

GHOSTS, AESTHETICISM, AND “VERNON LEE”

By Angela Leighton

“TO RAISE A REAL SPECTRE of the antique is a craving of our own century” (104) writes “Vernon Lee” in her early collection of essays on aesthetics, *Belcaro*. The nineteenth century is indeed, as Julia Briggs has pointed out, an age which craves ghost stories of all kinds. Sceptical of the supernatural yet nostalgic for it (Briggs 19), the age turns to ghost stories to assuage its lost faith. Ghosts, if nothing else, might still glimmer in the empty spaces of a universe vacated by the gods but not yet filled with the space journeys of science and science fiction. Their questionable shapes thus continue to shape the questions of an age seeking reassurance, even if that reassurance comes in a spasm of terror. And terror, however subtly or ingeniously aroused, whether by the self-induced fantasies of James’s governess or the calculated self-hauntings of Stevenson’s Jekyll, remains the primary motivation and aim of the ghost story. Fear of the unknown, whether within or without, provides the last bastion of a supernaturalism under threat from the encroaching “materialism” (Briggs 24) of the modern world. The ghost story not only indulges the unstable, if sometimes deeply conventional order of fantasy at the expense of “naturalistic art” (Cavaliero 7); it also indulges the wish to believe in another, more fearful world, beyond the material order of things. The specter focuses this trouble of belief. It is there and not there. It outlines emptiness but also fills it up, embodying and disembodying its own reality at the same time.

Vernon Lee is interesting, however, in appearing to deviate from this tradition. She published two collections of stories, many of them ghostly, in the 1880s and 90s. *Hauntings* (1889) and *Vanitas* (1892) contain tales which replace the prevailing Gothic mode of danger and terror with something else. “To raise a real spectre of the antique” hints at the difference. Specters, by their very nature, are figures for what is dead and gone, but a “spectre of the antique” has an impersonal, historical specificity normally lacking in the run of Victorian family spooks. The idea of “the antique” not only sets up the possibility of a “real spectre,” ironically casting the others into the shade, but also of a “craving” for specters which considerably alters their aspect. Hers are the ghosts of a historicism largely untroubled by supernatural design. They figure, not the terror of the unknown, but the seductive, fascinating difference of the past. They are located *in* history, not, extraterrestrially, out of it.

The ghost story thus becomes for Vernon Lee an expression, not of otherworldly supernaturalism but of this-worldly aestheticism. Traditionally, the immaterial nature of the ghost, spun out of old yarns of the spirit, lost holy souls, guilty revenants, puts it beyond the body, in the region of intangible ephemera. But Victorian aestheticism is essentially a materialistic creed. As Pater writes in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885): “It was to the sentiment of the body, and the affections it defined — the flesh, of whose force and colour that wandering Platonic soul was but so frail a residue or abstract — he must cling . . . [It] had made him a materialist” (1: 125). The past, for Pater, is an embodied concept; his revenants, Apollo in Picardy or Denys L’Auxerrois, are reincarnations, not apparitions, and the uncanny, that very Victorian void at the heart of things, is largely replaced by “relics”¹ — a characteristically Paterian word which keeps the past still palpable. It is the body which returns, even if in bits and pieces, rather than some threadbare spook. That “sentiment of the body,” no longer spirited into otherworldliness but fleshed with sense, pervades both French and English aestheticism. The physics rather than the metaphysics of being attract the aesthete. “A thing of beauty” may be alive or dead, human or artificial, but either way it is a thing, and thus keeps desire in touch with objects.

Vernon Lee, who was Pater’s most original disciple and commentator, though her work has been neglected for much of the twentieth century,² uses the ghost story to express all the seduction and ambiguity of aestheticism itself. Whether the ghost is “Dionea,” a reincarnated Venus whose physical beauty destroys the sculptor who desires to reproduce her, or “Medea,” a Renaissance beauty in a portrait who becomes real enough to the imagination of her nineteenth-century admirer to bring about his death, or the phantom Elizabethan lover of “Oke of Okehurst” who returns from the past to kill the woman who has become infatuated with the memory of him, the point is, not terror of disembodiment but desire for the flesh. The ghost affords a pretext for cravings which, if illicit and decadent, are also ironic and witty. Henry James, on receiving a copy of *Hauntings* soon after its publication, praised “the bold, aggressive, speculative fancy” (*Letters* 3: 276) of it, as if recognising that its ideas drove well beyond the usual requirements of the popular market.³ A “real spectre,” for Vernon Lee, is a substantially physical speculation.

One reason for this difference no doubt stems from her declared atheism (Gunn 16) which was lifelong and undeterred. She roundly castigated her old friend Maurice Baring in 1926 for his “‘Catholic other worldliness,’” adding: “I abominate such making light of life and its . . . well! *uniqueness*” (qtd. in Smyth 331). She herself was pleased to be dubbed “only a poor materialist” (*Maurice* xvii) by a French cousin, and in an article published in the *Contemporary Review*, called “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” assesses the ethical responsibilities of being, as one of the three speakers declares, “emancipated, free, superior . . . a thorough materialist” (700). Such materialism has no time for ghosts except, precisely, as objects of unbelief. This is the point Lee makes in *Belcaro*, when she writes that “the ghostly” is “a form of the supernatural in which . . . we disbelieve” (93). Her own fictional ghosts have no designs on their readers’ or victims’ beliefs; rather, it is the readers and viewers who have designs on the ghosts. Objects of desire rather than fear, they are figures for a beauty as palpable as it is imaginary, as pleasurable as it may be unreal. By dispensing with the conventions of fear, Vernon Lee clears the way for a story which enjoys the aesthetic possibilities of ghosts, and thus, also, the unaccountable, ghostly nature of beauty itself.

Nineteenth-century aestheticism has, of course, been dismissed for much of the twentieth century as an untenable elitism, complicit with the commodity culture it claims to despise. The extent to which the idea of the aesthetic reproduces the bad faith of the commodity, its confusion of idealistic and market values, has been stressed, most influentially, by Terry Eagleton in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. The commodity, he glosses, is “a kind of grisly caricature of the authentic artefact, at once reified to a grossly particular object and virulently anti-material in form, densely corporeal and elusively spectral at the same time” (208). Adorno’s assertion that “works of art are absolute commodities; they are social products which have discarded the illusion of being-for-society” (336) underlies most subsequent critiques of Victorian aestheticism.⁴ Art for art’s sake is, it is argued, a desperate idealism, unfailingly tagged by social use, value, marketability. The more Wilde insists on the beautiful uselessness of art, the more audible do its price-tags become. His “super-chic aestheticism” (23), as Adorno puts it, exemplified by the bric-à-brac style of *Dorian Gray*, is an ostentatious shop of words forever advertising its expensiveness.

The idea of the commodity thus short-cuts from the precious, “spectral” rarefactions of aestheticism to its “densely corporeal” investments. As a result, much recent criticism simply cuts out the trouble of a passage between them. Yet it is that passage, that space between immaterial abstraction and the facts of material power, which gives Victorian aestheticism its witty playfulness, its ironic self-awareness. To ignore that forcefield of difference in the search for an explanatory cultural politics of art, is to reduce Victorian double standards to twentieth-century single standards. To decode art into socio-political power, pleasure into ideological complicity, is to lose the thrill of tension between them. Not only does criticism thus risk becoming a predictable policer of meaning, a correcter of art’s incorrectnesses; it also misses, as Jonathan Freedman points out, the ways in which “aestheticism served to put its own professionalization and commodification in perpetual — and perpetually irresolute — play” (xxii). Eagleton’s preempting title, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, is opened up again by George Levine’s *Aesthetics and Ideology*, which audibly puts back the space between the two terms. It is that space, of connections but also of disconnections, which Victorian aestheticism crucially and self-consciously opens up. Thus Vernon Lee, arguing against what she saw as Ruskin’s moral law-giving, his “wondrous legal summing-up for the beatification of art” (*Belcaro* 212), hazards the Paterian proposition that “Beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad . . . it has no other value than its being beautiful” (210). The space between beauty and morality, aesthetics and ideology, remains, in her work, however contested and troubled, an open one — a space of “and” rather than “of.”

Much of Vernon Lee’s own writing about art concerns that most purely aesthetic art form: music. At the age of twenty-four she published a weighty work entitled *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), most of which is devoted to the forgotten world of eighteenth-century opera. She recalls, in the Preface to the second edition (1907), how she spent months copying out forgotten airs in the dusty attic of the Bologna music school. There, a “passion for actually seeing and touching the things of that time” (*Studies* xxi) turned into an obsessive love affair with the music of the past: “my many love passages with various composers, my infidelities and remorseful returns” (xxiv). Just as Pater cannot resist turning the scholar-connoisseur Winckelmann into a toucher-up of statues — “he fingers those pagan marbles with unsinged hands” (*Renaissance* 222) — so Vernon Lee punningly imagines “passages” and “returns” of an amorous as well as musical nature.

The touch of old manuscripts not only rouses her craving for the past, but also then releases its ghostly presences. Without the “life-blood of attention,” she explains, those lost “spectres . . . can never speak to posterity nor lay their hands on its soul” (*Studies* xiv). The handling, then, goes both ways, as the immaterial ghosts become blooded with desire for the soul of posterity. Nearly fifty years later, recalling one of those old singers, she reminded Maurice Baring, her fellow haunter of attics, “what would we not have given if some supernatural mechanism had allowed us to catch the faintest vibrations of that voice!” (*Maurice* xxix).

That “supernatural mechanism” became the ghost story. Imagined as a kind of stenograph, a machine to catch voices, the ghost story provides the only means, mechanical and unbelievable, with which to manage the supernatural. Vernon Lee wrote at least four variations of the same story, the first in about 1874, when she was still researching her book (*Maurice* xxxii); a second, “A Culture Ghost: or, Winthrop’s Adventure,” was published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1881; a third, French version, entitled “Voix Maudite,” appeared in *Les lettres et les arts* in 1887 and, finally, “A Wicked Voice,” the best of them, appeared in her collection *Hauntings* in 1889. For more than twenty years she toyed with the idea of hearing a voice from the past — a voice which would give body to its lost music. Such a recovery is conceived, appropriately enough, as a form of play, starting with those first rummaging researches in the Bologna attic: “the play instinct let loose in a lumber-room” (*Studies* xxi), as she calls it. That “lumber-room” is both the origin and the narrative destination of the story. Not only the literal dusty attic of old manuscripts, it is also the jumbled idea of the past itself: “the hay-loft, the tool-house, the remote lumber-room full of discarded mysteries and of lurking ghosts” (xvi). In addition, this is the place of fiction — a storehouse of things, useful and useless, which may be brought back into “play.” And playing, both in Schiller’s sense, of an instinct essential to all artistic work,⁵ and in the musical sense, is the art and trick of the ghost. For all her distrust of the “vital lies” perpetrated by such “professional prophets” as “Nietzsche” (*Lies* 205),⁶ Lee acknowledges that “music is beyond (or outside) Good and Evil” (*Music* 553). The question of a pure aestheticism, beyond moral and social responsibility, is never far from her thoughts when writing about music, that “condition” (*Renaissance* 135) which Pater famously put beyond the aspiring reach of all the other arts. Yet, if music is unconditionally beyond morality, a “play” of the imagination set free in a room, it is still not absolutely removed from what lies outside. That Paterian and Nietzschean “beyond” is itself a measure of the distance dividing, but not altogether disconnecting, art from good and evil. A “lumber-room” is a place full of stuff which has lost its relevant use, but has not therefore forgotten it. “A Wicked Voice,” as the title itself suggests, opens up the space between beauty and morality, between the disembodied voice and the wickedness of the singer, between “spectral” and “corporeal” densities of meaning, which is Victorian aestheticism’s special playground.

Two recent articles on “A Wicked Voice” have offered interpretations which focus on its sexual undertones. Martha Vicinus argues that this, like other stories by Lee, is a displaced celebration of “lesbian desire” (107), the effeminate figure of the singer being, quite simply, a figure for woman. Carlo Caballero, on the other hand, shows how the story is haunted by the idea of the body it refuses to name: that of the castrato. It is thus “a fantasy of sexual inversion” (389) in which music functions as a continuing *double entendre*. Certainly, even at the age of thirteen, Lee understood the physical origin of the

haunting sound she sometimes heard in the churches of Rome, gleefully reporting to her father an awkward conversation with a family friend about whether such a singer could be "a woman dressed up" (*Letters* 12). The physical machinery of the human voice is obviously and closely implicated in its pure sound. The voice, she explains, in an article on "An Eighteenth-Century Singer," "is the close neighbour of human nerves, mind, and heart"; it is "played upon by the performer residing in the very fibres of its mechanism" (845). This confusion of flesh and mechanism, the performer denatured into pure instrument, gives the song an inescapable and pervasive body. Music, she writes, penetrates to "the soul's vague viscera" (*Laurus* 141); it "'imitates . . . the languors and orgasms within the human being'" (qtd. in Caballero 394). Such organic proximity to flesh means that music touches all too intimately on the body's nervous system, thus riddling the means and ends, the material and immaterial properties of art. The aesthetic purity of music lies not beyond the body and all its potential for good and evil, but deep within it. Such riddling acknowledges the commodifications of aestheticism, while celebrating its capacity to evoke beauty for its own sake.

"A Wicked Voice" does not readily resolve into a consistent allegory. It is too raw a narrative, and the cracks in its construction are all too visible. Yet for this reason it offers an intriguing example of the displayed contradictions of Victorian aestheticism. The idea of a contemporary Norwegian composer in Venice, who is haunted by the ghostly voice of an eighteenth-century castrato to the extent of being unable to compose his own northern, Wagnerian music, opens up for Vernon Lee a "lumber-room" of connections, as untidy and odd as those of her own research. The "play instinct" thrives in such a room. As Schiller puts it: "the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these man is merely in earnest; but with beauty he plays" (105–6). The importance of not being in earnest carries with it the sound of what must be discounted: particularly, goodness. "And thus," claims Vernon Lee, "the world of the physically beautiful is isolated from the world of the morally excellent: there is sometimes correspondence between them, and sometimes conflict . . . most often there is no relation at all" (*Belcaro* 207).⁷ "A Wicked Voice" sets wickedness and the singer's voice in an opposition which is almost, but not quite, "no relation at all." Whatever is wicked about the voice, its physical manufacturing, its hinted sexual deviancy, its overwhelming seductiveness, remains at odds with its art. Those odds are the main point of the story.

It opens with the haunted Norwegian composer, Magnus, recalling the event which precipitated his enthrallment to the past. In a boarding-house in Venice, surrounded by his rowdy fellow lodgers and the debris of a shared meal — he remembers in particular the "huge hard peaches which nature imitates from the marble-shops of Pisa" (*Hauntings* 198) — he is given an engraving by one of the company of an eighteenth-century singer known as Zaffirino (Sapphire).⁸ The portrait shows an "effeminate, fat face . . . almost beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel" (206). His fellow guests then force him to tell the story of the singer, and to sing some of the songs for which he was famous. This prompts one of his listeners, an old Venetian count, to tell another story: that of Zaffirino's legendary power over the ladies, in particular over his own aunt who, it is asserted, died listening to the irresistible "Aria dei Mariti," the air of the husbands, well-known for its killing effects. The count's improbable, long-winded narrative is at first dismissed by Magnus, as "a hopelessly muddled story . . . full of digressions." However, he finds himself becoming drawn into it in spite of his contempt. It "becomes more intelligible, or per-

haps,” he acknowledges, “it is I who am giving it more attention” (202). This is that very “life-blood of attention” which, according to Vernon Lee, gave the dusty ghosts of her musical researches “bulk” and “voice” (*Studies* xlv). Her own “hopelessly muddled story” has a similarly transfusive effect on its reader. The count’s “cock-and-bull story of a vocal coxcomb and a vapouring great lady” (206) becomes “intelligible” because Magnus brings to it the subjective measure of his own desire. To pay attention is to enter the “lumber-room” of meanings, and to start to order them after one’s own heart. Magnus does so in a catastrophically literal way.

“That night,” he remembers, “I dreamed a very strange dream” (208). This is the traditional gateway to ghostliness. Yet the dream-frame, like most frames in Vernon Lee, fails to do its “framing work” (Robbins 155). Instead of taking us through into another place, it bumps us back into the present, where Magnus is lying, still awake, on a sofa, in the big Venetian drawing room that was the scene of the after-dinner story-telling. He notices a scent of white flowers, the watery white moonlight playing on the walls, and then he goes over the story of his Nordic opera, about a knight who returns home to find that hundreds of years have passed, and only a song, sung to him by a minstrel, recalls his life and exploits. It is from this vague waking state, in a present already rendered uncertain by that timelapsed story from the antique, that he lapses into the vivid reality of a dream: he is looking down on a ballroom, with yellow sofas and theatrical boxes, from where he hears the sounds of a voice, an “exquisite vibrating note,” and then the awful “thud of a body on the floor” (210). He immediately wakes in horror, realising that he has dreamed the tale of the count’s aunt, and encountered, meanwhile, the voice belonging to the portrait. This dream contains its own small joke-reminder of reality. In it, Magnus becomes aware of a “heavy, sweet smell, reminding me of the flavour of a peach” (210). The dream thus orientates itself around a dream-memory of those peaches on the boarding-house table which set the scene for the first telling of stories about Zaffirino. Where Magnus *is*, is in a story; which is also where we, the readers, are — although the fact that those original peaches were a trick against nature suggests that reality, in this story, in true aestheticist style, takes its bearings from art. In any case, dream peaches seem more appetisingly real than marbly real-life ones. The frustrated desire to eat them displaces into the stranger appetites of dream.

These two initial scenes: the first, of storytelling, the second, of story-dreaming, set the pattern of events to come. Magnus hears the voice of the dead singer everywhere. Searching desperately for the original melody of his own northern knight, he finds, instead, the laughing, virtuoso voice of Zaffirino. Lee’s descriptions of this voice become the leitmotifs of a story which comically trounces the self-important, nationalistic mythologising of the Wagnerian Magnus⁹ with the light, cosmopolitan, sexually ambiguous voice of an eighteenth-century castrato. On a gondola one night, that voice comes clear: “a thread of sound slender as a moonbeam, scarce audible, but exquisite, which expanded slowly, insensibly, taking volume and body, taking flesh almost and fire, an ineffable quality, full, passionate, but veiled, as it were, in a subtle, downy wrapper” (214). This is a story, not about a ghost haunting his victim, but about a victim haunting his ghost. That ghost takes “volume and body,” the two ideas of sound and flesh coming together, as they do in many of Lee’s descriptions of music, to evoke an art built up by desire. Metaphors intended merely to describe the voice, start to embody it. The notes which “swell,” a word repeated with almost embarrassing frequency, fill out a spectral into a corporeal presence. The ghost

starts to inhabit his own body, the voice its own instrumental flesh. The play of meaning between "volume and body" returns the idea of the voice to the "vague viscera," the "fibres" of its own ghostly sound. For the voice, as Magnus frequently expostulates, is a "violin of flesh and blood" (195), drawing into art the material imprint of the body, and specifically, of course, of a body unnaturally tuned to give forth that particularly haunting sound. The "downy" quality, repeatedly associated with Zaffirino's voice, also shifts unnervingly from an immaterial meaning — veiled, blurred, soft, feathery — to a suggestion of puberty physically stopped in time.¹⁰

Thus the ghostly voice snags, by way of puns, on these troubling other senses. Its artistry and beauty, so ethereally out of this world, catch from a long way off on the facts of life. To give body to that ghostly sound, as the story does, is to acknowledge, however discreetly, that its aesthetic power is connected with bodies all round. Those nervous mechanisms, which may be touched, maimed or even, we are given to believe, killed by beauty, cannot explain, exonerate or condemn beauty's power, but neither are they irrelevant to its production. Vernon Lee's punning awareness of the body in this story makes the condition of music, for all its pure play, a matter also of some harsh physical conditions. But those are remembered at a distance, in a wordplay, a kind of dream-wit, which makes the song's "killing" effects, on both singers and listeners, no bar to pleasure. The moral of the narrative, that such music is harmful and enervating, goes athwart a style which makes nothing so desirable as hearing the music once again.

Tormented by Zaffirino's voice, and finding that his own "heroic harmonies" of masculine exploits are being undermined by "voluptuous phrases and florid cadences" (216), Magnus tears up the mockingly effeminate portrait that seems to have started all this mischief. He throws the pieces out of his bedroom window into the canal, though one "scrap," he notices, is caught in the "yellow blind below" (217). Eventually, in desperation, he seeks a doctor, and receives the salutary advice to stop work and take a break in the country. Evidently the problem is a psychological disturbance induced by the unhealthy atmosphere of Venice. The count, on hearing the advice, immediately suggests that Magnus go and stay at his son's villa on the mainland and help with the maize harvest. The name of the place, Mistra, is recognised by Magnus, in a delayed reaction, as the place where the count's old aunt met her death at the "hands" of Zaffirino. He accepts the invitation "with gratitude and pleasure" (222).

The third section of the story, at Mistra, should mark a return to normality and sanity after the wavering light of Venice and its moonlit hallucinations. The villa is dull and ordinary. The maize harvest is in full flow, and Magnus is forced out of his creative nightmare into attending to the practicalities of cereal farming. By the end of the day he is exhausted. But before retiring to bed, he opens the shutters onto the garden and becomes aware of "a sudden whiff of warm, enervating perfume, a perfume that made me think of the taste of certain peaches, and suggested white, thick, wax-like petals" (229). Associated with the first story-telling about Zaffirino, the scent of peach flowers and the associated taste of peaches become the dream-cue for another repetition, a *deja vu* driven inexorably, not by ghostly machinations, but by internal desire, indeed appetite: "And with this odd impression of naturalness was mixed a feverish, impatient pleasure. It was as if I had come to Mistra on purpose, and that I was about to meet the object of my long and weary hopes" (231). The word "feverish" makes the pleasure at once willed and still sick, while "naturalness" remains a principle under severe strain. The moment that Mag-

nus is able to acknowledge his “craving” for the ghost-singer is also the moment which sets in motion another “take” of the story. The fever is for “pleasure,” at once a sickness and a purpose, a natural and an unnatural goal, a supernatural nonsense and a supreme inspiration.

And indeed, the narrative drives, with undeterred if unreal logic, towards the place that was first heard in a story and then dreamed in a dream: the ballroom. Magnus, unable to sleep, wanders through the villa’s half-derelict passages, and suddenly comes out into a little theatrical box above a ballroom, with its chandeliers, its frescoes, its yellow sofas and, in the corner, a harpsichord. This time he is awake, but the difference is hardly relevant anymore. There is a woman on the sofa, surrounded by other people, and, as he watches from above, a man sits down at the instrument and starts to sing:

The voice wound and unwound itself in long, languishing phrases, in rich, voluptuous *rifiorituras*, all fretted with tiny scales and exquisite, crisp shakes; it stopped ever and anon, swaying as if panting in languid delight. And I felt my body melt even as wax in the sunshine, and it seemed to me that I too was turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds as the moon-beams mingle with the dew. (234)

Magnus suddenly realises “that this voice was what I cared most for in all the wide world” (234). The unashamed sensuality of the voice, which has become more of a solid body than the bodies of the living, is caught in the “languishing phrases” of Lee’s prose. This is the “pleasure” for which the whole story has been impatient. From tall tale, to dream, to waking reality, it makes a return journey through various unstable frames to find the “real spectre of the antique” at last. While repetition baffles the sense of progress, desire creates the impression of a natural destination: the sound of Zaffirino’s voice, “languishing,” “voluptuous,” “panting.”

But there is a catch. Characteristically, the danger is signalled by a trick of words: “it seemed to me that I too was turning fluid and vaporous.” The word “vaporous” harps back to the misty moonlight of Venice and the sickly dreams which it induced. Magnus is himself becoming as insubstantial as a shade. But the word also echoes an earlier reference, when the composer had dismissed the whole story of Zaffirino’s musical prowess as a “cock-and-bull story of a vocal coxcomb and a vapouring great lady” (206). Immediately, there is a distracting sound from the sofa, and he hears, once again, as he had in his dream, the death throes of the old countess. The “vapours,” like all the other insubstantial, ghostly notions in this story, have become real, and the woman falls down dead, with pleasure. Such breath-taking beauty has literally taken the breath of its hearer.

At this point reality cracks, and Magnus finds himself in a bare room, stacked with lumber, including heaps of yellow maize and a broken harpsichord. Both singer and victim have gone. Instead, there are “pools of moonlight,” which appear to him “cold, blue, vaporous, supernatural” (236). The whole event collapses into moonshine, into a “supernatural” gimmick, though the lingering look of light on the ballroom floor still hauntingly recalls the “vaporous” condition of the woman and of the composer, both of whom dreamed on a sofa and found the beauty of Zaffirino’s voice too exquisite to bear. To decode this death either as a re-enacted castration scene (Caballero 390–91) or as a displaced form of lesbian desire (Vicinus) is to miss the element of play in the story — the crazy paving of its language, in which patterns, for no moral or emotional reason, repeat

themselves like dreams. Indeed, the story itself ends up where it all began, in the place where Vernon Lee became obsessed with the music of the past. The vaporous moonlight, the yellow corn, the broken harpsichord are indeed, literally, in a "lumber-room," a place full of the broken pieces of a story to which desire briefly gave life. Those objects in the deserted ballroom have become the imagination's bric-à-brac again, rubbish left in decay, but from which the voice of the past, seductive and beautiful, might be fleshed and blooded once more.

The final scene in the ballroom announces that, far from being cured, Magnus is only more sick. He has caught the fever which, he was warned, lingered in the night air. "Airs," like "vapours" in this story, circulate maddeningly through several meanings, playing literal against metaphorical, ghost-ing their own common sense. The "air" of Venice is a miasmatic, unhealthy atmosphere, and that sickliness becomes literal at Mistra, where, as Caballero points out, the "bad air" is, etymologically, a "mal-aria" which kills. By some weird logic of etymologies, the bad air is also the "*Aria dei Mariti*," which induces another, but equally mortal fever (Caballero 402), so that music, particularly the long-lost airs of the past, is contaminated by these other meanings. The imagination itself plays fast and loose with these references, collapsing the frames which should keep them apart, so that language itself is haunted by spectral other meanings which threaten to revive.

Related to these airs and vapours is that recurring yellow. The "scrap" of paper which catches in the "yellow blind" catches, at the same time, in a network of references: the "yellow satin sofas" (210) of the dream, the "yellow, reflected light" (215) of the miasmatic lagoon, the "yellow" (224) plaque on the statues in the church, the "yellow light" (226) of the acacia hedges on the mainland, culminating in the malarial "yellow faces of the peasants" (230) at Mistra. Thus malaria pervades the text, textually cued by that little "scrap" of paper which will not be destroyed but insists, like any ghost, on coming back. Just as cholera runs through Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), another text which asserts the aestheticist creed of being "indifferent to good and evil" (Mann 18), so malaria gives Vernon Lee an imagery, not only of a sickness long associated with Venice, but also of that decadence which spawned so many infectiously risky "yellow books." Airs, vapors and moonlight transmute, readily, from sense to sense, as the text plays out the ghosts in what should be safe and sane meanings.

One other connotation of this skidding associationism may have come from Vernon Lee's own original researches. The particular singer who was her model for Zaffirino, at whose singing, it was said, "people remained silent and breathless, and occasionally fainted and went into hysterics" (*Studies* 184), was Farinelli, the Italian castrato, friend of Metastasio, Hesse and Handel, whose fame spread all over Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. Farinelli, however, abandoned all this fame when he moved to the Spanish court and agreed to sing the same four songs every night for the melancholic Philip V. The name Farinelli, as Lee herself notes, probably derived from "Farina" (*Studies* 173), or flour, denoting that his family or patrons were millers or sellers of flour. The stacks of yellow corn which fill the derelict ballroom at the end of "A Wicked Voice" suggest, at a distance, a last piece of imaginative lumber — a long lost pun brought back to life. Fiction itself is a room in which author and reader both agree to play, in the hope of being haunted by the "mechanism," however creaky, which might bring back beauty's ghosts.

“The genuine ghost?” asks Vernon Lee. “And is not this he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard?” (*Hauntings* x). “My ghosts,” she adds, “are what you call spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones)” (xi). “A Wicked Voice” haunts us, not so much by its events, or even its misty atmosphere of derangement, but by its repetitions and puns. Its meanings slip the frames of reference it sets up, just as stories, dreams and waking life repeat the same event. Puns have a fruitful after-life, which may return to haunt the narrative, even to lead it to illogical destinations. The fun of the whole story is that Vernon Lee can give us a “spurious” ghost in whom, like fiction, we do not need to believe, but whose beauty is cravingly desired and pursued.

By comparison, the moral substructure of the narrative is unconvincing. Magnus’s last action in the ballroom is to try to retain the “unfinished cadence” of the voice he has lost. But when he tries to play it on the harpsichord, there is only a jangle of “broken strings” (236). This is his Faustian fate. He recovers from his fever only to find that he is doomed to compose a jangle of little airs, while suffering a “hell-thirst” (237) to hear the lost voice again. It is that “thirst,” that “craving” of a whole age, maybe, which has the last word: “May I not hear one note, only one note of thine, O singer, O wicked and contemptible wretch?” Against this morally cautioning indictment, the idea of those lost notes sings out.

Music, Vernon Lee repeated, is “a riddle” (“Riddle” 207); it is “a spell . . . which we cannot decipher” (*Belcaro* 107). The idea of art as sphinx has a longer history than its obvious fashionableness in the *fin de siècle*. Art, writes Adorno, is “a riddle” (176), specifically one always “waiting to be interpreted” (186). It is this “condition of want” (186) which is art’s seduction. “As in puzzles the answer is kept from view even though the structure cries out for it” (181). In “A Wicked Voice” the structure of the narrative “cries out” for the ghost which might satisfy its “want,” and explain, ultimately, the meaning of the voice which haunts Magnus. But it is of the nature of both art and ghosts, even “spurious” ones, to refuse to solve the riddle. The figure in the carpet, as Henry James’s nearly contemporary story acknowledges, cannot be unravelled from its pattern.¹¹ What remains is the pattern, the form, the aesthetic, artificial structure which “cries out.” While the critic is doomed to circle that structure, hoping to give the explanation of its puzzle, the ideology of its aesthetic, it is the “condition of want” which, like Pater’s other supreme condition of music, is calculated to make us go on wanting it. Vernon Lee has struck on that keynote of pleasurable desire which rings, loud and clear, beyond all moral or ideological solutions: “May I not hear one note, only one note of thine?”

Literature is neither an unreferential pure play nor an ideologically coded impure play. It is a play between the two, in a place, a “lumber-room” perhaps, in which things are not obviously quite useful or known, and where their meanings might not be quite what we expect — which is not to say that there is no meaning at all. Hence, writes Vernon Lee, “that confusion in all save form, that indifference to all save beauty, which characterises all the great epochs of art . . . which we, poor critics, would fain reduce to law and rule, to chronological and ethnological propriety” (*Belcaro* 127). There is a sense in which criticism will always be a church, establishing proprieties and laws, whether traditional or postmodernist, of the left or the right. But the figure in the carpet, the ghost in the machine, is lost if taken out of play, that is, out of the indifferent,

formal pattern of the work itself. It is that pattern which demands critical attention, as much as the many explanatory systems, social, political, historical, within which art plays.

Victorian aestheticism, fathered by Pater, contains, but also challenges, many of the theoretical developments of poststructuralism and cultural historicism. A "great picture," writes Pater, "has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow . . . caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet" (*Renaissance* 133). That play is not a totally "free play"; it figures, after all, in a carpet, specifically an "Eastern" one, the economic and ideological implications of which the *fin de siècle* relishes. But it is nonetheless a "play," a disturbance, a resistance of form to message. Pater, like Vernon Lee, and indeed all the Modernists who follow in their wake, makes a space for the aesthetic, for the condition of music or beauty, which works, not exactly as a transcendence beyond meaning, but as a different, even indifferent, stress within it. As Woolf quietly asserts in *Three Guineas*, one of her most politically trenchant prose works, published in 1938, the artist must work only "for the sake of the art" (146). In 1951, E. M. Forster announced at the beginning of a lecture: "I believe in art for art's sake. It is an unfashionable belief" (98). That belief, in a variety of forms, continues to be voiced by writers to the present day. *Art Objects*, in Jeanette Winterson's witty title, may be commodities in a market, to be bought and sold; but art also *objects*, as she forcefully argues, to being reclaimed as anything except "art as art" (31). That tautology has a long and fruitful history of objection.

"A Wicked Voice" may be a relatively raw and eccentric example of the delights and anxieties of Victorian aestheticism. But it does expose, in the form of an embodied ghost, the tension between beauty, for its own sake, and moral, sexual, ideological messages. Those messages are thrown into confusion, indeed into "a hopelessly muddled story," by the sound of a voice which simply insists, across history, dream and narrative absurdity, on the condition of its own music. That "craving" to "hear one note, only one note of thine, O singer" is the keynote of what makes art worth "playing," and also worth interpreting, in the first place.

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NOTES

1. Pater uses the word "relics" frequently, to express, on the one hand, the belatedness of his vision, struggling with "echoes, reactions, after-thoughts" of a lost "belief" ("Prosper Merimée" in *Miscellaneous Studies* 15), and, on the other hand, as a way of keeping hold, in the literal form of bodily remains, of what has gone (see, for instance, "Denys L'Auxerrois," in *Imaginary Portraits* 74).
2. Recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in Vernon Lee's work, thanks partly to the publication of six of her short stories by Peter Owen in 1987. Critics like Beer, Caballero, Hotchkiss, Maxwell, Psomiades, Robbins, Vicinus, and Zorn have all contributed to this welcome reassessment of a writer who, like so many Victorian women, fell victim to the out-of-hand rejections of the Modernists and Formalists. Woolf, who remembered Vernon Lee as a visitor to Talland House and visited her in Florence with Vanessa, became progressively uneasy about her own dismissals of her writing (see "Portraits," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* 239–40, and *Letters* 5: 137; 6: 217).

3. Vernon Lee, however, was delighted when Blackwell offered to publish “Oke of Okehurst” as a “*shilling dreadful*” (*Letters* 208).
4. Victorian aestheticism and decadence have undergone a fascinating re-evaluation as a result of the work of such critics as Dellamora, Dijkstra, Dollimore, Dowling, Eagleton, Freedman, Gagnier, Paglia, Psomiades and Showalter, for instance. But, with the exceptions of Dowling, Freedman and Paglia, these are mainly concerned with tracking the various ideological implications of the art of the period. The sexual, racial, and class entanglements of aestheticism have been examined in fascinating detail. But its sense of pleasure, beauty, and formal artistry has not.
5. Schiller’s conclusion that: “With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play” (107) is repeated with variations by both Pater, specifically in connection with music (*The Renaissance* 151–52), and by Vernon Lee, when she asserts, for instance, that: “All decent human work partakes . . . of the quality of play” (*Laurus* 219–20). If, as Donoghue has forcefully argued, Pater is the founder of modernity in his aestheticist separation of art as “commodity” from art as “play” (319), that separation has its roots in Romanticism, and in Schiller’s influential proposition that “beauty . . . accomplishes no particular purpose, neither intellectual nor moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty” (147).
6. Against the various “hoodwinking” (*Lies* 2: 182) myths of her own day, among them, the Freudian Unconscious and the Nietzschean Will, Vernon Lee asserts art’s more modest purpose: “The difference between art on the one hand and religion and philosophy on the other, lies just in this, that in order to commend itself to our acceptance, art does not (need not) pretend to be more than a pleasure and a refreshment, leaving its deep utility to individual and race to be deduced or guessed (or neither) just from this modest, venerable fact of pleasantness” (2: 154). Just such an argument against the authority of the Unconscious, and against philosophy’s take-over of the separate category of the aesthetic, is to be found in Edmundson’s recent book, *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida*.
7. Vernon Lee never wavered from her early belief that beauty and morality, or beauty and truth, are different and not necessarily reconcilable principles. “Beauty . . . is not in the least the same thing as Goodness, any more than beauty (despite Keats’s famous assertion) is the same thing as Truth” (*Laurus* 10). Caballero’s assertion that “she claimed for aesthetic beauty a specifically *ethical* role within daily life” (386) is not quite correct. Even in so late a work as *Music and Its Lovers* (1932) she concludes by declaring that art’s “aesthetic playground” is set apart from the “right and wrong” (555) of real actions and moral choices. The ethical value of art comes only from that apartness, that short freedom to play.
8. The meaning of Zaffirino’s name plays on the ambiguity associated with jewels throughout aestheticist and decadent literature. A symbol of beauty beyond price, the jewel is also, of course, commercially valuable.
9. Not only is Magnus “a figure for Wagner” (401) as Caballero points out, and for a kind of music Lee once described as leaving the reader “devitalised as by the contemplation of a slug” (qtd. in Smyth 209); but he also embodies something of that racial (and masculine) consciousness that the cosmopolitan Lee denounced wherever she saw it, and against which she launched her later pacifist work (see Beer 116).
10. Caballero’s interpretation of “downiness” as representing “the feminine, motherly breast” (390) is a little puzzling to me.
11. The point about the figure in the carpet, of course, is that the critic, who must search for extractable tricks, clues, messages, will never find it. In James’s story only another writer (interestingly a woman) discovers the secret by writing her own, equally secretive, version of it. As Stevenson’s poem, “The Figure in the Carpet,” suggests, such figures must always return us to “the interlocking risk / of pattern / or of art” (88).

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