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Vernon Lee's Moment

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<1> Vernon Lee is a prolific, imaginative writer whose moment came neither in the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, in which she wrote her best-known work, nor in the following century although she continued to publish until the 1930s. Will her moment come in the twenty-first century? For now, the answer appears to be yes. The first conference dedicated to Lee's work occurred in June, 2003, at the University of London. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham have recently edited a collection of essays based on papers presented on that occasion. In spring, 2006, they also published a Broadview Press edition of *Hauntings*, Lee's classic collection of fantastic tales. 2003 also saw the publication of Vineta Colby's biography of Lee plus the publication of the first critical study, Christa Zorn's *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. As the first critical monograph, Zorn's is likely to become a standard point of reference for students and scholars of Lee. As such, it is a welcome, even necessary, book. At the same time, the genre in which Zorn casts the work is one that Lee herself rejected from the outset of her career. This discrepancy suggests a question about method: namely, how should one present or re-present the work of a writer whose work critiques the academic genres in which literary work is customarily made available to students?

<2> The publication of the following review-essay (a form favored by Lee) in a collection of pieces in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* focusing on recent publications on the New Woman provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider Lee's project. Zorn assumes that Lee matters most as a New Woman writer. Coming at Lee from a different angle, I am not sure that I agree. This difference in view is based in part in life-experience. I first began reading Lee when I was writing a doctoral dissertation on John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Italian painters of the Renaissance. At the time, I found Lee's fiction to be amazing; but I lacked the critical and theoretical resources necessary to analyze it. These means came available only as a result of the long development of second-wave feminist and post-feminist criticism. Earlier, I could see how the erotics of Ruskin's and Pater's work challenged conventional academic thematics, but the erotics of a text such as Lee's short story, "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," though clearly radical, were beyond my ken. Now, much later, Lee's understanding of relations between desire, culture, and politics has come to be summed for me in a phrase she coined in 1896. Writing against Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (tr. 1895) and in implicit defense of the recently convicted and imprisoned Oscar Wilde, Lee argued the necessity of what she refers to as "the queer comradeship of outlawed thought," a shared sense based in sexual and cultural dissidence. In the past several years, a number of critics have performed analogous parsings of Lee's position: viz., Martha Vicinus, Kathy Psomiades, Dennis Denisoff, Kristin Mahoney, and Catherine Anne Wiley.

<3> Zorn's book asks: "How could Lee establish an alternative female subject position in an

aesthetic discourse that structured difference in binary terms and privileged masculinity?" (22). In the first chapter, she sketches Lee's personal and intellectual development with emphasis on how difficult it was for Lee to emerge as a cultural historian at a time when men dominated the field and amid increasing demands that writers in the field hold university posts. It is unfortunate that the timing of publication did not permit Zorn to read Colby's book before writing this chapter. Colby's study fills in a number of blanks regarding Lee's absorption in women such as Annie Meyer, Mary Robinson, and Kit Anstruther-Thomson. Lee's work, like that of her friend and sometime mentor, Walter Pater, is strongly motivated by a same-sex desire that frequently crosses lines of gender. It would have been very useful had Zorn been able in this biographical section to do more to contextualize Lee's extraordinarily subtle analyses of intimate friendship in a work such as *Althea* (1894) in relation to the affective and erotic ties she shared with other women.

<4> In the second chapter, Zorn demonstrates Lee's early resistance to positivist approaches within cultural history. Lee contends that aesthetic analysis and historical reconstruction always depend upon imaginative invention: i. e., on fiction. In the third chapter, Zorn argues that, among the many genres in which Lee worked, the essay is most significant. Here again, according to Zorn, Lee was on the defensive because of the declining prestige of review-essays and occasional pieces in face of newly entrenched academic specialization. Perhaps the best pages of the book are those at the end of this chapter, where she cites Virginia Woolf, who, in a characteristic piece of early modernist mater-slaying, rates Lee because she is too feminine—that is, because she writes both casually and impressionistically. The most innovative chapter is the fourth, where Zorn argues that Lee's adaptation of Greek male models of pederastic friendship to female same-sex relations is a major move in the recuperation of this tradition within the context of the quickly changing social situation of late-Victorian England. Zorn makes a convincing case for the importance of Lee's philosophic dialogue, *Althea*, as well as for the general significance of the genre in Lee's work.

<5> Zorn next doubles back to *Miss Brown* (1884), which she focuses on as an example of the New Woman Bildungsroman. The placement of the chapter implicitly subordinates the significance of this novel within Lee's oeuvre. Inescapable because of its length and its direct satire of British Aesthetes (including young Wilde), *Miss Brown*, although virtually unreadable as a novel, remains notwithstanding a key work within the history of Aestheticism and the Decadence. In it, Lee provides a contemporary anatomy of Aestheticism such as no one else had the wit, courage or possibly perspective to attempt. In the final chapter, Zorn reads the fantastic tales as Lee's most creative experiments in placing fiction in the service of cultural analysis, including unraveling the sexual hysteria that Lee demonstrates to structure male artistic and academic culture. Given the claims that Zorn makes in chapter two for Lee's re-imagination of the relationship between fact and fancy, one might expect her to argue that the tales therefore represent Lee's most significant achievement. The position of the chapter at the end of the book seems to imply as much as well. Zorn, however, sticks by her insistence on the primacy of the essay even though she singles out no single essay as essential reading.

<6> Zorn's best point about *Miss Brown* is to show how the novel undercuts the practice by Pre-Raphaelite artists of selecting working-class "stunners" as their muses, protégés, and future wives. The female protagonist of the novel, Anne Brown, despite being granted economic independence by her patron, finds that her function as muse thwarts the possibility of achieving mental and emotional independence. As an observation about the personality politics of two generations of Pre-Raphaelite painters, Lee's perception is acute. As a general point made a century later, it is one with which Zorn's readers will already be familiar as a result of the manipulation of female beauty in the fashion industry and Hollywood. As for looking at the novel as an instance of the novel of failed female development, both male and female authors of New Woman fiction (and here one might include the Henry James of *Portrait of a Lady* [1881]) wrote better novels and short stories that make the same point. Zorn also argues that Anne Brown's decision at the end of the novel to relinquish work and freedom in order to marry the unworthy painter-poet, Walter Hamlin, indicates how skeptical Lee was about modern marriage. Such skepticism, however, is endemic in New Woman fiction. It also turns up in Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), where Lord Goring describes marriage as an impossible institution for modern women.

<7> Even at the time of the novel's original publication, readers, both male and female, found it difficult to believe that Brown would choose to make a holocaust of herself in this way. For most readers, this turn in the action prompted incredulity. Recent queer readings of *Miss Brown* are more persuasive in arguing that marriage to Hamlin permits the prudish and sexually unselfknowing Brown to continue, mediated through sex with her husband, her infatuation with Sacha Elaguine, the Russian Lamia who pursues both Hamlin and his female protégé. Lee's obliviousness at one level to the sexual tension between Brown and Sacha is symptomatic of what Patricia Smith has referred to lesbian panic—the phobic response by female writers to female-female desire even in a text by an author who may herself be a Sapphist. The sensational excess of Sacha's presentation in the novel makes Lee's novel not only Aesthetic but Decadent—that is, Lee writes from within the very movements that she critiques. It is her role as an internal participant-observer that lends force to the observations she makes from a feminist subject-position rather than vice-versa.

<8> Zorn does not argue that Lee is a major figure within the history of Aestheticism and the

Decadence and thereby of British Modernism itself nor does Zorn look to important female Aestheticist precursors of Lee such as George Sand and Elizabeth Barrett. If Lee's moment is finally to arrive, I believe that the case needs to be made for her importance as a Victorian modern. This claim eclipses observations that can be made about her status as a New Woman writer. As the latter, Lee is one among many, a number of whom write better fiction and others of whom, such as Mona Caird, are more significant as feminist polemicists. Within Aestheticism and the Decadence, Lee's feminist perspective enabled her to be the best critic we have of male sexual hysteria. Not only an analyst of gender relations and the structure of the male psyche, Lee works powerfully to show how her fascination with boy-girls and her experience as a crossgendered, i. e. as a masculine woman, enable her both to specify new modes of psychological interiority and to show how such modes structure both innovation and cultural history. Lee's uncanny ability to inhabit unanticipated subjectivities and to show how these subjectivities constitute our world is her greatest gift.

<9> *Miss Brown* offers a detailed analysis of the internal dialectics of Aestheticism, including the tension between the emphasis on individual self-development (which includes the cultivation of sensations) and the need to attend to the capacity for self-development of the vast majority of British people who lived far below levels of middle-class leisure and comfort. Although presented in the novel as a conflict between Aesthetic individualism and Liberal Radicalism, this tension, as implied by Pater and made explicit by Ruskin, Morris and Wilde, exists within Aestheticism itself. At its best, the movement entertains both aspirations simultaneously, including awareness of the transformations that would be necessary to make Britain a modern, democratic state. Both male and female Aesthetes criticize male Aestheticist solipsism and commodification from Aestheticist perspectives.

<10> Zorn's academic approach prevents her from tracing this sort of complex dynamics. For instance, the decision to contextualize each chapter with reference to genre-theory does help establish Zorn's professional credentials, a traditional function of the monograph; and these aspects of the book will be useful to students. But the static and discontinuous structure thereby imposed on the book does not permit the tracing of these moving forces within Lee's work. As Zorn points out, from the outset of her career, Lee refused on theoretical grounds to adopt as her own the monograph and other academic genres in her work as a cultural historian. Hence, framing Lee within a monograph in effect marginalizes the most characteristic signature-effects of her writing. For one, there is no place here to discuss the baroque stylizations of Lee's writing that are one of her prime bequests to Sapphist modernism in the writing of Woolf and Djuna Barnes. Lee's stylistic profusion is in service of a polymorphous perversity, likewise modern, unattended to here.

<11> Zorn frequently describes Lee as turning her Aestheticist predecessors into straw men. My sense, though, is that the positions staked out (for example, on the moral character of art or on the contrasting emphasis on artistic autonomy) are ones that Lee inhabits from within Aestheticism in a continually shifting set of perspectives and emphases. One benefit that Lee gains by this approach is an extraordinary intimacy with Aestheticist practice that enables her to transform it, from feminist and Sapphist perspectives, from within. This intimacy means that Lee is the late-Victorian writer most alert to how sexual and gender-awareness continually shift the meaning of concepts and affects. In a biographical register, Lee's reflections on Pater—written either under the fictional mask of Baldwin in her philosophic dialogues, or in the exploration of key Paterian thematics such as the ethics of friendship, show her to have been possibly his most intimate friend as well as the writer best positioned to extend his work in new directions. Such capability likewise shifts the meaning of "Lee" herself as an author, inscribing hers as a crossgendered signature, including in the dialogues *Baldwin* (1886) and *Althea*.

<12> In these remarks, I have suggested that the recapture of Lee's originality will require an attention to gender-crossing, stylistic innovation and to her participation in speculative psychology at the turn of the century. Zorn's Lee stops more or less at 1900; but further explorations in these directions will underscore Lee's unique place as both a Victorian modern and an early twentieth-century modernist. In the meantime, Zorn's book remains a paradoxical gift: important in the academic recuperation of Lee but at the price of a consequent betrayal. Zorn surely does not intend to mimic that other Vernon Lee, whom I have not discussed here, who occasionally indulges in minor betrayals of the writers whom she loves by way of schematic reductions. A more inward approach, one might even say a more invaginated one, to Lee as Aesthete and Decadent would do her greater justice and more powerfully show her essential feminist contribution to cosmopolitan culture on the cusp of a century (and more) that has shown

feminist contribution to cosmopolitan culture on the cusp of a century (and more) that has shown far too little.

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