



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

## *Art, Social Significance of* in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

Therese Boos Dykeman

Economics, empathy, and social and ethical responsibility issues “permeate Vernon Lee’s aesthetic views” as they evolved in her forty books, articles, and letters. Lee envisioned her philosophy of art with an eye to all that surrounds, i.e. the conditions necessary for art and the reception by the audience. While a community of selves fosters creating and appreciating art, the most important activity involves the way individual selves, making ideological and ethical choices, live their lives. In *Miss Brown* Lee proved “moral habit” to be a “sturdy keeper of cultural and social values,” and with psychological insight she noted the important role of personality in human choice. In casting a wider gaze, Lee considered time and place in social conditions insofar as they allowed for good living. Lee developed a more inclusive aesthetics after attending socialist and labor union meetings. Lee’s theories of aesthetics were also influenced by her interest in Italy’s socialist movements, especially their notions of equal dignity of social classes and universal suffrage, and in Italy’s “current visible and tangible misery” about which she wrote in her letters to Gaetano Salvemini, “there is not a living soul who actually cares.” Aesthetics, she concluded, has a role in teaching and healing. But patriarchy is the problem with the “mal-distribution of wealth” and so the healthiness of social conditions. A member of the Union of Democratic Control, Lee agreed with its repudiation of alliances, reduction of armaments, and hopes for a just peace. The ideals she voiced were of a democratic, non-nationalistic Europe, borders drawn by native peoples, and an intellectual elite governing. Aesthetics, a democratic affair for Lee, flourishes best in a world conceived of globally, composed of socially responsible individuals. Aesthetics, necessarily a social affair, is influenced by individual and community and in turn influences their moral value.

### **Primary Sources:**

Lee, Vernon 1884. *Miss Brown: A Novel*. 3 Vols. Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood and

Sons.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1887. *Juvenilia: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*. 2 vols. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

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

### **Secondary Sources:**

Deisoff, Dennis 2006. Vernon Lee, Decadent Contamination and the Productivist Ethos, in Maxwell, Catherine & Pulham, Patricia (eds.): *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. Basington, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 75–90.

Terrier, Marie 2017. The Friendship of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) with Isabella Ford and Clementina Black: A Journey into the Radical, Socialist and Labour Movements of the 1880's, 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, 30–43.

Vincieri, Stefano 2017. Vernon Lee and Gaetano Salvemini, 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, 22–39.

Zorn, Christa 2003. *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. Athens. Ohio University Press.

### **Keywords:**

art, borders, economics, ethical, labor, moral, nationalistic, patriarchy, social, socialist