



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
Paderborn University, Germany

Pacifism in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

Therese Boos Dykeman

In letters, essays, and books, Vernon Lee built an argument for pacifism awakened for her by the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and the Boer War. In her theory, the two issues, psychology of empathy and pacifism, come together. They both involve concepts of exteriority, i.e., borders and boundaries—between selves, communities, and nations. Observing from the almost modern or global perspective of a European, Lee argued in her letters to Irene Forbes-Mosse, that the patriotism of the “rigid One-ness” of individual nations was problematic for peace. She critiqued militarism as engaged with “spiritual” resistance to peace and relationality, resulting in turning people at the borders against each other. Pacifist resistance meant beginning with reflection on self and other, initiating empathy, or that movement between the “I” and the “Not-I”. Encased in “concentric circles of interests and possessions,” the “sensitive periphery” of the intrinsic self, is “not stable but undergoing ceaseless integration and disintegration...,” and so communities never have total stability. Lee’s pacifism is based on this concept of history being “neither static nor absolute.”

Lee’s arguments *against* war and violence and *for* beauty that functions in favor of peace and European unity were presented especially in the allegorical satire, *Ballet of the Nations* followed by *Satan the Waster*. At the borders of ugly or alienation, rather than “war” comes an opportunity to become aware, reconsider. War is an effect of projecting one’s own fear onto other nations. The prevention of war necessitates that nations examine “their hidden drives and motives.” Only in peace can necessary reforms take place, such as “abolition of slavery, reform of parliament, free trade, freedom to go on strike, abolition of children’s work in factories, abolition of religious discrimination.” Only in peace is creation and appreciation of art possible; without peace, nothing can flourish.

Primary Sources:

Lee, Vernon 1909. *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life*. London and New York: John

Lane.

_____ 1912. *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*. London: John Lane.

_____ 1913. *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ 1915. *Peace with Honour: Controversial Notes on the Settlement*. London: Union of Democratic Control.

_____ 1915. *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*. NY: Putnam.

_____ 1915. The Wish for Unanimity and the Willingness for War, France-Italy, 1911-13, in *The Cambridge Magazine* IV (12 June): 482-484.

_____ 1915. *Peace with Honour: Controversial Notes on the Settlement*, London.

_____ 1920. *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction*. London: John Lane.

Secondary Sources:

Baldacchino, Rachel 2017. Being in Borders; Vernon Lee, Empathy and Pacifist Resistance, in *Les femmes et la pensée politique: Vernon Lee et les cercles radicaux/Women and Political Theory: Vernon Lee and Radical Circles*. Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 44-55.

Brockington, Grace 2006. Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in The Ballet of the Nations, in Maxwell, Catherine & Pulham, Patricia (eds.): *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. Basington, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 143-159.

Gagel, Amanda & Geoffroy, Sophie (eds.) 2018. *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee*. Vol. 3. NY: Routledge.

Geoffroy, Sophie 2017. Vernon Lee, Paul Desjardins, Daniel Halévy and Romain Rolland, in *Les femmes et la pensée politique: Vernon Lee et les cercles radicaux/Women and Political Theory: Vernon Lee and Radical Circles*. Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 113-131.

Sieberg, Herward & Zorn, Christa (eds.) 2014. *The Anglo-German Correspondence of Vernon Lee and Irene Forbes-Mosse During World War I: Women Writers' Friendship Transcending Enemy Lines*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

Zorn, Christa 2017. The Unique Correspondence of Vernon Lee and Irene Forbes-Mosse in World War 1: Women's Friendship Transcending Enemy Lines, in *Les femmes et la pensée politique: Vernon Lee et les cercles radicaux/Women and Political Theory*:

Vernon Lee and Radical Circles. Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 91-112.

Keywords:

borders, empathy, nation, pacifism, peace, psychology, reforms, relationality, war, Irene Forbes-Mosse