:

Theo Watts was to dinner. I asked Mrs Campbell whether he knew I was invited, and it appears he did fully, having chosen that day rather than another. Still he seemed to be very distant. It is true he has grown very deaf & was decidedly dull. But I think the little man wished to be frigid. When one is so small, & such a comic failure at being a mustachio'd Giminez, it isn't so easy to be frigid.

A year later he is "very friendly" and "seems quite reconciled." Her last reference to him (1892) indicates that the truce must have held — she has accepted his invitation to lunch. Their longest conversation concerns his diagnosis of the flaws in her half-brother's blank verse, too ancillary to repeat here. She judges the remarks repetitive and evasive, and is struck by the "great appearance of pedantry & dulness about him . . . . He impressed me as mediocre & selfsufficient, & a painful, slow, caddish professional caricature of Giminez." Vale, Watts-Dunton!

Walter Pater, whose theories of art run parallel to those of the Pre-Raphaelites, and whose career — esthete to moralist — matches that of Vernon Lee, comes as near to arousing genuine affection in her as did any man (Browning was already Olym-

10 "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" in Vernon Lee's For Maurice is "Dedicated in remembrance of the Spanish legends he was wont to tell me, to my friend of forty years back, Jose Fernandez Gimenez." a Spanish diplomat.
11 Vernon Lee's Letters, 125 (July 9, 1883).
Miss Lee becomes known to Pater and his two ubiquitous sisters ("rather gushing old maids") during her first season in London. Initially she is blunt but affirmative. "He is a heavy, shy, dull looking blond moustached creature over forty, much like Velasquez' Philip IV, lymphatic, dull, humourless. I sat next to him at supper & then he sat by me all the evening. Of all the people I have met in England he is the one who has been most civil to me. He spoke highly of my book, & of the Artistic Dualism paper." After "a really beautiful dinner, served with beautiful porcelain & glass" at the Paters, she amplifies:

He is very plain & heavy & dull, but agreeable; the sisters are younger than he & very pleasant. What strikes me is how wholly unlike Pater is to the Mr Rose of Mallock; so much so that, in some of Mr Rose's sentiments & speeches, I could almost imagine him meant for Symonds rather than for Pater. They have a very pretty house, with a great many pretty things in it, aesthetic but by no means affected & cheap, like for instance the Gosses . . . . He seems never to get separated from his sisters.

Miss Lee is invited frequently to stay at Casa Pater in Oxford on her way to or from Wales. On the first occasion she finds them all "extremely hospitable & kind."

I have a sweet little room at the top of the house, with Arundels of Luini & Francias. This is one of the prettiest houses I have ever seen; and it is such an odd feeling to come from our Sussex cottage with its peasant furniture & bible genealogical trees & prints of people of the year '20 offering each other five scrappy flowers as a "Friendships' Offering" to this dainty & dapper little house, with a sort of dinner-party dinner.

Mr Pater in dress coat & silk stockings & his sister in aesthetic garb.

She could not, by her nature, resist small mordancies even at the expense of people she liked best. She caws at the guests


13 In The New Republic: or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House (1877), William Hurrell Mallock presents satirical portraits of Ruskin, Arnold, Huxley, Jowett, and others. Mr. Rose, an esthete, was generally accepted as a reflection of Pater. Of Mallock himself Miss Lee had this to say: "a fat, squat, heavy jowled black chap, l'air très sournois, never a smile and a heavy, selfcentred manner of I don't want to please anyone. I certainly didn't want him to please me, nor me to please him, and the result answered my wishes. He cares only for people in the peerage, for the rest, & I should think disliked me as much by anticipation as I did him . . . . I never saw a more sunless nature."
attending a Pater tea, “24 women & no man! Except Pater”; sights him inescapably “cum ambobus sororibus”; and smirks over “the simplicity with which the dear Paters take this fashionable Bohemian element.” Nevertheless, she applies to them in almost every letter the descriptives “friendly” and “kind.” Sentimental fondness for the man seeps through, despite her unrelenting realism. “Pater is really very nice in his heavy way . . . and quite delightfully modest.” “After lunch we sat for a long time in Mr P’s study, & he gave me a copy of the new edition of his book & the photo I enclose. It is old, and he is much balder, fatter & uglier, about 40 or so. A very simple amiable man, avowedly (almost) afraid of almost everything.” “Each afternoon I have had a long private audience in his study, on account of his lameness, & he has read me part of his philosophical romance about the time of the Antonines.”14 Fine, but I think lacking in vitality.” “I left the Paters on Friday night after dinner . . . & I was quite sorry to go.” The genteel atmosphere of his home had a quelling effect on her brashness. “I am writing at an attic window at the Paters, more out than in on account of a smuggled cigarette the odour of which alarms me, hence the handwriting,” she explains to her mother. In Miss Lee’s tributary conclusion to Renaissance Fancies and Studies (1895) she acknowledges him “master.”

Another esthete of international repute inspires mixed scorn and sport from her, much in the way of the Pre-Raphaelites. She first encounters “the wonderful Oscar Wilde” in June 1881 and promises to send her mother 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.” Next she is grateful that he is one of “only two creatures [the other, William Rossetti] who seemed to have heard of me as a writer.” In August she bares her lengthiest scrutiny of him:

The principal literary event is Oscar Wilde’s book. Oscar is the Posthlethwaite of Punch,15 you know. He is a curious figure. Clever he must

14 Marius the Epicurean (London, 1885).
15 From February 1880 onward, George DuMaurier ran a series of sketches in Punch ridiculing the esthetic pose. Among the prominent figures he lambasted, Wilde is easily recognizable as Jellaby Posthlethwaite. Miss Lee spells it Posthlethwaite in her letters and in Miss Brown.
certainly be, since he took a double first of the Newdigate, & he has been petted by Ruskin & even by many others; yet he has become the perfect caricature, the perfect jester of culture, a sort of byeword. Now his book has come out (he is about 26) and he has had all manner of praise from Browning etc. & his poems, which are very expensive & very indecent, have run, in a fortnight, into a second edition. Several of the reviews have made awful fun of him, but the Academy has given him a tremendous puff, saying that if he will only drop his affectations & indecencies, he will be one of our great poets.

Her final allusion to Wilde is the rumor that he “has got into terrible hot water & left England” in the wake of the Marquis of Queensberry’s oppressions.

One writer effectively disarms Vernon Lee by sheerly affording her no target — he is always so “cordial & pleasant,” so helplessly mute and bashful. At first sight Leslie Stephen appears “a tall sort of solemn, scraggy, lantern jawed Rubens type, who looked hideously shy & sat in complete silence for half an hour. On my taking my departure he shambled forward & stammered inaudibly that he was sorry he had had no opportunity of speaking to me!” This impression intensifies when she goes to his home. He “shook hands but seemed incapable of articulating a word; indeed throughout the evening, although there were only seven of us, he never addressed any remark to me, looking most miserably shy.” On a return visit “He of course didn’t say a word.” Beyond this she keeps repeating what agreeable and friendly people he and Mrs. Stephen are.

Alfred Austin, Edmund Gosse, and Mrs. Humphry Ward may be grouped together as persons of minor but powerful status with whom Miss Lee publicly consorts but privately contemns. The future poet laureate looms as “rather a self conceited little man, who spouts a sort of utilitarian toryism & says that a poet should be a man in the first instance, a gentleman in the second & then only a poet. He seems to have succeeded in being the 2nd thing, but not much 1st & 3d. He goes in for great manliness, necessity of horse exercise, warrior aristocracy etc & speaks in a big voice to the peasants whom he meets.” Four days later she regrets having to leave the Austins’ home: “She is a particularly nice woman . . . & he is an amiable little man. Of course they are blue tories . . . but as he was born a Catholic & they make no secret of their disbelief, they never go to church, altho’ they know everyone all about. I am struck by
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the great difference between their whole manner & that of ordinary literary folk." Before long, however, Vernon Lee is seeking an opportunity to humble "that horrid little Austin," and is running down his critical acumen as regards William Watson: "Austin knows him & (wh: doesn’t tell in his favour) thinks him a good poet."

The values of Gosse oscillate awkwardly. He is "simple, genial, boyish; quite the only nice man I have met in this literary set," yet he "studiously" avoids her. He is "the only sympathetic reviewer I know," yet he writes "a miserable penny a lining Salon notice" on John Sargent, "taking it upon himself to decide that John (whom everybody talks of as quite the painter) is on the abyss. Then pitching into poor Miss Young’s book." Gosse is "extremely shy toward me" yet "Everyone thinks he has been most unmannerly to me." In the summer of 1886 the tide apparently swings to her direction: "Oh, the Gosses have waxed so civil! They have actually asked me to dinner." She becomes peeved about throwing over "a dinner of reconciliation with the Gosses" in order to go to another party, which is then canceled; is elated because "little Gosse . . . is evidently pursued with a desire to make it up with me”; is overwhelmed by the "quite remarkably pleasant” dinner that ensues. Gosse is visualized "a fattish, friendly, shabby yellow headed young man,” a host “who receives his guests in ginger velveteen & red slippers.” Shades of Pater!

From the outset Mary Augusta Ward, granddaughter of Thomas Arnold, extends advices to Vernon Lee, who takes them in good stead: "She is always very friendly, & I think it well to let her know my projects & what I am looking out for . . . . [She] recommends me to try & get [from Macmillan] a sum down for my next book.” But, on the creative side, Miss Lee considers her mentor a “nice intellectual & moral mediocrity,”16 and visits to her farm and town house “ruinous” and “not worth while.” Notwithstanding, she goes to both continually for a dozen years at least. A report that the Wards have been "going about groaning over my article on Amiel” inclines her (as with the Andrew Langs) “not to call.” This time,

16 On June 16, 1882 she told her mother: “Mrs. Ward was extremely friendly; she struck me as so completely the unfortunate woman of letters who is forced to squeeze into her work more wits than she has in her head.”
however, she decides “to show that social intercourse is not to be disturbed for an article; so I went & Mrs Ward was remarkably polite.” In August 1893 she executes a paired profile out of her long knowledge of the Wards:

I liked being at the Wards so much more than I anticipated. He, who is rather a blundering bumptious snob, was luckily away; and she is really an extremely nice woman, really modest and serious at bottom. It is he, with his absurd swagger, talking as if she were writing the Tables of Stone at the very least, saying “of course Robert Elsmere virtually destroyed Christianity” and so forth, has made her ridiculous. And she, unluckily, has neither keen literary sense to make her perceive her own mediocrity, nor sense of humour — not a shadow of it — to see that the sort of prophetic — hereditary (Arnold) prophetic position — which her husband makes for her is ludicrous. But she does not sell herself; and if she has made more money by her novels than anyone since George Eliot, and now has a beautiful country house and a shooting for her husband, it is not because she has written down to the public, but because, writing her own very serious and excellent, but mediocre views of religion etc, she has happened to meet the wants of the majority.

The next time Miss Lee broaches them to her mother, she is off “on Sat. to the Wards,” obviously in a jocund mood.

The two Tritons among so many minnows in Vernon Lee’s literary life are Robert Browning and Henry James. She accords them, ab initio, enormous respect. Although she delineates them as uninhibitedly as she does all others, she withholds censure when displeased. Browning fails to remember her within less than a year of meeting. Again, he evinces interest in Eugene Lee-Hamilton without seeming to grasp that he is her brother. Either of these oversights would have provoked her rancor against lesser fry. She abides both without prickly comment. Her sense of self-importance threatens to scuttle the relationship before it gets fairly under way. At one of the “great tertullas” in June 1881 she resists being “introduced to Mr Browning, who was there, ménant train de grand génie. I thought it so derogatory to myself to be honoured in the sort of way that Agnes Clarke was, by two minutes platitude. He is a rather common looking old creature.” Shortly, she goes with Mary Robinson to see Browning, at his very pretty house, with trees in front & behind, by the Maida Vale canal. We found him and his sister, a sprightly old spruce spinster, of the name of Sarrianna, in the drawing room; he
digesting his lunch, in considerable deshabille. He is a very fine, grand-headed, amiable, simple old gentleman — quite of another sphere from all the Rossettian poeticules. He seems very fond of Mary, & is generally paternal with everyone. He talked a long time, in a mooning sort of way rather, about banks, & trustees, & the Baths of Lucca, & Mrs Stisted & so forth; he has a great charm of complete unaffected grand-papishness. He is so completely a gentleman, a man, a human being, as distinguished from a writer, which all the minor fry are. He was very anxious to know who was the author of a poem which had been sent to him months before, & which he had only just read. Eugene may recollect the title Dorothy — it is a pastoral in elegiacs, very favourably reviewed in the Academy some time back. Browning seemed quite delighted with it, & said he was going to write to Kegan Paul to find out the author. He had a huge table crammed with books of poetry, sent to him at various times; he said he had so little time to read that sometimes months passed before he looked at them.

In an intimate concourse of the same kind three years later Miss Lee finds it quite as insuperable to equate the man with the poet:

Yesterday Mary & I went to see the Brownings. He was very gracious; & as it poured, we stayed a long while. He showed us his wife's Greek books, so small that she could easily hold them in one hand while lying down; & he showed us what really interested me, the real “Book” of The Ring & the Book. It is made up of the printed pleadings of the lawyers for & against Guido Franceschini, and several MS letters; evidently it was the dossier sent immediately on Guido's death to some protector of his by his lawyer. It seems absurd, but it moved me much more to think that this was the book out of which that great poem had come, than that the man who was showing it me had written that poem; I suppose it was easier to associate Caponsacchi, Pompilia, Guido, with that old vellum bound book than with the very solid old piece of prose who turned over its leaves . . .

By the way, Browning told me he had offered the story of The Ring & the Book to various writers, including Tom Trollope; & it was only after some time that he determined to work it himself.

She speaks of him on a dozen other occasions — calling on him for tea, seeing him at the Academy, sitting at the same dinner table, hearing an interpretation of his poems that clarify for her the difference between his "greatness" and his "talent."

17 Mrs. Henry Stisted, known locally as "The Queen of the Baths," was a stout eccentric who brought her own crimson upholstered armchair when she visited friends.

18 Arthur Joseph Munby (1828-1910), also published Benoni (1852), Verses New and Old (1865), and half a dozen others. Dorothy is a story of Dorset in English hexameters, simple, realistic, and moderately clever.
One remark unveils her salient attitude toward the declining lion, a blend of swagger and filial reverence: “Old Browning treated me like a long lost grandchild.” He was, in reality, far less the doddering old grandsire than Miss Lee was willing to pretend. In the same period she makes this observation of him, he writes: “Dear Vernon-Lee-Violet-Paget treats old R. B. as if he were the Philistine he is not, when she plays at supposing he forgets her existence.”

The name of Henry James decidedly outnumbers that of any other author in the Vernon Lee letters at Colby. In his visits to the Paget ménage during the seventies he is touched by the preternatural brilliance of the girl. After she develops into a received writer (seven books, numerous essays published) and is on the verge of her first novel, he becomes extremely involved, much more in fact than he bargains or has a taste for. He retreats prestissimo from this position but retains her amity with only minimal repercussion.

From the start he is “most devotedly civil,” “even nicer” than most of the drawing-room, afternoon-tea crowd she takes up with on arrival at London. “Kind,” “wise,” “pleasant,” and “nice” are the ascriptions she sprinkles through her comments about him. At parties she talks “half the time with Henry James,” and even with Matthew Arnold present she finds “no one to amuse me” except James. The extent to which he exerts himself in this respect is instructive: “These shawls are quite large, but they are so like gossamer, that Henry James drew them thro’ his ring on Friday without difficulty.” She lunches with him time and again, once when James Russell Lowell “told some excellent ghost stories about Buccaneers in the style of Washington Irving.” He gives her tickets to plays, assays her literary prospects, and introduces her to people abroad, albeit the “sort of Americans, who shudder at Howells, [but] look up to James as a sort of patron saint of cosmopolitan refinement.” In ways sly and pointblank she demonstrates further irreverence, limning his distress as an addicted victim to “pinching boots”; comparing him to Arthur Lemon, whom

19 He was also better aware of her work than she supposed. See his reference to her Euphorion in “Inapprehensiveness,” Asolando (1889).

20 Arthur Lemon (1850-1912), an artist known best for his renditions of Tuscan sunshine and sullen Mediterranean scenes. Miss Lee mentions him in the Preface to Hauntings (1889) and appraises his work in the catalogue of A Memorial Exhibition, Goupil Gallery, February 1913.
she deems "the cleverer & more suggestive of the two"; analyzing James acutely as "very friendly, with that curious mixture of (I should think) absolute social & personal insincerity & extreme intellectual justice & plain-spokenness." Skepticism aside, she defends him indignantly when some "smugs" castigate him as "a vulgar American" without "the manners of a gentleman, etc. etc."

The reef on which their friendship almost ran afoul was Vernon Lee's three-decker novel, Miss Brown. James's supreme tact and her untypical forbearance steered them past this threatening point into clear waters of a tolerable, if less familiar, association. On July 11, 1884 she tells her mother happily that James "takes the most paternal interest in me as a novelist, says that Miss Brown is a very good title, and that he will do all in his power to push it on." On the 30th, "I have Miss Brown here to work at. I am going to dedicate it to kind Mr James, who is most sweet & encouraging." She writes him to the same effect. On the 31st he answers efflorescently: "Be assured, dear Miss Paget, that this proposal touches the most sensitive parts of my being and produces there the most delightful agitation. It will be a great honour for me, as well as a great pleasure, to see my name on the threshold of your beautiful structure; it will never be written in a more distinguished place." Was she justified in expecting as efflorescent a critique on the book itself? She chafed a little when no word came. In the meantime James was not living up to her faith in his plain-spokenness. On September 26 he says flatly to Thomas Sergeant Perry: "She has written a novel ('very radical and atheistic') called Miss Brown," while to the author—nearly three months later—he hedges ignominiously: "Miss B. is all right . . . I have already read the first volume with its too amiable inscription."21 Within six days (December 12) he unbooms himself to Perry:

As I told you, my modest name is on the dedication-page, & my tongue is therefore tied in speaking of it—at least generally. But I may whisper in your ear that as it is her first attempt at a novel, so it is to be hoped that it may be her last. It is very bad, strangely inferior to

21 It in fact contains a parenthesis subject to several contestable interpretations: "To Henry James I dedicate, for good luck, my first attempt at a novel."
her other writing, & (to me at least) painfully disagreeable in tone . . . . It is violently satirical, but the satire is strangely without delicacy or fineness, & the whole thing without form as art. It is in short a rather deplorable mistake — to be repented of. But I am afraid she won’t repent — it’s not her line. Don’t betray this very private opinion of mine. I am sadly put to it to know what to write to her. The whole would never do. 22

Pleading “domestic duties and arrears of work” for not sending her a “screed” on the subject of Miss Brown, James takes time out in January 1885 to curry “a little longer patience” on her part. 23 At long last (May 10, 1885) he delivers his adjudications, not, however, without preliminary ecstasies of self-debasement: “I am on my knees, prostrate, humble, abject, in the dust . . . . I hereby declare to you that the rest of my days shall be devoted to removing from your mind the vile impression my ignoble silence must have produced upon it.” The gist of his deliberations: “It is to me an imperfect but a very interesting book . . . . a promising experiment.” In June he is both open and devious about “my beastly delay in writing to you about Miss Brown. The delay rankles in my own consciousness, if not in yours . . . . It shall never occur again . . . . MB is as interesting as it is brilliant.” More than a full year after the matter was set in motion, Miss Lee is surprised when James appears at her house, stays more than two hours, and asks to see her again later in the week. “I think he is really most conscientiously sorry for not having written about Miss B, and is making violent efforts to repair,” she confides to her mother. On August 1st she dispatches her last word on the misadventure: “As it happened H. James wrote most kindly to ask after Mary & to offer to come again on Tuesday. I must say he has done much more than enough to prove himself repentant about Miss B.” And she exults over receipt of a long telegram inquiring whether he might come that evening. Vernon Lee’s astonishing calm in a situation which would normally raise her hackles can be accounted by her profound deference to his

22 This and the preceding quotation from James to Perry letters are from Virginia Harlow, Thomas Sergeant Perry: A Biography (Durham, N.C., 1950), 318, 319-320.
23 The quotations from James’s letters to Vernon Lee are from the originals in Colby College Library or the published versions in PMLA, LXVIII (September 1953), 680, 683-692.
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ability and position,24 and by his wariness and masterful social diplomacy. He knew he had a “tiger-cat” by the tail and was too prudent to let go.

James’s determination to succeed as a dramatist, in defiance of public and professional condemnation of his first produced play, comes out in a related triad of letters. On September 29, 1891 Miss Lee writes from Chelsea Gardens to Mrs. Paget: “In the middle of our cleaning, up came Henry James. He is going in deliberately for playwriting, as novels don’t pay & he has always felt the ‘scenic’ gift. He has given us stalls for this evening for his play. T’is his old story The American dramatised.” Three days later she says of the performance: “A great deal seems to me unnecessary concession to a vulgar public. But unexpected pathos, passion & interest. Reception by papers unfavourable on the whole.” The English reviewers leveled such criticisms as: melodramatic, obscure, the American too much a caricature, the dialogue not dramatically true. James’s reaction, to Miss Lee, was self-defensive, patronizing to audience and critics, and (from our vantage of hindsight) pathetically optimistic.

Yes, the public is vulgar and vile, yes, a first play is a mere getting one’s foot into the stirrup; yes, one must be in the saddle, in order to go .... Exquisitely difficult is it to write a play even as bad as The American — and exquisitely irresponsible is all criticism of it which doesn’t conceive both the general and the particular character of the task, in the milieu I have had to accept to be heard at all .... But wait — ah, wait! — this is nothing. Wait till I begin to ride!

The saga of Vernon Lee’s “discursive and picturesque improvisations” (Mary Robinson’s phrase) persevered to the end of her life, finding fuller outlet through conversation than letter-writing in the latter decades. As her reputation for vehemence spread, the once-wounded learned to keep a safe distance. Publishers and editors came to regard her an incorrigible bugbear. And, for a fact, excluding such colossi as Swinburne, Browning, and James, no one was totally secure from her noxious pellets. Percy Lubbock’s doleful verdict may be taken as definitive: “It was impossible to control or to civilize Vernon Lee.”

24 She accepts equanimously her standing as novice to domine. “He says his plan through life has been never to lose an opportunity of seeing anything of any kind; he urges me to do the same. He says that chance may enable me to see more of English life, if I keep my wits about me. He is really very kind & wise, I think” (July 5, 1885).